

Season 6 of HBO's *Girls*: Ending with a whimper

By Ed Hightower
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In a previous comment on HBO's comedy-drama series *Girls* (2012-17), a WSWWS reviewer noted that "in fits and starts, the show manages to capture certain truthful elements of this generation's experience. Ultimately, however, the show's creators are unable to probe the source of social difficulty to its source, and their fixation on a complacent layer of the upper middle class severely limits the series."

By Season 6 (February-April 2017), the series' final one, virtually nothing remains of these truthful elements. Characters and plot lines clumsily wind down or collapse altogether. At the same time, the young writer/protagonist Hannah (Lena Dunham) deepens her commitment to upper middle class feminism—complete with the implication that all men are rapists—and learns about "personal responsibility" when she becomes a single mother.

This result masquerades as something progressive—a woman does not need a man to raise a child, etc.—but in reality amounts to little more than the empty moralizing of the well-to-do. Social questions play zero role. Nothing is guaranteed to you. Shut up and keep marching! (And of course it helps to have no economic worries.)

Confined by these limited thematic elements, character development nearly grinds to a halt.

In Season 6 of *Girls* serious issues receive the type of superficial treatment accorded them by the mainstream media: the viewer is offered the dramatic equivalent of brief sound bites that reveal next to nothing about the underlying sources—or even, in any profound, genuinely disturbing sense, the experience—of the addiction epidemic, the soaring cost of living, the lack of decent health care, the crisis of art in contemporary society and so forth.

Addiction is a case in point. Adam (Adam Driver), the protagonist's boyfriend, is a recovering alcoholic turned "sex addict." Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings are

an essential part of his life. Jessa (Jemima Kirke) goes to rehab and leaves to shack up with a man her father's age in a relationship based on cocaine. Marnie (Allison Williams) has two boyfriends who become opiate addicts, one without her even noticing. Hannah's downstairs neighbor is also in recovery from drug addiction.

Girls scratches the surface here. No unifying cause or group of causes emerges at all, or a hint of one. The writers draw absolutely no connections between the conditions, economic and psychic, facing young people and the addiction epidemic.

Relationships are not treated with any greater seriousness or profundity in Season 6. The now successful actor Adam sets out to make a film about his relationship with former girlfriend Hannah. In so doing, he ultimately realizes he still loves her, that their connection ran deeper than he realized. In an implausible whirlwind, Adam wins Hannah back, the two appear to be deeply in love, and then break up once more soon afterward during an awkward conversation at dinner.

The wandering idealist Ray (Alex Karpovsky) seems to be rekindling a relationship with his old flame, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), who has returned to Brooklyn from her job in Japan. Shoshanna's uptight and entrepreneurial personality once complemented Ray's uncompromising and fighting spirit. (To be sure, Ray is generally at a loss for something to fight *for*. We learn in passing that he went through a "communist phase" at some point. How he arrived at that "phase," what issues he grappled with, what tendency he was a part of—such relevant, intriguing material is left untouched).

Ray becomes inexplicably entranced by Shoshanna's former boss, Abigail, played by *Saturday Night Live*'s Aidy Bryant. By the end of the episode in question he and Abigail are kissing on a merry-go-round, having fallen in love. It is an example of one of the more interesting characters in the series being tied off to whatever is

nearby like a loose piece of thread.

Hannah's social outlook—and it appears Dunham's as well (she strongly supported Hillary Clinton in 2016 and weighed in ignorantly and irresponsibly on the case of Stanford student Brock Turner)—played a smaller role in prior seasons of *Girls* and was generally presented in a relatively light-hearted fashion. Not so in the series' final season.

Episode 3, *American Bitch*, which has drawn plaudits from various quarters, is worthy of special consideration, for its anti-democratic implications. Here Hannah visits a favorite contemporary author of hers, Chuck Palmer (Matthew Rhys), at his posh New York apartment. She has penned an Internet rant expressing her disappointment that the author is the latest of her favorite male writers to be accused of coercing a woman into having sex with him. Chuck wants to give his side of the story.

As the conversation unfolds, the writer conveys a believable sympathy for the alleged victim while explaining there was no lack of consent. Hannah complains there was an “imbalance of power” in the relationship—itsself a far cry from sexual assault—and tells her own story about a grade school teacher who used to rub her shoulders. Hannah and the author appear to reconcile by reading a rough draft of his account of the experience with his accuser. They lie down together on his bed and talk.

Ultimately, the empathetic demeanor proves a ruse, as Chuck makes an overt sexual advance. It was all an act! He has lured her into his lair with a wounded dove façade, only to try and victimize her. As Hannah leaves, young women are lining up to enter the building, implying that the author operates a sexual assault assembly line.

Men, it seems, even those women admire, would just as soon devour them. Elementary teachers, favorite authors, even fathers stand ready to pounce on unsuspecting females when they are most vulnerable. Thus, the presumption of innocence for the accused degenerates into the “victim's right to be believed.” This remarkable, if repugnant scene communicates the preoccupations of a definite and reactionary social layer.

This selfish and, frankly, stupid version of feminism is accompanied in Season 6 of *Girls* by warmed over, Reagan-era moralizing, which bears the imprint of Judd Apatow, the show's executive producer and the writer-director-producer of numerous films. Apatow's previous unappetizing morsels of insight, spiced up with sexual titillation, include the importance of waiting to have sex with the “right person” in *The Forty Year old*

Virgin(2005); the rejection of abortion in *Knocked Up* (2007); and the meaning of loyalty to high school friends destined to attend a different college from you in the abysmal *Superbad* (which he produced, 2007).

Apatow's voice in *Girls* is unmistakable. When Marnie, down and out, evicted from her pathetic apartment, attempts to pawn her jewelry, she discovers it is all fake, a metaphor for her many relationships with dishonest people, including her parents. The enlightened pawn-shop owner tells her in so many words that this is all her fault, and she needs to take responsibility, and so on. At least the musings receive appropriate representation as the guidance of an exploiter of the poor.

Hannah's decision to keep the baby she conceived with a water-skiing instructor reprise Apatow's lessons about “adulthood” advanced in his own films. Again, the mention of abortion prompts a summary and perturbed rebuke. In the final episode, Hannah's mother delivers a scathing speech about how life is hard and no one guaranteed it would be easy, which Hannah then regurgitates in the direction of a young woman who is arguing with her own mother. The lesson couldn't be clearer: when you have learned to brow-beat younger people about “responsibility,” then you have truly grown up.

I laughed one or two times watching this final season. The young actor Elijah (Andrew Rannells) tries out for a part in the new musical *White Men Can't Jump*. Maybe it was only one laugh. *Girls* proves the need for a turn to deeper social thinking by serious artists, but only in the negative.

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