

OUR NERD IS AN ISLAND: A Textual Analysis of *Modern Family*'s Alex Dunphy

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Introduction

Writing in *Salon* a little more than a decade ago, author Ian Williams (2003) declared that the “American dork” had made peace with society’s well-chronicled tendency to poke fun at dorks and at nerds. Taking their cues from movies like *Revenge of the Nerds*, they “started to see themselves in a different light,” Williams argued. By the start of the new millennium, dorks and nerds were “sitting atop the cultural heap of history, finally king of the mountain.” Citizens, pop singers, and Hollywood superstars alike embraced their “dork” or “nerd” status to validate how they were brought up. True dorks and nerds took umbrage at the co-optation of their painful experiences, but the rush to join what had for so long been an unpopular and marginalized segment of society spoke to what Williams called “the lasting power and redemption of geekery.”

But Williams (2003) also worried the acceptance of and emulation of dorks and nerds might damage their ability to come up with society’s next great ideas. “The typical dork, allowed to stew in his or her own juices, is capable of almost anything,” he wrote. Williams asserted it would “be a pity if none of us could look back upon our childhood with the kind of anger, resentment, self-pity and desire for revenge that have fueled our greatest work.” Resurgent anti-intellectualism in the decade since *Salon* published Williams’ assessment may be a prime source of the “juice” of which Williams writes. Indeed, say some social critics, times are once again grim for those who reside in America’s “reality-based community” (Suskind, 2004) where intelligence is valued and half-baked and unsubstantiated ideas are dismissed rather than disputed for the sake of sustaining manufactured controversy, where solutions to the world’s problems “emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality,” as an aide to former President George W. Bush told a *New York Times* reporter. Instead, those who trust their “gut” and act decisively – not sit on society’s sidelines, wasting their time thinking – create their own realities, realities purportedly under attack “by the intelligent, educated culture” (Pierce, 2009, p. 7). As Richard Hofstadter (1963) predicted in the early 1960s, intellectuals are again increasingly isolated, cordoned off, the gap between themselves and the public widened in part by the media’s willingness to give a stage to anyone with a compelling idea while at the same time giving voice to those who dismiss genuine expertise as elitist. Intellectuals are victimized by political and cultural forces that “combine a deep

reverence for learning with a profound suspicion of too much learning” (Jacoby, 2008, p. 30).

America, claims Aeon Skoble (2001), is “on the verge of a new ‘dark ages,’ where not only the notion of expertise, but also all standards of rationality are being challenged” (p. 25). Author Susan Jacoby (2008) believes the United States is “in serious intellectual trouble – in danger of losing our hard-won cultural capital to a virulent mixture of anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism, and low expectations.” Jacoby asserts that “[d]umbness has been steadily defined downward for several decades,” thanks to a decline in reading, an “erosion of general knowledge,” and a particularly destructive “arrogance” that spurs some to wear their lack of knowledge as a badge of honor. Rigorous pursuit of knowledge is increasingly unpopular (Pierce, 2009, p. 7). Actress Jenny McCarthy is given repeated opportunities to claim incorrectly that vaccines cause autism, while astrophysicist Neal DeGrasse Tyson is castigated by conservatives for the scientifically accurate miniseries *Cosmos*. A growing number of Americans “have smugly concluded that they do not need to know” basic information, like the fact the earth revolves around the sun or how to locate on a map the countries of the world. In January 2014, 23 percent of Americans told a pollster they believe climate change is not occurring, a jump of seven percent from the previous April (Pappas, 2014). It is bad enough, Jacoby (2008) asserts, that so many of us are not equipped with this knowledge, but “denying that such knowledge exists” is particularly destructive.

The media have for decades offered up negative portrayals of intelligent people; indeed, as Conway (2008) claims, “American culture loves to mock the intellectual” (p. 143). But has this tendency to mock intensified during society’s most recent spate of anti-intellectualism? This paper attempts to assess how intelligence today “is rendered culturally meaningful” (Randell-Moon, 2008, p. 178) through a textual analysis of Alex Dunphy, the brilliant and hyper-focused middle child in the successful ABC situation comedy *Modern Family*.

Theoretical Terrain and Literature Review

When considering how intelligence is “embodied and articulated” (Randell-Moon, 2008, p. 173), on a popular television show like *Modern Family*, it is vital that researchers assess how intelligence is culturally and historically regarded (p. 176) – or stated simply, what we as a society think of intelligence at the moment an analysis is undertaken. But first, a brief historical journey is in order.

The 1950s saw the development of a particularly virulent strain of anti-intellectualism stimulated by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s malicious campaign to eradicate Communism and Adlai Stevenson’s loss to Dwight Eisenhower in the

1952 Presidential election (Hofstadter, 1963, pp. 3-6). At first, only intellectuals bemoaned the gap between themselves and the American people. By the end of the decade, however, and especially after the Soviet Union's successful launch of Sputnik, much of the nation realized that anti-intellectualism "might be an important and even a dangerous national failing," as Hofstadter asserted (p. 5).

