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Millennial Television: The Representation of Dysfunctional Parenting in *Rick and Morty* (2013-)

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Abstract

The postmodern TV series *Rick and Morty* has quickly become a popular choice among the Millennial generation. Academically, it has been analysed from a mostly philosophical approach, leaving a lot to say regarding its impact on media and culture studies. Thus, the aim of this essay is to study how *Rick and Morty* portrays the dysfunctional family, focusing on the parental figures of Rick, Beth, and Jerry. These characters present toxic traits throughout all three seasons of the series and contribute to the dysfunctionality of the family. The results of the analysis show how the series' nihilistic approach to life resonates with the Millennial generation, as does its representation of the dysfunctional family. This dysfunctionality is related to detrimental aspects of modern society such as toxic masculinities, emasculation of father figures and problematic motherhoods.

Keywords: millennial, family, postmodernism, motherhood, masculinity

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1. Introduction

When contemplating the 1920s, most think of the Roaring Twenties in America, its dramatic changes in economy, feminism and jazz, but one of the most influential discoveries of this period was actually one presented in a small laboratory in Soho, London. On the 26th January 1926, the Scottish electrical engineer, John Baird, presented a rudimentary prototype of a television to a group of scientists from the Royal Institution (Burns 1998, 3). In retrospect, this was the starting point of something that would become an essential part of society because “one of the forms of traditional mass media that can be seen as a force in public spheres and the formation of public opinion is television” (Sturken and Cartwright 2004, 179). Throughout the years, television slowly began to play a big part in family life, and the popularity of television over other examples of mass media, has made it “become [the American] nation’s (and increasingly the world’s) most common and constant learning environment. It both mirrors and leads society” (Signorielli and Morgan 2009, 335). The vast majority of media consumers nowadays are Millennials, a generation “unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse” (Howe and Strauss 2000, 4). This multiculturalism found in the Millennial generation is a byproduct of globalization and, even though migrations and diasporas have been taking place for centuries, these youths have been brought up in a time in which the technological and communicational side of globalization boomed.

The emergence of new methods to watch television shows such as online streaming, video on demand, and mobile applications have shaped the way that millennials consume cultural products. Before, viewers were limited to when and how they were able to watch their favourite shows and, even though sitting down in front of the television set may not be as common as before, this more traditional way of watching TV has not yet completely faded away. Even so, it has influenced the shows that millennials are more inclined to view, as not all viewers are able to follow set programming schedules because “daily life can be unpredictable and, when it is the television schedule is not equipped to allow for it” (Evans 2011, 152). Therefore, alternative methods of watching TV, such as downloading and streaming, are “seen as a way to bend and adapt the otherwise inflexible temporal structure of television to the viewer’s own ends” (152). It is understandable why there has been a growth in TV series that do not necessarily follow a linear narrative, which is a popular feature of most adult cartoons such as *Rick and Morty*.

Rick and Morty, created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland, first premiered in 2013. Its total of three seasons have produced recent interest in academic fields such as philosophy (Evans 2015; Miranda 2017; Koltun 2018; Kitchen 2019) and politics (Miranda 2017). They mostly focus on analysing Rick's existential nihilism, and how it relates to other specific philosophical movements such as Nietzsche's reflection on what is a true "educator", Nagel and Camus's views on absurdism, and Fromm's criticism of the capitalist society and its alienation of man. Since these publications focus on philosophical aspects of the TV series, it is important to analyse the implications of *Rick and Morty* in a different field of study such as media culture. As previously mentioned, television plays an important role in representing the Millennial society, and mass media "[works] in unison to generate specific dominant or popular representations of events, people, and places, whether these events are fictional, actual, or somewhere in between" (Sturken and Cartwright 2004, 152). So how exactly does *Rick and Morty* portray the Millennial family? The postmodern TV show *Rick and Morty* presents the Millennial viewer with a dysfunctional family structure, which is corrupted by its toxic family members Rick, Jerry and Beth, and their detrimental actions.

