

Culture and the Sitcom: Student Essays

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PART I

FEMINISM ON THE SMALL SCREEN

CHAPTER 1

30 Rock: Ironic Feminism in Show Business

MARGARET MURRAY

Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) has made it big. She has her very own variety show on NBC, *The Girlie Show*. This show is her contribution to feminism – a variety show made “for women, starring women.” There is more to television, however, than meets the eye, and the big man upstairs, Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin), Head of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming, at NBC, calls the shots for Liz’s dream show. Immediately, Jack strips *The Girlie Show* of all that it stands for, thus creating *TGS with Tracy Jordan*. This new show maintains only a skeleton of its former intention by including the now meaningless initials *TGS*. Not only is the name distorted, but the pro-woman meaning behind it has lost all effect through the inclusion of notoriously insensitive and prejudiced Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan), a man no less. *The Girlie Show* is stopped in its tracks and reformed before even being given a chance to succeed.

This is the first instance of women not being taken seriously

in show business within this sitcom, a theme that recurs continuously throughout its 138-episode run. Time and again, Tiny Fey, who is also head writer and executive producer of *30 Rock*, references struggles as a woman in comedy during her real-life experience as a writer on *Saturday Night Live*. Through *30 Rock*, Fey uses Liz as a parallel to her own trials and experiences in the ruthless world of show business, specifically in comedy, and brings attention to issues of which many people are ignorant, both intentionally and unintentionally, concerning feminism and the ideas that women in the workplace are treated with inferiority, oversexualized, and conditioned for maternity.

Much of the humor in *30 Rock* lies in the quick and easily unnoticed one-liner comments within conversations. Many of these comments are derogatory toward women in the context of typical and blatantly incorrect stereotypes. This nonchalant insertion of inferiority is seen in a conversation between Liz and Jack in "The Collection":

Jack: Lemon, I'm impressed. You're beginning to think like a businessman.

Liz: Businesswoman.

Jack: I don't think that's a word.



Still from 30 Rock, "The Collection" (Season 2, Episode 3)

Jack being the aggressively conservative traditional character makes him the greatest perpetrator against women. In "Plan B," Jack states "*TGS with Tracy Jordan* without Tracy Jordan is an oxymoron, like 'liberal government' or 'female scientist.'" Even when in reference to people he cares about, Jack is unable to avoid implications of female inferiority. When speaking about his Congresswoman girlfriend in "Secrets and Lies," Jack comments "I like when a woman has ambition. It's like seeing a dog wearing clothes." Over and over Jack suggests that any ideas of women in power is either a silly joke or completely null.



Still from 30 Rock, "Secrets and Lies" (Season 2, Episode 8)

Quips like this that are unnecessary to the plot are easily overlooked, but are, in fact, quite essential to the make-up of the show itself and the societal stance it takes in reference to treatment of women in more commonly masculine industries.

Fey has personally had to overcome many obstacles in her career due to her gender, but she has also done so in a way that has opened doors for other women to enter. Fey was the first female head writer for *Saturday Night Live*, which was a feat in its own right, but even more so because *Saturday Night Live* was historically sexist with many cast members and former writers being outspoken in their beliefs that women are not funny (Patterson). In addition, an episode of *30 Rock* was dedicated to one of Fey's firsthand experiences on *Saturday Night Live*. In "The C-Word," Liz is in uproar after overhearing one of her inferiors call her the c-word, based on comedian Colin Quinn doing the same during her head writer stint on *SNL* (Blay). Bringing attention to the backlash and lack of support seen by women in comedy, Fey uses the inferiority forced upon women in a more general sense, as seen in her conversation

with Jack about businesswomen, as well as specifically, as seen in her verbatim personal experience.

Inferiority is not only seen verbally, however. Over-sexualization of women and the mediocrity implied by it is a common occurrence in every work place. *30 Rock* is no exception and in fact, slaps viewers in the face with its blatancy. The character of Cerie (Katrina Bowden) who is Liz Lemon's assistant is the perfect example of an under-valued, over-sexualized woman in show business. Time and again, the male writers for *TGS* only acknowledge Cerie in reference to her body or her scandalous clothing. She is never seen as someone with substance or ability but only as a mere symbol for women's lack of respect in the workplace.



"You guys want coffee?"



"You guys want coffee?"

Stills from 30 Rock, "Jack the Writer" (Season 1, Episode 4)

In "Jack the Writer," Liz is forced to talk to Cerie about her clothing choices in the office and tells Cerie "You have to wear a bra to work if you want to be taken seriously in this business." In the stereotypically idiotic, blonde-woman fashion, Cerie responds by explaining she doesn't need to be taken seriously because she intends to "marry rich and design handbags." Later on in the episode, Liz confronts Cerie's scandalous choices once again: "You need to dress like you have a job. And parents who raised you in some kind of shame-based, American, religious tradition."



"Liz, I took your advice. I'm wearing a bra!"

Still from 30 Rock, "Jack the Writer" (Season 1, Episode 4)

As Liz casts societal judgement on Cerie for her wardrobe, Fey and the other writers of *30 Rock* are simultaneously criticizing the two extremes women can fall into as scandalous or shameful, neither of which is seen positively. Fey herself witnessed this treatment of women as mere sexual tools and not as a function for comedy – or other careers, for that matter – when she was a writer for *Saturday Night Live*. In her book *Bossypants*, Fey describes a situation in which her female colleague Amy Poehler was telling a rather vulgar joke when Jimmy Fallon interrupted her “and in a faux-squeamish voice said, ‘Stop that! It’s not cute! I don’t like it’” (Fey 177). There is, however, another place women can fall. Liz Lemon herself is seen in this masculine light as a consequence of third-wave feminism, which grants her the lack of sexualization but simultaneously takes away any femininity at all (Patterson). Fey uses Lemon to showcase the inability for women to find desirable middle ground in terms of treatment and perception.

The most significant overarching theme throughout the entirety

of the series is the ticking time bomb of Liz's childbearing years. The show makes it quite clear that there is a difference between Liz and Jack Donaghy (Liz's older boss and mentor) beginning with gender. Liz spends almost seven full seasons trying to find a perfect partner with whom she can have kids, at one point even looking into adoption as a single mom to fulfill her maternal desires. On the other hand, Jack's typical plotline is always business, never fatherhood. Even in the episodes in which he is a father, and even more so in the episodes in which he is a single father, Jack is rarely at home with his daughter and often forgets she exists. In "Plan B," Jack's family-centered boss Hank Hooper (Ken Howard) simply asks him how his baby is at a lunch meeting. Jack, being the businessman that he is, responds with "Baby... Ah, yes! Baby: Black-Asian Bisexual Youths. Those are viewers we want, and TWINKS is gonna bring them in!" Though Hank was clearly talking about Jack's daughter, Jack always puts business first and family second.



Still from 30 Rock, "Plan B" (Season 5, Episode 18)

Similarly, in "When It Rains, It Pours," Tracy Jordan, the lead

male actor for *TGS*, tries and fails for the third time to be present for the birth of one of his children.



Still from 30 Rock, "When It Rains, It Pours" (Season 5, Episode 2)

The clear lack of paternal instinct in the male characters is reinforced by Liz's excessive desire for motherhood, as seen in "Senor Macho Solo" in which Liz ends up dating a little person she only approached in the first place because she thought he was a child.

Consistently throughout the seven seasons of the show, Liz makes references to "having it all," which "for Liz, [...] means something like enjoying a career, a family, and more- and enjoying these all at once" (Barkman). She is caught in middle ground of having traditionally feminine, familial desires and fighting for the idea that women do not need to sacrifice their careers (Barkman). In "The Moms," Liz tries to justify herself in being unmarried to the mothers of the characters, to which Jack's mother responds "Oh for crying out loud, Liz. You see, that's what feminism does. It makes smart women with nice birthing shapes believe in fairy tales. Stop waiting for your

prince, Liz.” Liz’s desperate attempts at “having it all” often lead to rash compromises, as seen in “SeinfeldVision” in which single Liz is talked into buying a wedding dress with the justification of “I’m gonna get the wedding dress, and then I’m gonna have a baby, and then I’m gonna die, and then I’m gonna meet a super-cute guy in Heaven.”



Still from 30 Rock, “SeinfeldVision” (Season 2, Episode 1)

This constant back and forth between work and personal life is indicative of many women in this century. The notion of “having it all” can seem almost impossible, and Liz embodies all of the struggles in that regard.

Industries across America repeatedly infantilize women and doubt their capabilities based solely on gender and sexist assumptions and stereotypes. Tina Fey uses *30 Rock* to bring attention to her own experiences with sexist treatment in comedy as a woman. She also proves through her character of Liz Lemon that fighting said sexism can backfire with a complete loss of femininity. It is an all-or-nothing scenario: a woman can either be oversexualized or one of guys. Positions

in between those extremes are few and far between. Beyond the sexist mistreatment, there is also the balancing act that most women must learn concerning work and personal lives. The stigma of motherhood in professional settings follows every woman during the traditional childbearing years, whether wanted or otherwise. A philosophy has emerged from *30 Rock*; "Liz Lemonism" has been described "as satire speaking to the tension about how feminism can/should be represented in comedy" (Mizejewski). There are infinite struggles that women must learn to cope with in addition to the lingering sexism of the 21st century, but Fey does an admirable job scratching the surface of sexism in addition to third-wave feminism present in current industries.

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CHAPTER 2

Elaine Benes: Seinfeld's Early Feminist Model

MEGHAN BARBER

As a young woman, I remember rushing into the living room to watch reruns of *Seinfeld* on TV after family dinner. *Seinfeld* was, and still is, a widely popular sitcom that first aired in 1989 and ran for nine seasons until 1998. With its knack of turning the minutiae of everyday life dilemmas into philosophical conundrums, and its roots in stand-up comedy, *Seinfeld* ensures its position as a popular cultural icon of the 1990s (Skovmand 97). Generally mischaracterized as being a show about nothing, "...we've learned from some of the greatest dramatists of the twentieth century, being about 'nothing' can, indeed, be at the heart of everything" (Auster 189). As such, the show shines when contemporary events and concerns peak through in moments between the main cast (Auster 190). Since Hulu licensed the rights to all nine seasons of *Seinfeld* in 2015, there has been a resurgence of interest in the show, not only from longtime fans but the next generation. With viewing platforms shifting from network television to online streaming, millennials

are able to access and process media quicker than ever. In light of the revival of loyal viewings, I feel it is appropriate to revisit and assess the success of the character of Elaine Benes through a third-wave feminist lens.

Seinfeld is the impetus that brought Elaine Benes to life as a feminist model among the observational humor found in the rituals of urban life. The character of Elaine Benes, portrayed by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, captured my attention as I was growing up. As a feminist woman, I was predisposed to identify with Elaine. I understand the term “feminism” to mean: an inclusive advocacy for gender equality, affirming overlapping identities — including race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation — and how these features impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination. Feminism means checking and acknowledging my own white privilege. It’s the right to exist as an individual with an equal say and the ability to make choices that affect my life and the way I present myself to the world. The character of Elaine shaped my understanding of what it means to be a woman, and I firmly believe that we should all be feminists. Elaine was a lead character way ahead of her time, as she is depicted as an equal among an all-male cast on the situation comedy *Seinfeld*. She is a modern woman whose arc over nine seasons presents a version of complex feminism. As the lone female protagonist on *Seinfeld*, Elaine is set up to garner attention, which supplements the fact that she is such a strong and positive representation. The Elaine Benes character continues to influence my understanding of being a feminist as she: celebrates her sexual agency, holds her own among her male costars, and navigates her world as a feminist.



Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Elaine Benes in Seinfeld, "The Foundation".

As a champion of sex-positivity, Elaine is a woman on television who celebrates female sexuality. She is commonly applauded as one of the first women on television to be this open with her sexuality. She has plenty of sex – enough to rival that of the men on the show –and she is upfront about discussing her dates and sexual encounters with her friends. Remarkably, she is not labelled a slut or shamed for her actions within the framework of the show. Her sex-positive outlook works to destigmatize the taboo surrounding conversations on female sexuality – on television and in real life. *Seinfeld's* Elaine is open to discussing her sexuality as is evident in episodes such as "The Contest" and "The Sponge." In "The Contest," Elaine, George, Jerry, and Kramer enter into a contest to determine who can go for the longest period of time without masturbating. The plotline acknowledges female sexual pleasure and the fact that women have sexual appetites, too, as Elaine insists that she should be included in the competition among the group of friends. She tells them that masturbation is not simply part of the "male lifestyle" but is something quite common among men and women. Her character presents a positive image of women to viewers that increases awareness with regard to both male

and female pleasure – the latter of which is hardly talked about on television.

Additionally, in “The Sponge,” Elaine’s preferred method of contraception has been discontinued and she ventures on a 25-block search to stockpile her own supply. After locating and purchasing an entire case, she then realizes that her usage needs to be restricted (i.e. she must limit the amount of sex she has). This results in Elaine deciding whether or not her boyfriend is “sponge-worthy,” eventually dumping him at the end of the episode in favor of conserving her sponges. She routinely prioritizes her own happiness – and pleasure – above that of any male counterpart. Elaine continually proves that not only do women have sexual needs, but they can exercise and express them as they themselves see fit and without shame. This is representative of a feminist mindset wherein men and women are equals, and the pleasure of either party should be respected, acknowledged, and pursued within the confines of consensual sexual relations.

In the episode “The Mango,” Jerry is disappointed to learn that during his brief relationship with Elaine, all of Elaine’s orgasms were just an artifice. Jerry wants to have a second chance at pleasing Elaine, who unapologetically grants him this opportunity. In a clear sign of progression, a woman can criticize a man’s inability to satiate her desires when not restricted to a long-term relationship. Similarly, in the episode “The Rye,” Elaine dumps a musician who would rather save his oral adroitness for his instrument than his woman. This attitude plays into Elaine’s character as a whole on the show every time she unabashedly speaks her mind.

Elaine is just as crass, narcissistic, and insensitive as the male cast members. Her character goes beyond being an added dose of estrogen; Elaine transcends gender norms and is seen as an

equal. She is Jerry Seinfeld's ex-girlfriend – creating a tension-filled relationship between Jerry and Elaine that draws the viewer in – but she is not an object of affection for the men of the show. Instead, Elaine is presented as a buddy and is clearly not interested in romance with any of the men in her friend group. The result is an unapologetic, single, professional woman living in New York City who embraces her sex drive and independence.

Elaine created a space for funny women in television because she is a flawed, loud-mouthed, crass, and witty character. Throughout the run of *Seinfeld*, Elaine coins her own phrases, is commonly more successful than her male counterparts in the workforce (if not within a stable job, she is proactive at exhausting her options), and she is driven to fulfill her own passions. With that being said, Elaine is still flawed in a way that resonates as more human than most TV characters. She is not what people may refer to as a “textbook feminist” nor does she have many close friendships outside that of the core group anchoring the show. In fact, as Kramer tells her in “The Pool Guy”: “You’re a man’s woman – You hate other women and they hate you.” Moments such as this are commonly misjudged, however, to portray Elaine as merely “one of the boys” or perhaps anti-feminist; instead, these moments highlight just how *real* and feminist her character truly is. For instance, Louis-Dreyfus's own qualities strengthen Elaine's, as the actor's wit is just as biting as her male co-stars (Armstrong). She errs on the side of brashness for the sake of having the last word whenever men give her grief over a given subject she disagrees with them on – sometimes, she even leaves the room and thus ends the conversation. Comments such as Kramer's in “The Pool Guy” do her more service than harm because Elaine is a woman who doesn't put up with anything she need not, which is entirely self-empowering and feminist.

While she may not be the most supportive of her female friends, it is realistic that a woman may find herself feeling competitive with others, especially when it comes to defending her own lifestyle choices. In *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing*, Sarah Worth declares that Elaine Benes's apparent feminism is not quite so feminist after all. She argues that Elaine is "one of the boys" by Carol Gilligan's standards. Gilligan's ethics of care promotes the division of male and female schools of the idea – that men and women have different ethical standards – where women abide by the ethics of care, which argues that they are innately wired to have more caring and attentive qualities than men centralizing around the fact that women are meant to be mothers (Worth 41). By the standards advanced by Gilligan and Worth, if a woman does not abide by these ethics of care, it is impossible for her to be a "good woman" – it is impossible for her to be a feminist. This is a limited analysis as Worth's exploration of the ethics of care with regard to Elaine follows archaic notions of what it means to be feminist. Worth judges Elaine not by the content of her character but by her adherence to Gilligan's ethics of care. This reading of the Elaine character is problematic because the Gilligan code for feminism suggests that women are required to be nurturers or fulfill traditional gender roles to some degree to qualify as "good women." While some may perceive Elaine to have character flaws, this is what makes her a believable feminist. Elaine continually emerges as a three-dimensional character and does not take the backseat to her fellow co-stars.

Elaine's character is feminist, which is not only seen through her overt ownership of her sexuality or how she holds her own among an all-male cast but also by how she navigates her environment. Elaine is the most successful of her male counterparts in the workforce, and she is the only character on

the show who maintains fairly stable, high-level employment. She is a successful, driven, and brassy woman. Elaine's influence on the modern generation is palpable because she created space for more complex women to come on television in later decades. Elaine does not simply exist in the background of *Seinfeld* to add estrogen to the cast – she is a forerunner in entertainment and comedy. What makes Elaine's character a feminist role model is that she is a three-dimensional, true-to-life woman.

As seen from episode to episode, Elaine battles with some very commonplace issues regarding her work, social life, love interests and daily mishaps. Viewers follow her as she tackles what life throws her way head on and with dry sarcasm. While she may be flawed and imperfect, Elaine does not shy away from standing her ground, stating her opinion, and going after what she wants, which is a the mark of a feminist character. We catch a closer glimpse of her disposition in "The Soul Mate" when Elaine is conversing with a group of old female friends who have all settled down and had children, and Elaine simply tells them that she has no idea "what the big deal is" about having children. In the context of Elaine, it is important to note the very difference between a selfish man and a selfish woman. A selfish man is to be expected, while a selfish woman is a radical departure from everything women were traditionally taught to be: caregivers, nurturers, mothers, and doting wives. Elaine expresses her wants in life and doesn't let society dictate or mandate what is right for her own life. Elaine is an opinionated, unstoppable feminist force, and her imperfections are what make her relatable and influential as a feminist model.

To say that Elaine Benes is "one of the boys" is a degradation of nine seasons of character development. The misconception that Elaine is in any way anti-woman, due to her seemingly lacking maintenance of friendships with other women, is not

only anti-feminist, but it is an incorrect observation. Seeing Elaine as two-dimensional, marriage-seeking, boyfriend-having, and potential child-bearer, is archaic, and to function under a definition of what a woman and a feminist “should be” is to reduce women to an unfair, two-dimensional archetype (Armstrong).

Elaine is a totally independent character; for the duration of the series, she neither got married nor had children. Her character was interesting and relatable without falling back on either of these tropes. This representation of a self-reliant and individual woman taught me from a young age that getting married and having kids is not a requirement of being a woman. Her selfish nature taught me how to appreciate my individuality and to not be afraid to go after what I wanted in life – whether it be a job, a pastry, or sexual satisfaction. Holding the men in her romantic life to exacting standards and dumping them when they fall short is boldly confident and subverts the idea that a woman needs a man – or significant other – in her life to achieve happiness. She knows her own strength and her worth; truly, Elaine’s characteristics while imperfect, are something to respect. I admire her ability to be an unwavering, casual, and inclusive feminist, all of which makes Elaine Benes an iconic, feminist model because of her sex-positivity, unapologetic nature, and feminist mindset. Viewers then and now are hooked. Elaine has solidified her position as a feminist icon and continues to pave the way for many women to come.

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CHAPTER 3

The Evolution of Leslie Knope: Defying Stereotypes of the Modern Working Woman

MAIA SCACCHI

Pawnee, Indiana may just be a small town, but to Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), it means the world. The masterminds behind *The Office*, Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, reunited in 2009 to create *Parks and Recreation*, a show following the cheerful, optimistic, and work-driven Knope, whose job as Deputy Director of the Parks and Recreation Department leads her on many adventures to liven up her hometown. At the beginning of the series, Knope is a young, mid-level bureaucrat struggling to find love, success, friends, and her place in the world, and throughout the seven seasons of the show, she finds all of that and more with many jokes along the way.

Knope is among the many fictionalized, working women characters in sitcoms that are subject to various negative stereotypes. From breaking away from the traditional domestic sphere to having power in a patriarchal society, working women

in sitcoms and the real world alike have been scrutinized for changing the status quo. Since the start of the workplace sitcom in the 1970s, series have used these stereotypes to either fuel their shows or to push against them (Kutulas). In *Parks and Recreation*, the evolution of Leslie Knope is used to show that a modern working woman can achieve both her professional and personal goals by defying stereotypes about love, friendship, appearance, and power.



Still from Parks and Recreation, "Ms. Knope Goes to Washington" (Season 5, Episode 1, 2012).

LOVE

Much of the first season includes Leslie's infatuation with a co-worker, city planner Mark Brendanawicz (Paul Schneider), with whom she had a fling with several years before. Through her short-lived relationship with Mark and a series of many awkward and hilarious blind dates, Leslie fails to find a relationship other than with her job. Leslie's dilemma fits into the conventionally held attitudes about women in power and the perceived personal sacrifices they must make for

professional gain. Of these sacrifices, love and marriage are at the top of the list (Reardon 1995).

On top of being too committed to their work, women in the workforce have often been characterized by men as too ambitious, bossy, and threatening to be suitable partners. In contrast to Leslie's character, one can argue that Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer) in *The Office* – an attractive, shy receptionist – has a thriving personal life and love life in particular because of her nonthreatening lack of career ambition and sweet disposition (Barrett and Davidson 2006). While Leslie's personality is not suitable for the men she meets early on, she is soon introduced to her perfect match during the show's second season, Ben Wyatt (Adam Scott). Wyatt is a nerdy state auditor who comes to Pawnee to evaluate the town's funds and finds a lot more.



Still from Parks and Recreation, "Leslie and Ben" (Season 5, Episode 14, 2013).