Resentment directed at intellectuals is not new. It occurs cyclically, Hofstadter contended, and stems from the intellectual's "increasing prominence" (p. 6). Another wave of anti-intellectualism took place during the Reagan administration. But what we actually feel toward intellectuals may be "ambivalence" (pp. 7, 19). Americans have a "love-hate relationship with the notion of the intellectual" (Skoble, 2001, p. 24). We ridicule intellectuals, but also seek "enlightenment and culture" (Hofstadter, p. 19). We revere *and* resent intelligent people. We honor our Enlightenment roots, but then dismiss as "elitist" anyone who dares trust more than their "gut" when attempting to solve a significant problem. We listen to experts, but then insist that our opinions, no matter how ill informed or reactionary, are just as valid as their expertise. We elevate "anti-intellectuals" (Hofstadter, pp. 20-21), ostensibly "competent" individuals "obsessively engaged with this or that outworn or rejected idea" (p. 21). Jacoby identifies several possible causes of our ambivalence: our focused and context-free consumption of information; living in a society where all experience is monetized (p. 16); resurgence of religious fundamentalism built on distrust of facts (p. 17); and a national system of science education where beleaguered teachers scared of being labeled liberal shoehorn intelligent design into discussions of how the earth came to be.

Nerds are the less positive part of what Quail (2011) calls the "hip/square dialectic" (p. 461). A nerd often appears as the comedic foil to a character who is more adept than the nerd in social situations. The "hip/square dialectic" has been seen in numerous television programs over the years, from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963) to the critically acclaimed NBC series *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) to *Modern Family* and *The Big Bang Theory*. As Quail explains, the nerd's main thematic function has been to reinforce the commercially attractive hegemonic masculinity of the "hip" character. Early on, in shows like *Dobie Gillis*, the nerd was not the butt of jokes. The relationship with the hip character was used to "bolster cool masculinity," but not at the nerd's expense (p. 462). More contemporary depictions of the "hip/square dialectic" revolve around "unfriendly, competitive antagonism between the nerd and the jock or cool kid" (p. 462). Nerds either find them pitted against the cool kids or as segregated guardians of the "moral high ground," claims Quail (p. 462).

The celebration of the nerd marked by Williams (2003) may only be a result of the media's ongoing need to sustain and grow their audience. The popularity of a film like *Napoleon Dynamite*, Quail argues, may actually signal a

“simultaneous affirmation and disavowal” (p. 465) of nerds and dorks. Aspects of nerd culture are appropriated, not used as the basis for a deeper understanding. By partaking of nerd-driven media content, audience members may be assuring themselves that they are not in fact nerds, questioning society’s still hegemonic take on what counts as masculinity, or continuing society’s practice of parodying nerds (p. 466). If the repositioning of the nerd as cool in the renowned “Mac v. PC” ad campaign was more than just opportunistic rebranding of cool to include a “traditionally nerdy pastime” (p. 467), we would be experiencing “a general cultural embracing of the nerd,” Quail argues (p. 467).

Denigration of intelligent characters on television begins early, as Franzini (2008) and others have noted. For example, attending school is portrayed on television as not being “cool.” Characters spend little time engaged in academic work. School is little more than a “backdrop for the social relationships” (p. 197) that play out between a show’s characters. Intelligent characters – like Steve Urkel of *Family Matters* and Lisa Simpson of the long-running Fox hit *The Simpsons* – are portrayed as unpopular and awkward in social situations. It is impossible for characters to be “both cool and smart,” as Franzini contends (p. 197). If we accept that television continues to be a key means of socialization and a source of information about what society values, then these portrayals make being smart seem “unattractive to people from an early age” (p. 198).

Intelligence is valued only if it can be applied practically, to solve problems (Conway, 2008). “Pretentious, merely theoretical eggheads” are criticized, “while wit, practical knowledge, and modesty about smarts are championed” (p. 146), Conway writes in her essay about *The Simpsons*. An intelligent character must not show off his or her intelligence. In *The Simpsons*, Lisa “is most likable when she uses her intelligence to help solve problems” (p. 149). Lisa is susceptible to flattery and reacts defensively when it is revealed that her baby sister, Maggie, may be smarter than she is (p. 152). She wants desperately to escape Springfield, but actually enjoys “the lowbrow shenanigans the family engages in” (p. 156). Having and displaying knowledge means more to Lisa than the knowledge itself; her character suggests that intelligent people favor engaging in “oh-so-clever intellectual one-upmanship” (Matheson, 2001; quoted in Conway, 2008, p. 158).

As Randell-Moon (2008) points out, the meaning we attach to intelligence and to being an intellectual “cannot be unbound from social and cultural contingencies such as race, gender, class, and sexuality” (p. 173). Even though the television audience today sees more nerds and geeks, they still are most often portrayed as “marginalized and undesirable,” Kendall (2011, p. 506) argues. Most are white male computer experts whose success in school, high IQ, odd dress and social ineptitude sustains a hegemonic take on masculinity that “continues to give primacy to aggressiveness and physicality” (p. 519). They exist in a liminal space between human and machine, Kendall (1999) contends, “portioned off from the

rest of humanity,” which protects the rest of us from a “potential compromise through close relationship with computers” (p. 263).