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to explore the dysfunctionality of the family through the main parental characters in the three seasons of *Rick and Morty*. There are numerous ways to approach the study of the family, but this paper will consist of a critical analysis from a postmodern view of media culture following various theoretical frameworks of masculinity: toxic masculinity, following the definition used by Sculos (2017b); and hegemonic masculinity, as delineated by Connell (1995). Both of these concepts are imperative aspects of the dysfunctional family, as described by Deborah Chambers (2001). First, the essay will cover the concept of Millennials and then how postmodern television such as *Rick and Morty* appeal to this generation, moving on to the analysis of Rick, Jerry and Beth, and finally, how their dysfunctional parenting affects Summer and Morty.

2. *Rick and Morty*: Millennial Television

Millennials, a diverse generation with such varied ideologies, indulge themselves in postmodern television. They do so because "many postmodern image texts, be they television shows, films or advertisements, have more than one preferred reading and may be interpreted by viewers in different ways (Sturken and Cartwright 2004, 253). Thus, Millennials find ways to identify themselves one way or another with these postmodern TV shows, as there is

always some aspects of the show that they can connect with personally. According to Koltun, *Rick and Morty* is a reflection of their very own beliefs, and “the absurdist humor of *Rick and Morty* provides the millennial generation with a much-needed trivialization of all the stressful factors in their lives. [...] Rick and Morty’s philosophy encourages disenchanting youth to respond to that which they cannot change with irony, laughter, and a sense of absurdity” (2018, 103). The youths that have been captivated by *Rick and Morty*’s narrative have contributed to the series winning multiple awards in 2018, including an Emmy for “Outstanding Animated Program” and also “Best Animated Series” for Critics’ Choice Television Awards, among numerous other nominations. But there is something else than the show’s dark humour and interdimensional adventures that has the Millennial viewer hooked.

While watching *Rick and Morty*, it is clear that it is not just another meaningless show the purpose of which is solely to entertain. It is so popular because the way in which they “satirize and belittle traditional social constructs such as the institutions of marriage, family, religion, and government” (Koltun 2018, 102) represents millennials’ feelings towards modern society, seeing as they “have grown up in a world that promised them everything but neglected to deliver” (102). Even the Millennial character, Summer, nonchalantly states that her “generation gets traumatized for breakfast” (McMahan 2017a, 00:25). Therefore, this psychological connection with the show means that Millennials identify themselves with *Rick and Morty*’s ideologies and messages about their society. They see themselves reflected in the discourses portrayed in the show and agree with the criticisms it makes. But are the TV series’ discourses on family detrimental to the viewer or are they solely a representation of the vast diversity found in modern society?

3. Dysfunctional Families

The notion of family has always been an important topic in ideological discourses and, when thinking of the family structure, the most common concept that comes to mind is that of the “nuclear family.” This family structure consists of two parents of opposite genders and their children. It has been represented this way even since the 17th and 18th centuries because it was essential for the diffusion of the white Western ideology during the expansion of colonialism. During the 21st century, the way in which families are portrayed has begun to change, and there is a growing representation of those who do not comply with these traditional ideologies. Families are more diverse than before, and consumers are presented

with real families that can be found in today's society, this is because there has been a shift in the perception of families and "shifts in the roles of fathers, mothers, and the changing emphasis on children in television programming" (Reimers 2003, 120) which "reflect changing demographics" (120). Taking into account the popularity of the television show *Rick and Morty* among the Millennial generation, it can be considered a good starting point to study what ideals modern television convey to the younger generations.

At a first glance, *Rick and Morty* portrays a rather traditional nuclear family, it is formed by: Jerry, the father; Beth, the mother; Summer, the teenage daughter; and Morty, the teenage son. The main difference between their family and the typical nuclear family is that they also include Rick, Beth's father, in their family structure. The plot does not revolve around the whole family, but it mainly focuses on the space adventures that Rick and Morty embark on together, leaving behind the rest of the family members for the majority of the episodes. This aspect in itself already presents the viewer with a fragmented family, some of the members are given more importance than others. Even so, it is essential to analyse each member individually, as every one of them present their own qualities that contribute to the family image that *Rick and Morty* portrays.