At first, the rule against dating within the office tests Ben and

Leslie's newfound attraction for each other. After secretly dating for a time, the couple decides to cut things off to avoid a scandal when Leslie decides to run for City Council. After the breakup, Leslie and Ben are both miserable as they try to avoid each other at work. After months of debate, Leslie finally confronts Ben and makes a decision ("Smallest Parks").

Leslie: There is another option. We could just say "screw it" and do this thing for real.

Ben: What?

Leslie: I miss you like crazy. I think about you all the time. I want to be with you. So let's just say "screw it."

Ben: No, we would have to tell Chris.

Leslie: Yeah.

Ben: It could turn into a scandal.

Leslie: Yeah.

Ben: It could hurt your campaign. I mean, how would you imagine we do this?

Leslie: I don't know. But I...I know how I feel, and I want to be with you.

Putting her beloved job on the line, Leslie shows where her priorities lay and the power of what love can do. Viewers watch as Leslie's relationship with Ben passes many milestones, including a tear-jerking proposal and wedding, and viewers ultimately see the couple happily raising triplets together. Even with her dedication to work and her ambitious personality, Leslie proves that she is capable of finding and fighting for love.

FRIENDSHIP

Another stereotype that Leslie fights is a lack of relationship with her co-workers. Early in the series, Leslie is often made fun of or dismissed by her co-workers for her “can-do,” positive attitude. In the pilot episode, viewers see two of Leslie’s employees, April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza) and Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), laughing at pictures of Leslie falling in a pit that she is trying to convert into a park. One study reinforcing this idea states that “individuals tend to hold negative stereotypes of female managers,” and women leaders are more liked to be “implicitly associated with incompetent traits” (Heilman).



Still from Parks and Recreation, “Halloween Surprise” (Season 5, Episode 5, 2012).

While much of the beginning of the show includes scenes where Leslie is disrespected and disliked by her co-workers, through the seasons she is able to establish real and meaningful relationships with everyone in the office. One of the most

powerful relationships in the show is between Leslie and her boss, Ron Swanson, a private, deadpan libertarian who believes all government should be privatized, which is essentially the opposite of Knope. Despite their differences, Leslie and Ron learn from each other and grow to become best friends. During the fourth season, when Leslie's campaign to run for City Council takes a turn for the worse, Ron comforts Leslie in a rare scene of vulnerability ("Win, Lose or Draw").

Leslie: Ron, for the last six months, my friends have worked so hard. Every five-minute coffee break at work, every night, every weekend, every spare moment of their lives, they gave to me. If I lose, I'll never forgive myself. You deserve to win.

Ron: We didn't volunteer to help you because we wanted to wrap ourselves in personal glory. We did it because we...care about you. You had a dream, and we wanted to support your dream. That's what you do when you care about someone. You support them, win, lose, or draw.

This moment, among others, truly encapsulates the love and compassion others feel toward Leslie. Through the series, these friendships endure the ups and downs of life from dealing with breakups to moving on to new jobs, but through it all, Leslie proves over and over her ability to be the very best friend. When revealing her values, Leslie states, "We need to remember what's important in life: friends, waffles, work. Or waffles, friends, work" ("The Fight"). As a boss and a co-worker, Leslie is respected for her dedication to her work, but her empathy and ability to create these meaningful relationships and to be a true friend is what makes her even more admired.

APPEARANCE

From the very beginning of the series, Knope's looks make her instantly stand out in contrast to many other women on TV. Knope's affinity for pantsuits combined with her ignorance of conventional beauty standards defies the media's oversexualization and beauty ideals it has set for its viewers. Women on TV have been used to attract male viewers for generations by selecting actresses who are very skinny, pretty and sexy. By doing so, the media has skewed women's standards of beauty for themselves to almost unrealistic expectations, resulting in consequences such as eating disorders and self-objectification (Vitelli).

Knope, on the other hand, provides a realistic woman who is slim, but not a size zero, and attractive, but not as conventionally pretty as most successful actresses are. Additionally, she dresses mainly in pantsuits throughout the series, defying the sexualization of women in media who often wear short, tight, and revealing clothing to intrigue male viewers. Besides just her physical appearance, Knope's character creates a contrast to the idea of conventional beauty in a way that mocks the standard portrayal of women on television.



Still from Parks and Recreation, "The Banquet" (Season 1, Episode 5, 2009).

In "The Banquet" during the first season of the series, Leslie attends a banquet for her mother, who is to be receiving a public service award for her work in the town's school system. After deciding to get her hair done for the event by an old-fashioned male barber, Leslie loves her new bold look. She says, "Salvatore calls this hairdo 'The Mayor,' and yes I will wear my hair like this when I am the first female mayor of Pawnee." She arrives at the banquet and is instantly made fun of for her boyish-looking hairdo as she is called "Sir" by many guests and is even mistaken as a part of a lesbian couple. Knope's ignorance on beauty standards makes her both funny and empowering because she doesn't know and her character

doesn't necessarily care what people think about her looks. Appearance is only a small part of Leslie's whole persona, which makes her someone to engage with rather than something to look at in the series.

POWER



Still from Parks and Recreation, "Bus Tour" (Season 4, Episode 21, 2012).

Women in the workplace have been placed at a disadvantage for generations. From lower pay to less opportunities for advancement, negative stereotypes have prevented women from gaining power and having success in their careers (Latu). Although significant strides have been made to reduce gender inequality in the workplace, women fall victim to a world dominated by men at work and in other aspects of their lives.

One area where this issue is especially prevalent is the underrepresentation of women in positions of power. Across the world, only 21.8% of members of parliament are female

(The Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014) and of the 196 nations across the world, only 22 are led by women. Additionally, although women comprise 47.3% of the US labor force, the percentage of women occupying top leadership positions, such as Fortune 500 CEOs, is quite low: 5.2% (Catalyst, 2014). These facts confirm that even though women make up around half of the workforce, there is a significant disparity in the number of women compared to men who have had the opportunities to achieve great success in their careers.

For three seasons, Leslie serves as Deputy Director of Pawnee's Parks and Rec Department and is only able to accomplish so much as a mid-level bureaucrat. Knowing and wanting to do more for her hometown, Knope successfully campaigns to be the first woman member of Pawnee's City Council. When showing Ben her new City Council office, Leslie reveals a mantel full of portraits of powerful women such as Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi and – to his surprise – he finds someone else on the wall as well (“How a Bill Becomes a Law”).

Ben: Is that a picture of you?

Leslie: Yes. I am big enough to admit that I am often inspired by myself.

Her progression of power, something that real women are often criticized for or unable to achieve, marks not only a small victory for Leslie but for all women everywhere.

Erika Engstrom states that Pawnee acts as a “symbol of the U.S. itself, and by extension, patriarchal views that prevent feminist progress,” and Knope presents a woman who has the ability to shake up the established system. Leslie often states her ultimate goal is becoming the first female President of the United States, a feat that in real life almost occurred this past November. In a world dominated by men, a character like Leslie

Knope sets a new ideal and inspiration for working women to strive for power and to be proud of their accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

Parks and Recreation's success is hinged on Leslie Knope's evolution. The show's first season received criticism, some stating that the show "lacked in character development" or "could use a genuinely likeable male lead" (Moyer). This negative feedback, although harsh, led to some much-needed changes, particularly in Knope's character as the lead of the show. Her transition, while subtle, made a big impact on the audience, gaining viewers and leading them to watch for six more seasons. As the series progresses, Knope is no longer simply the butt of all the jokes; she evolves into a genuine, strong, and ambitious working woman dealing with everyday situations to which an audience can relate.

Over and over again, Knope pushes boundaries and stereotypes while never settling for what people expect whether it concerns her work or relationships. Although fictional, Knope's character offers a new and optimistic perspective on all the possibilities for working women of our generation to show that they can have all they wish for and more. Her ambition and bold attitude has even led fans of the show to create the saying, "Be the Leslie Knope of Whatever You Do," and subsequently mugs, t-shirts, stickers and other products have been produced with the quote. She is inspirational, bold, and never for a second is she someone other than herself. She is Leslie Knope.

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CHAPTER 4

Bewitched: A Magically Feminist Show

ISABELLE JEFFREY

In 1964, the magically and enchanting sitcom *Bewitched* made its debut on ABC and put a spell on audiences everywhere. The charming situational comedy depicts a rather typical, middle-class, nuclear family living in the suburbs. But there is a plot twist that makes this seemingly ordinary sitcom truly magical. The main character, Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery), is a *witch*. With the wiggle of her nose or the snap of her fingers, she can do anything she wants. Her magical talents help her in everyday life and add a twinkle to the boredom of suburbia. These supernatural abilities make Samantha one of the most powerful female characters in sitcom history. One can argue that having such a strong, female character like Samantha at the center of the show helped *Bewitched* become a symbol of feminism. But not everyone sees the show in this way. Some critics of the series, such as Gary Kenton and Walter Metz, suggest that *Bewitched* is an oppressive show due to its reliance on patriarchal norms and female suppression. Although Kenton

and Metz suggest that *Bewitched* is a sexist sitcom, scholars like Susan Douglas have a different view of the magicom. In fact, Douglas and I share the opinion that this show is extremely feminist because it puts female characters at the center of the show and gives them magical powers that no mortal man could possess. I think it is more compelling to give attention to the strengths, powers, and abilities of the female characters like Samantha and her mother, Endora (Agnes Moorehead). If viewers focus on their magical dominance over of the mortal male characters, I think a strong case can be made that *Bewitched* is extremely feminist and pro-women; it might be called a magically feminist sitcom.

Kenton and Mertz are among scholars who suggest that *Bewitched* is a sexist show due to its portrayal of female characters and the gender power-dynamics. They believe that Samantha is made smaller, is belittled, and is chastised for having her powers. Rather than being championed for her natural talents and abilities, she is restricted from using them and is made to feel bad for having them. Her husband Darrin (Dick York 1964-69, Dick Sargeant 1969-72), in particular, often restricts her from using witchcraft. Thus, the patriarchal power structures of the show seek to keep Samantha normal and less powerful than her husband or, for that matter, any other male character. In his chapter titled "The 1960s Magicoms" Kenton writes, "By trying to suppress her formidable powers in order to be a 'normal' American housewife, Samantha became a hero to traditionalists" (78). Kenton, like many other scholars, argues that Samantha's natural talents and abilities are restricted so that she can attend to the housework and live out her days in the domestic sphere. In many ways, taking away her powers makes her subservient to her male counterparts, which maintains traditional gender roles. She succumbs to the pressure every female character faces in sitcoms: dealing with

the gender structure and male dominance. To add to this argument, Metz writes, "don't you see that *Bewitched* is just another example of degradation of womanhood? Here's a woman with unimaginable power and she uses it to shore up her husband's ego" (98) and that "'*Bewitched* was as anti-feminist, anti-sexual, and pro-centrist as a sitcom could be" (94). I think this analysis is a common read of the sitcom. It is a traditional analysis that suggests that *Bewitched* is inherently sexist and seeks to keep women in a position that is secondary to men. But I suggest we look beyond these critiques at competing messages and instead focus on the feminist aspects within this magicom.

While these opinions are valid, I have to disagree with the arguments that *Bewitched* is a sexist show that seeks to hinder and restrict females. The show's central character is a woman who has supernatural talents that far surpass that of any male character in the show. Physically, Samantha is the most powerful character in the magicom. In an interview with Mary M. Dalton, Gary Kenton suggests, "I think *Bewitched*, you could make an argument for a certain feminist reading. This woman is definitely the smarter character... and more powerful" (Kenton "Chapter Six" 5). In this interview, Kenton goes so far as to say that there may be room for a feminist interpretation of the show. He sees the intelligence and prowess of Samantha and points to the feminist nature of the show. In addition to this, Samantha never follows Darrin's call for restriction of her powers and instead uses them to save him, and other male characters, from doom. Rather than listen to her husband and follow his rules, she disobeys him and becomes a rebel. What is great is that Samantha never gives up her powers and continuously uses them throughout the show. Susan Douglas argues, "In *Bewitched* we have a woman's dream and a man's nightmare. Darrin was surrounded by an endearing yet

constantly troublesome matriarchy, a domestic situation in which is wife, mother-in-law, daughter, and other relatives were all witches, endowed with magical powers, which constantly threatened his professional status and his authority as head of the household" (127). My read of *Bewitched*, like Douglas's, is that it is a matriarchal show focused on reinventing the female image and talent spectrum. Every female character stands for something in the feminist movement. Samantha, along with Endora and her cousin Tabitha (also played by Elizabeth Montgomery in a black wig), refuses to be restricted by the patriarchy and sexism of male characters and traditionalist women like Mrs. Kravitz (Sandra Gould).

Samantha and Darrin's neighbor Gladys Kravitz is a hero to traditionalists and a foil for the strong female characters. Like certain men in the show, she represents the old ways and seeks to keep gender roles traditional. She is an older housewife who has spent most of her life tending to her family, her home, and her husband. Because she has been contained in the domestic sphere for most of her life, she is nosey and pays way too much attention to other people's business, especially Samantha's. Mrs. Kravitz "was a parody of an old housewife with too much time on her hands and nothing to do except live through others" (Douglas 133). In many ways, she is in charge of pressing the social code and making sure everyone stays in line with cultural norms. That is why she pays so much attention to Samantha's every move; she wants to make sure that Samantha is following the rules of suburbia. Because she is nosey and wants to know everything, she is always watching from her window or sneaking over to Darrin and Samantha's house to make sure that everything is normal. In the episode "Be It Ever So Mortgaged," Mrs. Kravitz says, "Don't try to stop be Abner. I'm going over there. There is something going on and I'm going to find out what it is" (Avedon and Saks). This is a classic move

from Mrs. Kravitz and is a pattern she maintains throughout the series. It is this constant surveillance of Samantha and this need to maintain tradition that drives Mrs. Kravitz. Throughout the eight seasons of the show, she continues to be a strong foil for the progressive and feminist female characters.



Still from Season 1, Episode 2 "Be It Ever So Mortgaged."

In stark contrast to the role of Mrs. Kravitz, Samantha stands as a symbol of feminism and female empowerment. Having a central character like Samantha allowed *Bewitched* to be a, "show that hailed young female viewers by providing, and seeking to reconcile, images of female equality – and, often, even images of female superiority" (Douglas 133). Samantha has powers that make her stronger and more powerful than any other character in the show. Her talents and abilities far surpass that of any man. She is clearly in a dominant position in comparison to her male counterparts and she does not apologize for it. Although she does play the housewife role, she is rarely ever just in the background. Viewers never just see Samantha doing housewife things; rather, she uses her powers

to make those chores and day-to-day work easier. In this way, she is maintaining her identity as a witch while also maintaining her role as a homemaker. Sam is a modern housewife who explores interests outside the home; she puts a modern twist on being a stay-at-home wife by using her powers to be more empowered. This allows her to be a proto-feminist character. Her main focus is not just the home and making her husband happy, but it is about her pursuing her interests as well. "Samantha embodied important contradictions, for she was a happy, respectable suburban housewife who exerted power beyond the kitchen or the living room...The show often suggested that women, especially younger women, were smarter, more creative, and more versatile than men" (Douglas 128). In addition to putting a modern, feminist twist on being a housewife, Samantha also plays an integral role in Darrin's career. In almost every episode, she ends up saving Darrin's job and helping him come up with a fantastic advertisement. It is suggested that "Samantha engineered the outcome so that Darrin got the credit for coming up with a great idea or doing a great job, but the audience knew who was the real power behind the throne" (Douglas 128). In many regards, this makes her smarter and more business-savvy than her own husband. In the episode "Help, Help, Don't Save Me," Darrin is struggling to come up with good pitches for his client Caldwell Soup. Samantha ends up making his original ideas much better, proving that she has abilities and smarts far beyond that of a simple housewife. In this scene, Samantha proves herself and clearly shows that she is just as good, if not better than, the male characters in the show. The sitcom's depiction of such a strong and powerful female character invites feminist readings of the series.



Still from Season 1, Episode 5, "Help, Help, Don't Save Me."

While Samantha is more of a subtle feminist, her mother Endora is an outspoken one. She is arguably the most radical character of the series. From the very beginning of the show, Endora is vehemently against Samantha marrying a mortal and giving up her powers. She cannot understand the appeal of being a housewife and giving up so much freedom. Endora is truly bewildered by the notion of housewifery, the American dream etc.; "Endora is probably one of the most radical feminist characters to appear in the sitcom. She not only mocks Darrin at every opportunity but disdains all the cherished trappings of the American dream to which her daughter aspires – marriage, children, suburban house, security – all of it" (Kenton 78-79). She sees this as a sacrifice that Samantha is too good to make. Endora values her daughter's talents and so desperately wants Samantha to keep them. Giving them up, especially for a man, is not an option in Endora's eyes. During the interview, Kenton acknowledges Endora's strength, "well, and her mother, the Agnes Moorehead character, was, you know, one of the

prototype feminist characters. I mean, she just couldn't understand, you know, why she had this enormous power, she could go anywhere, do anything" (Kenton "Chapter Six" 5). Endora wants to instill a sense of pride, rebellion, and confidence in Samantha; at a time when women were supposed to just listen to their husbands and lose their individual identities, this was a pretty radical notion. Endora seeks to protect and fight for women, like Samantha, especially because she sees men as idiots and buffoons. Endora truly believes that Darrin, and most men for that matter, are weak and stupid in comparison to women. Thus, she cannot understand why Samantha would want to be secondary to her husband and give up her noticeable dominance. Endora "sees him [Darrin] as a mere mortal to whom Samantha is superior, and as someone who is constraining Samantha, trying to make her life too confined, boring, and predictable" (Douglas 130). Endora has such an interesting perspective and brings so much to the show in terms of female empowerment. She acts as a teacher for many viewers as she lectures Sam on the dangers of allowing men to act like kings in many episodes. A great example from the first season is "Be it Ever So Mortgaged" when Endora says, "Just because you married a human, Samantha, that's no reason to overdo this grubby little housewife role" (Avedon and Saks). Endora's role in the show is to bring attention to sexism, unfair gender roles, patriarchy, and other societal conventions that seek to make women secondary.



Still from Season 1, Episode 2, "Be It Ever So Mortgaged."

In many ways, I think that *Bewitched* is a feminist show that says a lot about gender roles, patriarchy, and societal expectations. It is a strong reading of the series to look at it as a female-centered sitcom in which almost all of the featured female characters are strong. Characters like Samantha, Endora, Serena, and even Samantha's daughter Tabitha (Erin Murphy) in the later seasons, highlight the progressive attitude running through this particular magicom. The feminist ideals are often contested by Mrs. Kravitz, but I think her role is necessary to give a sense of realism to the show by acknowledging pervasive attitudes and offering a stark contrast to the witches. Mrs. Kravitz represents the past and people who are not ready to embrace the second wave of the women's movement. She is a representation of the older generation, the traditionalists who are stuck in their ways and even women who are happy being just housewives. But the younger generation, people like Samantha and Tabitha, clearly desire more for themselves. Tabitha is born with magical powers and from the get-go is

more powerful than her father and other male characters. Her mother and grandmother encourage her to be proud of who she is and to cherish her supernatural talents. *Bewitched* really starts a conversation about the empowerment of women and how that is represented in different generations during the 1960s. The show clearly invites a conversation about female issues and female empowerment as it centers on such strong women characters.

Shows like *Bewitched* were able to bring social and political issues to the forefront of television. For me, *Bewitched* started a conversation about feminism and really highlighted the feminist perspective. I think it is important to see *Bewitched* as a feminist show because it was one of the first series that really put strong women at the center of a sitcom. Before this, we see a lot of women inhabiting the typical female roles as mothers, housewives, or housekeepers. Here, we see that but with a twist. Samantha is not simply a housewife, a homemaker, a mother, etc. She is a witch who is smart, talented, powerful, and able to do things outside the home. I think *Bewitched* is an important show because it depicts women who are in power positions. Viewers see women who are more dominant and able than men with talents that extend beyond the home. The domestic sphere does not define Endora and Samantha; rather, their valued is based on their abilities as witches. *Bewitched* shows that women can and should be valued for more than their pot-roast or the way they set the table. The series uses witchcraft and Samantha's wiggly nose to show that women have talents that far surpass what is assumed of them. The real power of the show does not necessarily come from witchcraft but from the strength of the female characters and their talents outside the home.

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PART II

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

CHAPTER 5

Black-ish and the Black Experience: Diversifying and Affirming Accurately and Authentically

KYLIE LONG

Since its premiere in 2014, the ABC sitcom *Black-ish* has received mixed reviews regarding the show's representation of the black experience in America. *Black-ish* depicts the everyday happenings and struggles of the Johnson family, and it also tackles important issues of the day, even controversial ones. This middle class, African-American family of six is headed by father Andre (Anthony Anderson) and mother Rainbow (Tracee Ellis Ross). Their children Zoey, Andre, Jack and Dianne are played by Yara Shahidi, Marcus Scribnet, Miles Brown, and Marsai Martin respectively.

Every week, the Johnson family navigates difficult topics that are common to the black experience today. *Black-ish* exists in a tough space where the series seems to be morally obligated

to depict all parts of the black experience accurately, both good and bad, while simultaneously ensuring that it does not condemn the “other,” which in this case is “non-blacks.” In order to stay true to the struggles of African-Americans in the United States, the acceptance and ratings for *Black-ish* suffer. People usually turn on fictional television shows to escape the world around them rather than be bombarded by the troubles of the world. *Black-ish* does not shy away from these troubles. The show dives deep into some controversial issues in black culture and American society as a whole. The controversial topics that *Black-ish* addresses play an essential role in the societal impact of the show. Despite the early success of the series, the controversial depictions of the black experience in the United States as well as the overall “unapologetic blackness” that make the show authentic and important have led to a decrease in ratings. These topics include race, sexuality, and police brutality, and *Black-ish* never fails to tackle these hard-hitting topics head on. Remaining controversial in nature is likely the only way for the show to continue holding true to its representation of the black experience even at the price of declining ratings.