Women have rarely been seen playing the “nerd” role in media content. Kendall (1999) notes that a test designed to help individuals determine if they are nerds “presents nerds as male” (p. 262). Additionally, a group of computer users studied by Kendall attach feminine qualifiers to the word “nerd” – this “defines the normative case of nerd as *not* (author’s italics) as female” (p. 262). The lack of women in the nerd’s role, Kendall (2011) contends, protects the “superior economic and technological status of white men” (p. 519). Young women pursuing degrees and jobs in computer science do not pursue knowledge in and of the field as aggressively as they might have had they not been exposed to the nerd stereotype. And when they do, according to media portrayals, they become part of a community that is cordoned off and engaged with only when its expertise is needed (p. 521). Nevertheless, identifying as nerds has enabled women to push back against sexist depictions of intelligent women in which they cast off the “literal and symbolic accoutrements of bookish propriety (Thomas and Holderman, 2008, p. 34)” and allow their intellect to be degraded in order to find romance and sexual fulfillment.

But as Eglash (2002) explains, it takes more than “oppositional use of their technocultural identity” (p. 59) in websites like GeekGirl and NrrdGrrls! to enable women to push back against these stereotyped portrayals. These websites, he claims, often “reproduce the very boundaries they attempt to overcome” by linking a stereotyped term or phrase to a desired identity (p. 59). Even though the sites encourage all female nerds to participate in the move toward normalcy, they often do so by rejecting feminism. Kendall (1999) worries that the contributors to the NrrdGrrls! bulletin board, for example, tended to address sexual inequality through individualistic means, rather than by attempting to address inequalities by generating social change. Contributors were led to believe “that women can achieve greater equality through merely ‘exuding’ the desire for it” (p. 278). Still, Kendall believes that while women are “ambivalent” about feminist activism, they did reject society’s rigid picture of ideal femininity (1999, p. 278).

Television has a ways to go in this regard. In the celebrated HBO series *Six Feet Under*, the opportunity to have the character of Brenda Chenoweth (Rachel Griffiths) challenge patriarchal constraints using her considerable intelligence was scuttled when the show’s creators chose to portray her as a temperamental, sex-addicted “unruly” woman (Hart, 2008, p. 167). Brenda was rendered “powerless and unimpressive,” her drive for sex having cancelled out her intelligence. In the end, Hart notes, Brenda was easily contained, kept “securely ‘in her place’ within the patriarchal social order” (p. 171). In the WB Network’s *Beauty and the Geek*, attractive women tried to help nerds become less socially awkward, while the nerds tried to nurture intelligence in the women. While the

nerds encouraged the young women to acquire information “essential to a normal life” (Quail, 2011, p. 476) like reading maps and engaging in political debate, the information and skills taught by the young women were “more trivial and of little consequence,” most of which had to do with impressing the opposite sex. When one cast member – a young woman – confessed she had not changed at all during the game – she lost the respect of the show’s participants. In so doing, Quail explains, “[s]he solidifies a stereotype of a ‘mean girl’ or ‘bitch’ who is ultimately punished for operating outside the bounds of appropriate femininity” (p. 477). Her actions reinforced the notion that femininity “includes sensitivity, selflessness, and helpfulness – along with beauty, social skills, and an acceptable level of intelligence” (p. 477).

When contestants in *Canada’s Next Top Model* in 2006 claimed to embrace their nerd alter egos, they were in fact rejecting them. “[A] female nerd,” Quail wrote, “is distinctly unaesthetic and must be transformed immediately” (p. 478). Moreover, the “nerd knowledge” eschewed by the show’s contestants was “not math and science related but rather photography and personal assisting,” leaving viewers to conclude that among women, only supermodels are not nerds. The show “constructs any professional woman as a nerd by default” (p. 479).

Thus, despite the presence of more intelligent and accomplished female characters on television – for example, forensic scientist Abby Sciuto (Pauley Perrette) on the long-running CBS crime drama *NCIS* – the “common set of learned cultural meanings that signify intelligence” (Randell-Moon, 2008, p. 178) in female characters has not expanded all that much. Only the sexy male nerd has taken “significant strides” – has “come into his own” (Walker and Sturgis, 2008, p. 213). Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), sidekick to Buffy Summers in the popular series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, claims at one point she was not ashamed to be a nerd because, claim Walker and Sturgis (2008), “it’s age of computers an nerds are now a good thing to be” (p. 211). It took nearly the show’s entire seven-season run for the portrayal of Willow to evolve from focusing on her scholarly achievements and aptitude with technology to an immersion in witchcraft, a lesbian relationship, and an attempt to destroy the world in which she becomes the knowledge that had motivated others to marginalize her (Randell-Moon, 2008, p. 183). Still, portrayal of her intellectual abilities no longer revolved around the acquisition of knowledge; instead, as Randell-Moon points out, her being a nerd – and moving past it – “structures and is informed by all aspects of her subjectivity,” which *Buffy* viewers saw as a “shifting and self-reflexive process” (2008, p. 184).

Modern Family

Modern Family premiered on ABC in September 2009 (Abrams, 2009). The show, which features an ensemble cast, is the second most popular scripted situation comedy on television, trailing only CBS' *The Big Bang Theory* – another top series featuring extremely intelligent primary characters. The show has won the Emmy award for Best Comedy Series five times. One writer called the show “the crowned jewel of ABC’s comedy brand” (O’Connell & Goldberg, 2014).

