

## ENG 280: Second Place

The Bottom: An Analysis on Class Differences Displayed on Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*

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**Audience Analysis (144 words):** The Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* created by Jenji Kohan and Piper Kerman aired July 11th, 2013. The target audience for this piece is the working middle class, those who can regularly watch Netflix. The audience may hold values opposing the "American Dream," believing that it is not a tangible concept in life. As for appeals, the realities and hardships that come in everyday lives, such as discrimination, addiction, or financial issues are evident in society. The location of the audience is broad, the United States and more, as viewers can relate to the vast areas from which characters originate. Netflix is a site used by young adults, but with the internet growing the audience age is increasing with it. Overall, the purpose for this analysis is to bring awareness to those in the prison cells and how they are each different.

Word Count: 2,689

In prison everyone is supposed to be on the same level, the bottom, right? The idea that a federal penitentiary is the lowest of lows is a common concept – among the upper and middle class, anyway. This stereotype of the lower class being more eligible to end up in prison allows the higher classes in society to impose a knowledge they *think* they have of that person. This stereotype of prison inmates is most notably brought on by forms of media seen in everyday life. Television shows such as *Cops* portray thrilling criminal chases that take place in the lower income neighborhoods, ending with the ultimate arrest of a mindless drug addict. Another example could be Adam Sandler's 2005 film *The Longest Yard* that displays men, primarily black men, that just got picked up off the streets and care more about a McDougle than getting to see the family they left behind. These fragments of cultural media give the most surface level versions of what real prison inmates are like. However, the hit Netflix series, *Orange Is the New Black*, challenges those ideas by deeming every character found in prison a real human being with real emotions and real background stories. The creators of this show fabricate a new definition of what it means to be in a prison cell. By watching this show, one must be open to the idea of reality, that crazy cop chases and McDougles are not a criminal's everyday life. As stated in Amanda Johnson's online article dealing with the series, by showing the true identity of the characters' real story, such as their parents' habits, the home they grew up in, etc., the audience is compelled to feel sympathy for what has happened (Johnson). Beyond just the storyline of the series, the creators of this show display sincere concern about the identities of those in women's correctional facilities and give a new and honest definition for those women who are residents of these institutions, which in turn is a topic rarely discussed in our society. Overall, a real prisoner

is someone who has hit that rock bottom of society, and by being in prison they are working on themselves and rising to their own version of the top.

Based on the true story written by Piper Kerman, *Orange Is the New Black* is a show that gives behind-the-scenes details of a women's federal prison in upstate New York. Primarily in seasons one and two, this series analyzes the riveting narratives of women who struggle with financial issues, drug addiction, sexuality, and more, all while following the main role of Piper Chapman. Chapman is a middle-aged, middle-class woman who got caught in a wrong place, wrong time situation in her younger years. With being charged in court, she lands herself in a women's penitentiary. This sudden shift in life puts strains on all her relationships back home; however, even with a rocky start to the life behind bars, Piper meets some of the most fascinating, caring, and rather successful women at Litchfield Women's Department of Corrections. The social class analysis of certain characters, including Piper Chapman, Red Reznikov, and Tasha Taystee Jefferson, give a full circle view of the several different types of people who end up in prison and how their time is spent once they are there for a long period of time.

Looking deeper into Piper's situation, this is truly an example of someone who drops to the bottom of the social class totem pole very quickly. While in an exclusive relationship with her girlfriend, Piper gets brought into a money exchange overseas for a drug smuggling business. Fast forward ten years, Piper eventually grows out of this stage of living life on the edge and finds herself owning a handmade soap business with her best friend and happily engaged to her fiancé – male fiancé. Suddenly, Piper is then charged as an accessory to a drug crime and is placed in federal prison for 15 months. Piper was experiencing social mobility in a rising

direction, in close grasp of the American Dream of financial success, when all of the sudden her world came crashing down to the wretched bottom where she never thought she would be. This is the typical outline of most drama films; even Adam Sandler's character Paul Crewe suddenly landed himself in prison when he used to be a wealthy NFL star. However, he just wins a football game and all is well, whereas Piper seems to live the real life of never getting a break. Kathleen McGinn looks at social class in her account by expressing that the upper-class population is people labeled as independent and who have power over their own lives, where the lower and working classes are tagged to be reliant on others (McGinn). The employment factor plays a huge role in Piper's character, as this is something she holds onto throughout the whole series; she believes that if she maintains her social mobility rate on the outside world, then her life will appear as if she never went to prison. Piper is a person who believes the stereotype of inmates as being the bottom, and she is afraid that will be her destiny.