Controversial topics are addressed and tackled directly in each episode, but the serious elements are punctuated with tasteful comedic relief. The modern sitcom must be authentically diverse for the sake of accurate representation of minorities in the media. All people deserve to see a depiction of themselves that is true to their experience on television at some point because it can be affirming. If this depiction is not authentic or accurate, however, it is essentially worthless and will do more harm than good. In order for successful diversification of the modern sitcom, the influence of black sitcoms on interracial contact has to be identified and addressed, and it is imperative that the diversity depicted be deep rather than broad. *Black-*

ish satisfies these two requirements and can be considered groundbreaking in terms of its depiction of the black experience. In my opinion, *Black-ish* is the first black family sitcom to get it right.



Still from *Black-ish*, "Stuff," (Season 2, Episode 10, 2016)

Take, for example, two other black family sitcoms, *The Cosby Show* and *The Carmichael Show*. While *The Cosby Show* was groundbreaking in terms of its depiction of a wealthy, African-American family on television, the show did not take on many critical, controversial topics. Also, the black experience that is true to the majority of African Americans is not the life that the Huxtable family lives. The Huxtable family depicts the nuclear, African-American family in a way that had never been seen before on television as members of the family chase their American dream and break myriad stereotypes along the way. *The Cosby Show* was affirming for African Americans during its network broadcast in the sense that the minority was represented on television, but it is an example of broad diversification that is not deep. On the other hand, *The Carmichael Show* does address hard-hitting issues, but it lacks

the sophistication that *Black-ish* brings to diversity television. There is a certain effortless intricacy in which *Black-ish* portrays the black experience that isn't always there on *The Carmichael Show*. Furthermore, both of these shows have "black clouds" hanging over them: the Bill Cosby scandal undermines the credibility of *The Cosby Show* and the abrupt cancelation of *The Carmichael Show* takes it off the screen. Both of these circumstances take away from the positive influence these shows might have on the black community.

In an attempt to improve ratings, networks including ABC began broadcasting television series with "expanded worldviews." Rather than sticking to a traditional family sitcom mold, shows became more controversial and more inclusive of minority races, nationalities, and sexualities. Paul Lee, ABC's entertainment chairman was quoted saying that, "[he thinks] the changes in the demographics in the U.S. are every bit as important a revolution as the technological changes that we're all going through" (Baysinger). This demonstrates that influential people within the network that produced *Black-ish* are aware that the demographics of the nation are changing and that networks needed to adapt accordingly. *Black-ish* and a few other minority sitcoms were created in an attempt to adapt to the changing demographics in the United States. This attempt at adaptation is necessary because if television networks and show writers do not realize the importance of representation and do not adjust, minority groups will be left without affirming representation on television and – in a concern that is important to the business side of television – won't watch.

While increasing diversity is an important goal in and of itself, it is important that television shows do not ostracize but rather educate the "other," which in the case of *Black-ish* is the "non-black" audience. A survey conducted by Mastro and Tropp has

proven that negative stereotypical TV portrayals of blacks are harmful for acceptance of African Americans (Mastro and Tropp). Stereotypes like “black men are dangerous” or “black women are loud and angry” reinforce negative ideals that may already exist in the audience when depicted in the media. This demonstrates why the complex and authentic depiction of the black experience in *Black-ish* is important for society as a whole. Reinforcing negative stereotypes is an example of how media representation that is inauthentic or inaccurate does more harm than good for both black and non-black audiences. *Black-ish* exists to overcome the previously stereotypical portrayal of African Americans on television and is not just aired for the sake of comedy. Reinforcing a negative stereotype about one group to another could be harmful in more than one way, which is why diversity television exists in such a tough space. *Black-ish* reinforces why negative stereotypes and other mistreatment of African Americans is so hurtful by going far beyond using them solely as jokes. Furthermore, this demonstrates that the writers of *Black-ish* are aware of the influence this show has on society and contributes to their successfully authentic diversification.

It is also important that television diversity be deep rather than just broad. Sure, having a full line-up of diverse faces and families is great, but if those families are not examined deeply and accurately, the diversity serves as a tokenism, and the depiction is not affirming. The Bechdel test, based on an exchange in a comic strip created by Alison Bechdel, asks whether a sitcom or any other form of fiction contains at least two women characters who speak and who talk to each other about something other than a man. A racial version of this test can be used to ensure that programming is deeply diverse. “Having minority characters talk about race in a way that’s not in relation to white people” is one way to ensure this type of diversity on television (Poneiwozick). *Black-ish* passes this test in

its discussion of the black experience. Unfortunately, the cost of this newfound richness of diversity and portrayal of minorities and engagement with controversial issues has been steadily decreasing ratings.

The show begins in the first season with Andre Johnson expressing his concerns about his family and how some members have assimilated to their white neighborhood. He is worried that his children are losing touch with their black culture, which also means they are unaware of the struggles that African Americans face on a daily basis because they are living in a bubble. In the pilot episode, Andre becomes hyperaware of this and, in turn, determines that his new promotion at work is racist because they “put him in charge of ‘black stuff’” as the new senior vice president of the “Urban Division.” This workplace struggle is something that is faced in many different forms by African Americans in the United States today, which makes this depiction accurate. This episode is important because it creates a conflict for the main characters as they do not want to be defined by their race while also remaining “unapologetically black.”



Still from Black-ish, "Pilot," (Season 1, Episode 1, 2015)

Another more comedic example of broadly deep diversification and representation on *Black-ish* is an episode regarding sexuality and the black community. Sexuality is a main topic of this episode with the focus being the common discomfort within the black community regarding homosexuality. Homosexuality is a taboo topic within the black community that is usually avoided at all costs. An episode at the end of season one highlights this phenomenon. Dre's sister Rhonda (Raven Symone) is a lesbian who has decided to live her life and let people figure it out over time rather than to come out to them. Her approach is due to the common lack of acceptance of homosexuality within the black community, especially by the older generation. The episode is appropriately titled, "Please Don't Ask, Please Don't Tell." Some of the funniest moments of this episodes are when some of the African-American characters deny that their family members are gay while providing descriptors common of homosexual relationships.

This is an instance where a negative part of the black experience is brought to the light, and discussion surrounding it is forced because it is such an important topic. The discussion is important because it sheds light on an issue that is intraracial rather than interracial, which makes the show more inviting to “the other.” This also allows the show to satisfy the racial Bechdel test because this is presented as an intraracial issue.

The significance of deeply broad diversification on television is important now more than ever within the black community due to the current social climate. The episode titled “Hope,” tackles the current black experience in the United States deeply and accurately. In this episode, The Johnson family sits down to watch the evening news together. While watching the news, there is a story about a case of police brutality in which an African-American man has been shot. Rainbow reminds her children to always be “nice” to the police to which Dre responds by listing recent cases of police brutality in the United States such as Freddie Grey and Sandra Bland, both cases in which the victim complied and still died at the hands of the police. When Rainbow suggests that they “hope” that everything works out, Andre reminds her of President Obama’s first inauguration. In one of the most powerful moments on the show, the episode cuts to footage of President Obama walking alongside the presidential motorcade with a voiceover of Dre asking his wife if she was as terrified as he was that something horrible was going to happen and that their “hope” would be snatched away from them.



Still from Black-ish, "Hope," (Season 2, Episode 16, 2016)

This is why Andre feels that his children need to be exposed to the harsh reality of being black and American and why some of the topics on the show like those discussed in these episodes are so hard-hitting and deep. Police brutality is an issue that is a harsh reality of life for African Americans today. This is the best example on the show of deeply authentic representation of what it is like to be black in America today, which makes the series groundbreaking. All of the episodes ring true to the black experience in some sense, but this is certainly one of the most hard hitting and accurate.

Rather than poke fun at or make light of the current racial situation in the United States, *Black-ish* tackles these issues head on in an attempt to educate viewers. Episodes are not as harsh as a lecture on race in America due to the lighthearted comedic nature of the sitcom genre. The light-heartedness allows the influence of the themes and conversations of the show *Black-ish* to reach myriad audiences. The fact that it reaches a broad viewership doesn't necessarily mean that it is received well by all viewers. Ratings have suffered for *Black-*

ish due in part to this depth of diversity. *Black-ish* dives head first into social and racial issues that go beyond the comfort zone of most viewers. But if the show were only to scratch the surface of these issues, it would not be an adequate depiction of the black experience. This is the tough space in which *Black-ish* exists and must continue to navigate as long as it is on air.

Black-ish is the epitome of deeply broad diversification on the small screen and should receive more recognition for the accuracy in which it portrays the black experience in the United States. There is much more to affirming representation than simply seeing a person of your skin color on television. *Black-ish* successfully provides insight into the life of this African American family and is able to dive into each character as an individual rather than using them as tokens. In order to remain authentic and affirming for its minority audiences, *Black-ish* must remain true to its message and deep diversification on television because minority depictions on television greatly influence society, both intra- and interracially.

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CHAPTER 6

Broad City Viewpoints: Advocating for Open-mindedness and Acceptance

EMMA COOLEY

Broad City is a contemporary comedy series created by and starring two Jewish-American women, Abbi Abrams (Abbi Jacobson) and Ilana Wexler (Ilana Glazer), in their countless adventures in New York City. The duo's show began on YouTube in late 2009 and was co-produced by Amy Poehler when it came to Comedy Central in 2014. *Broad City*, one of few web series to be picked up as a television series and maintain its success (Glover), receives critical acclaim for its humor and authenticity, and the fourth season will begin in fall 2017. In this classic buddy sitcom, Abbi and Ilana are middle-class, college-educated, and determined to make it in a big city without their parents' help. To sum it up in one sentence, "the characters are fun and fresh: horny, sometimes bi-curious young ladies, rolling

joints and scraping by, keeping it casual with the men in their lives while reserving their most raging affection for each other” (Yuan). *Broad City* tackles the challenging millennial transition into adulthood with a liberal perspective and nothing-can-go-wrong attitude.



Ilana Glazer as Ilana Wexler and Abby Jacobson as Abby Abrams in Broad City, "Two Chainz"

Broad City's origins on the web has given the two creators complete control over the content from the very beginning, which continues to be evident in the television series. Throughout the show, Abby and Ilana are not afraid to have serious conversations or to participate in true, human moments of profanity and nudity. This crude authenticity is the core of *Broad City*, and it stems from the creators' bold personalities, the initial low-budget production of the YouTube videos, and the capacity for web series to take risks and depict "a broader array of stories" due to the lack of restrictions on producers (Glover, Christian). When moving over to the television landscape, *Broad City* did not only remain loyal to its homemade aesthetic but impressively kept its progressive

beliefs and authenticity strongly intact as well. While this show may seem hilariously mindless and quite silly on the surface, there is constant advocacy for progressive freedoms such as sex-positive feminism, LGBTQ liberty, and drug consumption on *Broad City* as the co-stars shatter taboos and break down social barriers with their easygoing and frivolous antics.

Men are not the focus of *Broad City*, and when male characters do appear in episodes, they are not in the position of power. Ilana acts in complete independence when it comes to her sexual endeavors. She refuses to date her long-term bed buddy and wealthy dentist Lincoln (Hannibal Buress), claiming that their relationship is purely physical despite his constant efforts to take it to the next level. During the first season, Lincoln invites Ilana to a wedding ("Destination Wedding"), helps her best friend Abbi find an apartment ("Apartment Hunters"), and even fixes her tooth for free ("Pu\$\$y Weed"). Meanwhile, Ilana forgets his birthday ("In Heat") and does the absolute bare minimum to keep the sexual relationship going while always maintaining her independence. Ilana appreciates Lincoln as a friend but shows viewers that she does not rely on a man for happiness and, instead, relies on herself first and foremost, as noted in this conversation with Abbi's roommate Bevers:

Bevers: You and Lincoln seem like a pretty serious couple.

Ilana: We're sex friends... although we haven't had sex in like, four days. You know, today I was actually with him all day, but I didn't see his dick once.

Ilana ask Abbi for her impressions of the relationship, too:

Ilana: Ab, do you think Lincoln and I are like a "couple"?

Abbi: I don't know, I mean, you've been spending a lot more

time with him lately, right? And if you're not having sex, he's either your boyfriend or your best friend.

Ilana: Ow! You are my best friend! Don't you ever call anybody else that!

Abbi: What the (Bleep)?

Ilana: He's not my boyfriend! I'm wild and I'm free! I'm a sexual X-man, I'm Wolverine. I'm Vulva-rine.

Conversations such as the one above clearly show that Ilana values her independence and friendship with Abbi above all else. More often than not in *Broad City*, "it's men who are reduced to one-dimensional exaggerations of themselves, not women... Abbi and Ilana are the pioneers [of their own adventure] while the men are generally the obstacles they must overcome" (Alter 51).

Though Abbi sometimes resorts to traditional feminine ways, such as falling madly in love with the boy next door, Jeremy (Stephen Schneider), Ilana's sexual openness consistently triumphs whereas Abbi fails to win over this boy's attention. This power that Ilana represents is sex-positive feminism, which is centered on the idea that sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom. In addition to the feminist attitude that she does not need a masculine figure for support, Ilana's sexuality remains ambiguous; in many episodes, she kisses female coworkers and frequently attempts to drag Abbi into threesomes. In the episode "Coat Check," she even falls in love with a girl named Adele (Alia Shawkat). In this case, Abbi has to point out that Ilana and Adele look *exactly* alike, which is the reason that Ilana is so attracted to her. Ilana responds to this realization in confusion, "but ... I have sex with people different from me... different colors, different shapes, different sizes. People who are hotter, people who are uglier. More

smart; not more smart. Innies, outies. I don't know, a Catholic person" ("Coat Check"). Ilana's open approach to her sexuality shows that women do not need to rely on men and do have the freedom to explore their sexuality. Her character defies neat labels while carrying feminist tones and messages of self-love, opening viewers' eyes to a new kind of woman, a type they cannot help but admire. Ilana is just one character in *Broad City* who accepts all kinds of people, but this is part of the overall progressive viewpoint of the show.



Alia Shawkat as Adele and Ilana Glazer as Ilana in Broad City, "Coat Check"

Not only does Ilana champion sexual freedom, but *Broad City's* supporting characters also represent diversity in sexuality and identity. Ilana lives with a gay, Venezuelan, drug-dealing immigrant named Jaimé (Arturo Castro). Although he may seem like a token diversity character for his sexual orientation and Latin-American background, Jaimé is a reliable friend, possesses a wonderful personality, and – of course – provides the *Broad City* gang's marijuana. Ilana and Abbi are not friends with him just to have a "gay best friend" but, more importantly,

for his personality and individuality. He is always there for his friends, and the “Citizen Ship” episode focuses on Jaimé earning his American citizenship, which is followed by a huge celebration. Also, Jaimé and Lincoln spend most of this episode together sharing jokes and playing pranks on a yacht. Their back and forth banter is good-natured and sincere, and they even act out *The Titanic’s* Jack and Rose to seal the deal (Framke). This is an example of the effortless close bond that is formed between members of the *Broad City* crew, regardless of their background or identity. This approach to a gay character is successful because the show is not just about Jaimé being gay; it is about human stories with funny dialogue, which gets viewers, regardless of how they identify, to like the characters and accept them readily (Frutkin). On the other hand, despite the intersectionality of his sexual orientation and ethnicity, the depictions of Jaimé as a homosexual are narrowly stereotypical. He is extremely girly and animated, and this kind of conventional depiction can turn media representation of gay men into a sort of joke, which is upsetting to LGBTQ viewers (Gomillion 351). Jaimé’s character is constructed in a way that does not show the audience an entire spectrum of sexual orientation, but nevertheless, this is balanced out by Ilana’s fluid sexuality and non-stereotypical personas. Overall, Jaimé’s character shows that being gay should not be something unusual or off-putting nor the only redeeming part of his personality. It is, rather, simply another normal aspect of his identity among many others in a tolerant and open-minded community such as the one represented in *Broad City*.



Hannibal Buress as Lincoln Rice and Arturo Castro as Jaime Castro in Broad City, "Citizen Ship"

In addition to showing a variety of sexualities and identities, *Broad City* depicts progressive attitudes through Abbi and Ilana's frequent use of recreational drugs. Their choice to indulge in marijuana and other substances openly and enthusiastically is not just a ploy to incorporate more humor into the show but part of their liberal mindset and belief that every individual has freedom of choice. *Broad City* is one of few shows that portrays female characters using marijuana, even in the new wave of liberal TV. "With the exception of Donna and Jackie in *That '70s Show*, there have been scarce female stoners," but "the madcap stoned adventures of Abbi and Ilana in *Broad City* have changed that narrative" (Coslett). The traditionally male-dominated marijuana domain is proving to be more and more a women's space, and of course, Abbi and Ilana are at the forefront of this. Whether it be high doctor office visits in "Pu\$\$y Weed," college-dorm bong smoking during "In Heat," or adventures with imaginary friends in "Wisdom Teeth," Abbi and Ilana find themselves in great fits of laughter and in some interesting predicaments after consuming

marijuana. Still, they always manage to emerge safely from such situations. Abbi and Ilana's marijuana use in the show is always regarded as a casual and everyday act. In "Pu\$\$y Weed," Abbi considers buying her own weed a very grown-up thing to do, comparing it to the adult act of doing taxes. Also in this episode, Ilana conceals her marijuana in her vagina to hide it from sniffing dogs on the subway. The two girls are confident in their drug use; they completely own it and view the activity as a source of empowerment. Abbi and Ilana's attitude toward drugs makes viewers feel comfortable with the act and eliminates any negative preconceived notions. The open use of recreational drugs in *Broad City* mimics that of other TV shows such as *Workaholics* or *That '70s Show*, but this time, it is just a girl gang, and they do not rely on "macho men" for their blissful experience. The best part about it is that this girly duo write each episode based off their everyday experiences; *Broad City* is as realistic as a contemporary female sitcom gets.



Ilana Glazer as Ilana Wexler and Abbi Jacobson as Abbi Abrams in Broad City, "In Heat"

On television today, there are aspects of series that may not

seem authentic, such as the lack of diversity or the oversexualized portrayal of women, but with *Broad City's* democratic background derived from its online origins and enhanced by hilarious writers and genuine content, the characters never fall short of authentic. As co-writer Abbi Jacobson puts it, "When we write for these characters... I think the thing we talk about the most is like, well, what would we really do? It's just real" (Miller). Ilana and Abbi make authenticity their top priority, which makes their message exceptionally powerful and convincing. From diversity in sexuality, origin, income, and more, this series depicts millennials in an honest way, especially when it comes to contemporary womanhood. As a perfect example, Abbi and Ilana have a strong female friendship as each other's counselors and confidants, both inside and outside of the show. Glazer explains that "this kind of relationship is something relatively new as millennials have grown into their 20s...women (and men) are getting married later, so primary relationships are friendships that spawn after college, when you meet someone in a new city — either New York, Austin, or any other place unfamiliar — and the friendship's foundation lies in the novelty of it all" (Evans). The two women are not afraid to show these realities of millennial life, and handing them on an accessible silver platter to a wide audience through television is truly "a revolutionary act" (Yuan). *Broad City* represents a new wave of television that reflects the way millennials view the world, "with no presiding sexual norms, no judgment on experimentation, and with diversity among friends and in the city at large that doesn't feel like a quota — presented in a way that acknowledges the heroines' skewed perspective without trivializing the greater difficulties of others" (Yuan). What is really the revolutionary part, is that these ideals are being conveyed to Abbi and Ilana's own demographic as well as educating older age groups about typical millennial lifestyles.

This liberal mindset of contemporary television shows is necessary to facilitate the rapidly changing open-minded views of young people, and groundbreaking work like *Broad City* that challenges dominant narratives would not have a place to exist and experiment if it were not for avant-garde platforms such as YouTube and Comedy Central. *Broad City* is often compared to *Girls* as both depict early-20s female friendships in New York City, but there is a contrast between *Broad City*, a show that began as a YouTube series and thrives through streaming and marginal outlets, and *Girls*, a HBO network television series. The main characters in *Girls*, although embracing some proto-feminist ideals such as sex-positive feminism, do eventually conform and join the suburbs to be mothers. On the other hand, Abbi and Ilana are two gals that will never conform; never in a million years will they be caught settled down with kids, living in the countryside of New York. *Broad City* has kept its cutting-edge content intact since its humble beginnings as a web series and continues to prove that it will never be tamed, no matter what new obstacles may come the future (Glover). The creators and characters are able to be so trailblazing and nonconformist, because there are channels available that are more willing to take chances and press against ideological boundaries than broadcast networks are. From big ideas such as marijuana legalization to just using profanity and nudity, it all “has to do with being young women and having agency over [their] behavior and words” (Glazer). Now more than ever, these digital spaces are giving voices to individuals and paving the way for acceptance. *Broad City* is a great example of the kind of sitcoms that are needed on television today to diversify the image of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be human.

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CHAPTER 7

It's (Not) Just A Joke! It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia and Absurdist Political Satire

ALYSSA MCAULIFFE



Still from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, "Gun Fever Too: Still Hot" (Season 9 Episode 2).

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, although a far cry from the beloved family-friendly 1950s series *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, will be tied with the latter for the longest running, live-action sitcom ever with its recent 14th season renewal. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* follows the misadventures of "The Gang," a group of four degenerate 20-somethings who co-own a dive bar in the middle of Philadelphia. Unlike many other American sitcoms that can attribute their longevity and consistent popularity to relatable, endearing characters and funny yet lighthearted plotlines, this show finds its stride with some of the worst people on television doing the most outrageous, unsettling things every single episode. Dennis Reynolds (Glenn Howerton) is a veritable sociopath who prides himself on his (sometimes imagined) ability to manipulate women. His sister, "Sweet" Dee Reynolds (Kaitlin Olson), is incredibly volatile and best compensates for her insecurities by hurling insults at everyone around her. Mac (Rob McElhenney) and Charlie (Charlie Day) are a dynamic duo whose collective intellect amounts to that of an impressionable, easily distracted child, and Frank is the estranged, equally ridiculous, sometimes-father of the Reynolds siblings.