Modern Family has also been credited with reviving the situation comedy in the face of reality television’s continued popularity. In 2011, the show bested NBC’s *The X-Factor* in the ratings, causing *Modern Family* co-creator Steven Levitan to tweet, “It’s extremely gratifying that a scripted comedy finally beat an overhyped karaoke contest” (Villareal, 2011). ABC announced in May 2014 that it had renewed the show for a sixth season; the announcement followed a highly publicized – and highly rated – fifth season finale revolving around the same-sex wedding of two members of the blended Pritchett-Tucker-Dunphy clan.

Modern Family is a single-camera show shot in a “mockumentary” format, alternating traditional sitcom situations and interviews with characters in which they comment on and set up those situations. Actor Ty Burrell plays Phil Dunphy – oversized kid, real estate broker, aspiring magician and former college cheerleader. Julie Bowen, perhaps best known before *Modern Family* for her work on NBC’s *Ed*, plays Phil’s intense and competitive wife, Claire. The Dunphys have three kids: the flirtatious indifferent student Haley (Sarah Hyland), intelligent, bookish, and focused Alex (Ariel Winter), and Luke (Nolan Gould), who despite his family’s concerns about his unorthodox approach to learning and an apparent lack of intelligence and common sense, shows near prodigy-level aptitude as a magician and as a singer. A blithe spirit, Phil Dunphy is enthusiastic and adventurous, in stark contrast to Claire, who likes to be in control – of herself and of the events that swirl around the family.

Claire’s dad, the gruff and narrow-minded Jay Pritchett (Ed O’Neill) runs a successful closet design and installation business. After divorcing his first wife, Dede (Shelley Long) – mother to Claire and her brother, Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) – Jay met and married Gloria (Sofia Vergara), a buxom and demonstrative native of Colombia who after her own divorce is raising her style-conscious metrosexual son, Manny, played by Rico Rodriguez. In season four, Gloria gives birth to a son, Fulgencio (“Joe”). Mitchell Pritchett – fussy and anxious – works as a lawyer while his partner, Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet), stays at home to care for their adopted daughter, Lily, played in seasons 3-5 by Aubrey Anderson-Emmons (Rizzo, 2011). A former professional party clown and collegiate football player with a flair for the dramatic, Cameron in season four supplanted – with mixed results – the music teacher at the middle

school attended by Luke, Manny, and Alex (“Modern Family,” 2014). The couple’s plans to adopt a second child fell through.

Alex Dunphy

When *Modern Family* premiered, Alex Dunphy, played by actor Ariel Winter, was in middle school, excelling academically, putting pressure on herself to sustain that excellence, and navigating through a full agenda of after-school activities. “You know those kids who are so intelligent it’s annoying?” begins ABC’s character biography (2014). “Well, Alex Dunphy is super smart but in a completely likeable way.” The character is also described as an “outside observer to the antics that surround her while she quietly does her own thing.” Yet in a 2012 interview, Winter said she enjoyed playing Alex “because she’s a role model who’s teaching kids you can still be cool and be a nerd” (Gardner, p. 11).

Method

I conducted a detailed textual analysis on the first season (24 episodes) of *Modern Family*. Following Mazzarella’s (2008, p. 71) lead, I conducted a “preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975, p. 15) on the segments in which Alex Dunphy was involved and in which other characters mentioned or discussed her. This was followed by several subsequent viewings of the Alex segments, during which I explored interactions between Alex and the other *Modern Family* characters. I paid special attention to the role Alex’s intelligence played in her struggles to be noticed and for acceptance. Careful attention was also paid to the characters’ lines, communication patterns, dress, actions, and non-verbal communicative behavior.

Comprehensive notes were taken during each reading. Additional readings and review of the notes and transcripts enabled me to identify, confirm, and refine themes that emerged as the analysis moved forward. The analysis was expedited by the discovery in July 2014 of the United Kingdom-based *Springfield! Springfield!* fan website which contains verbatim transcriptions of all *Modern Family* scripts. The site’s creator confirmed in an email to the author his diligence in ensuring the transcriptions are accurate.

Discussion

Modern Family’s treatment of intelligence begins with its title sequence. In it, the freeze-frame that ends the opening segment is contained in a large framed photograph held briefly by the Dunphys, the Pritchetts, and the Tucker-Pritchetts. In the sequence’s last shot, with all three families together, the photo is flipped over by Alex, with help from Haley, to reveal the *Modern Family* title

card featured on what now appears to be a small blackboard. The sequence suggests Alex has helped to write or is the keeper of the official history of the three families.

During *Modern Family*'s first season, Alex usually dresses frumpily. She is often seen with her arms folded. She wears either jeans or cargo pants, t-shirts featuring elaborate silk-screened images often too young for her, what appear to be Chuck Taylor sneakers, and, most notably, plaid button shirts with stripes of various colors that recall flannel shirts often worn by men. Her hair in early episodes is black, and recalls Morticia Addams of the popular 1960s sitcom *The Addams Family*. Peace signs appear frequently on her shirts. The symbol's link to the 1960s marginalizes Alex and her ideas as outdated and irrelevant. As befits a peace sign-wearing hippie, she is concerned with the environment; in "Moon Landing" (Wrubel & Winer, 2010), she and Luke collect bottles for recycling, with the money they receive going toward building a school in Africa.

