Who is *Shameless* This Election Season? One TV Show's Challenging Depiction of the Working Poor

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Since the 2016 Presidential race began, pundits have been scrambling to understand what is apparently the most inscrutable segment of the Trump voting bloc: disaffected white working-class middle-aged men who feel they have lost gender and race privileges along with their economic security. Journalists have helped make J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* and Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash* bestsellers, as Jack Metzgar noted here last week. While it's heartening to see studies like these get their due, media discussions still tend to rely on stereotypes and to define the white working class by their now infamously "deplorable" beliefs. While Vance and Isenberg historicize this group's grievances, Showtime's Shameless take a different tack: skewering the typecasting of those with the least direct voice in the mainstream press.

Promotional poster for Showtime's *Shameless*.

In the series, adapted from the popular UK version about a (largely) white working poor family headed by an alcoholic father, the Gallagher clan and their rowdy Chicago South Side neighbors provide an alternate, if somewhat controversial, representation of urban poverty that relays intricate truths about surviving everyday life on the economic fringes. In fact, the show's most recent promotional materials have, in true *Shameless* fashion, exploited the election backdrop. One features actors William H. Macy (Frank), Emmy Rossum (Fiona), and Jeremy Allen White (Lip) posed somewhat menacingly in Fourth of July garb against an American flag, with the tag line "Screwed in the USA." The video version adds a commentary, with Macy noting tongue-in-cheek, "It's an election year, so we're doing this patriotic thing," and Rossum cracking "it's got Americana, summer, the in-your-face aggressive Gallagher vibe." But a commercial for Season 7 puts another spin on this message: beneath the scrolling line "This Fall, every American voice will be heard," a clip of Frank appears, drunkenly singing the national anthem from a jail cell. This time the tag line notably changes: "We're so screwed."

Parsing out the "we" in this claim is one of the many challenges posed by this complex, often outlandish portrait of an in-your-face family in distress. Is *Shameless*, as John Hendl argues, a flashy bit of "white trash porn" to titillate Showtime's presumptive entitled viewers who like their comedy smart and edgy but also feel a sense of cultural superiority? An "empathetic" glimpse into welfare offices, chaotic classrooms, ERs, and family court that shows how those with "a voracious appetite for self-preservation" make do, as *Washington Post* critic Hank Steuver proposes? Or a refreshing tribute to embracing "the luck you got"

(series' theme song title), from staff writers who have experienced similar childhoods? Who, precisely, are the "screwers" and the "screwed"? Shameless runs with the most outrageous class stereotypes only to turn them inside out, foiling any election pollster or social commentator seeking convenient demographic labels.

The show's blended "tragicomedy" or "dramedy" format helps to underscore its broader defiance of pat narrative formulas, staid moral stances, and static categories. As scholar Glen Creeber points out about the UK version, *Shameless* resists both documentary realism and laugh-track humor, the twin defaults of many film and TV depictions of the white working class. Its nuanced treatment of bipolar illness, which affects both Monica, the absent Gallagher mother, and Ian, the second eldest son, similarly captures poverty's extreme lows and highs (the latter often courtesy of cheap liquor, drugs, and sex). Both noisily crowd the screen in every story arc, matched by equally manic pacing and camera work.

That said, *Shameless* clearly relishes making its characters into a spectacle that becomes most sensationalized in their enjoyment of all things sexual. Ian begins the show as a closeted pre-teen who has sex with men of all classes and types but soon falls for the local homophobic bully, Mickey Milkovich—who is also closeted. Their fraught evolving romance, which goes public, has become a fan and LGBTQ community favorite (with its own hashtag, "Gallavich"). Fiona has immediate, unapologetic sex with every man she dates and younger brothers Lip and Carl match that behavior from a young age. African-American next door neighbor Veronica, who began the series as an enterprising, self-styled internet porn star, has inventive sex with spouse Kevin, a white fellow barkeep at the Alibi Room. While such depictions risk indulging another frequent caricature of both the white and black "lower" classes—hyper sexual, excessive bodies and appetites—the show has also been viewed as "remarkably sex-positive" and a frank (no pun intended) exploration of sex as "free" entertainment (Steuver). Linda Tirado echoes this exact sentiment in her autobiographical *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*: when you're scrounging for change to take numerous buses to get to your crappy job(s), she comments, it is no small comfort that at least "sex is completely free." Even fourteen-year-old Debby feels compelled to lose her virginity and 'rapes' her passed out boyfriend in order to get pregnant (much to Fiona's dismay). This is an entirely different, yet just as legitimate, form of 'Americana.'

At the same time, the Gallaghers frequently take on mind-numbing, demeaning, and occasionally dangerous paid work when they can get it (or stand it): removing toxic waste; working construction; operating an unlicensed daycare center in their home; waitressing; erotic dancing (Ian, at a gay club); selling office supplies; bartending. Lip, somewhat in denial about his Ivy League-level IQ, takes a highly checkered path to college but does

eventually work as a TA at the University of Chicago. Daddy Frank, however, also trains his children to engage in illegal money-making schemes such as stealing and selling drugs, falsely claiming disability benefits, cheating on welfare claims… the list is breathtaking. (Last season, he panhandled on the streets by claiming that his half-Black step-son, Liam, was an "African orphan.") Yet only Carl serves as Frank's true protégé. The others mostly express disgust about his unparalleled narcissism and exploits. They bemoan their "Gallagher genes" as much as they tout the "Gallagher way." Frank has some of the cleverest lines, but the joke is usually on him. Fiona, particularly, keeps trying to create a stable home through conventional means and eventually throws her father out. Even within this single family unit, divisions splinter any tidy portrait of "the" urban poor. The Milkoviches down the street serve as the bleakest version of that demographic, complete with a brutally violent, sexually abusive father. Their situation never gets played for laughs; if anything, it demarcates a line that should never be crossed in this neighborhood's value system. Even within these few South Side blocks, then, class identity across family and community appears fragile, rather than cohesive.

Yet the Gallagher children have undeniably inherited one key trait from their father: cynicism. Suspicious of bromides, pre-packaged ethics, or political parties and slogans, they absolutely see a "rigged" system and are proud of their resourcefulness by any means necessary. As Lip states matter-of-factly early on in the series, "there are only two ways for the poor to make money: steal or scam it." They're unashamed of their rawness — their frantic grabs at pleasure as well as survival — but they don't really believe in collective power. They see how deprivation, exhaustion, and humiliation can not only beat down the "screwed" individually but cause them to turn on one another.

That's precisely why none of the *Shameless* crew would fall for Trump's pandering. They'd mock him as the biggest "screwer" of all who profits 'shamelessly' from the very system keeping them right where they are. (Also see Creeber on the characters' disaffection from politics.) But perhaps their efforts to be bold, loud, visible can provide some insight into his supporters' most extreme and repugnant responses to their own varied experiences of disenfranchisement. Tirado's book serves as another illuminating source: "The problem I have isn't just being undervalued—it's that it feels as though people go out of their way to make sure you know how useless you are." We need political leaders who truly recognize, rather than exploit, this feeling. We need to give working poor people a genuine reason to participate in what Tirado calls the "luxury" of "civic engagement."

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