Although it may seem too ridiculous and offensive to have any real-world merit, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* often tackles extremely difficult, pertinent social issues with biting satire. The line between transgressive comedy and satire is often blurry in this show, but among the anarchy and debauchery lies a grim analysis of society as it exists today. Whether there is any hope for reform is up for debate – *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* may simply hold a mirror up to viewers, saying "look how terrible *we all are*." This dark sitcom reveals why many of our country's most divisive political issues – like gun control, gay marriage, and welfare – provoke years of unproductive, irrational debate and yield little cultural progress. By reducing

opposite ends of extreme viewpoints to the absurd, this sitcom actually facilitates healthy political discourse, even if the characters themselves never seem to escape the chaos.

While *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* did not necessarily start out as a political satire, it has certainly garnered the most buzz over the episodes that address hot button social issues of the time in controversial ways. In "Gun Fever Too: Still Hot," the Gang makes its second attempt to reach consensus about gun rights and gun control in America. After watching Frank (Danny DeVito) vehemently promote the second amendment, a gun and a hoagie in each hand, on a local news station, each character exhibits an intense emotional response. Dee and Dennis want all guns off the streets; meanwhile, Charlie and Mac agree with Frank and embark on a mission to get more guns to the public, including in local schools. Neither pair has engaged in any research on the subject of gun rights or gun control, yet both camps are undoubtedly convinced that they are on the "right" side. Sound familiar? Welcome to the state of American politics as it stands today.



Still from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, "Gun Fever Too: Still Hot" (Season 9 Episode 2).

The emotional (over)reaction that each member of the Gang displays in response to the gun control issue serves as the catalyst for subsequent attempts at political action, but unsurprisingly, neither team has considered the validity of alternative viewpoints. Dee and Dennis spend the day trying to prove just how easy it is for anyone, including potential mass murderers, to obtain this kind of weapon; they do not, however, experience any luck, both siblings being denied at every turn because of concerning background checks or refusal to pay exorbitant fees. Meanwhile, Mac and Charlie try to incorporate armed security into a middle school's defense plan for shooter situations and find that the kids are unsettlingly violent. After attempting to train the students in offensive measures with everyday objects that could be used as weapons, the two men flee the bar in fear while Charlie screams "imagine if they had guns!" As Charlie, Dee, Mac, and Dennis each come to terms with the reality that their poorly researched opinions may not have any merit, viewers begin to question their own preconceived notions about hot button issues. Since the

"increase in the viewing [of] political satirical shows increases the level of political socialization," the sarcastic humor found in this episode may spark real life conversations about gun control that avoid the pitfalls of unwavering political alliances and introduce more middle-ground ideas (Nazir).

At the end of "Gun Fever Too: Still Hot," the Gang meets back up again with each side having completely switched its original opinion about gun control, still all just as emotional and with the same radical views. They then reconvene with Frank, who reveals that his whole righteous television stunt was actually just a ploy to get gun rights activists all fired up: "I bought a stake in Gunther's Guns, I got everybody angry and scared, they bought the guns, I made a fortune." The Gang is visibly upset by this new information – they went to all this trouble to prove each other wrong, and the person who got them all "hot" in the first place has no moral ties to the issue whatsoever. Frank continues:

I think of myself more like Al Gore. You know, he got everybody worked up over Global Warming, then he made millions. Yeah, everybody does it – liberals, conservatives, doesn't matter. This is America! You're either a duper or a dupee. I'm a duper. You guys are the dupees!

We laugh at this outrageous turn of events, but is it really that unprecedented? According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, "only 19% of Americans today say they can trust the government..." "just about always" (3%) or "most of the time" (16%)" (People-Press.org). This deep-rooted mistrust is exploited in this episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* through Frank's manipulation of the Gang and the rest of the cable-news-watching public.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia relishes in the extreme. Dee,

Dennis, Mac, Charlie, and Frank, along with an outrageous cast of special guests and season regulars, all constantly push everyday scenarios to the “nth degree.” That is part of the fun, and it is likely one of the reasons the show maintains such a loyal fan base. The Gang’s antics are hilarious because they are so incredibly ridiculous – it is a play on traditional conventions of drama, and nothing is safe from the chaos these characters create, including the political. In an interview with *Vice* series creator Glenn Howerton, he remarks that “Usually the answer to any extreme political viewpoint is somewhere in the middle, but that’s just not the way we operate. That’s kind of how we are now, two opposing sides screaming at each other and never backing down. It’s horrible for our country, but it’s really fun for our show.” Howerton’s comment, although made in jest, actually speaks to a very real and very grave phenomenon in present American society.

This episode is a perfect example of how polarizing social issues like gun control can be, and it certainly proves that these radical viewpoints, much like those we see in real life, do little, if anything, to promote compromise or execute successful government action. The fact that these characters who are so deeply attached to their beliefs at the beginning of the episode completely flip-flop by the end of one day exemplifies the idea that neither side has definitive answers. These social issues are far too complex for consensus to be reached in one go or, in this case, in one episode. But is there really any hope for compromise when, as political commentator John Avalon argues, “politics follows the lines of physics. Every action creates an equal and opposite reaction. And the extremes incite each other” (Rettig)? Since the Gang has the collective attention span of a small child, the end of this episode means the end of their gun fever. That is not the case, however, for American citizens and politicians today.

While “Gun Fever Too: Still Hot” shows how unfettered emotions and the dismissal of alternative opinions contribute to political stalemates, other *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* episodes argue that the worst offense may be complete ignorance. In “Mac Fights Gay Marriage,” Mac, a deeply indoctrinated Catholic, tries to convince Carmen, a transgender woman with whom he once had a relationship, that her recent marriage to a man is considered a gay marriage. With Bible in hand, he tells the couple, “I am about to do you guys a huge solid... In the eyes of the Lord, your marriage is an abomination, and if you don't get a divorce, you're going to hell.” Mac chooses to ignore the fact that he *also* had relations with a person who was, by his reasoning, male. As Carmen points out, “Look, if anything, you're the one that slept with me when I was a man.” When Carmen's new husband reads another quote from the Bible, one that allows the beating of slaves without punishment as long as the slave does not die, Mac backtracks and frantically asserts that *this* part of the scripture is different and does not apply to modern times. The hypocrisy in Mac's argument is blatant. He confounds his disappointment in Carmen never calling him with his blind religious beliefs, and the result is a hilariously one-sided debate.



Still from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, "Mac Fights Gay Marriage" (Season 6 Episode 1).

Though studies have proposed that "some forms of humor may facilitate audience acceptance of the very ideas the satirist intends to disparage," *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is absurd enough that the majority of viewers recognize the irony and laugh at how unashamedly uninformed the Gang is (Gring-Pemble). Mac masks his own internal conflict about his possible homosexuality with anger and ignorance. Once he realizes that he is fighting a losing battle, Mac laments "Now you're calling me gay, telling me I'm tripping, and trying to confuse me with your liberal biblicisms!" Carmen's husband suggests what fans of the show have suspected for many seasons: "Man, my guess is you've been confused for a *very* long time." Mac's tactic to save the sanctity of marriage (in his eyes) is common in political debates. People often lash out because of internalized fears or biases, not because agreed-upon, "true" facts are being denied. Seeing Mac's outrageous embodiment of this should improve the ability of viewers to recognize such behavior in real life – it might even encourage them to reevaluate their own social prejudices.

In another episode, "Dennis and Dee go on Welfare," Dennis and Dee do, in fact, go on welfare. This episode is just as offensive as it sounds, but the cringe-worthy humor found in this episode has a greater purpose. When the eponymous characters quit their jobs at the bar, they happily decide to file for unemployment benefits. Realizing this government program actually pays more than they made at the bar, Dennis and Dee figure they could take it one step further: welfare. In this episode, the naive brother-sister duo expresses a belief that many have in our society: that most of the people on welfare are actually content to be so and that welfare is a crutch for the poor that rewards laziness while leeching money from every other hardworking American. The ensuing disastrous events that plague Dennis and Dee – including the two trying to seem "worthy of welfare" by feigning a crack addiction then accidentally getting hooked – is an exaggerated take on the real life vicious cycle of poverty in which millions of Americans are trapped.



Still from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, "Dennis and Dee Go on Welfare" (Season 2 Episode 3).

Meanwhile, the two still (surprisingly) employed characters, Mac and Charlie, also make a visit to the "welfare store," as they endearingly call it but not to get unemployment benefits for themselves. They want to exploit the other side of this program by hiring people involved in the "work for welfare" initiative, hoping that they will be able to acquire free manual labor since the employees would be paid by the state. Mac and Charlie, of course, take advantage of the two workers appointed to them and force them to scrub the urinals among other menial tasks. A grim reality sets in when the male worker injures his leg at the end of the episode after Frank coaxes the two to play football with him. Frank tells the female worker Maria to go grab them a few beers, but both workers reveal that they do not drink alcohol. Frank is astonished. "You don't drink? Jesus Christ! You two are a couple of downers, huh? You work hard, you don't drink. How'd you end up on welfare?" There's the punchline.

Now Frank, of course, does not really care (he answers his cell phone when Maria starts explaining her plights) and neither does any other member of the Gang. But members of the Gang are clearly terrible people – what does this say about the real-life Americans who share the same beliefs?

One of the key elements in this episode, especially within Dennis and Dee's storyline, is transgressive humor. Although *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* hinges on smart, caustic sarcasm, its jokes do often toe the line between sarcasm and transgressive humor. When the Reynolds siblings are at the unemployment office trying to vie for their right to welfare, they both decide to take on different personas. By their reasoning, welfare is for "deadbeats," so they have to look the part. Dee wears a bicycle helmet backwards and feigns mental retardation, and Dennis does the talking: "Hi. Um, I'm a recovering crackhead. This is my retarded sister that I take care of. I'd like some welfare please." The scene is almost hard to watch, but it still makes viewers laugh because it is so absurd. In his essay "Breaking and Entering: Transgressive comedy on Television," Michael V. Tueth says that "for transgressive comedy, the societal taboos and the misbehavior that satire wishes to end must remain, so that one can experience the delight of the entry into forbidden realms" (10). For *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* to even exist in the first place, there must exist terribly ignorant, offensive people with extremely low ideals. The show's creators seem almost willing to give in to the human degradation that plagues our society rather than to rise above it.



Still from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, "Dennis and Dee Go on Welfare" (Season 2 Episode 3).

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia is innovative in its approach to sensitive topics like gun control and gay marriage because it refuses to take itself too seriously. Since the Gang is comprised of terrible, outrageous, problematic people, viewers can more easily separate themselves from the characters and the actions they take; as seen in episodes like "Dennis and Dee Go on Welfare," however, sometimes the horror is far closer to home than we might like to think. Even if the show and its creators express little faith in society's ability to overcome its weakest links, these politically charged episodes at least offer great examples of how *not* to act. Hypocrisy and ignorance are two of the greatest enemies of rational debate. The takeaway message from "Mac Fights Gay Marriage" and "Gun Fever Too: Still Hot" is that you should definitely not employ both when trying to prove a point.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia has been capturing the attention of viewers for fourteen seasons. No longer is it merely a dark sitcom – it has now become the uncensored voice of a tired, cynical nation. The national conversation today is riddled with extremism and prejudice, and it is defined by debilitating political biases; a show like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* shows players on both sides of the aisle how absolutely absurd the polarization is. If people like Dennis, Dee, Mac, and Charlie keep adding vitriol and ignorance to our social and political landscapes, there may not be much hope for a change after all. With each passing season, the Gang becomes increasingly less stable and assuredly more insane. Perhaps we are all becoming victims of the chaos as well.

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CHAPTER 8

From Jesse Helms to Last Man Standing: How Politicization of Television Continues to Divide America

TOMMY O'HAREN

In a sort of vicious cycle, the television Americans consume is a product of the culture of the time, which in turn, can change and influence said culture. This phenomenon is none clearer than in family sitcoms. Since their inception, family sitcoms have reflected and influenced what Americans believe to be the idealized version of family. Recently, many shows have been created to represent the growing liberal and diverse portions of America, seen in shows like *Modern Family*, *Fresh off the Boat*, and *Black-ish*, while some shows – like *Last Man Standing* – have continued to focus on the traditional and conservative view of what it means to be a family. This tug of war between liberals and conservatives over control and representation of media is not a new concept. These constant power struggles can be

viewed as a microcosm of the larger political battle that exists in the United States. In that same vicious cycle, politicized television increases the radicalization of public discourse, leading to more profoundly biased content being made and released, consequently furthering the divide separating Americans.

In this essay, I will examine how historical and current conservative leaders control the public media, how conservative ideologies have been represented in media – mainly through the lens of family sitcoms – and, primarily, how these approaches exacerbate political intolerance across party lines. To do this, I have identified three types of conservative representation within the media: ironic conservatism, true conservatism, and reformist conservatism. To begin, I will examine some history of conservative influence over television starting with the rise of right-wing media in the 1960s.

Jesse Helms was a U.S. Republican politician from North Carolina who held and supported extremely conservative views. He not only strove to further his political agenda from within his Senate committee positions but also from his position as the vice-president of Capitol Broadcasting Company. Helms's desires for his career in media were twofold. He wanted to convert audiences to the GOP through the tearing down of liberalism and the democratic party, and he wanted to elect conservatives to office. He would release his own commentaries on air, twice a day, five days a week. These segments would usually involve racist rhetoric, the comparison of liberalism to socialism/communism, and attacks on "liberal media," which he believed was leading to the degeneration of morals in America. Within his position at the broadcasting company, he would also control which content was made and released to the public. "Television executives, he felt, should exercise their influence by programming entertainment and

news that supported time-honored morality and promoted conservatism – the conservatism, he believed, that undergirded a free and prosperous society” (Thrift).



Senator Jesse Helms. U.S. Senate Historical Office.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:JesseHelms.jpg>

By 1968, Helms’s influence had spread across states and to over fifty radio stations. Through a combination of Helms’s influence, political pushback against civil right movements, Nixon’s ability to appeal to moderates, and changing opinions on the Vietnam

War, politicians like Helm were able to secure the voting bloc and strengthen the number and conviction of conservatives across the south (Thrift). This influence was able to affect the American culture in all aspects and is still seen today. I will now begin to examine the three types of conservative media through the lens of family sitcoms that are present due to Helm's influence and argue that these sitcoms, while appearing benign, are highly politicized and only divide the American public.

IRONIC CONSERVATISM

One of the most successful family sitcoms of all time was released in 1971 amid the height of the conservative media influence. This iconic series features a character that can be viewed as representing conservative ideals, but the way he is intended to be received is different from what you might think. *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-79) continues to be regarded as a sitcom with extremely well-done social commentary, mainly through the character of Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor). Archie is a character that expresses prejudice against about every major sect of people in existence that differs from himself. Now, this does not mean that all conservatives are racist, homophobic, sexist, etc., but his manner of conducting himself falls fairly well in line with that of conservatives of the time, especially Helms.

The character of Archie is interesting, however, due to the fact that viewers are not supposed to agree with his actions or beliefs. While we are not supposed to see eye-to-eye with him, we are put into an interesting position due to the fact that he's just so likeable. You can't help but root for him. His character is ironic. You enjoy him even though you disagree with what he stands for, which raises the question, "does *All in the Family*

ridicule racist behavior or make it seem permissible” (Jones)? The answer was determined by whom you asked. Liberals saw the show as anti-racist and anti-bigotry in support of their own views while conservatives saw the show as reaffirming and finally acknowledging them (Jones). It was a perfect demonstration of the satire paradox in which the group that is being satirized does not see the work as derisive but, instead, sees it as unironically validating their belief system (Ellis).

TRUE CONSERVATISM

True conservatism can be defined as the media portrayal of conservative ideas that the audience is intended to hold and agree with in a non-ironic way. There is no satire intended like what is exemplified in ironic conservatism. This can be seen in the recently cancelled sitcom *Last Man Standing* (ABC 2011-17) starring Tim Allen. Within the show, storylines and characters are written in which a conservative viewpoint is the correct one and liberal viewpoints are not. In other words, it is media written by conservatives for conservatives.

REFORMIST CONSERVATISM

Reformist conservatism was coined by Daniel Hallin based on his belief that there is representation that “serves liberal progress but does not directly threaten the protected interests of media ownership and the dominant class” (Real). This can be seen in shows like *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-92) and *Modern Family* (ABC 2009-), in which minority characters are introduced but very much fit into a heteronormative, white, upper-middle class family structure set in stone by conservative values. In *The Cosby Show*, issues of race are rarely if ever introduced and discussed. There is very little that connects the show to any aspect of Blackness. This was done to “carefully avoid

antagonizing any members of the audience" (Real). Creators of the show did not want to threaten the white, majority viewership by confronting racial issues that stem from a prejudiced society. This type of portrayal can be seen in *Modern Family* in the family structure upon which the show is built. The inclusion of the homosexual relationship and parenting appears to "represent the so-called 'twenty-first century gay family,'" but "Cam and Mitch actually play two extremely gender-normative roles – roles it seems that the show has taken pains to concretely define" (LaVecchia). The show lets its audience believe that the series portrays a progressive notion of what it means to be a family, but the series simply restates the conventions of the ideal conservative family in a new light.

Now that the types of conservatism in media have been identified, I will now look at how these family sitcoms can divide viewers. To begin, I will focus on the feeling of underrepresentation by conservative Americans. Tim Allen is openly conservative, which is somewhat unusual among Hollywood actors, and he has publicly criticized former President Barrack Obama and just as publicly supported President Donald Trump. As a fairly liberal person myself, I do not agree with what Tim Allen has said about certain topics, but I unabashedly support free speech. What is difficult to listen to, however, is Tim Allen's comparisons of being a conservative in Hollywood to living in 1930s Germany (Washington). Though I believe this to be a ridiculous hyperbole, what I find more interesting is the number of conservative Americans who share a similar viewpoint.

Conservatives in America feel that they are under attack and have felt this way for some time. Ironically, a powerful example of their frustration can be seen in the cancellation of Tim Allen's sitcom *Last Man Standing*. Even though the show was cancelled alongside *Dr. Ken*, *The Real O'Neals*, and *American Crime* (three

shows that are easily seen as left-leaning ideologically) and despite the fact that network executives gave solid reasons for the cancelation of all of these shows (they did not want to continue airing comedies on Friday nights), conservatives still saw the cancellation as attack on their way of life (Goldberg).

Many conservative news outlets have reported on or voiced outrage about the cancellation of the series, such as Fox News posting a few tweets from fans of the show arguing that the cancellation was attack on free speech (Savitsky). Fans began to provide their own reasoning as to why the show was cancelled with one of the most commonly accepted answers being summarized by the title of an article from *The Blaze*, “ABC canceled ‘*Last Man Standing*’ because Hollywood despises normal Americans” (Walsh). While I do not believe there is an attack on conservatives occurring in America, I am able to recognize and understand their viewpoint. For many years, a conservative and very stereotypically traditional way of life was really the only one represented on television. Recently, however, representation has shifted to favor a more diverse and, I would venture to say realistic, depiction of families. Simply put, there is not an attack on conservative America, as seen in the examination of the lasting effects of Helms’s influence, but social conservatives feel a lack of representation alongside the increased depictions of diversity on television, which leads them to believe they are under siege.



"Courtesy of ABC"

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/>

[why-last-man-standing-was-canceled-tim-allen-responds-1004414](#)

To continue looking into the divisiveness of these family sitcoms, the next logical step is to examine the way characters and situations are portrayed within the genre and how these representations cause political rifts. In *Poetics*, one of the earliest analyses of poetry and entertainment literature, Aristotle introduces the idea of characters being "objects of imitation," meaning that they represent "men in action" or, in other words, real life. He adds to this idea, however, that these characters "must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral characters mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks or moral differences)," meaning that they must be portrayed better, worse, or equal to what they represent in the real world (Aristotle). When looking at sitcoms, it is easy to see how certain characters are written to fall into these better or worse representations.

To begin, we can continue looking at *Last Man Standing*. As previously stated, Tim Allen is conservative and plays one within

the show. It is clear that, from an outside view, the audience should relate to Tim's character, Mike, and to his struggles being the main character. This automatically leads viewers to favor a conservative viewpoint, as it is the perspective through which the show is intended to be viewed. Now, this is not necessarily a ploy to sway audience opinion, but when partnered with the demonization of opposing views, it can be viewed as a somewhat malicious attack.

In the "Precious Snowflake" episode of *Last Man Standing*, Mike is required to give a speech at his daughter Mandy's (Molly Ephraim) school, but he must first ensure that it is approved by the school's faculty. His daughter instructs him to be sure that it is free of microaggressions, which he calls a "liberal attack on free speech." Mandy then goes on to explain that a list was created to include what not to say to protect the students, which leads Mike to ask, "From what? Ideas?" This type of dialogue insults a more liberal way of thinking and discredits its legitimacy. The title of the episode can even be seen as an insult to liberals as the phrase is often used to chastise the idea of politically correct language. This is not the only instance of demonizing opposing beliefs within the show.

The character of Ryan (Jordan Masterson), Mike's son-in-law, is often used as a scapegoat of sorts for liberal ideas within the show. He is a steadfast liberal whose beliefs are presented in a negative light. Ryan is also often positioned in direct contrast with Mike, who garners the support of viewers as the main character. This can also be seen in shows like *All in the Family*. The character of Michael (Rob Reiner), Archie's son-in-law, can be described as "Archie's only constant rival" and "a parasite" due to his political position being much more liberal compared to Archie's (Jones). He stands in direct contrast to Archie and is the least likeable of the main characters, which puts him at

odds with viewers and can be read as a denunciation of liberal ideas.

In some ways, *Last Man Standing* can be seen as the modern *All in the Family* especially with regard to the sons-in-law characters, an interpretation that gives some credence to the previously mentioned belief that *All in the Family* was a more conservative leaning show than intended. Conservative shows are not the only ones to do perpetuate these patterns of representation. Many modern shows contain characters who are old, White conservatives, and these characters usually display some form of ignorance or prejudice, which presents all conservatives in a negative light that parallels the representation of overly sensitive liberals.