3.1. Rick's Toxic Masculinity

What characterises Rick is his intelligence, cynical personality, and indifference towards life. He is the main character of the TV show and occupies the majority of the screen time throughout the three seasons; therefore, he makes the biggest impact on the audience. In the first season of *Rick and Morty*, he establishes what seems to be a cheerful catchphrase: "Wubba lubba dub dub"; which, to any viewer, means absolute nonsense but, in the last episode of the season, the viewer finds out the real meaning is actually "I am in great pain, please help me." Thus, the viewer realises Rick may not be as carefree as they first thought and that both the TV show and main character are more complex than what they first appeared to be. He masks his more emotional side with a sarcastic facade and attacks other characters who do show theirs. This is a clear indicator of his toxic masculinity because he takes part in what Sculos believes to be "the toxicity of contemporary masculinity" (2017a, 5) which is to think that "to be a man is to never be weak or naïve. To be a man is to be in control" (5). These aspects of his personality also lead his family to believe that he has no emotional ties to them and is indifferent to their fate. Morty, as the character who shares the

most time with Rick and knows him the best, tries to convince the others of his grandfather's detrimental character. He tells Summer that Rick "bails on everybody! He bailed on Mom when she was a kid! [...] And in case I never made this clear to you, Summer, he bailed on you. He left you to rot in a world that he ruined because he doesn't care! Because nobody's special to him, Summer, not even himself" (McMahan 2017b, 04:50). Even so, the family still validate his toxic behaviour, especially Beth, who has a deep fear that Rick is going to abandon her again as he has done so before.

Rick's toxicity is mostly taken out on Jerry, who is often the butt of Rick's jokes; he is belittled and made fun of for no other reason than being Beth's husband. There is a constant confrontation between the two men in the family, Rick feels that Jerry is not good enough for his daughter and makes sure he knows so on various occasions. After Jerry loses his job, Rick's opinion of him deteriorates even more, as does his snide comments. In "The Wedding Squanchers", when someone knocks on the door, he says: "Uh... Why don't you get it, Jerry? You're the man of the house and you don't have a job" (Kauffman 2015, 00:12). After being invited to a wedding, Rick refuses to go because "weddings are basically funerals with cake. If I wanted to watch someone throw their life away, I'd hang out with Jerry all day" (00:56). He considers Jerry's masculinity subordinate as opposed to his own hegemonic masculinity, proving how men, "within a society that may be characterized as 'patriarchal', may experience subordinations, stigmatizations or marginalizations as a consequence of their sexuality, ethnic identity, class position, religion, or marital status" (Hearn and Morgan 2015, 11). This marginalization that Rick imparts on Jerry is because of his own concept of what "being a man" is supposed to be; Rick promotes this aspect of toxic masculinity by depreciating Jerry as a man because he is unable to adopt the role of breadwinner—which Beth is forced to assume.

Even though he is constantly criticized by Rick, Jerry is one of the only characters who takes a stand against the rest of the family's meekness when dealing with him. This is interesting because he is the only person who does not share a blood relation with Rick. The whole family suffer and are forced to go through numerous traumatic experiences because of Rick, yet they still stand up for him because he is part of their family. In "The Wedding Squanchers", they are forced to move to a different planet because of Rick and the conversation that entails between the family shows the clear division between them:

JERRY. Why are we doing this for someone that would never do anything for anyone but himself?

MORTY. That's not the point, Dad. We love Rick. For...for...for the most part.

SUMMER. Yeah, you don't love people in hopes of a reward, Dad. You love them unconditionally.

BETH. That's very good, kids. I'm proud of you.

JERRY. OK, so let me get this straight. For the rest of your lives, no matter how much it hurts you, no matter how much it destroys our children's futures, we're gonna do whatever Rick wants, whenever he wants?