Alex is often seen reading, doing homework, working at her laptop, or lugging around her cello and sports gear. She is often seen in the background of shots, with the primary action going on in front of her or elsewhere. Her intelligent assessments of Dunphy life are dismissed, at times ridiculed. She completes her schoolwork by herself. "Alex has never really been a kid," Claire says during a documentary segment (Williams & Koch, 2010) as the viewer sees Alex alone in her room, sitting on a beanbag chair in her room, books and materials surrounding her. When playing the role of observer (discussed later), Alex shows little emotion, as when Phil is writhing in pain due to a kidney stone (Lloyd & Spiller, 2010). "I'm going to be fine," he says, moaning. "We know Dad," Alex responds. "We don't know that. It's a miracle I'm standing up," Phil says, changing course. Alex nods, slightly amused by the drama. Later, comforting Phil, she tells him to feel better, but her look indicates Phil should just get over it, that removal of the stone is a simple procedure.

Alex purports to be uninterested in fashion. In "Come Fly With Me" (O'Shannon & Hudlin, 2009), Alex flatly rejects Claire's demand that she wear a dress to a wedding. "What – it's going to kill you to look like a girl for once?" Claire asks and then suggests she again borrow one of Haley's dresses, which reinforces the impression she could care less about being fashionable. "No – that sends an ugly message: that I'm Haley," Alex responds as her shoulders slump. She suggests that Claire worry more about Luke, who is not wearing pants.

We now turn to a discussion of the major themes revealed by the analysis. They take the form of perceptions of Alex that episodes suggest are held by the other members of the Dunphy, Pritchett, and Tucker-Pritchett clans.

Alex the Square The "hip/square dialectic" described by Quail (2011, p. 461) is quite evident in Alex's relationship with her older sister, Haley. Haley

chides Alex with predictions that her need to share her intelligence and her obsession with scholarly pursuits will lead to a life of loneliness. Haley dresses stylishly – low cut blouses, skinny jeans, and boots – while Alex, as noted earlier, dresses plainly. Alex claims to want no part of dressing like Haley. “I don’t want to look like Haley and her stupid friends,” she tells Jay’s wife, Gloria (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2009). When Gloria explains that she wears dresses and does not resemble Haley, Alex responds curtly, “You *are* (author’s italics) Haley.” Listening to Claire remind Alex of her laundry list of activities and their start times, Haley snidely asks, “doesn’t she also have no boys at forever?” (Lawson & Winer, 2010). When Alex claims, “the cello is more in demand in university orchestras,” Haley poses a question: “You know what’s not in demand? Girls who play in university orchestras” (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009a). Alex struggles to maneuver her cello case out of the house. In fact, Alex is often shown almost literally juggling her many activities as the family looks on.

Yet there are additional dimensions to the relationship that at first glance soften the marginalization of Alex’s intelligence. Haley’s lack of intelligence is a running comedic theme in the show. When Haley asks for \$40 and then admits it is for a dress – not a book as she had claimed – Alex chimes in, “I’d be more worried she couldn’t come up a single book title.” She then smiles as if to congratulate herself. When Haley concludes erroneously that Claire has agreed to allow her to attend a party rather than go to Jay and Gloria’s for a family gathering, Alex asks, “You really don’t understand what just happened there do you” (Lawson & Winer, 2009)? Alex needles Haley about her self-absorption. “I’m talking about me,” Haley says about a party to which she, not Claire, was invited (Lawson & Winer, 2009). “That’s unusual,” Alex says, again reading a book at the family’s kitchen table. Claire also bets Phil he will not be able to teach Haley – “our dumbest kid” – to use a new television remote in 20 minutes or less (Levitan & Winer, 2010).

Alex matches Haley jibe for jibe, especially as the first season goes on. After Haley’s “forever” comment, Alex fires back: “Don’t you have an eating disorder you need to attend to?” (Lawson & Winer, 2010). In “En Garde,” she proudly convinces Haley she can recharge her cell phone battery by rubbing it on her hair after telling her that it “probably just statically defracted.” (Zuker & Einhorn, 2009). Later, Claire reveals the joke to Haley, who calls Alex a “geek.” Alex quickly replies, her voice trailing ominously, “At least I didn’t give myself a bald spot” (Zuker & Einhorn, 2009). She later convinces Luke that Jay has only a short time to live (Lawson & Winer, 2009) and calls him an “idiot” for thinking his parents were chiding him for talking “black” – not “back” to them (Spiller & Lloyd, 2010). Alex also convinces Luke that a female friend of Phil’s who pays the family a visit in “Truth Be Told,” is really his mother and that if she likes him; “you’ll go live with her.” There is a distinct “shooting fish in a barrel” feel to Alex’s

machinations. She tortures them because she can. It is sport for her. When Haley reminds her that Luke prompted Alex's scheme by calling her a "dork to dork salesman," Alex says "The Empire Strikes Back" in a calm, cold, confident, evil voice (Lawson & Winer, 2010). Yet Alex's needling at times gives way to concern. Alex tries to provoke Haley by suggesting that Jungle Tanya, a zookeeper hired to entertain at Luke's birthday party, is coming on to Dylan. "You don't deserve this...hot reptile chick. You know, probably has her own apartment," she says (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009b). But her deception gives way when it becomes clear Jungle Tanya actually is coming on to Dylan.

