

# Paradigm Shift

Times have changed. So has Television. Get on the bandwagon.

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We all want characters we can relate to, that's why the idea of the empty shell is so pervasive in entertainment. This term refers to a main character who is a blank canvas of personality, with no traits being too strong to distinguish them too much from any given viewer so the audience can attribute their own traits to the character and enjoy the relatability. This is why franchises like *Harry Potter* work so well. Harry's two best friends, Ron and Hermione, are endlessly interesting, so we put ourselves in Harry's shoes to imagine spending time with these fascinating characters.



Picture from IMDb

Neutrality has its limits, though. In order for a character to be relatable they have to at least share motivations with the audience. Take a look at one of the most famous teen films for example. In *Mean Girls* (2004), the main character is an underdog who is motivated to bring down the mean girl. Throughout the chaos that ensues, however, it becomes clear that the underlying motivation may all along have been popularity. Cady may have only enlisted in the hero's journey for the love of a boy the mean girl in charge, Regina George, was dating.

Now let's take a look at the 2019 film *Booksmart*. Sure, the characters are still very much interested in love and being accepted, but the motivations have changed. The characters are both smart girls who were accepted into their dream colleges. One of the main characters is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and her story revolves around her fierce friendship. The narrative here is one of female empowerment rather than competition.

Now, this is not to say that everything made before 2019 ought to be condemned as toxic. But it is undeniable that the audience's shifting demands for certain storylines is evident and noteworthy.

With the #MeToo movement and a new wave of political activism, it's clear that something has changed, and that voices that have long been silenced are finally being heard.



Picture from IMDb

This claim is true of television as well. In 2009 the CW network launched its most popular show *The Vampire Diaries*, based on a book series of the same name by L. J. Smith. The show then went on to have a successful eight seasons on the CW, resulting in two popular spin-offs. One of these spin-offs, *Legacies*, came from the same network and producer as *The Vampire Diaries*, but has a very different feel.

In 2009, a main character with one token POC friend acting as a damsel in distress, needing to be rescued by the various stronger and more interesting men, was a common and acceptable heroine trope. But it's hard to imagine Elena Gilbert as a compelling main character on a TV show today.

An audience simply cannot live through the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements without learning a thing or two. And it is becoming more and more apparent that the values of our society as a whole have changed.

Take *Legacies* for instance. Yes, every actor on the show is still conventionally attractive and everyone speaks with perfect wit and sarcasm, but a certain suspension of disbelief is required in film and TV. What I want to focus on is Hope Mikaelson, the magical tribrid baby that slays a dragon without the help of the men around her. Hope is a hero in her own right. The men around her are powerful and good as well, but her heroism doesn't *depend* on theirs. Lizzie Saltzman, another character on the show, has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, while her sister, Josie, is a control freak who is always trying to keep everyone happy. She also happens to be bisexual. This is a dramatic shift from the two token Lesbians in that one season of *TVD* who got killed off the second they'd served their plot purposes.

In just over ten years television has changed significantly, and yet the world of *Legacies* is the same one we saw in *TVD*. It's just better. More inclusive, and I'd dare to say a more realistic reflection of our society. We are seeing TV veterans like Julie Plec write these nuanced characters because they are finally allowed to, because there is a demand for them, and because what worked fifteen years ago will not work today.

The bottom line is that TV is here, it's feminist, it's colored, it's queer, and we're all here for it!