MORTY, SUMMER AND BETH. Yes. (Kauffman 2015, 16:50)

In this instance, it is clear that Rick is not only toxic to himself, to Jerry, but also to his own family. He creates a divide between them and then stands aside, allowing them to choose between himself and Jerry, which results in Beth and Jerry's separation. Both parents recognise that Rick's actions are detrimental to all of them, but Beth chooses to side with her father rather than with her husband. Summer and Morty mimic what their mother does, siding with her to receive her approval and distancing themselves from their father.

Rick's toxic masculinity is not the only thing that he openly shares with his family, he also shares his cynical views on concepts such as love, marriage, education, and the meaning of life itself. Rick is egocentric and conceited and, because of his superior intelligence, he believes he knows just about everything. He takes Morty out of school so he can accompany him on his intergalactic adventures which inevitably takes a toll on his grandson's grades. When confronted by Jerry, Rick tells him how school is "a waste of time" and "not a place for smart people" (Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland 2013, 03:39). Even during his best friend's wedding, Rick has no respect for anyone else's feelings, he pushes his toxic thoughts about love onto those present while making his best man's speech; he tells them that if he is the smartest man in the universe and cannot make a marriage work, then it is most likely a lie that everyone tells themselves because they are too afraid to die alone (Kauffman 2015, 07:56). It is possible that Rick's pessimism is due to his separation from his wife, it is also possible that he has always been this way, but by pushing it onto other characters he is the reason for larger rifts between the already dysfunctional family in *Rick and Morty*.

Thus, with Rick, *Rick and Morty* problematises toxic masculinity commonly found in dysfunctional families. He represents the male figure who represses his emotions and

criticizes those who share theirs because they are not ‘manly’ traits. There is a specific conversation that Rick initiates with Morty while in a drunken stupor that sums up his role in the family:

RICK. We’ve got adventures to go on, Morty, just you and me...and sometimes your sister and sometimes your mom, but never your dad. You wanna know why, Morty? Because he crossed me. [...] First thing that’s different: no more Dad, Morty. He threatened to turn me in to the government, so I made him and the government go away. I’ve re-[burps]-placed them both as the de facto patriarch of your family and your universe. [...] I just took over the family, Morty. (McMahan 2017b, 21:03)

Even Rick acknowledges that it is his return to the family that disrupts their reality, he is a negative influence on both Beth and Jerry’s marriage and their teenage children. He is allowed to wreak havoc with no consequences because he establishes himself as the patriarchal figure of the family, who is not to be questioned. This intense interaction between Rick and his grandson is then lessened by the use of postmodernist humour. Rick starts talking erratically about his love for McDonald’s special edition *Mulan* szechuan sauce which he says is what drives him to do the things he does. This absurd humour turns something rather dark and twisted into something comical, allowing the Millennial viewer to trivialize this situation which represents negative aspects of society.

3.2. Jerry’s Emasculation as a Father Figure

In *Rick and Morty*, Jerry may work as a trope for an emasculated father figure. He is pushed out of his paternal role in the family because of Rick’s return. Jerry’s subordinate masculinity is overpowered by Rick’s dominant hegemonic masculinity, which makes Jerry feel useless as a father and as a husband (Harmon, Ridley and Roiland 2015, 09:30; 14:47; Ridley 2017, 01:38; McMahan 2017a, 19:37). The presence of another male figure in the family distances him further from his family, which makes him even more insecure and resentful; this is normal because “men who find it difficult or objectionable to fit into the patterns of traditional masculinity often find themselves castigated and alienated” (Craig 1992, 3). He craves to reestablish this connection with his family but the closer the others get to Rick, the further they distance themselves from Jerry.