Alex the Scold Alex can be a prude. When Haley complains Manny lustily stares at her during family gatherings, Alex blurts out with eyebrows raised, "maybe if you wore a bra" he would refrain from doing so. She takes pride in her ability as a tattletale (Lawson & Winer, 2009) and provocateur. When Haley announces Dylan – whom Claire does not like – is coming to Luke's birthday party, and Claire resists the idea, Alex acerbically notes that her sister "can't go 10 minutes without her boyfriend's tongue in her mouth," adding "it's like he's feeding a baby bird" (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009).

While she is treated like a party-pooper, her acerbic commentary at times serves as the family's only link to the truth. In "Up All Night," she calls Claire on dressing up for the firefighter who took Phil to the hospital for treatment of a kidney stone. "Those heels were really hot," she said, standing by Phil's bed (Lloyd & Spiller, 2010). She reminds Haley that she failed her driver's exam because she "drove into the bushes" (Levitan & Hudlin, 2010).

Yet Alex also enjoys stirring up trouble and is a gossip. In the show's pilot, Alex is disgusted that Haley has a boy in the room that she and Haley share. As she and Claire frost a cake, Alex wonders: "So you know if Haley got pregnant, would you ever pretend she has mono for a few months and like tell everyone the baby's yours?" Claire is taken aback as Alex rambles about a senior who was "out sick" (her skepticism evident in her tone) for several months "but Jenna Resnik swears she saw her breast-feeding in a coin co-op car wash." She asserts, "It would be really cool to see Haley that fat...and how awesome would it be to have a fake little brother who's really my nephew." Claire lets Alex know she is aware that her main goal is to "make trouble for your sister." Her rejoinder produces a raised eyebrow from Alex (Levitan, Lloyd, & Winer, 2010).

Alex the Placeholder Alex repeatedly references a desire to grow up and leave the Dunphy clan. She bides her time, waiting for the day she can start her own life. In "Run For Your Wife," she grunts as she carries her cello, a lacrosse stick, an equipment bag, and a backpack. "You movin' out?" asks Phil. Almost wistfully, she replies, "five more years" (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009).

When it comes to schoolwork, Phil and Claire pay little attention to Alex. In “Starry Night,” they scramble to help Luke and Haley complete their work. Meanwhile, Alex – again seated at the kitchen table away from the main action, announces to no one in particular – and a little condescendingly – that she finished her work “on my own and on time” (Zuker & Winer, 2010). Phil and Claire respond with “Not now, Alex.” While Alex is forced to attend Luke’s soccer game “because you love your brother,” in Claire’s words, the same reason is given for why Luke is not forced to attend Alex’s orchestra concerts (Zuker & Koch, 2010). Her activities are not important. In “Not In My House,” Alex sounds like an adult as she scolds Haley in their room for drawing on her poster. “Don’t be such a baby, it’s just some dude with weird hair.” Alex looks down at the poster in disbelief. “That’s Maya Angelou,” she asserts, then whispers, “you idiot.” An uninterested Haley replied, “Oh, sorry, I don’t follow the WNBA” (Williams & Koch, 2010). Haley has no idea who Angelou is, so Alex is left to enjoy her poetry alone.

Thus, the Dunphys know little about Alex’s life – or about Alex. In “Come Fly With Me,” Alex surprises Claire by agreeing to shop for a dress with Gloria. “Actually, I’d love to go,” she says. “See you don’t know what my thing is. You have no idea what my thing is” (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2010).

Alex the Spinster Alex expresses a mixture of disappointment and pride in her social ineptitude. When Claire wants to buy her a new pair of shoes for a dance, she firmly tells Claire she isn’t going, and then complains about “a bunch of immature boys trying to impress you with how cool they are when they’re really just a bunch of dorks.” She sounds like the preteen she is – not quite ready to interact with boys. But she steadfastly maintains the “no thanks” tone (Levitan & Hudlin, 2010). Later, she calls the dance a “freak show,” but after confidently assuring Claire she knows how to dance, she expresses her fear that no one will ask her. Claire comforts her, then gives her the same advice she had given Haley in preparation for her third driver’s test. “Even the advice I get is a hand-me-down,” Alex wryly observes (Levitan & Hudlin, 2010).

Out with Gloria to reluctantly shop for a dress, Alex reminds her that she is her grandmother. “Step-grandmother,” Gloria replies. “Anyways, today think of me as a girlfriend – two girls out for an afternoon of fun.” Looking longingly at Gloria, Alex says “What do you usually do with your girlfriends?” (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2010). After Alex criticizes Haley’s public displays of affection for Dylan (O’Shannon & Einhorn, 2010), Haley says, “Don’t be so jealous – I’m sure you’ll meet someone hot at computer camp.” Having accused Alex of reading her journal, Haley notes that “it contains the details of a life and you don’t have one” (Williams & Koch, 2010).