On the other hand, Red is a very unique character and yet is relatable physically and mentally to the working-middle class. In the second episode of season one, titled "Tit Punch," her story is outlined in terms of being lower middle class, exceptionally close to reaching that lower-class label. The story is slightly puzzling about Red as she is an owner of a local sandwich shop but lands herself in prison for the assault charge of punching an uppity customer in the breast that had surgical implants, resulting in over \$60,000 worth of damages. During the dejection of realizing she will go to prison, Red confides in her husband by saying, "Because no matter how hard you try or how much you want it, there are people who serve the bread and people who eat the bread" (Netflix). Red is an individual who sees the clear separation of working and middle classes from the upper class. In terms of mentally feeling different from this

woman, Red also compared herself physically to this woman. Red is a normal-looking lady in her late forties with stretch marks and pale skin, yet when this clearly upper-class woman with fake breasts and expensive clothes walks in and mistreats her, the divide of social class becomes evident. In their duo piece addressing women in advertisements, Ashley Kraus and Jessica Gall Myrick declare the idea that being thin or beautiful is caused by the ideal internalization brought on by media (Kraus and Myrick). However, the series then turns Red's story around when she is shot to the top of white tribe, the racially segregated portion of white women in the prison. This apex of the prison life reverses Red's self-esteem, and suddenly she is a stern yet nurturing mother to those younger women still lost mentally.

Additionally, Tasha Jefferson, usually referred to as Taystee, is a young black woman who is full of joy even inside Litchfield's fences. Being in and out of foster care, Taystee has seen social class in a very tiny window as she was booted in and out of the juvenile system when foster care didn't work out, seeing it as a very old concept in life. Therefore, she immediately is immune to the idea of social class in the prison, or really in the world at all. In the series, Jefferson states, "The system is made out of sand. It's crumbling and being knocked down" (Netflix). However, the system may not be seen by her in particular, because the African American community seems to be on top in terms of social power in the prison. The prison is separated into the three blocks, or as the inmates call them, "tribes," those being the Suburbs for Caucasians, Spanish Harlem for the Latinas, and the Ghetto for the African Americans. The Ghetto residents use their quantity to intimidate the lesser communities, always being systematically on the top of the hierarchy when it comes to anything prison-wide. This increases Taystee's idea that the social class system is growing old and instead a new gesture of Blacks is

breaking free. In fact, Rebecca Ann Lind, the author of *Different Paths, Different Voices*, agrees with Taystee on this note, stating, most media today are experiencing a huge wave of radical change simply because there are new races being seen in everyday media such a film, television, and even live broadcasting (Lind). Taystee's carefree attitude about her lower-class status fabricated a new lens for all the inmates to see that, perhaps without the influences of drugs, alcohol, or any other contraband, living in a harmonious society is possible.

Beyond just these few characters in the series, *Orange Is the New Black* pulls attention to several other elements that create a stereotyped social class for inmates. The elements are brought on by each individual's prior experiences, making them susceptible to the mental and physical hazards of the world. An example being drug usage, which is common not just among the Litchfield inmates, but female inmates all over the United States. Liviu Alexandrescu calls out society's flaws in his online article announcing there is a misconception that the lower class is more prone to drug usage; he also affirms this is a frequent stereotype among modern society (Alexandrescu). There are several inmates in the prison that happen to be lower class and use drugs, such as Tiffany Doggett, who only has about three teeth in her mouth due to the toll drugs have taken on her. This is a recurring story where it is seen that the young daughter grew up in a home with deadbeat addict parents and soon just followed into their footsteps of poor decisions. However, we also come across Nicky Nichols, a relapsing heroin addict who has been in and out of prison since she was sixteen. But, unlike Doggett, Nichols grew up in a quite wealthy home as her father and mother were well-known socialites of New York City. Nichols was since then raised by a nanny whom she disobeyed often, ultimately causing Nicky to be blamed for her parents' divorce. This type of constant pressure to be known in the world or to live up to her