In “M. Night Shaym-Aliens!”, Jerry finally feels accepted and valued to then find out that it had all been part of a simulated reality. Jerry is placed there without him even realising

that the robot-like interactions and glitches are obvious signs of the hyperreality he is experiencing. He goes to work to sell an advertising pitch, succeeds, and is even presented with an award for his work. In his speech he says: “today was the best day of my life, but, the truth is, it’s more meaningful that that [...] I am...finally complete!” (Kauffman 2014, 14:44). As soon as he finishes his speech, the simulation disappears and he is left crestfallen when he realises that none of it was not real. When he returns back to reality, he tries to sell the same pitch but his real bosses fire him. This moment becomes the starting point of Jerry’s downward spiral because “the importance of the family to white male identity is confirmed at the crucial moment when the husband of the family loses his job, is disempowered, and can no longer claim his position as ‘head of the family’ [or] breadwinner” (Chambers 2001, 111). Thus, the *Rick and Morty* viewer perceives how Jerry is ridiculed because of his inability to “be a man”, a concept that devalues the subordinate masculinities found in heteropatriarchal societies and legitimises hegemonic masculinity.

The TV series also opposes subordinate and hegemonic masculinities by making Jerry compete with Rick. According to Beynon, there are four discursive themes that occur in the American and British concepts of masculinity: theme 1, the “new man” and the “old man”; theme 2, “men running wild”; theme 3, emasculated men; and theme 4, men as victims and aggressors (2002, 124). *Rick and Morty* not only portrays two of the four main themes in masculinity, but also contrasts them in the TV series. Rick may be considered part of theme 2, “men running wild”, which naturalises “a fear of a rampant, untamed masculinity, of men running wild, and either behaving in an irresponsible way sexually and, thereafter, failing to take seriously their responsibilities as fathers” (128-129). Jerry, however, forms part of theme 3, “emasculated men”, which focuses on “the alleged utter incompetence of men, how hopeless and infantile they are, and how vulnerable and hollow is contemporary masculinity” (134). The opposition of these two masculinity tropes is clear in “Something Ricked This Way Comes”, when Morty turns to Rick for help with his science project instead of Jerry:

JERRY. Well. I mean, traditionally, science fairs are a father son thing.

RICK. Well, scientifically, traditions are an idiot thing.

BETH. Morty, I think it will be fun for you to work on a science project with your *dad*¹.

(McMahan 2014, 00:16)

¹ Emphasis mine.

In this moment, Beth appears to support Jerry but, while saying it, she texts Morty: “Your father is insecure about his intelligence” (00:26). Jerry is evidently portrayed as incompetent while Rick does not even take the situation seriously. During the whole episode, Jerry is adamant that Pluto is a planet and is scared that Morty is going to “go find Rick and go over [his] head about Pluto” (04:01). First, Jerry felt emasculated as a father when his son asked someone else for help with a science project and then, he is constantly worrying that his own son will undermine him by asking someone more knowledgeable—in this case, Rick—for help.

Jerry’s fragile masculinity deteriorates even more because of the way he is treated by those around him. After Jerry and Beth separate, Rick still unrelentlessly attacks Jerry’s self-esteem. Jerry accuses Rick of being self-righteous and taking his family away from him and a backlash from Rick ensues:

RICK. You act like prey, but you’re a predator! You use pity to lure in your victims! That’s how you survive! I survive because I know everything [...] and you survive because people think, ‘Oh, this poor piece of [bleep]. He never gets a break. I can’t stand the deafening silent wails of his wilting soul. I guess I’ll hire him or marry him. (Ridley 2017, 12:27)

This scene presents the epitome of the opposition between the two main masculinities in the series. Even though Rick is one of the most toxic characters in the series, he accuses Jerry of being the real reason for the dysfunctional family. Rick believes that Jerry is the one who destroyed any chance Beth had of succeeding in life by making her pity him enough to agree to marry and form a family with him. This dominance of hegemonic masculinity over Jerry’s subordinate masculinity is something that Millennial viewers can easily identify with because it is something ingrained in contemporary society. Even though they may recognise it as something detrimental to the concept of masculinity, belittling it allows them to deal with these common aspects of their world.