The depiction of Dre's boss (Peter Mackenzie) in *Black-ish* and even Jay (Ed O'Neill) near the beginning of *Modern Family's* run is as prejudiced, or simply ignorant men, and this does not help mend political estrangement. In shows like these, however, there is a feature that I find more peculiar: shows that include minority characters seem to be considered inherently more political. This appears to be a commonly held belief as Richard Dyer, a top scholar in star studies, says that "representation is always political," and Denis Provencher states that "even though we may be talking about a piece of fiction, there's a grain of truth in that fiction." I believe it not uncommon to hear the idea that shows that include racial or sexual minorities do so for only two possible reasons, to meet some sort of diversity quota that exists or to "push an agenda" surrounding said minority. There seems to be an idea, more common within conservative circles, that representation equates with shoving ideas down viewers' throats. How often have you heard the phrase, "I'm fine with gay people as long as they're not all in my face about it?"

While it would be ideal to live in a world where a group of people could be represented and the motives for their presence not be questioned, there may be some validity to this idea. Ryan Murphy, an openly gay writer and producer who has released numerous shows focusing on gay characters (most famously *Glee*), has admitted to creating shows that are “clearly responding to current cultural debates about LGBTQ rights and families, ‘trying to mix it up’ by presenting show themes that play in what he calls ‘the political sandbox’” (Cavalcante). Kenya Barris, the creator of *Black-ish*, shares a similar belief, stating that “Culture and class are our themes, but it’s really about having a family show that’s talking about something...So much of that has been lost to zaniness. But true comedy does come from having a point of view and a perspective” (Rosenberg). Is it only possible that when we live in a society without prejudice where all are considered equal that a depiction of a minority will not be seen as pushing an agenda and, more importantly, will that ever happen?

The vicious cycle of media and political control will likely continue as long as television lasts. Those in power will always try to sway the general public’s opinion in their favor. While this not necessarily an uplifting outlook, I believe there is a silver lining when it comes to the media we consume. It is true that many family sitcoms are politicized, but I do believe that, at their core, all the creators of these shows really want to do is make their audience laugh. There is undeniable good these shows have done. They have provided representation for groups of people who previously had little to none, and they have – in some instances – caused many individuals to change their views on certain groups of people from negative to more favorable ones. These shows have a great amount of power and influence over their viewers. Maybe it is possible that they simply set out to create entertaining television, but

the highly politicized audience projects its own issues onto the shows. What I see as most interesting, however, is looking at the fundamental core of all of these family sitcoms and realizing how little is actually different among them and how little has changed over time.

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CHAPTER 9

Fresh Off the Boat: A Fresh Take for Asian American Sitcoms

SAMANTHA OSTMANN

In modern television, we now see more of a presence of minority sitcoms. It has not always been this way, however, and we have rarely been exposed to sitcoms centered on Asian Americans. In 1994, the sitcom *All American Girl* aired on television featuring comedian Margaret Cho. This sitcom focused on Margaret Kim (Margaret Cho) and her wild lifestyle and high expectations from her Korean immigrant family. *All American Girl* failed to be a successful sitcom and went off the air very quickly. One criticism of the series is that it promoted negative stereotypes of Korean-Americans and lost track of the theme and material for the show by trying too hard to appeal to a mainstream audience (Critical Media Project). Margaret Cho was pushed to act “more Asian” or was told she was not acting “Asian enough.” The sitcom was cancelled after less than a year,

and another Asian American sitcom did not appear until almost two decades later.

Fresh Off the Boat debuted in 2015 on the ABC network as the first Asian-American sitcom on television since the short-lived *All American Girl*. The new sitcom is centered around the Huang family, which consists of the Taiwanese born grandmother, the father and mother, and three, first-generation, American sons. The series is set in the 1990s, and the Huang family has just moved from Washington, D.C to Orlando, Florida to pursue the American dream. This sitcom has been paramount in demonstrating positive ways minority characters can adjust to a new environment. The show applies humor in an appropriate manner, most often by the Huangs's amusement and bafflement at the frivolous and thoughtless tendencies of their White, American neighbors. *Fresh Off the Boat* is not the first sitcom featuring an Asian-American family, but it is the first sitcom to provide humor in a way that builds community morale and appreciation for diversity rather than reinforcing negative and false stereotypes of minority races.



Huang Family. Liz Raftery. tvguide.com. August 7, 2017

The sitcom is successful in balancing the aspects of a traditional family sitcom while still being authentic regarding the heritage and experiences of Asian-American families. By including three generations of the Huang family in the household featured on the sitcom, viewers get a unusual experience allowing them to relate to the Huang family. The Huangs face obstacles for a few reasons: they live in an American suburb, they are outwardly in touch with their Asian heritage, and they also are coping with living among three generations in one household. Grandma Huang (Lucille Soong) is most in tune to the Asian heritage and speaks very little English. Louis Huang (Randall Park) and Jessica Huang (Constance Wu) have recently opened a new steakhouse restaurant in Orlando. The eldest son, Eddie (Hudson Yang), is a die-hard fan of the world of hip-hop, rap, and basketball. This complex combination of family members with various expertise levels in American culture is comical and provides an authentic representation of immigrant families. Rather than drawing

humor from the failures and struggles the Huang family faces, the sitcom provides humor in an appropriate manner and includes scenes that provide a chance for the viewer to relate to and respect the Huang family and some of the obscure challenges it faces as a transplanted minority family in a White, suburban community. The sitcom depicts Asian Americans in a positive light, which contributes to the significance it has in modern society and reinforces why it is important to continue to air minority sitcoms on television.

GRANDMA HUANG

Grandma Huang is not an American citizen, speaks Mandarin Chinese primarily and very little English, and she is most rooted in tradition. Grandma stays home most days and may be able to escape speaking English this way, but she is not able to escape all the influences of American life. The power of American consumerism and materialism of the 1990s can permeate even the family member most in touch to her heritage. The episode "Driving Miss Jenny" is focused on Grandma Huang and her newly motorized wheelchair. This episode centers around the frustration and challenges her son faces while coping with his mother aging, as she struggles to maintain her independence and not be confined to the home all day. The writers use this scene to allude to the extent that American consumer culture influences everyone during this time – from wealthy to poor and everyone in between. Grandma Huang is content most often with the traditional way of doing things, such as remaining in an old-fashioned wheelchair. She is hesitant and doubtful of most things attributable to American culture, which makes it significant when she participates in aspects of American culture.

This character seems negative at first, due to her traditional

tendencies, but she functions to affirm positive messages by going against stereotypes and proving to the boys and their parents that they are more like their American counterparts than it seems. Grandma Huang wants more freedom, independence, and mobility, and the motorized wheelchair allows her to do that. Grandma Huang is influenced by American culture as well, and it provides viewers with a vision that even the most different of people are similar in many ways. The fact that a woman who speaks Mandarin Chinese and understands very little English finds joy in a motorized wheelchair creates a parallel to suburban housewives who enjoy the other inventions of the 1990s that make life easier and a bit more enjoyable.

Another opportunity to relate to “others” and find humor in the show is present in this scene because the native-born American and the immigrant alike enjoy the new and innovative products of the 1990s. Grandma Huang is a marginal character and is often not needed in many scenes of the show. Yet, Grandma serves as a strong contrast to the children of the family, proving that those most distant from American life and culture and those most in tune with it can cohabitate, appreciate differences, and get along with one another. This aspect of the show allows viewers to appreciate the complex family structure present in the Huang household and it also provides another outlet for humor as we watch Grandma Huang get exposed to and adapt to the unfamiliar American culture.

FATHER AND MOTHER HUANG

The parents of the Huang family offer more humor to the series due to their differences in accepting and becoming a part of American culture. Louis embraces the new American culture and all that comes with it while his wife Jessica is very hesitant

and doubtful at first, but eventually comes to slowly accept American culture. A research report by Qin Zhang outlines the common perceptions Americans hold about the Chinese and Chinese Americans, "Asian Americans are respected for their competence, diligence, intelligence, and success but disliked for being categorized as cold, nerdy, unsociable, and foreign. The negative feelings of resentment, intimidation, and hostility could even be aggravated when they are perceived as excessively competent yet unsociable."

In the episode "No Thanks-Giving," Jessica and Louis decide to abandon their family on Thanksgiving to keep their restaurant open and capitalize upon the holiday. When Jessica has to tell her extended family they will not be in attendance for Thanksgiving dinner, she reports back to her husband about how her family received the news, "My mom congratulated me on choosing work over her, and Connie stole the moment by saying her psychic predicted it all." This scene is a perfect example of the competition, diligence, and drive for success informing the perception majority viewers have of most Asian Americans. Instead of portraying Asian Americans as cold and unsociable by showing the family as prioritizing work over the family, the show contradicts the stereotype by using it in what turns out to be a positive manner that critiques American society. Even though the family does choose to work over the holiday, the Huangs ultimately celebrate together on the special day and become closer and more grateful for each other than before. Jessica and Louis reflect upon their achievements and success and talk to their kids about how proud they are of them. Thanksgiving is still at time to bond, create memories, and enjoy family time together, demonstrating that Asian Americans open their hearts up and share their love freely with the people who matter the most to them.

In "Citizen Jessica," there is a scene that demonstrates the

problems Chinese Americans face. In this episode, Jessica is forced to confront the fact that she is not a legal American citizen, only a temporary resident. She tells her husband, "It's not that I don't want to be a citizen. The process is just so hard." At the end of the episode, after discovering all the benefits a citizen has, she tells her family, "I decided I am going to apply for citizenship. I am not going to let the process intimidate me. Bring on the interrogation. I'm ready. I want to be able to vote and to be on *Wheel of Fortune* one day." Not only is this situation faced by Chinese Americans, but it is faced by many other minorities and immigrants as well. Creating an episode centered on the struggle of not being an American-born citizen allows viewers a chance to empathize with the struggles of the minority population and hopefully become more accepting and supporting of all people.

Actress Constance Wu. Image Group LA. August 7, 2017



Actress Constance Wu. Image Group LA. August 7, 2017

An article by Marianne Sison provides research evidence why viewing scenes like this is so important, "By learning about the experience of 'the other', we can communicate across, between and within cultures to promote human empowerment and sustainable social change." Before *Fresh Off the Boat* aired in 2015, there was no show that celebrated the culture and

heritage of Chinese Americans. By including real events that occurred in the 1990s, problems that all parents face when raising kids, and the obstacles the family encounters as a Chinese-American family that has moved to a new neighborhood, *Fresh Off the Boat* is successful and necessary to create a culturally inclusive environment that provides viewers with the chance to relate to and support each other. Before viewing "Citizen Jessica," I never knew how daunting the process was to become an American citizen. Being exposed to the problems that others deal with that I will never encounter allows me to have a more open mind for empathizing with others and understanding their experiences.

On the show, Louis Huang is depicted as more freely accepting of the American culture and way of life. This would normally present a problem to Louis and Jessica's relationship because they hold radically different views of American society, but they work together, compromise, and reach solutions to parent their children effectively and to make decisions leading their family to success. Most modern sitcoms focus on parents fighting and the negative repercussions it has on the family. *Fresh Off the Boat*, however, uses the commonplace problem of disagreements among parents to show that it is important and very easy to compromise with your partner, and this is an essential part of making a marriage successful, whether it is marriage of two American-born citizens or two Asian citizens living in an American community.

HUANG CHILDREN

The children of the Huang family are the most comedic element of the show. Eddie Huang is the most Americanized of the family and wants nothing to do with his Asian heritage. Evan Huang (Ian Chen), on the other hand, identifies more with the

Asian culture portrayed in the lives of his mother and Grandma Huang. The middle son, Emery (Forrest Wheeler), is a mix between the two, like his father, Louis. The children are a great illustration that inclusion is possible, no matter how involved people become in the “others” culture or how open they are to changing their way of life. An open mind and acceptance for everyone despite their differences, for better or worse, is all that is needed to create an inclusive community for all people. The Huang children are very different, but they all have open minds and are accepting of all people, proving that it doesn't matter if they agree or disagree with others to maintain respect for all people and a successfully inclusive environment is easily attainable.

Eddie Huang is arguably the most interesting and complex character of the show. *Fresh Off the Boat* is based on the memoir written by the real-life Eddie Huang, who grew up in Orlando after his Taiwanese father immigrated to America because he believed it was “the land of opportunity” (NY Times). This memoir is a story about race and assimilation in America and the experience Eddie had as a kid from a minority race. An important aspect of Eddie's life is his love for hip hop and sports. In an episode from the third season, Eddie decides to take the rest of the year “off” in eighth grade because he believes only high school grades matter, a perfect example of Eddie participating in American culture and disrupting the traditional values of his Asian-American family. Jessica explains her frustration to her husband when deciding how to deal with Eddie, “See that's the problem he thinks he can just sit back and everything is just going to be handed to him so he doesn't appreciate anything. I was so careful and so strict with him.” This scene demonstrates the power of the American culture permeating the strong heritage of the Huang family. Jessica decides to punish Eddie by taking away his bed saying,

"Recommit yourself to school and hard work and you get your bed back."

This scene is significant for two main reasons. First, it demonstrates the hardships that minorities face when confronted with American culture. Second, it demonstrates the strength of the Huang parents in parenting their child in alignment with traditional Chinese beliefs and convictions. This scene reinforces the overarching message of the sitcom. While trying to achieve the American dream, many obstacles and problems may come and try to stop immigrants from succeeding. The Huang family can succeed, however, and achieve the dream of all its members because they adapt to their new American environment while remaining in touch with their Chinese heritage. Throughout the series, Eddie learns how to adapt his love for things of American culture such as music, sports, and popular culture, to accommodate his Asian background better and give him a unique personality and character to achieve success as a minority child.

Evan Huang is very intelligent and mature for his age, and in the episode "This Is Us," Evan makes it known to his mother that he wants to attend a private school. He says, "I want bigger challenges Mommy," and Jessica responds, "I don't need to pay people to push you to succeed, I can do that myself," demonstrating her refusal to conform to the norms of American families. When Jessica finally agrees to allow Evan attend private school, Evan speaks a line demonstrating the importance in Chinese heritage of intelligence and schooling over all other aspects of life, even family. Evan says in pure joy and excitement, "Goodbye Mommy! Tell the family I'll see them in six months," thinking that the private school is a boarding school when, in fact, it is not. Evan's excitement over his education deviates from the American social norms and represents how the family has not lost its Chinese heritage and

background even after living in a stereotypical White, American suburban neighborhood during the 1990s.

When interviewing for admission into the school, Evan is asked about his family and answers, "They're all good eggs. We rent a house in North Orlando. My parents run a steakhouse. We're just your typical American family who's overcome incredible odds to achieve big dreams." This one line from the episode is paramount to the themes and messages the show aims to portray. An Asian-American family can both maintain its unique culture and heritage and embrace the new culture of the environment in which it lives while succeeding and maintaining happiness during this process. Evan Huang is very young, but he is smart enough to realize that while his family is different from many others in the community that is no reason his family should be excluded, treated differently, or not respected. The demonstration of inclusion for minorities that we see in *Fresh Off the Boat* is just one of the many positive aspects of the show, and it is enough to substantiate its success and the demonstrate the need for the show to continue in the future.

Emery Huang is unlike either Eddie or Evan exactly but represents a moderate mix of his two brothers. I believe the show is so successful because of its family structure and the many personalities present. The Huang children are the best example of this. The fact that Louis and Jessica can appropriately and effectively parent three children, each completely different, is another perfect demonstration that inclusion is possible in American society, which leads to great successes for everyone.

As mentioned earlier, the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* was created from the memoir of Eddie Huang. The show is set in the 1990s and functions as a nostalgia piece as Eddie looks back on his childhood and the experiences he had growing up. The sitcom

is successful operating from this premise because it allows viewers to understand and see the struggles Eddie confronted as a kid and how he used them to grow as a person while becoming stronger in his values and beliefs. "It's a book about fitting in by not fitting in at all" (NY Times). Eddie is different from his peers in appearance and the heritage of his family, yet Eddie is also different from his family because he is actively participating in and is much more attracted to the American culture that his parents often resent and don't understand.

Eddie's parents achieved the "American dream" by moving to Orlando, running successful businesses, and parenting and raising three successful, driven, and open-minded children. Just as Eddie's parents achieved their dream, Eddie does as well. In his memoir, Eddie ends up attending law school and later opens and runs a very successful restaurant. Without having the show take place in the 1990s, the audience would not be able to see Eddie develop into a young man and become strong-minded and determined to achieve the American dream for himself. Eddie's childhood years helped to shape his character and beliefs that led him to success today. Showcasing his childhood years on a sitcom proves successful as well. These years of assimilating into the culture of "others" was challenging for the Huang family but very rewarding as well. The attitudes, motivations, and support the members of the Huang family provide to each other proves why their assimilation story is successful. Having a sitcom display this rough, but very touching, journey allows viewers to relate to members of the Huang family and open their minds to becoming more accepting of other people and the hard journey they embark upon when moving to a foreign environment.

ABC Network and the writers of *Fresh Off the Boat* have created a sitcom that encourages viewers to respect a minority group due to the success and strength against all the adversity

demonstrated by the characters. This show has the potential for a greater impact on society because it is so different from past depictions of Asian Americans on television, and it provides an opportunity for viewers to relate to the Huang family and, more broadly, to relate to the Asian-American culture and people. The ability of the Huang family to stay true to its roots and remain intact as a strong family support system allows it to succeed to a greater degree than they thought possible when measured against all the uncertainties and troubles they face along the way. *Fresh Off the Boat* exposes the strengths of the Chinese culture and heritage and shows that minority races succeed and reach great accomplishment despite all the challenges and obstacles that get in the way. The sitcom is successful because it incorporates humor for entertainment, while still addressing the serious social and political issues faced by all Americans and problems faced solely by minorities in America. *Fresh Off the Boat* is insightful and thought provoking and proves that minority sitcoms can be successful in creating diversity in a positive manner. I think this sitcom is pivotal in showcasing how our society has evolved to create sitcoms that shed a positive light on diversity and addresses modern and relevant problems with realistic situations. *Fresh Off the Boat* is on track to break the 100-episode mark, and I believe this is significant in proving how influential and valuable the sitcom is for creating a space that fosters a more open-minded and inclusive society.



Huang Family. Kevin Foley/ABC. August 7, 2017

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PART III

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

CHAPTER 10

*M*A*S*H: Tragedy or Comedy?*

JANE SCHAEFER

Since the invention of the television in the early 1900s, it has been a significant part of American culture. While it was initially invented as a way to communicate news from all over the country more easily, it quickly became much more than that. In addition to the sporting events that would be broadcasted on live television, live entertainers would be broadcasted in between major news stories. This then evolved into films being shown on television, as well as radio shows being taken to the small screen. The production of television shows simply for entertainment changed the way television was viewed. The most popular and timeless form of television shows was the situation comedy. Since the first sitcoms aired in the 1950s, they have continuously been a way for Americans to unwind at the end of a hard day, spend time together as a family, and inadvertently hear the latest news. Sitcoms are reflective of what is occurring in American history at that time, whether it be the portrayal of interactions between races reflecting the civil rights movement, or the tension at a war time, or the attitudes regarding women's role in the workplace.

Released in the 1970s, M*A*S*H has proved to be one of the most enduring situation comedies. Although it first aired almost forty years ago, the show can be easily found by flipping through television channels almost any day of the year. Set in the 1950s while the United States was in the midst of fighting the Korean War, M*A*S*H portrays many of the events that would take place in everyday life of the soldiers who were abroad at war. Even though it was based during the Korean War, the series aired when America was actually fighting in the Vietnam War, during a time when the government faced decreasing support for the war from citizens the longer the conflict continued. M*A*S*H is not only one of the most famous sitcoms, but it is also one of the most influential. Although M*A*S*H is obviously critical of the war efforts in Vietnam, it also praises those people who are fighting in a war whether or not they believe in it. The lasting influence of the series comes as much from the fact that this sitcom has an important message as from its considerable entertainment value. M*A*S*H endures because it encourages support of soldiers at war at the same time that it reinforces the idea that patriotism can be expressed without following leaders blindly, and the series also encourages personal connections among characters and optimism even during a dark time, which fits the tone of popular sitcoms across time.



flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tom-margie/864620217>, August 4, 2017.

The encouragement and support of soldiers fighting in a war, regardless of whether they agree with what they are fighting for, is an important theme in M*A*S*H. When this series was on the air during its initial run, many of the soldiers at home and abroad were experiencing a severe backlash as well as being called horrible names and facing other insults. This show provided an insight into the life of soldiers who were experiencing this sort of negative reaction, which can be seen in the episode "A Full Rich Day." In this episode, Hawkeye (Alan Alda) in penning a letter to his father back home in the States and recounts to him the events that would happen in a full day at war. In his letter, he speaks of how much of his day is spent taking care of other people and helping those that have been injured at war. At the end of the letter, he speaks of the fact that these soldiers in his unit must rely on each other to get through each day because of the lack of support that

they experience from others all over the world. In 2003, when American soldiers were moving into Iraq, there were many of the same attitudes toward the war as there were during the Vietnam War. Studies from this time period, which was very similar to that when M*A*S*H aired, showed that although people were not in support of war, they were not lacking in patriotism. Many of these anti-war individuals were interested in the long term success and wellbeing of the nation; they just didn't believe going to war was the right way to achieve that (Hamilton 2012).

Perhaps the most important and reflective episode of the entire series is one titled "The Interview." This episode served as the season finale of the fourth season, which has been reviewed as the best season of M*A*S*H. In this episode, a real-life news correspondent, Clete Roberts (playing himself), interviews the characters acting as soldiers abroad, asking them questions about their thoughts and their experiences while being away at war. While some of the responses to these questions were scripted, with the cast being told beforehand what was going to be asked, others were not. The characters spoke about how they were missing home, their families, and what they like to do in their free time. When Colonel Potter (Harry Morgan) is asked about what good will come from the war, Potter bluntly responds, "Not a damn thing." This line accurately portrays the way that many soldiers were feeling while they were fighting in Vietnam. Along with many other American civilians, the backlash against the war was large in part because they didn't believe that the war would accomplish anything. But, even though soldiers did not necessarily agree with being at war, it was their duty and their job to protect the United States in whatever ways the Commander in Chief sees fit. The unscripted responses to the interviewer's questions provided truthful insight into the way that civilians were viewing the war while

also acting the part of a soldier doing what he is being ordered to do.