parents' expectation is a prime factor in Nichols turning to drugs to soothe her internal issues. Both of these characters come from an adult life of drug addiction and crime, although their adolescent stages couldn't be more different from each other. The series displays an unintentional comparison between the two characters to give the theory that stereotypical lower-class traits are present in the upper class too, just with a bit more makeup to cover up the track marks. *Orange Is the New Black* gives a twist on what is expected of the classic drug abuser hitting the bottom. While some may see the wild criminals on *Cops* as a real illustration, the creator of these characters is not going to let anyone slip through the cracks and be known just as a lower-class drug addict.

Furthermore, the creator of this show, Jenji Kohan, has a well-founded premise for establishing a type of show that addresses such controversial topics like social class levels. Born and raised in California, Kohan seems to have media producing in her blood. Nellie Andreeva examines Jenji's life and work on the Hollywood Deadline's producer database, finding out several reasons as to why Jenji is admirable for her work. Jenji's father and brother are Emmy-award winning producers and her mother an award-winning novelist. Jenji had her first job on the set of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and even wrote a few shows for the hit series *Friends*. By starting with both of these shows, Kohan created a platform to not only learn from the best creators such as Andy Borowitz and David Crane, but to also observe a changing society from the 1990s to present-day 2018. The 2002 launch of Netflix online streaming started with small title movies and little to no series. Kohan entered the Netflix family in 2005 with her original series on controversial marijuana titled *Weeds*; this series has since been signed up to eight seasons (Andreeva). Kohan has also been awarded for her media creations in the form of

Outstanding Variety Series and Best Episodic Comedy. Kohan's elaborate past of production allows her to create a show that has all the comedy in the world while simultaneously calling out each and every flaw that lies under the surface of society. Netflix as well has experienced such a boom business-wise that this type of show is perfect for the audience they are gaining, which is middle to upper class who can afford the website fee in reality. *Orange Is the New Black* touches on subjects that most leaders in our world do not dare cross upon; in fact, the series does more than touch on them but rather screams from the rooftop and shines a spotlight on the matter. With Jenji's experience in the production field, and Piper Kerman's experience in an actual federal prison, the two created a show that shows the true ins and outs of the prison and system. *Orange Is the New Black* represents the bottom as a checkpoint, a place of rest and solidarity before stepping back into the world and regaining your own success.

Moreover, the rhetorical theme of the series *Orange Is the New Black* displays a point of conflict throughout the series, that point being definition. From the moment Piper landed herself in court she was immediately scared of the prison she thought she knew, most likely from media conceptions such as *Cops* or *The Longest Yard*. However, Piper's definition is then soon flipped around to what prison actually means, which is rehabilitation. The whole objective of a prison is to house those too dangerous to live in society, teaching them suitable ways to live amongst the population. Now at Litchfield that may not seem capable because of the rotting education center and lack of initiative from its employees, but the true lessons are taught between the inmates' relationships. They have each others' backs and are family to one another inside those cinder block walls. The definition soon gets flipped for the audience as well. As one may *think* they know what is going on in the prison, they truly have no idea until shown the evidence of what

really takes place. *Orange Is the New Black* is not a documentary on the details of prison by any means, but it does allow real people to see hardships that take place every day. It can be really easy to judge someone off their employment, physical appearance, race, and so many other aspects, but taking a step back and clearing old definitions of inmates, the barrier of lower-class status disintegrates and one can see the true identities of those labeled as prisoners.

In conclusion, modern day media does impact our perspective of the lower-class population and makes it seem as though they are the ones constantly behind bars. Most people in society view the lower class as individuals who have hit the bottom and are not making any motions to climb back up. *Orange Is the New Black* is a highly popular show but the analysis on the production as a whole is scarce to come by, most likely because the show is still in the midst of the sixth season while filming the seventh. The general examination of the characters in this series allows the viewer to step inside the lives of those characters and see firsthand the journey that carried them into prison. Overall, I believe Jenji Kohan, along with Piper Kerman, produce a factual representation of the lives of federal inmates and manufacture a definition of prisoners that is genuine to the different social classes of society. After all, who gets to determine where the bottom is, exactly?

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