3.3. Beth’s Dysfunctional Motherhood

Beth’s whole narrative as a possibly dysfunctional mother revolves around Rick and Jerry and the role they have in her life. The viewer is presented with no insight into her background story, and the only references to her childhood are about Rick having been an absent father. When representing motherhood, “mothers are condemned either as a passive background

presence or as a dark threat to patriarchy, that is, to ‘the family’” (Chambers 2001, 99) and, in the case of *Rick and Morty*, Beth is a threat to the family because of her need to content her father. She puts Rick before her marriage and children and, even though she sees that Rick can be a negative influence on her family structure, she allows him to run wild and impose his toxic traits on those around him. Beth does this because Rick had always been an absent father and, even though she presents a more contemporary version of the mother—one who takes on a more dominant role in the family as the breadwinner—her agency as a character in the TV series still depends on the males surrounding her. Barbara Rothman believes that “men control women as daughters, much as they control their sons, but they also control women as the mothers of men’s children” (1998, 21). Rick, as Beth’s father, exerted great control over Beth when she was younger for he was the only male role model that she had growing up. Taking into account Rick’s personality, it would be expected that Beth grow up to be just as toxic and, while attending a family therapy session, the therapist is the one to tell Beth the harsh truth:

THERAPIST. I think it’s possible that you and your father have a very specific dynamic. I don’t think it’s one that rewards emotion or vulnerability. I think it may punish them. I think it’s possible that dynamic eroded your marriage and is infecting your kids with a tendency to misdirect their feelings.

BETH. [bleep] you.

MORTY AND SUMMER. Mom!

BETH. [bleep] both of you, too. (Gao 2017, 09:44)

This is a turning point for Beth and, even though she retaliates against the therapist and her children by swearing at them, it is because she knows that the therapist is right: Rick’s toxicity has been rubbing off on her and she has become selfish, not putting her priorities as a mother before her feelings as a daughter.

The phrase “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” is fitting of Beth’s role in her family and the only characters to try to make her realise this are Rick and Morty. Women who experience a damaged father-daughter relationship find “their self-image, their feminine identity, their relation to masculinity, and their functioning in the world [to be] frequently damaged” (Leonard 1990, 3) this is because “traditionally, the father [...] projects ideals for his daughter. He provides a model for authority, responsibility, decision-making, objectivity, order, and discipline” (11). Even so, Rick may have provided an inadequate and toxic

childhood for Beth, but she knows deep down that she is still capable of choosing for herself what type of woman she is going to be. Morty makes her realise just how much like her father she has become when he tries helping her to fix a broken machine. Like Rick, she is adamant that she can fix the problem herself and Morty shouts at her: “Like father, like [bleep] damn daughter! You want to be like Rick? Congratulations! You’re just as arrogant and just as irresponsible! [...] Kissing Rick’s ass isn’t gonna help keep him around, Mom. But it will help you lose everyone else” (Ridley 2017, 14:30). At first, she tries to blame Rick for her actions, and asks him why he is not capable of admitting he is a bad father (McMahan 2017a, 10:20) but, as always, Rick is frank with his daughter and tells her: “Oh, dude, no. No, bad father all the way to the max over here. I’m a [bleep] nutcase. And the acorn plopped straight down, baby” (10:26). Beth finally accepts the truth: that she has followed in the footsteps of her father who she had always been criticising. This is a moment of realization for her and she has an important conversation with her father:

BETH. Dad? I feel like I’ve spent my life pretending you’re a great guy, and trying to be like you, and the ugly truth has always been...

RICK. That I’m not that great a guy and you’re exactly like me.

[...]

BETH. Dad, I’m out of excuses to not be who I am. So, who am I? What do I do?

RICK. My advice, take off. Put a saddle on your universe let it kick itself out.