This series also encourages the idea of patriotism, not only by going to war to fight for your country but that it can also be shown by small acts taken at home, even if it is simply just supporting loved ones while they are abroad. This was especially important for viewers to see during the Vietnam War and to be able to use M*A*S*H as an example of how they can support their soldiers and loved ones, regardless of their political beliefs. In "Fallen Idol," Radar (Gary Burghoff) begins to wonder if his idol Hawkeye is worth his adoration. Radar has always looked up to Hawkeye, but when Hawkeye snaps at Radar, leaving him on the verge of tears, Radar starts to question Hawkeye. This can be symbolic of how many Americans began to write off those who went to fight in the war in Vietnam. This episode shows that although someone might not always agree with what you are arguing about or fighting for, you can still value them and support them in the same way that you always have been. Radar's opinion of Hawkeye is changed, but he soon realizes that Hawkeye is still the same admirable person he as before the accident. Rather than being very upfront about this idea, the series takes a more complex approach to this, leaving the viewers to discover things for themselves. Similarly, this same idea could easily be seen while reading newspapers or other media in everyday life during this time. There was the heavy encouragement of women contributing to the war effort, not by going abroad and actively fighting in the war but by offering support on the homefront by helping raise money for the war effort or simply becoming more supportive of the war being fought (Ghilani 2017). This coincided with the message that was being portrayed by M*A*S*H in a more playful and indirect way rather than actively recruiting people to join the military or donate money to the

cause. The combination of these two things could be argued to have changed the way many people viewed the war and leading to more support and greater backing by American citizens.

Many episodes of *M*A*S*H* reflect and present the fact that being at war is not simply a job for soldiers but a job for the entire country. There is heavy emphasis on the female nurses who contribute greatly to the war effort, as well as the wives and children at home without their husbands and fathers (Thompson 2014). It is touched on several times that although soldiers at war miss their families at home, the letters that they receive from their families is what helps them to get through the war. This can be seen in the way that soldiers discuss their families, as well as the way that the attitudes shift when discussing their families. In addition, several episodes of the series address and praise those that support the war, maybe not in their beliefs, but rather in being able to raise money and awareness for the war in multiple different ways (Thompson 2014). Not only did *M*A*S*H* offer different points of view in the way that it was filmed, being one of the first American sitcoms to take place in a completely different country, as well as using zooms and telephoto lens shots, but it offered the point of view of needing help from civilians to win the war. The series makes it clear that soldiers are not the only ones at war; the entire nation is, and it can only be won with the help of everyone (Austerlitz 2014).

The importance of family and the support that is offered through loved ones at home is easily seen in the popular episode "Point of View." This episode is presented through the eyes of a wounded soldier, Private Rich (David Stafford). As a result of having shrapnel lodged in his neck, he becomes unable to speak. Because he undergoes multiple surgeries to repair the problem, he stays at the 4077th. Colonel Potter is noticed to be portraying strange behavior, being in a bad mood, and

unwilling to talk to anybody. While Private Rich is recovering, he manages to get Colonel Potter to open up to him and tell him what has been upsetting him. Potter confesses that he forgot to call his wife on their wedding anniversary, which has left him distraught and angered by the war and having to be separated from his wife. Radar hears this and calls Potter's wife and explains what happened, which prompts her to forgive her husband. Immediately following this, Potter's attitude changes, leaving him in a better spirits and more optimistic about the future. This is a prime example of the impact that the relationship with loved ones still at home has on soldiers while they are abroad – how it influences their attitudes and their overall wellbeing.

Maybe most importantly, M*A*S*H has served as a reminder to viewers that soldiers are still ordinary people who value human life as whole. The connections between the American soldiers and some Korean citizens portrayed in episodes helped American people to see that there was still hope for a better world after war. An episode titled "Old Soldiers" portrays this very theme. When a group of Korean children arrive at the medical compound with a curious illness, soldiers and physicians working there take it upon themselves to care for these children, even though they may have had ties to the enemy. Instances such as these show the ability of soldiers abroad to look past the race and ethnicity of those people who need medical attention and to practice humanity by being able to recognize that these children are innocent victims of their situation. Soldiers being able to look past this serve as a beacon of light to the viewers of this show revealing that although these soldiers are fighting in difficult situation abroad, they are not stripped of their capacity to value human lives. A newspaper article published in December of 2005 addresses the importance of the series. M*A*S*H aired during a time

when many Americans were tired of hearing about the negative things that were occurring abroad with young innocent children dying and suffering as well as the lives of loved ones being lost. But this sitcom offered a different insight into life at war. It portrays soldiers as “good, old American men,” giving them “credibility, believability, and humanity.” Watching this show caused many to change their opinions on those at war, making them feel as though they were heroic (Guider 2005).



*Still from M*A*S*H, “Abyssinia Henry” (Season 3, Episode 24, 1975.)*

A highly talked about episode of M*A*S*H is one that portrays the worst of war while also showing the strong relationships that are formed between soldiers during a stressful wartime. “Abyssinia Henry” is the finale episode of third season and sets the tone for the rest of the series. When Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake (McLean Stevenson) is discharged from the Army after completing his tour in Korea, he and his fellow soldiers go out for one last night together. The morning after a night full of drinking too much, Blake says goodbye to the 4077th and boards his helicopter to go home. Life continues on with

the operating room soon becoming full of injured soldiers and doctors attempting to repair their damaged bodies. Radar then comes in and delivers gut-wrenching news: Blake's helicopter has been shot down over the Sea of Japan, leaving no survivors. The doctors, Blake's friends and comrades, are taken aback and noticeably upset with many of them crying at the operating table as season three draws to a close. The last couple of minutes of this episode are two of the most unexpected and shocking minutes of television; it was one of the first times that a character on an American television show was killed off in such a tragic way. Much of America was reeling from death of Colonel Blake along with many of the cast members. The writers of M*A*S*H had not told any of the actors on set how the episode was going to end, creating more true, pure emotion in this scene. People watching at home were taken aback and hit with a hard reality: death is a very real aspect of war. Not only was it one of the first times that the worst parts of war had a light shone on them in M*A*S*H, but it also helped audiences to see the relationships that were created between soldiers while at war. The real emotion portrayed when Radar walked into that operating room, stating that Blake, one of their friends and a fellow soldier had died, reiterated the fact that soldiers were victims of war as well, rather than only contributing to it. Soldiers at war suffer and deal with the death of their friends more often than loved ones at home, which is something that should not be pushed aside simply because they are doing their jobs and fighting at war.

Although M*A*S*H was portraying a different war and a different time, many of the issues that are addressed in this iconic series are very similar to those that were occurring during the time that this show was aired. With heavy backlash being experienced with regard to the Vietnam War, M*A*S*H makes light of these situations, encouraging a better attitude toward

the war. This can be seen in the way that it supports patriotism while also disagreeing with cause, supporting the war effort while at home, and offering a reminder that soldiers are still human beings simply doing their jobs. This series does so while also bringing attention to other issues that are very real during this time period and providing a place for Americans to find humor in the midst of a dark situation. In addition, M*A*S*H can easily be viewed as one of the originators of “dark comedy.” M*A*S*H not only had a large impact on Americans and the war being fought during the time it was on the air, but it also marks the start of a new age in situation comedies.

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CHAPTER 11

Louie: A Role Model When It Counts

WILL ZURIER

Louis C.K. is a renaissance man when it comes to television. A comedian, writer, producer, editor, and actor, Louis C.K. has walked many of the different roads that lead to television success. In 2010, C.K. got his break when *Louie* was picked up by FX. Written by C.K. himself, “*Louie* may be best described as short films, since several episodes are divided into two unrelated segments with distinct storylines that actively avoid the traditional three-act structure” (Kunze, 59). *Louie* is a dynamic and groundbreaking show in the way it follows C.K.’s struggles as a single father. *Louie* is different from the typical construction of the single father seen throughout many sitcoms; his single parenting is a product of divorce, he does not have a strong supporting family or enlist other help while dealing with the difficulties of bringing up two kids on his own, and as such the show emulates his real life triumphs and tribulations in all aspects of adulthood. This unique and authentic situation makes *Louie* a compelling and realistic

character; he chooses to put a spotlight not only on his parental role but also his love life and workplace struggles, which are not mutually exclusive events. Throughout *Louie*, we can see C.K. emerge as an unlikely role model—maybe not as a husband or an ex-boyfriend—but as a father.

In 2006, C.K. arrived on the situational comedy scene with his show *Lucky Louie*. In the show, C.K. played the role of a blue-collar man who is married with a daughter. It ran twelve episodes on HBO before being cancelled that same year. Peter C. Kunze attempts to figure out why *Lucky Louie* may have failed back in 2006 in his piece, “Fatherhood, Feminism, And Failure In Louis C.K.’s Comedy.” Writes Kunze, “It can be difficult to assess why the series failed, but one noticeable disconnect between Louis C.K.’s stand-up and the sitcom is the lack of authenticity” (Kunze 59). C.K. is a single father; when he attempted to stray from his reality in *Lucky Louie*, he was unable to capture his true emotions. Seeing *Louie* as a strong parental role model comes from the true-to-life scenario for Louis C.K. contextualized by his own realities as a person and a single parent.

Louie seems to evade the common trends that Judy Kutulas brings to the reader’s attention in her piece on family dynamics throughout sitcom history. *Louie* is a dynamic and groundbreaking show because it represents the synthesis of many of the attributes and tendencies of several shows mentioned throughout the piece, such as *The Simpsons*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *My Three Sons*. C.K. is a baby boomer and exhibits many characteristics attributed to that generation in his eponymous role in *Louie*. C.K. has a tumultuous relationship with his mother in real life and on the show. He characterizes her as being selfish and claims that her lack of presence in C.K.’s childhood led to his strong independence as an adult. The baby boomers are also known as the “me generation,” which *Louie* embodies by continuing

to work on the comedy circuit, even though the hours are detrimental to his health and wellbeing. Louie also demonstrates the desire to have it all that is common among baby boomers; chasing success by night on the comedy circuit and striving to be an admirable father to his daughters by day. Although his atypical working hours are not good for his health, they enable him to spend time with his daughters during the day, a role traditionally occupied in sitcoms by a Cleaver-esque mother.

In her chapter, Kutulas writes that Homer Simpson “bears little resemblance to any 1950s fathers” (Kutulas 63). This observation is even more true of Louie. In fact, he bears little resemblance to any fathers throughout the entirety of sitcom history. In an interview conducted by Mary Dalton, Kutulas argues, “We’ve always done a lot of dad families without moms...That form I think is typical because then it lets you have dad try to figure out mom’s role and somehow that’s hysterical...” (Dalton/Kutulas). Although there have been many single father households on TV, there are few as complex and difficult as the one seen on *Louie*. Louie must look after two young daughters, who are completely dependent on him. The older daughter is not old enough to help Louie to take care of her younger sister. They both need him all the time. He must balance his unpredictable work schedule with his children’s more routine schedule, and he has no reliable or consistent support to help him along the way. With such a fragile situation, one might question how this man is going to balance these issues when he can barely take care of himself. This tension is what makes *Louie* an entertaining and powerful series. It is the fact that he is willing to jeopardize his own emotional health and sanity to be present and a strong role model in his children’s life no matter how difficult it may be.

A single father household is not uncommon in sitcom history;

its roots date back to *My Three Sons* (1960-72), and this narrative pattern has been a constant motif to this day. It is the single-father through means of divorce that makes *Louie* an unusual show, however. "The divorced single father really does not enter the sitcom world until relatively short-lived *Hello, Larry* (1979-80) and more successfully in *Silver Spoons* (1982-86), *Blossom* (1990-95), and, later, *Two and a Half Men*. (2003-)" (Kunze 59). Though the divorced single-father sitcom pool is fairly small, what makes *Louie* unique among his predecessors is his distressed financial situation and practically nonexistent support network. Louie's situation within the show highlights the odd duality of his identities as an individual and a father – everything is imbued with the added significance of his daughters' dependency on him. While this context puts *Louie* in uncharted waters, the sheer plausibility of the situation is what gives the show's audience a means of relating to it.

In *Silver Spoons*, the father is excessively wealthy, and in *Two and a Half Men*, the father is somewhat financially strapped but takes advantage of his brother's wealth to ease the burden of raising his child. Both sitcoms use household staff members to help them to deal with the task of raising children on their own. In the pilot episode of *Louie*, Louie discusses the issues of sending his kids to public school:

I go to my daughter's school to volunteer sometimes. My daughter goes to a public school, and I volunteer not because I'm a good person, but because you have to, because nobody works there... So, my job as a volunteer is to stand there usually near my daughter, so I can be with her...

Unlike the shows mentioned above, Louie does not have help or the means to send his daughters to private school. Louie is a role model as a father because he takes time out of his own life to make a less-than-optimal situation better for his daughters

by spending quality time with them. Without any financial or family safety nets, *Louie* shows how being a single father is a full time job, and he does so in an admirable fashion.

In 1980, a research study conducted by Australian psychologist Michelle Garnett found that “single fathers had less difficulty with becoming a single father than they did with becoming a separated person” (Russel 352). The semi-autobiographical context in which *Louie* is written gives the viewer an honest look into the true emotions that C.K. feels on a daily basis. In the *Louie* episode entitled “Dog Pound,” viewers are able to see his actual struggles with everyday life when his children are not around. During this episode, Louie’s children go to their mother’s for the weekend, which inherently makes Louie depressed. Planning to work out, he ultimately winds up eating ice cream, smoking weed with his obnoxious neighbor, and adopting a dog that dies the second it enters his home. This view of Louie’s life is something that is unfamiliar in other sitcoms revolving around a single father. When his children return from their mother’s house, he proceeds to tell them that he had a good weekend, shielding them from the depths of his sadness. We are able to understand this unique crossover from Louis C.K. to Louie in this revelation from an interview C.K. had with Terry Gross on NPR:

I’m a person who tends to fall into depression and sleep a lot and eat a lot. I can’t really do that ‘cause my kids are with me and there’s nobody there to cover for me, so at 6 in the morning they’re at my bed, ready to seize life. And I just can’t go back to sleep. (NPR)

As we can see from both this interview and “Dog Pound,” C.K. is the opposite of a role model when his children are not around. When they are with him, however, they bring out his best qualities and propel him to be a better man throughout the

process. If only by default, the presence of Louie's kids allows him to tap into a side of himself that he otherwise cannot access, and the divorced single father trope becomes transformed into one of an unlikely hero – even if the hero racks up more defeats than victories.

Louie is able to teach his girls invaluable lessons through his strong demeanor, a façade he feels compelled to put on since he desperately wants to feel more masculine. In “Longitudinal of Divorce on the Quality of the Father-Child Relationship,” an article published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, a research study shows that “When comparing divorced and married fathers, for example, we see that married fathers have more parental opportunities than do divorced fathers” (Arendell 1995). Louie attempts to be as fatherly as possible around his children because his “parental opportunities” are limited, albeit less limited than the traditional divorced father. Louie tries to embody the fatherly role every chance he gets, and viewers cannot always tell if he is doing this to save his daughters or himself. In the episode “Back,” Louie and his two daughters, Jane and Lily, have a discussion over who should carry a backpack on the trip home from school:

Jane: Daddy, my backpack is too heavy. Can you carry it for me pleaseeee?

Louie: No, I would never do that to you.

Jane: Do what?

Louie: Take your burden away from you.

Jane: Daddy, that's not taking, it's helping.

Louie: No, it's not. Because, see, it would

deprive you of your growth and development.

Jane: No! But Daddy!

Louie: If I don't help you and you struggle, then you get stronger.

Jane: Nooooo!

Louie: By doing more than you believe you can do you put yourself in a moment of doubt and pain.

Lily: Here, just give it to me!

This quick argument on the walk home from school between Louie and his daughters deftly exemplifies how Louie is able to find and utilize parental opportunities even when it masks his own shortcomings. Through a simple subject such as carrying a heavy backpack, Louie is able to teach his daughters about responsibility and persistence while simultaneously allowing himself to be lazy. When examining the dialogue between them, we can see that Louie attempts to insert no less than five different valuable lessons during their short walk because he has limited time to teach his girls proper values and life lessons. Even though his efforts to teach Jane a lesson are thwarted by his older daughter, Louie is able to retain a manly image throughout the exchange. Louie is a role model because he attempts to teach his daughters valuable life lessons in the limited time they have together, even in the face of his own vastly flawed existence. Louie is not with his girls all the time because he shares custody with his ex-wife, but when he is with them, he excels at seizing "parental opportunities."

In a now-infamous quote from 1993, NBA superstar Charles

Barkley said, "I'm not a role model... Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids." In many ways, this quote applies to the version of C.K. that comes across in *Louie*. Louie is not the idealized version of what a single father should look like, but he uses what he has to provide for himself and his family. Just as Barkley developed a bad boy image on the court to play off of the more polished personalities of Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal, C.K.'s portrayal of himself in *Louie* stands in stark contrast to Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and a number of other comedians who play themselves on the show. At the risk of his own self-image and mental health, C.K. provides viewers with a version of himself that invites criticism. The crucial disconnect that C.K. papers over so skillfully is that he receives the royalty checks that Louie doesn't receive within the show; his shortcomings are monetized in a meaningful way that supports his children. We only hate Louie for things he does and says on the screen, but the man he is outside of this construct paints a more wholesome and role model-worthy picture.

This dichotomy between his persona on-screen and off-screen feeds into another point of discussion in considering whether or not Louie is worthy of being considered a sitcom role model – the separation of the artist from the art. Every day, hundreds of writers pour thousands of words into columns on beleaguered, misunderstood, and often loathsome geniuses such as Kanye West and Woody Allen. Can we separate their artistic brilliance from their immense fallibility as people? And in the case of *Louie*, to what extent can we do that when the art is a complete extension of the artist himself? Woody Allen may have roles in his movies that hit close to home, but nobody is quite like C.K. in terms of devastatingly authentic self-deprecation. Consequently, it becomes difficult for an audience to distinguish Louie's shortcomings as a character from C.K.'s

shortcomings as a man – especially because so many of these shortcomings exist on both sides of the coin. Despite all of his problematic traits, Louie maintains an everyman mentality that endears him to his daughters and his viewers, and they root him on, no matter what the horrible consequences will inevitably be.

Louie creates a divorced, single father character with limited resources and support, which breaks the mold of the typical single-father construct in sitcoms. Due its semi-autobiographical nature, viewers are able to see the writer's true emotion and passion throughout the show. If there is one simple takeaway to be had, it is that Louie is unabashedly Louie. This often manifests in his problematic tendencies – his depression, his inability to maintain a relationship, his laziness – but also can be seen through his devotion to his family and his craft, despite the overarching sense that all is lost. Louie is a character that has wholeheartedly dedicated himself to going down with the ship, even if the ship's sinking is mostly his fault. To make matters worse, he does not have the support of family or the financial resources that could help make his difficult life easier, yet he still finds a way to overcome the everyday parenting obstacles in order to become a strong role model for his two young girls. Much of the show's world is the direct outcome of a man who is hopelessly stuck in his ways, many of which are bad and some of which are good. Yet, Louie's role model status comes from his negative traits – as we watch this flawed, broken person venture out into a cold, unfeeling city to protect his family, we are reminded of some critical aspect of humanity that Jerry Seinfeld and Homer Simpson don't get close to. Louie clearly has his downfalls, but being a father is not one of them. To put it in Barkley's terms, we may not want C.K. raising our kids, but he sure can dunk.

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CHAPTER 12

Regressive Yet Crucial Controversies in The Big Bang Theory

ALEX BUTER

The CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, created by executive producers and writers Chuck Lorre, Bill Prady, and Steven Molaro, is one of the most highly rated yet highly critiqued shows on modern television. The series has aired for ten years, but it is often looked at with disdain by self-identified “nerds.” The show centers around four brilliant and driven scientists and their love interests, their awkward interpersonal interactions, their career issues, and their hilarious, everyday encounters. The combination of simple and intellectual humor makes *The Big Bang Theory* relevant to everyday life and accessible to individuals’ various tastes in comedy. Nevertheless, this popular show is deemed offensive by many viewers because of its regressive attitude toward equality – encompassing sexuality and gender, race, and social class – and for valid reasons because this series certainly perpetuates these antiquated

beliefs about our society. It is these offensive portrayals of the main characters that give this show a narrow-minded feel, resulting in negative criticism.

I argue, however, that these controversies regarding *The Big Bang Theory's* presentation of gender, race, and class are needed in our society to help create a *progressive* movement toward genuine acceptance of others. Alan Yang, creator of *Parks and Recreation*, *Master of none*, and *Date and Switch*, states, "I'm not naive enough to think a single episode of TV is going to change everything, but it's my hope that some people watched that and it at least brought to light something they hadn't thought about before," and he further notes that a sitcom can "express something you yourself haven't personally experienced" (Ellwood 81). Thus, without *The Big Bang Theory's* ability to draw these issues into question, television would be lacking. Sitcoms are a highly effective way to address current problems without making them seem too aggressive or serious, so shows like *The Big Bang Theory* can be used to identify and create a dialogue about these concerns in a productive way.



Stereotypical portrayals of both women and men are a

significant part of this show. They create a tension that is difficult for me as a viewer because I reject these attitudes but still find the series enjoyable. Penny (Kaley Cuoco), the neighbor of roommates Leonard (Johnny Galecki) and Sheldon (Jim Parsons), who are the two primary scientists, is presented as a “dumb blonde,” a woman whose sexuality is at the forefront of both narrative and comedy. For instance, in an episode where Sheldon and Leonard compete for tenure status, Penny “plans on with members of the tenure committee to further Leonard’s cause,” says Sheldon’s jealous girlfriend, Amy (Mayim Bialik) in “The Tenure Turbulence.” All parties in the scene, Penny included, concur; the canned laughter that is present all throughout the conversation solidifies the fact that Penny’s sexuality is exploited – but without disapproval from the characters. In conjunction with the men, who are seen as too “nerdy” to be attractive or social, this encourages a difficult situation; these conventional, offensive integrations of character traits are crucial to the humor in this sitcom.