Alex the Teacher Alex Dunphy enjoys sharing her knowledge, even if it leaves her open to criticism – and even if other characters disregard it altogether. She spends a great deal of time and effort mastering information that those closest to her rarely want. Yet it matters greatly to Alex that she has the chance to display her knowledge rather than just accumulate it, as Conway (2008) suggests. Meanwhile, Alex is engaged in the world’s loneliest game of intellectual one-upmanship (Matheson, 2001; quoted in Conway, 2008, p. 158). Phil is criticized for talking down to Claire and Jay as they struggle with a television remote (Claire) and a printer (Claire, Jay), but since the information he dispenses has practical application, he is permitted to share it. The families’ frame of reference always takes center stage.

“Did you know fencing goes back to the 12th Century?” she asks in “En Garde.” Haley responds with her own question: “Do you know what’s even nerdier than fencing? Knowing when it began” (Zuker & Einhorn, 2010). When Gloria is unable to persuade Lily, then a baby, to fall asleep, Alex, annoyed, turns a page in her book and says “I have a theory,” as she looks angrily at Gloria (Lawson & Winer, 2009). Gloria does not ask Alex to expound on her theory; she continues with what she was doing. Alex theorizes without being judgmental that Luke has ADHD (Zuker & Winer, 2010). Again, her advice is disregarded. Later, carrying her laptop she rattles off the symptoms in a professorial tone. “I think that’s enough, Alex,” Claire admonishes (Zuker & Winer, 2010), again rejecting her attempt to apply actual facts to a situation. Yet it is Alex who listens to Luke’s presentation on Vincent Van Gogh that culminates in Luke’s conclusion that aliens are monitoring us and will someday “liquefy us and use us as fuel” (Zuker & Winer, 2010).

Even Alex is at times more concerned about what she can gain by flaunting her knowledge than with how it might help mankind. When asked what she is most afraid of, she replies, “global warming,” and then nods as if congratulating herself for getting the right answer. Her real worst fear? “Getting a B” (Levitan & Hudlin, 2010).

Alex the Parent Ironically, the Dunphys often need Alex’s intelligence. They believe in ghosts (Zuker & Einhorn, 2009). They consult spirits with a Ouija board (Lloyd & Spiller, 2010). Yet they do not include Alex until she is needed to solve a family crisis or to reprise her role as keeper of the family’s history. Meanwhile, Alex marvels at and countenances their “shenanigans” (Conway, 2008). But more important, she often helps her family find their way past them, despite the fact they do nothing but deride her intelligence.

In “En Garde,” having tired of Cam’s emulation of great film directors, they turn to Alex to record a skating routine that Mitchell and Claire never completed when they competed as teenagers. They later look at the video, now

posted online, over Alex's shoulder in the Dunphy kitchen. She chronicles events with accuracy, not with drama like Cam (Zucker & Einhorn, 2010). In "Undeck the Halls," Alex tells Phil and Claire that it was she who smoked and burned a hole in the couch after her attempt to orchestrate a *Spartacus*-like confession by all three of the kids. The attempt failed because she and Haley refused to confess, leaving Luke to take the blame. "I don't know what to believe with this kid," she says angrily (O'Shannon & Einhorn, 2010). Yet later, she sheepishly confessed to the act. "You can take my Christmas away, but don't take it from everyone else," she says. When it is revealed that a glass ornament caused the hole, Claire calls "stinking beautiful" (O'Shannon & Einhorn, 2010) Alex's attempt to save Christmas. Whether they learned anything from Alex's act is an open question.

In the middle of the first season, Alex contends in a documentary segment that the most irritating thing Phil and Claire say to her is that she should "act more like an adult." She says this to camera with an angry look, as if she hears it all the time (Spiller & Lloyd, 2010). Yet after the episode once again reveals the family's flaws and predilections, she asks "how hard could that be?" with a confident look. She provokes her siblings, often with chilling precision and detail, but is also positioned as the person who keeps the family from injury and demise. Sometimes the two coalesce. When Claire discovers a picture of a naked woman on the computer (Phil actually downloaded the image), Alex eagerly offers a negative assessment of Luke's character – "Did he lie? He lies all the time," she says in rapid-fire fashion – and advice on how to punish him. "A lot of parents are hitting again," she tells Claire in a near whisper (Williams & Koch, 2010). Later, she overhears Phil and Luke playing a hand slap-based game in his room. Thinking Phil is hitting Luke as punishment, she walks away from the door with a satisfied smile.

When Haley gets drunk with some other kids during the family's trip to Hawaii, it is Alex who tells Claire about the misdeed. "You're not going to like this as much as I do," (Corrigan, Walsh, & Levitan, 2010) she begins, pointing to herself. Her resignation at once again having to bring Phil and Claire up to speed turns into delight as she sits down at a table in the hotel's restaurant.

Even her digs are imbued with a "what I have to put up with" tone. Alex cannot comprehend why Phil would want to race Claire, a much stronger runner (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009a). When a zookeeper tells kids gathered at Luke's birthday party that a reptile eats "little boy brains," Alex says, "well, at least Luke has nothing to worry about." But her tone and body language suggest that she will eventually have to bail him out of some situation where intelligence fails him (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009b). *Modern Family's* pilot opens with Alex telling Phil and Claire in matter of fact fashion that Luke had again gotten his head stuck in the bannister. "I'm just going to say it," she says, "he needs to be seen by a specialist" (Levitan, Lloyd, & Winer, 2009). When Luke speculates that

it would be “cool to go to a school made of” the bottles they had recycled to build the school in Africa, Alex urges Phil and Claire to put him in a “special school,” then tilts her head as if to say “am I right?” (Wrubel & Winer, 2010).