BETH. I can’t do that. The kids, Jerry, my job and, as much as I hate to admit it, ABC’s ‘The Bachelor.’ (McMahan 2017a, 17:01)

Here, the viewer is presented with a message of acceptance: Beth finally realises that her relationship with her father is dysfunctional, and that she too is taking on a dysfunctional role with her children. The only difference between Beth and Rick is that she declines Rick’s offer to abandon her family and live her life doing whatever she pleases. In this moment, Beth chooses to reject toxicity and try to become a better wife and mother, something that Rick was never able to do. As his daughter, she has learned from his mistakes, she personally knows what it is like to have a dysfunctional parent and does not desire this for her own children. In this last season of *Rick and Morty*, Beth begins to redeem herself: she recognizes her toxic role in the family and makes the decision to become a better parent, starting her process towards functional parenting.

3.4. Effect of Dysfunctional Parenting on Summer and Morty

After analysing the dysfunctionality of the family's parenting, it is clear that both Morty and Summer are two teenagers who have grown up surrounded by a lot more toxicity than most. Whether it is worrying about the near-death experiences they suffer when on intergalactic adventures with Rick or the separation of their parents which, compared to the former, can almost seem trivial and insignificant. These years of their lives are already a hard period for any teenager, and adding an immense amount of conflict and stress to their lives takes a toll on them. This can be detrimental to them because "through particular child-rearing practices, parents can have a substantial impact on adolescent behaviors of major concern to adults, such as school achievement patterns, drug use and deviance, and self-concept" (Brown *et al* 1993, 468). Even Jerry and Beth realise the consequences of their parenting styles when Morty has a baby with a sex robot and asks:

MORTY. What do I do if it cries?

BETH. Then you put it down and let it cry itself out.

JERRY. Yeah, right. We tried that technique on Summer and she's gonna end up stripping. [...] [talking to alien baby] Isn't she? Yes, she is. She's gonna strip for attention because she was denied it.

BETH. Stop filling it with your own insecurity, you're gonna turn it into Mort- uhh [clears throat] more of you. (Acosta and Randolph 2014, 05:28)

Thus, we see how the two parents know that Morty is an insecure and anxious, and Summer is self-conscious and attention-seeking because of the ways they have been brought up. They acknowledge their errors yet they do nothing to change them. What is added to this dysfunctional bringing up is the introduction of Rick to the family who, as previously mentioned, has no problem forcing his toxic ideas onto others.

The space adventures with Rick are enough to affect Morty and Summer's psychological state. On the one hand, Summer feels inferior because she is hardly ever taken on the adventures, she even confronts Rick multiple times about his sexist attitude but is dismissed immediately (Acosta and Randolph 2014, 04:53; 06:35; Roiland 2014, 06:59; and McMahan 2014, 19:46). On the other hand, Morty, even though he is included in the adventures, is extremely disturbed by what he experiences, he even says to Rick: "You know what, Rick? That's it! I'm done with these insane adventures. That was really traumatising! I quit! I'm out!" (Ridley 2014, 01:25). But Rick still uses his authoritative patriarchal position

in the family to convince him to carry on with them. This eventually ends in the two children fighting because of Rick's excessive attention given to Morty and not to Summer; Rick deals with this insecurity of theirs in his characteristically toxic way by saying: "I know the two of you are very different from each other in a lot of ways, but you have to understand that as far as Grandpa's concerned, you're both pieces of shit. Yeah, I can prove it mathematically. Actually, let me grab my whiteboard" (Roller 2015, 07:21) . He continues to write down his calculations and finishes by saying: "So, in conclusion, you're both equally mercurial, overly sensitive, clingy, hysterical, bird-brained homunculi and I honestly can't even tell the two of you apart half the time because I don't go by height or age, I go by amount of pain in my ass, which makes you both identical" (08:41). Technically, Rick solves this feeling of inequality between the two children by stating that, in his eyes, they are both equally annoying. Even so, morally, they are degraded and insulted, which is not a functional way to deal with their problems. This shows how Rick does sometimes end up teaching them a lesson but he still uses his toxicity to do so, hurting his grandchildren's feelings in the process.