Sheldon and Howard (Simon Helberg) each have girlfriends who are equally as smart as the males, yet their careers are occasionally made fun of, apparently just because they are women. Moreover, they are portrayed as “ugly” and “dorky” girls as opposed to the attractive yet supposedly simple-minded Penny. In her article “Representations of Female Scientists in The Big Bang Theory,” Heather McIntosh argues that Amy’s and Bernadette’s (Melissa Rauch) careers are attractive on the surface to viewers and to their boyfriends, but their professional lives are diminished in worth when compared to how often their feminine roles and duties take over the storyline. McIntosh even reminds readers of the fact that Bernadette admits to downplaying her intelligence to make Howard feel more confident about his own. Amy and Bernadette’s relationships are presented alongside the various

romantic relationships of Leonard and Raj (Kunal Nayyar), which creates even more distaste among viewers, as their “nerdy” relationships seem to be successful while the relationships between “smart” men and “dumb” females usually fail, as would be expected. This is meant to be a central element in the comedy of such sitcoms, but it still propagates a patriarchal society because the men never have to change to become more compatible with the women, and they are never expected to play a part in improving the relationship (Walsh, et al. 124). This is not a problem for Raj, however, because he lacks successful relationships as a whole.

It is possible that one of the reasons that Raj’s relationships seem to fail is because of his ambiguous sexuality. His character is gender fluid, which not only addresses homosexuality and gender identity, but brings issues of race into this context, as he is the only non-white character on the show. The amalgamation of both gender and race in the Raj character is a significant reason that this show is a leader in drawing attention to inequality in the 21st century; these two concepts actually elevate *The Big Bang Theory* due to the ability of the series to portray the harmfulness of stereotypes upon both men and women who suffer the brunt of the jokes and the consequential judgment of viewers. Raj is positioned as the laughingstock of the series – Sheldon, Leonard, and Howard are set apart for several reasons. Unfortunately, one of the reasons Raj is alienated from them is because he’s a person of color, which gives rise to racism because of his additional “other” identities. His character is written so that, at times, it suggests a pattern of gender fluidity; he skirts the boundaries of traditional gender non-conformity and is not especially masculine in the ways that the show denotes. Thus, the fact that he is isolated in all of these ways points to discriminatory attitudes because, on their own, these qualities would be innocuous. When these traits are

analyzed along with his race, these characteristics reinforce him as someone who does not fit the standards established by the series.

For instance, although Sheldon is awkward, he is the most intelligent and as such is respected. Howard and Leonard are able to interact with others relatively normally, so they are not quite as easy to ridicule. Raj, however, is severely afraid of females and cannot communicate with them at all, reinforcing the idea that he is insecure in his sexuality. He is the solitary Indian on the show, which leads to several questions. Why must this Indian character be the character who is fluid and consequently made fun of? Why are the jokes surrounding his race at the forefront of the comedy? His parents, who live in India, constantly try to force him into a marriage dictated by them, which perpetuates the stereotype of arranged Indian marriages. Furthermore, it reveals that Raj cannot manage to find a relationship on his own; he is seen as a failure – but as a funny failure. The show suggests that this confusing reading of Raj's character may be because of his closeness with men, high-pitched voice, way of dressing, and his needy, emotional personality. Many viewers have become offended that Raj is both presented as possibly bisexual or homosexual and as inferior to the other white characters *because* of his inability to communicate as clearly as they do.

This representation reveals commentary on race: Raj is developed to be of lesser likeability and, thus, perceived as lower in status than Leonard, Sheldon, and Howard because he is held back by his race. According Kimberly Walsh et al., "Characters that deviate from traditional gender roles are portrayed as unhappy and pathetic... The portrayal of nontraditional males and females as dissatisfied serves to emphasize the importance of filling the traditional gender roles" (128). Taking this into consideration, Raj is destined to

become an outsider. His Indian identity prevents him from integrating into society in a productive way because of his awkwardness, and this suggests that other races combat the same issue because, apparently, they do not belong. In a society full of judgment of others based on such shallow characteristics, attention needs to be drawn to the impact that these assumptions can have both on an individual and on a community as a whole. *The Big Bang Theory* illuminates the roots and results of such racist labels and allows viewers to witness how their own interactions with others can be harmful because Raj is a pitiful character.

The show advances racist views of Raj by allowing the other characters to view him as “other,” but their judgment of him is not seen as offensive because it is displayed through apparently good-natured humor. In “The Skank Reflex Analysis,” Amy comforts Penny after she has sexual relations with Raj. The fact that Penny regrets sleeping with Raj and that Amy agrees that this was a mistake points to a racist element as well: Raj is the only person of color with whom Penny is ashamed of having intercourse. Amy’s consolation of Penny is founded on a historical premise of racism, seen through the language she uses: “She engaged in inter-species hanky-panky and people still call her great.” Amy is referring to a Russian ruler who had “intimate relations with a horse.” Because she compares sex with an Indian man to sex with a horse, it is evident that Amy views Raj as an “other,” even if they are presented as friends. Moreover, Amy calls Raj “a little Indian boy” later in the conversation. This downplays Raj as a person because, according to Amy, he is lesser of an individual because he is Indian and, therefore, Penny should not worry about her “mistake.” While this scene is humorous in many ways, it is still heavily racist, especially because of the characters’ apparent ignorance of how offensive their opinions and words are.

Kenneth Ladenburg in his analysis of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* deems that racial naiveté – when in conjunction with sarcasm and political adherence – serves as a comedic element. Humor, he says, is also created through “...the buildup and subsequent relief of tension or stress, through the sudden introduction of the odd or unexpected, and through a feeling of superiority over others” (860). The way that Amy and Penny view Raj is transmitted to the viewer through this humor, which is why it is so forceful. Those who witness the degradation of Raj are made aware of his differing qualities and consequently judge him further, even if it is not in an overtly negative way.

Another element in *The Big Bang Theory* that causes characters to be established as “others” is the clear construction of ranking individuals based on their social class. Penny, who not only is cast as a “dumb blonde,” is also presented as a lower-middle-class waitress who struggles to make her way, unlike the males. This could certainly be tied to sexism, but the focus here is on economic disparity. The show implies that a woman, who is not a “genius” like the others, is lacking because of this lack of intellect. She is overtly looked down upon by the other characters: “What’s she going to do, take people’s drink orders and get them wrong?” jokes Sheldon when the group judges Penny for attending a professional meeting along with them in “The Tenure Turbulence.” She is disapproved of and laughed at by Sheldon, Leonard, Amy, and Raj because she does not belong in a setting where her intellect and professional life are of lesser standing than theirs. The inclusion of this issue is due to the fact that “At a time when education matters more than ever, success in school remains linked tightly to class” (Spangler 471). Sheldon and Leonard, on the tenure track, are certainly seen as more educated and thus of higher economic standing because Penny has no Ph.D. degree and they do. To viewers, the show makes it clear that Penny is different because of her

class, and because many people identify with this – or are at least influenced by it in some fashion – dialogue is inevitable and necessary if we are to combat discrimination.



In sitcoms over the years, and evidently still today in *The Big Bang Theory*, those who are not members of the working-class, “...were presented as great successes or young with much promise,” which solidifies the difference between Penny’s

opportunities and the men's (Butsch 19). Her limited income represents more to some viewers: it is offensive because she is a cerebrally inferior woman within a lesser social class and who possesses fewer opportunities, and she is not respected as a consequence of this. She is set apart and scorned, and viewers are able to see the social disparity that results from the economic. While Richard Butsch's discussion of sitcom family life does not especially pertain to *The Big Bang Theory*, his general assertions about the working class are useful to incorporate in this analysis. For instance, "Working-class families, in other words, were given a try when 'normal' fare wasn't established or sustaining ratings. But even in these peak years working-class shows remained a minority among domestic situation comedies" (19). The lack of depictions of the working-class speaks to the audience's desire to be removed from such observations, whether it be because the working class is unentertaining or unlikable. The lower classes, then, are looked down upon because they are not "good" enough to appear on television. Moreover, Butsch reveals that working individuals situate their comedic effect through battling obstacles, which they usually created themselves. Traditionally, the working class was portrayed as inept, immature, and emotional; they are essentially "dumb but lovable" (21). Penny certainly creates most of her problems herself through her "dumb but lovable" decisions but solves them in a humorous way; the focus of the show is not on her triumphs, however. Rather, it focuses on her weaknesses and her distinction from the intelligent, higher-class figures in the series. Penny is the stereotypical pitiable, weak female character because of these reasons that become so real and personal that viewers cannot help but discuss them. *The Big Bang Theory* directs these discourses, narratives, and conversations, and so we must appreciate it in this aspect. Without this show, it is possible that some people would not understand how damaging sexism,

racism, and judgment regarding social class can be. By seeing the impact of these harsh connotations on endearing characters, viewers sympathize with and want to protect these “others.”

We cannot ignore the influence that the media, especially television, has on our beliefs about society and the groups of people that make up communities. For whatever reason, humans naturally categorize each other, especially through gender, race, and class. Because this process of creating factions of individuals based on arbitrary qualities is so abiding, viewers have been taught to accept it without question. These stereotypes are easily circulated through sitcoms, which is why we must be careful about how seriously we take these shows and the “normal” distinctions they draw between individuals. This caution is necessary because the process of creating binaries, groups, and “others” institutes an unyielding distance among people, especially those of different races, sexes, or social class. The ensuing perception that stereotypes are wholly true results in a damaging, systematic process of “othering.”

Because the influence of television shows is undeniable, we must manipulate our reactions and morph them into something positive: a discussion addressing the problems that sitcoms present, even if they do present them so in a humorous way, as if to cover up the blaring reality of these issues. Thus, “...we just can’t run from having these conversations” (Walsh et al. 80). Rather, we should use the humor that sitcoms, such as *The Big Bang Theory*, enable as a mode of reference to catalyze this discourse. It is up to us to utilize or to accept the harsh generalizations presented to us in this show.

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CHAPTER 13

Nothing? Seinfeld Is About Everything!

ANTHONY DURAN

Regarded as one of the most culturally relevant sitcoms, *Seinfeld* embodies many conceptions held in the modern day about the true New Yorker. This comedic sitcom capitalizes on a dry, satirical humor running through the daily situations that four, narcissistic friends – Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld), Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), George (Jason Alexander), and Kramer (Michael Richards) – who get thrown into, situations that mirror the everyday struggles that some individuals constantly overdramatize. It is ironic, however, for this particular show to be held in such high esteem with a plot based on the premise that it would be a “show about nothing.” Yet, the unfortunate events of life that the characters continuously suffer transcend the quotidian (as Al Auster eloquently argues) to bring significance to its viewers.



Peabody Awards. 20 July 2017. http://static.peabodyawards.com/user_images/4117209_G.jpg

Seinfeld is relevant, interesting, and not incidentally hilarious in this regard; its claim to nothingness is actually a conceit because it addresses difficult social issues through subtle, yet effective, satirical humor. *Seinfeld* is about much more than nothing; the use of humor to temper controversy while casting progressive ideology as relatable and amusing discreetly exposes the viewers such topics, leading them to think and proves valuable for engaging with others in the real world. The situations the characters are placed in possess a strategic presence of social issues, but it is in their responses to confronting topics such as homosexuality, abortion, and racism that resonates with the way many Americans feel.

“NOT THAT THERE’S ANYTHING WRONG WITH THAT.”

In the episode “The Outing,” Elaine, in an act of consciously misleading a woman eavesdropping on her, infers as a joke that Jerry and George are a homosexual couple. Although a stranger to Elaine, the eavesdropper is actually a reporter who writes for the college newspaper at New York University and will

publically expose them for this rumor. Throughout the episode, there is a lack of acceptance for homosexuality and a presence of homophobia; while nothing is said outright, it is in the anxiousness of Jerry and George that the episode attempts to connect to its viewer on the matter. This is a tactic to uncover and make the viewer think about the stigma in society that there is something not acceptable or abnormal about homosexuality. Jerry is found scrambling to carefully defend his interactions with George and the things they do for each other, such as him getting Jerry tickets to the musical "Guys and Dolls" for his birthday. In order to prevent offending anyone (in the context of the show), Jerry would say repeatedly, "Not that there's anything wrong with that." Although this appears for the purpose of comedic entertainment, it is also an attempt to convey to viewers that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality while also empathizing with some individual viewers that they are not alone in feeling uneasy with this topic.

In the chapter "Male Anxiety and the Buddy System on Seinfeld," Joanna Di Mattia thoroughly explores the context of shifting social frames in society and how the concept of homosexuality is purposefully implemented to satirize the traditional masculinity of the white male. Even though homosexuality is explicitly the focus in this episode, the show as a whole possesses a homoerotic element among the male characters to give viewers enough context to recognize the similarities between the homosocial interactions of men and homosexual relationships (Di Mattia 95). Lingering issues with homosexuality are addressed here through George and Jerry's need to prove their heterosexuality. As Di Mattia notes, "Jerry and George realize that to be a man, one must play at being a man and must be perceived by other men to possess an unquestionable manhood... homosociality becomes an unstable dramatization of masculinity, performed over and

over again" (97). It is here that Jerry and George's issue, as New York men, is clear; they cannot have other people under the assumption that they are homosexual because that will tarnish their manhood with regard to how they are viewed by society. Di Mattia's analysis coincides perfectly with the purpose of *Seinfeld* making an episode like this: as the two feel their manhood threatened due to people thinking they are a gay couple, the sitcom's subtle progressive ideology becomes apparent.

Seinfeld shows viewers two straight characters whom they are familiar with; therefore, even if perceived as gay, it does not change them and should not matter outside of the realm of television in the real world either. According to Albert Auster in his chapter, "Seinfeld: The Transcendence of the Quotidian," the show poses questions to the viewer that "we are meant to actually ponder" (190). It is no longer just another episode of a sitcom that comes and goes on television, but it is a challenge to the audience at that time to think about homosexuality as normal and for audiences in the modern society to continue to push for normalized narratives involving homosexuality.



Still from Seinfeld, "The Outing" (Season 4, Episode 17, 1993)

WHEN DOES IT BECOME PIZZA?

The conflicting scenarios among the group persist as other issues are addressed in plain sight to invoke personal reflection by the viewers. Abortion is a difficult topic of discussion due to the clear divide in America between pro-life and pro-choice perspectives. Often, people on one side of the ideological split disdain people on the other side. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was not commonplace as a storyline of a television episode during the era of its original broadcast. Yet, it is the clear focus of the episode "The Couch."

Elaine asks her boyfriend his opinion on abortion, and his response results in her inability to date the man whom she previously told Jerry was "perfect" if he could have just been pro-choice. This situation Elaine finds herself in, although masked with humor, provokes viewers to contemplate their own position on abortion and to critique her response to her boyfriend's perspective. The audience, in pondering Elaine's

decision, gives insight on the matter and plays a role in developing one's own stance, changing how viewers will handle themselves in regard to the topic of abortion in the real world. "The irony of *Seinfeld* purportedly being about nothing is the latitude to be about anything it wanted to address" (196). This claim by Auster in his chapter exemplifies the significance of episodes such as this, continuing that the influence of religion and gender on the characters is how "It even raises political issues. In fact, being about nothing is an advantage for the series, since it raises no political and social expectations, and the series could go wherever the imagination of its creators decided to take it" (196). This freedom of the creators further supports the value of *Seinfeld* to its audience in being about important issues that promote progressive ideology for its viewers to contemplate.

The issue also has an impact on Kramer and Poppie (Reni Santoni), who are starting a new make-it-yourself Pizza restaurant. The concept of making your own pizza is relevant to the humor of the show amid an in-restaurant argument about whether or not a pizza is or is not one before it goes into the oven. This simple analogy on pizza explores the complexity of the argument in society about the morality and legality of abortion. *Seinfeld's* way of challenging the viewer to think about highly debated topics through the sitcom's carefree humor is revealed in this sense. *Seinfeld* does not concern itself with whether the analogy is offensive because it is an argument over pizza on the surface. To the viewer, however, it can be read as a clear discussion about when the fetus inside a pregnant woman is considered a life. This relates to the difference between men and women on the topic and also to the stereotypical political affiliation of people from New York as a liberal city/state where they would all be expected to agree on a pro-choice stance. The complexity of characters in terms of location, origin, family

background, and general ability to care about a serious subject further connects to viewers, who presumably have friends and the same sets of identity markers as the characters.

“YA KNOW, I DON’T GET IT.”



Still from Seinfeld, "The Cigar Store Indian" (Season 5, Episode 10, 1993)

As with abortion, racism is a very sensitive topic in our modern society, a subject that can result in the average person being backed into an uncomfortable, defensive position if the wrong thing is said. In "The Cigar Store Indian," Jerry attempts to make amends with Elaine by buying her a full-sized, Native-American statue from a cigar store and is then deemed a racist for the purchase. In addition to this, Jerry is simultaneously interested in dating a Native-American woman, but because of being called a racist after his purchase, he consistently finds himself making the most politically incorrect statements on the matter.

It is in this episode that the sitcom reveals its ability to address serious and widely discussed issues during the 1990s, issues that still cause controversy in society today. Although a source

of controversy, it is seen through the lack of understanding by Jerry that the sentiment many Americans hold about racism and being politically correct in regard to addressing race is personified. Al Auster addresses this in his chapter, highlighting an example from this episode about how “George is embarrassed to ask an Asian letter carrier for directions to the nearest Chinese restaurant, and Jerry scoffs that he never gets embarrassed when anyone asks him directions to Israel” (195). Auster clarifies Jerry’s lack of understanding on the topic of race and what is acceptable, as Jerry claims in the episode, “Ya know, I don’t get it.” Many Americans feel this way about the topic of racism, however, and the sitcom’s ability to present the disgruntled side, as well as the confused/defensive perspective of Jerry, connects the viewer in some way to the issue. This is where the audience can think about ways they can change their behavior in society not to be offensive or take action in helping others over what is wrong about a statement or word said. Very applicable to the time period of *Seinfeld’s* original broadcast, it still serves a purpose in modern society in terms of how individuals can work together to abolish racism, rather than further polarize people due to the fear of saying something wrong, as Jerry does in this episode.

Shane Gunster does not believe the series paves the way for social change, but there is some value in bringing some important topics into consideration. “The characters constantly invent new possibilities for social action, conjuring the need for decisions or analysis in situations that are conventionally viewed as unworthy of a second thought. Neither we nor they are under any illusion as to the larger significance of such praxis – it has none – but this ironic cover does not alter the feeling that actions have, nevertheless, been taken and choices have been made” (Gunster 213). Jerry has no intention of being racist when buying the Native-American statue, but there are

consequences of his action nonetheless. *Seinfeld* creates a way for the characters to act as if the social issues present in the situations they find themselves in do not matter in the grand scheme of life, but this approach results in a deeper analysis of their actions by the audience. Although the series purports to be a show about nothing, it is the meanings behind the misfortunes of the characters that reveal the attempts to make viewers comfortable in discussing social issues in our society.

"YADA YADA YADA..."

Seinfeld is a real-life sitcom that reveals many social issues through episodes in a humorous, satirical manner, making it enjoyable rather than uncomfortable for viewers to watch. To this day, the series is still thought provoking in regard to questioning the issues pertaining to society, and it will forever be a presence in comedy, sitcom television, and life. From taking on the hard-to-discuss topics of the time period and injecting it into the daily lives of four New Yorkers in uncommon ways that would make their lives unnecessarily harder, this is why the cultural significance of the show is lasting.

Seinfeld's significance ranges far beyond the fact that it is funny and entertaining, a contradiction of the idea that the series is about nothing. On the contrary, the specific agenda found in the multiple plots of episodes make the show the series cultural significant. It was never about nothing but about everything that made average people struggle on a daily basis, question their beliefs, and work to build real relationships. Disregarding one's individual opinion on the sitcom itself, as Albert Auster beautifully claims, "We are all *Seinfeld* characters..." (196). When there are so many instances that arise in our own lives that correlate almost identically to a situation or event in *Seinfeld*, how could one refute this claim? If you have ever been

frustrated, confused, or curious about the minutest action of another person, statement, or something you see, then you cannot. You are George if you see a guard at a clothing store and wonder why he does not have a chair, Elaine if you are infuriated by a woman not wearing a bra, or Jerry if you cannot stand running into a relative outside of a family gathering, like his Uncle Leo. with regard to Kramer, I think everyone can agree they have at least a little bit of his strangeness/wackiness in them that reveals itself every once in a while. Although all these situations result in misfortune through the characters taking action, *Seinfeld* connects to society in this way. Through watching episodes, viewers learn more about themselves and think critically about the ridiculous scenarios of the four best friends whose hidden progressive ideology offers valuable lessons that can be applied in the real world.

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CHAPTER 14

Interpreting Womanhood Through Sex and The City

DELANEY BRODERICK



Figure 1. (clockwise from left) Cynthia Nixon as Miranda Hobbes, Kristin Davis as Charlotte York, Kim Cattrall as Samantha Jones, and Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw in Sex and the City, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"

HBO's *Sex and the City* ran from 1998-2004 and follows the personal lives and careers of four, lifelong friends in New York City. The show chronicles both the successes and failures of the women and deals with aspects such as sisterhood, womanhood, sexual independence, and women in the working world. Although these four women are best friends, they largely differ in personality. The show's protagonist and narrator Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) is a writer who is both sensitive and indecisive at times and is feminine in terms of one of her interests, her love of fashion (particularly shoes). Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) is a lawyer, who is stubborn and

oftentimes cynical. Charlotte York (Kristen Davis) is an art dealer, who is very naive and sweet as well as a true romantic. Last is Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), a businesswoman who is confident and promiscuous. The popular show is usually considered to fall under the category of postfeminism: a movement that is largely defined by freedom of choice, independence, and personal freedom. Because personal choice is a central concept of postfeminism, a woman who has a career is not considered any different than a woman who stays home as a housewife because a woman's experience is never rejected or discredited. While Carrie represents a very traditional image of womanhood in many ways, the experiences of each woman are examined in the series, and each of the friends is shown as equal within the group. *Sex and the City* emphasizes the differences of these four characters and the importance of female friendship and conversation in offering a perspective that accepts both conventional and non-conventional angles on what it means to be a woman among friends in a relationship where no friend's outlook is considered better than another.