Alex the “Typical” Teen Alex is justifiably proud of her abilities and accomplishments. But she yearns to fit in. She mimics her more popular friends act as she brusquely leaves Claire to go shopping at the mall (Zuker & Koch, 2010). But while Claire saw it as the moment when “my baby girl became a teenager,” Alex framed it initially as something she wanted to “get over with.” When Alex meets Claire later, she admits that the pressure she’s been feeling at school contributed to her foul mood – and then asks for money to go to a movie. Back with her friends, Alex can only look on in horror as Claire loudly reminds her to buy a training bra. “Teach her to screw with me,” Claire mutters (Zuker & Koch, 2010).

Rebuffing Gloria’s suggestion that she is beautiful, Alex says, nodding, “I’m not – but that’s OK. I’m the smart one.” She punctuates her self-assessment with a cocky look and shake of her head. (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2010). Yet when Gloria points out that a bus boy has been smiling at Alex, it is evident his attention makes her happy – as well as a little uncomfortable. When Alex decides to date, Gloria asserts, she will change her mind and wear a dress in order to “look beautiful” (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2010). Alex eventually buys a dress, proudly telling Claire “it’s not the end of the world” (O’Shannon & Hudlin, 2010). Alex finally does attend the dance referenced in an earlier section. As Claire talks in a voiceover about her fear that her kids won’t fit in, Alex seems happy at the dance; she confidently moves a boy’s hand from her waist to her shoulder (Levitan & Hudlin, 2010).

As the families wait in the airport for their flight to Hawaii, Alex and Haley notice a young man sketching. Mooning for a boy brings them together; for once, they are partners in crime. Alex wonders out loud if he was “sketching us,” to which Haley responds, “yeah...us,” noting Alex’s frumpy attire that included a large military-style hat and a flannel hoodie. Later, after it is revealed that Haley’s “soulmate” is in the eighth grade, Alex – again dressed as though she was 20 or 30 years older – falls, laughing, off the couch during a documentary segment (O’Shannon, Wrubel, & Winer, 2010).

When Alex interacts on the family’s terms – in more typical family situations – harmony is often achieved. She happily takes part in preparing French waffle cakes for Phil’s birthday (Lawson, Herschlag, McCarthy, Lawson, & Sullivan, 2010); she agrees with Phil on the way home from Hawaii that his assistant, Vicki, would be perfect for Phil if Claire died (Corrigan, Walsh, & Levitan, 2010). But if Alex attempts to elaborate on or elucidate a situation, she is shut down. In “Coal Digger” (Lloyd & Winer, 2009), she sits down next to Jay to

watch a football game. “I like football – Haley hates it, which is weird because it’s all boys and there’s no reading required.” Jay has his arm around her, but misses her point. When she goes on to explain that Haley spends a great deal of time on her hair in the morning, Jay covers her mouth (Lloyd & Winer, 2009). At Luke’s birthday party, Alex admires the functionality of Claire’s unpopular comb sheathes, but is shot down when Phil makes fun of them (Corrigan, Walsh, & Winer, 2009).

Conclusions

A Biblical scholar might see in Alex Dunphy the sibling of the Prodigal Son; she’s smart, works hard to the point of exhaustion, and excels at school, but has to endure the celebrations which mark her family’s attempts to make it through the day trusting their “gut” and suffering for it. She stands by as they manipulate each other, act insensitively, and are just plain stupid in certain situations. Alex’s comments about their antics come off as jokes that only she laughs at, an impression heightened by the fact the other characters are off in their own world as Alex congratulates herself for her perspicacity. When the Dunphys do listen, they reject her advice, rejections made more impactful to the audience by the fact Alex is a strident know-it-all. As her family members celebrate their circuitous solutions, Alex remains cordoned off with her books to nurture her obsession with a form of intelligence that has no application in the lives of Phil, Claire, Haley, and Luke. Alex spends a lot of time doing her homework and studying, but in the first season of *Modern Family* is never shown at school. And perhaps most significantly, Alex rarely takes part in the faux interview segments. She is thereby deprived of opportunities for reflection – and for the audience to perhaps validate how she deals with her family.

But while Phil, Claire, Haley, and Luke usually dismiss Alex’s intelligence as an annoyance, they end up often calling on her to save them from their own stupidity and superstition. Thus, like Lisa Simpson, Alex is “most likeable when she uses her intelligence to help solve problems” (Conway, 2008, p. 149). But once she does help them, she resumes her work – alone, often at the dining room table or in her room. Alex cannot simultaneously be smart *and* accepted by her family. She engages in fully realized interactions with her parents only when she acts like a typical teenager (Zuker & Koch, 2010). In these situations, Alex leaves her intelligence behind, which suggests a reading of intelligence as something to be hidden – cancelled out in the name of normalcy.

While the perspectives offered in this essay emanate from *Modern Family*’s first season, the episodes emphatically assert that for Alex, being a nerd, despite her often confident self-identification as one, is not at this stage in her life

“a good thing to be” (Walker & Sturgis, 2008, p. 211). Life with the Dunphys is more “disavowal” than “affirmation” of Alex as nerd (Quail, 2011, p. 465).

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