Morty's insecurities created by dysfunctional parenting are also augmented by Rick's toxicity. While trying to talk to his father about some of his girl problems, Rick intervenes and tells him that he should not be getting advice from his father because his marriage is hanging from a thread, he concludes with what he thinks about love:

RICK. [...] "Listen, Morty, I hate to break it to you, but what people call [air quoting] 'love', is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed. It hits hard, Morty, then it slowly fades, leaving you stranded in a failing marriage. I did it. Your parents are gonna do it. Break the cycle, Morty. Rise above. Focus on science. (Roiland 2014, 01:52)

This in itself is enough to make Morty worry, he is old enough to realise that his parents have been having problems and Rick only magnifies any negative feelings that Morty has about his parents' relationship. Anything that he had been fretting about before now seems meaningless compared to the possible separation of his own parents. Summer also mirrors these negative feelings towards her parents' relationship and, while they are fighting about what they would be doing if Beth had gotten an abortion and they were not been stuck together because of the children, Summer exclaims: "Thank you guys so much! It's a real treat to be raised by parents that force themselves to be together instead of being happy!" (Kauffman and Roiland 2014, 08:18). Unfortunately, Summer and Morty's fears are confirmed and Beth and Jerry do end up

separating for a while. As happens with any separation within the family, “most family members experience substantial psychological and emotional disturbance around the time of divorce” (Lamb 1999, 126). Summer and Morty are going through a possibly delicate time of their lives, yet they prefer to act as if they have no problem with it by constantly telling Jerry to move on from Beth (McMahan 2017a, 06:26). Even so, in one way or another they end up manifesting their distress: Morty wets himself in history class and Summer is caught inhaling pottery glaze in the art room (Gao 2017, 06:11). As a family, they are advised by the principal to attend psychological counseling and, when they do, Beth tells the therapist: “They’re just angry at me for divorcing their father” (13:58). Summer contradicts her and refuses to acknowledge that the reason behind her problems at school was the divorce. Even so, Beth explains to her: “that’s the point of pottery-enamel huffing, Summer. You do it so you don’t have to say ‘I’m angry at mommy’ out loud” (14:07). Even though they leave the therapy session doubting whether it had helped with their problems, at the end of season three, Beth and Jerry decide to try to make their marriage work. What happens after this reconciliation will most likely be the main narrative in season four of *Rick and Morty*.

4. Conclusion

After analysing the parental figures in *Rick and Morty*, it is clear to see how the show tries to appeal to its Millennial viewers by portraying a dysfunctional family that they can identify themselves with. The family is presented as dysfunctional because of the three toxic parental figures: Rick, Jerry, and Beth. The show uses postmodernist humour to allow the Millennial viewers to laugh at the toxic aspects of the characters who, in reality, represent the toxic discourses found in society. These detrimental discourses of toxic masculinity, sexism, gender roles, among many others, are exaggerated and trivialised to make them easier to accept. The figures of Summer and Morty represent the feeling of overwhelming disenchantment of the Millennials with their society and those who surround them. Both of them are able to see the toxicity around them, yet they have no power over it or how it affects them.

Therefore, the postmodernist show *Rick and Morty* contrasts the mundane problems of a typical Millennial family with exciting space adventures which the characters embark on. The show’s typical escapades into space help both the family members and the Millennial viewer to disconnect from the challenges of everyday life. Even so, it is obvious that the creators of *Rick and Morty* still feel the need to reprehend certain aspects of society, and they do so by

ridiculing characters who present these harmful qualities. Taking into account that television is one of the most influential forms of mass media and is also one that mirrors society, *Rick and Morty* encapsulates the Millennial generation's ideology perfectly. The craziness of Rick and Morty's adventures puts everything into perspective for the Millennial viewer; they realise the show's central theme is how futile dwelling on what our purpose here on Earth is, let alone worrying about dysfunctional families and toxic family members, because "nobody exists on purpose. Nobody belongs anywhere. We're all going to die. Come watch TV" (Kauffman and Roiland 2014, 18:05).

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