While Carrie's love of shopping and fashion are traits that comprise a large part of her identity, *Sex and the City* has received much criticism over the years due to Carrie's consumerist attitude. In many ways, the character is obsessed with material goods, ranging from the latest Christian Louboutins to Dolce & Gabbana straight off the runway. Critics have labeled Carrie as a narcissist and self-important, but a postfeminist perspective allows for Carrie to be addicted to shopping and fashion *without* being considered less of a woman for these traditional feminine qualities. The postfeminist movement emerged as a reaction to first and second wave feminism, which postfeminists considered too polarizing (Southard 152). Because postfeminism rejected many of the notions of the first and second feminist movement, in

postfeminist perspective no conflict exists between feminism and femininity (Adriaens and Bauwel 178). In "A Woman's Right to Shoes," Carrie's \$485 Manolos are stolen at a party hosted by her old friend Kyra, who tells Carrie that she must remove her shoes before entering the house. Kyra is unsympathetic toward Carrie, telling her it is ridiculous and immature to spend that much money on shoes. Frustrated at Kyra's condescending response, Carrie tells Miranda on the phone, "It's not about the money; I don't care about the money. I am talking about a woman's right to shoes! Why did she have to shame me?" Carrie's reaction reflects the notion of postfeminism that a woman's power is *not* diminished by traditional methods of expressing femininity, which in this case is her shoe obsession.

Because Carrie is the narrator of the show, her perspective is emphasized in every episode. Carrie's narration is central not only because it provides insights about her character but additionally because in each episode she poses a question, which almost always revolves around a discussion she has with her friends in the episode. These questions often relate to sex, in addition to many scholars noting how they connect a sexual topic to a larger societal issue with regard to women (Ross 4077). For example, in "Are We Sluts?" Carrie asks the question "Are we simply romantically challenged, or are we sluts?" In the episode, Carrie's new boyfriend Aidan does not immediately sleep with her, leading to her to worry if this means that something is wrong with their relationship. Carrie then contemplates whether modern women in Manhattan are over-sexual and have the expectation that healthy relationships must include sex, meaning Manhattan women are "sluts" or whether Aidan not wanting a sexual relationship means that he just wishes to be friends with Carrie. Carrie's own perception of this issue is shaped and influenced largely by the perspectives of her friends. In this episode, Samantha is the one to have

suggested that Aidan could not be interested in her sexually, which Carrie would not have considered otherwise, and this highlights the value the show places on the various viewpoints of the four characters.

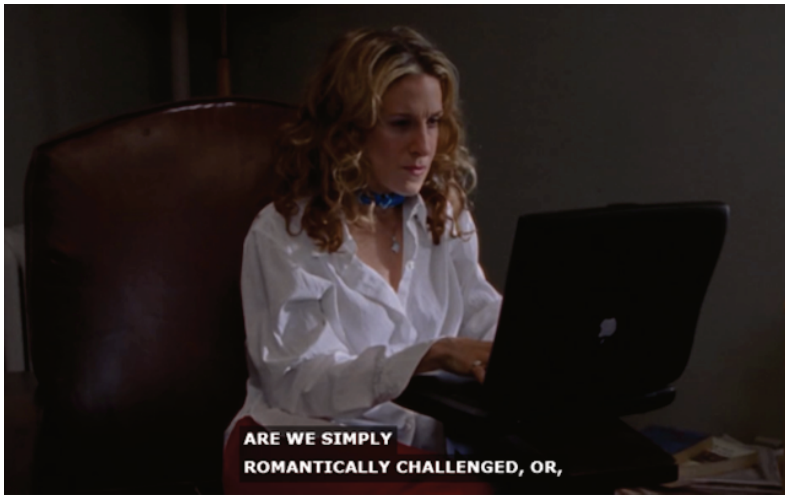


Figure 2. Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw in Sex and the City, "Are We Sluts?"

Carrie's narration throughout the show is also important because the question Carrie asks at the end of each episode is the topic she writes about in her "Sex and the City" column for *The New York Star*. Carrie's writing provides a deeper understanding of her identity, and her column is pivotal to the character because Carrie organizes her life largely through her writing, as it serves as a way for her to reflect on her own life experiences and examine and consider other perspectives, which are offered by her friends during their conversations. From the very beginning of the series, it is clear that the creators want Carrie to be understood/represented in relation to her column because the opening credits of the show include

a bus with an advertisement for Carrie's column, which shows a provocative picture of Carrie and caption reading "Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex." Scholar Georgina Isbister notes that Carrie's writing is important to the show because it documents the character's transformation and growth, as well as how Carrie looks to her friends and to her writing rather than to men for the answers to her open-ended questions.

While Carrie's identity is largely defined by material things such as her love of fashion, Miranda understands her identity through her career. Miranda is unwilling to compromise her job because of her gender and is upset when she is looked down upon for being a woman in a male-dominated occupation. In "Attack of the Five-Foot-Ten Woman," Miranda is offended when her old-fashioned housekeeper, Magda (Lynn Cohen), tells her it is her duty to take care of cooking and chores and discourages her from being a part of the working world. Annoyed, Miranda complains to Carrie, "I don't need to make pies. I'm practically a partner in a major law firm, if I want a pie I can buy it." Miranda clearly takes pride in her position as a Harvard-educated lawyer and gains a sense of accomplishment from her achievements. Additionally, Miranda choosing to call Carrie conveys the importance of female friendship and the problems with the patriarchal practices and standards that have stigmatized women in the working world for so long.

Unlike her best friend, Miranda is more androgynous than Carrie, who is presented in a traditional feminine role. Fashion is unimportant to Miranda, she is not very interested in keeping up with her appearance, and she is much more cynical than the happy-go-lucky protagonist. Many postfeminists rejected the strict definitions and limitations of the gender binary, and androgyny defies these constraints both in physical appearance and in culturally constructed gender roles (Fien and Sofie). Physically, Miranda is not shown to dress in a conventionally

feminine way and often is shown in styles that are traditionally worn by men, such as a pantsuit or trousers. Additionally, Miranda does not conform to the gender roles have restricted women throughout history. The character's response to Magda's patronizing attitudes conveys Miranda's discontentment with the domestic sphere and her desire to have a role in the professional world, which is a culture controlled by men. These beliefs correspond to the postfeminist notion of independence and personal freedom yet do not condemn conventional ideas on womanhood, which are more feminine and are embodied by Carrie. Although Miranda does not display rigid masculine or feminine characteristics, she is not considered to be less of a woman than her best friend.

The other two central characters, Charlotte and Samantha, have almost *nothing* in common with each other. Charlotte and Samantha represent ideologies from opposite sides of the spectrum: Charlotte being generally conservative and Samantha radically liberal. While Charlotte is optimistic, innocent, and insecure at times, Samantha is hyper-sexual, self-assured, and unapologetic. The two often argue about relationships, as Charlotte believes in the importance of monogamy and marriage while Samantha is more primarily interested in casual sex. The two come to a breaking point in "Shortcomings" when Samantha has sex with Charlotte's brother. Furious, Charlotte yells at Samantha and insults her promiscuous behavior "Is your vagina in the New York City guide books? Because it should be; it's the hottest spot in town: it's always open!" Charlotte later apologizes for her rare outburst by baking Samantha muffins. This instance demonstrates the importance of personal and sexual freedom, as Charlotte is the one who must apologize to Samantha, suggesting that it is wrong to criticize and judge others for their sexual practices.

In addition to using this postfeminist notion of the significance of sexual freedom, this example also emphasizes the importance of sisterhood: despite the two character's opposing views, they are able to overcome this dispute in their friendship. This dynamic representation of female friendship is crucial to the show because it facilitates discussion and debate between the women regarding the roles of womanhood, sexuality and consumerism (Ross 4220). In this episode, Charlotte's act of baking cookies for Samantha conveys her traditional understanding of womanhood while Samantha's is understood through her sexual freedom. Although Samantha is feminine in physical terms, she is androgynous in concern to her role in the world, which is similar to Miranda. Samantha is a high-powered business woman, thus her career also is something that is typically restricted to men. Additionally, Samantha's personality is also more masculine in terms of her attitudes toward sex and her being both dominant and aggressive (Fien and Sofie). This duality exhibits the postfeminist notion that allows for both feminine and masculine traits to simultaneously work together rather than restricting women to fit into only *one* of these identities.

Charlotte's belief system not only largely conflicts with Samantha's, but she is perhaps the biggest outlier of the group due to her very traditional stances. In her article for *The New Yorker*, Emily Nussbaum notes that she is perhaps the only one of the four that did not receive backlash from men, as the others were considered "gold diggers, man-haters, and sluts." Being the most innocent of the group, Charlotte's desire for marriage is expressed early on in the show, and unsurprisingly she is the first of the friends to wed. Not long after Charlotte *does* get married, she is disappointed with married life, and her romantic vision of marriage becomes tainted. Although Charlotte's marriage does not last long and results in a divorce,

the show does not criticize the idea of traditional gender roles; later on, Charlotte's wish for a domesticity is fulfilled and, ultimately, the character quits her job to be a mother and full-time homemaker. The show also does not reject the narrative that mothers *can* work; when Miranda has a child, she continues to be a lawyer and overcomes much skepticism from others. Perhaps this is the show's postfeminist lens suggesting that both choices face scrutiny, and both should be accepted. Additionally, Charlotte's old-fashioned perspective derives from a postfeminist notion in which women looked back to traditional standards of womanhood and femininity.

A central element of the postfeminist perspective is including elements of irony, which are also crucial to postmodernism (Steeves 4358). The irony in *Sex and the City* is often presented in a humorous tone, which allows for the show to use controversial sexual issues (abortion, masturbation, infertility) in a tone more suitable for addressing a large audience. Much of this humor is found in the scenes where the four friends have discussions regarding sex. In "The Monogamists," Samantha tells her friends, "Tell a man 'I hate you,' you have the best sex of your life. Tell him 'I love you,' you'll probably never see him again." Samantha's candid response uses humor to explore the idea that men are afraid of commitment. *Sex and the City* uses these discussions to emphasize the ambiguity in Carrie's questions, which directly relates to the four women's diverse perspectives in a way that suggests no woman is wrong in her opinion.

These discussions of the show also facilitate one of the most examined themes about the series: the relationship between sex and consumerism. Many scholars have analyzed the show in terms of the central characters' viewing men the same way they view material goods. Aside from Carrie's obsession with shopping, each character discusses men similarly to the way

they consider consumable goods: something they gain fulfillment from that is disposable. While much criticism of the show is based around the issue of these four characters being consumers, a postfeminist perspective argues that this approach helps the characters become less dependent on men and helps them achieve individual freedom. To the postfeminist movement, consumption is a way to gain and assert one's power and dominance. Additionally, because women have not been able to make choices for themselves throughout much of history, purchasing material goods and participating in consumer culture is a way for women to understand themselves and receive gratification from others and society, thus boosting one's self esteem (Adriaens and Bauwel).

Sex and the City presents various perspectives on how modern women understand womanhood and the merits that come with each of these understandings rather than discrediting any woman's experience. The show uses these representations to suggest that womanhood cannot be presented in a singular lens, which is central to postfeminist ideology. It is important to consider the implications of postfeminism that are at the very core of the show, as these are still relevant on television today. Shows like *Girls*, which follows a similar postfeminist trajectory, have often been compared to *Sex and the City* and have faced many of the same criticisms. While postfeminism offers an outlet for women to express their sexuality freely and make individual choices without judgement, it is also important to consider that it is one-dimensional to have a show centered on womanhood that consists entirely of a white, affluent cast of characters. It is also necessary to note that postfeminist discourse is extremely problematic in the way that it frowns upon any criticism of topics like sex workers (including occupations like the porn industry and strippers), due to the fact that "it is women's personal choice." In many ways,

however, these women are not truly in control of themselves, or sexually liberated, as their job *depends* on the patriarchy and, furthermore, perpetuates a system in which men objectify women.

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PART IV

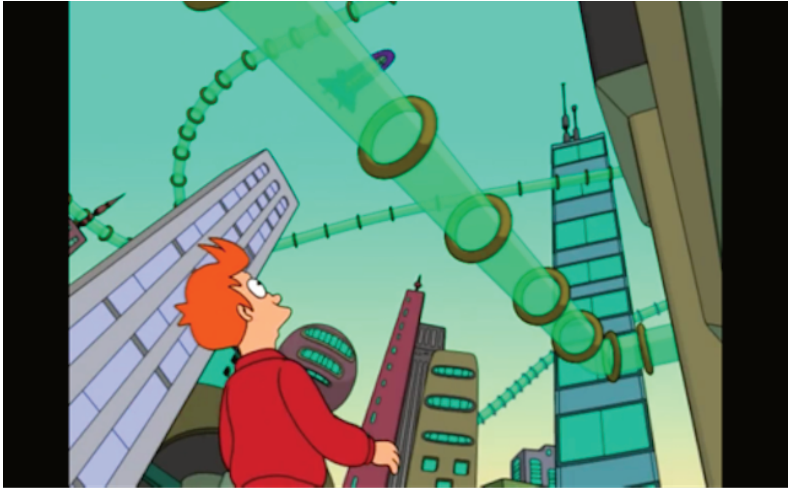
TAKING ANIMATED SITCOMS SERIOUSLY

CHAPTER 15

From Alcoholic Robots to Robosexuality: The Usage of Robots in Futurama

SAM BISHOP

Futurama is a sitcom that aired from 1999 to 2003 on Fox, was on hiatus from 2003-2008, and then was revived from 2008 to 2013 on Comedy Central. The show is based around Philip J. Fry, a pizza delivery guy from 1999 who is cryogenically frozen (by accident) until the year 3000, and his adjustment to life in the 31st century. The show typically focuses around science and/or science fiction, but when dealing with more socially and culturally relevant topics, it accurately highlights the strengths and flaws of life in the 21st century. *Futurama* acclimates mainstream viewers to progressive ideology in an indirect way because the behaviors portrayed in the show are ahead of their time.



Philip J. Fry observing the new technology in the year 3000. Still from Futurama, "Space Pilot 3000" (Season 1, Episode 1, 1999)

Futurama is an animated series that aired during prime timeslots, but it would not have been successful without the prime-time animated sitcoms that preceded it. In the 1960s, *The Flintstones* was the first animated sitcom to stay on the prime-time slot for longer than a season, and its adult-targeted content allows it to do so. "John Mitchell, vice-president at Screen Gems, suggested that Hanna-Barbera develop a cartoon aimed at adults, and this soon gave rise to the development of *The Flintstones*... The show was greeted with mixed reviews but high ratings" (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 75-76). After the cancellation of *The Flintstones*, prime-time animation dwindled away. In 1989, creator Matt Groening worked with James L. Brooks to create *The Simpsons* as an adult-focused animated sitcom. Although it aired at the same time as *The Cosby Show*, it was still very popular and successfully reached its target demographics (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 83). After Groening's success with *The Simpsons*, FOX wanted another

successful show. Groening then created *Futurama*, a show that “won its time period in most key demographic areas, including adults ages 18-49, adults aged 18-34, adults aged 25-54, men and women aged 18-49, and teens” (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 86). Groening had created a second wildly popular show.

There are a variety of characters in *Futurama*, and I believe that each character adds something to the show. Philip J. Fry, better known as Fry, is a lazy, somewhat dumb, and immature delivery boy with a well-meaning heart. Because he is from the 20th century, he points out the changes from the 20th century to the 31st century. Fry’s girlfriend and Planet Express pilot Turanga Leela is a mutant. Mutants like her are outcasts of society, and she captures the struggles of being an outcast. The relationship between Fry and Leela, offers commentary on modern and outdated facets of relationships. Fry’s coworker, Amy Wong, is rich and has a conceited attitude over her less fortunate coworkers. Fry’s relative, Professor Hubert Farnsworth, adds science and math-related jokes to *Futurama*. He comments on issues such as global warming, deforestation, and genetic modification. The manager, Hermes Conrad, highlights the excessive nature of bureaucracy, the struggles of obesity, and the ineffective markers of masculinity. Last (and to the crew, least) is John Zoidberg, an anthropomorphic crustacean-based alien whose well-meaning but inept nature causes many problems for the crew.



The Planet Express Crew. Still from Futurama, "Proposition Infinity" (Season 7, Episode 4, 2010)

Robots serve a different purpose in *Futurama*. Robots parallel humans in every way except appearance. In the 31st century, robots feature all shapes, models, sizes, ethnicities, religions, and personalities. Robots stand in for humans for two reasons. First, robots parallel humans because, in the 31st century, the humans have progressed way past the modern way of life in the 21st century. Humans rarely see race, human-against-human war is rarely an issue, and people are free to spend their spare time however they please. Although they have figured a lot of things out, their society is not a utopia either. Everyone has a career chip that tells them which job they have. Its bureaucracy is incredibly tedious. Humans mistreat mutants and condemn them to sewers with radioactive waste. Earth's military, led by fearless coward Zapp Brannigan, attacks almost anyone who lands on Earth, hostile or otherwise. Brannigan is a warmonger, but he's a coward when he has to fight. The President of the Earth is Richard Nixon's head, and the Presidency is sponsored

by the delicious taste of Charleston Chew. When it comes to humans, the show's universe is bizarre and unrelatable.

To better relate to its audience, *Futurama* introduces us to the culture of robots. Robots have many of the same careers and social entities that humans have. Depending on the model, some robots act, perform factory labor, work in civil service, practice medicine, preach, know everything about cultural holidays, or enforce the law. There is a religion, Robotology, that helps people evade their sins, and charities are in place to make sure homeless robots can still function. Although the robots' society may seem wholesome on the surface, there are also robots that occupy the underbelly of their society. Many robots are pickpockets or alcoholics. Some pay Hookerbots for all sorts of sexual activity. The Donbot leads the Robot Mafia, and Clamps acts as his muscle. The robot known as Roberto is designed to be insane, and he has a fascination with stabbing and murder. Other robots just want to kill all humans. On top of all of this, most of the robots are owned by Momcorp, a company run by a seemingly old and frail woman (in public) who really is a power-hungry sociopath (in private) who does whatever is necessary to get what she wants. She has no regard for life, robot or otherwise, and she sacrifices whatever she can to achieve her goals. In short, robot society is not nearly as well-run as human society, but this is intentional. *Futurama* points out the flaws in our society by paralleling it with a less-functioning society of robots; however, sometimes the robots offer up alternatives on social issues that promise better futures for modern society.

In *Futurama*, robots are powered by alcohol. When consuming alcohol, most robots become better individuals. They tend to be less selfish and treat humans with more respect when alcohol powers their systems. When robots consume too much alcohol, there are rarely negative side effects. Without alcohol, however,

robots degrade. They rust, become more rude and bitter, and if they go long enough without it, they die. Because alcohol is essential and beneficial to robots in *Futurama*, the implication is that alcohol is essential to our modern society. Although this is not exactly true, humans do rely on alcohol for a variety of reasons. Under the influence of alcohol, they become happier (or as we call it, intoxicated). On alcohol, people act in ways that they typically would be apprehensive about, such as confessing their romantic feelings or making new friends. Alcohol is also used as a coping mechanism, especially with regard to depressing events. Granted, alcohol is not always the ideal solution for all of life's problems, but it is easily accessible to those who need it. Alcohol offers humans one possible way to handle the pain of everyday life, and *Futurama* indicates that humans need it as a motivator and coping mechanism.

The main religion in *Futurama*, Robotology, is a parody of Christianity. In short, Robotology is the belief that Robot Devil and Robot God decide the fate of robots after their deaths. Those who refuse to believe in Robotology and/or sin consistently are condemned to Robot Hell, an abandoned amusement park in New Jersey (the oft-thought "hell-hole" of modern America) that mimics Dante's Inferno. After introducing the religion in earlier episodes, Robot Devil and Robot God become recurring characters that interact with the main cast on a semi-regular basis. Like Satan, Robot Devil condemns bad robots to the level of Robot Hell that most suits them, be it smoking, gambling, piracy, lust, or another sin. Robot God, on the other hand, saves Bender's soul from eternity in robo-limbo. By introducing Robot Devil and Robot God as characters and creating distinct personalities for each of them, the show indicates that God and Satan (or at least higher-level deities) exist.

Futurama uses robosexuality, the sexual relations between

humans and robots, as a parallel for the LGBTQ movements. In the episode titled "Proposition Infinity," Bender (a robot) and Amy (a human) sleep together. Robosexuality is socially unacceptable at this time, but after the rest of the crew discovers their relationship, the episode then mimics the "coming-out process" for LGBTQ young people at that time. Professor Farnsworth (an old man) frowns upon the act of robosexuality, and Amy tells the crew that her parents will definitely not approve. Bender and Amy ultimately start a campaign advocating the legalization and social acceptance of robosexuality.



Bender and Amy's Robosexual Pride Parade. Still from Futurama, "Proposition Infinity" (Season 7, Episode 4, 2010)

After the parade, the Planet Express crew watches a news clip highlighting robosexuality's unpopular status. The news then cuts to a commercial with an anti-robosexual message from a traditionally dressed woman. "If robosexual marriage becomes legal, imagine the horrible things that will happen to our children. Then imagine we said those things, since we couldn't

think of any. As a mother, those things worry me. Say No to Infinity.” In other words, the anti-robosexuals do not want to accept the new change, but they have no valid reason to be against it.

After the commercial ends, Bender announces that he has set up a televised debate on robosexuality. The next shot then cuts to the debate. Professor Farnsworth (the old man) is Bender’s opponent, and Bender makes a passionate speech about the reasons that robosexuality should be legal. Professor Farnsworth never makes any logical arguments against robosexuality. By the end of the debate, Professor Farnsworth admits that he only hates robosexuality because a robot took the love of his life. He also admits that the love of his life was a robot. Professor Farnsworth then acknowledges his bias against robosexuality, promotes its legalization, and by the end of the episode, robosexuality is legal.

“Proposition Infinity” aired in 2010, and at that time, same-sex marriage was both illegal and socially taboo. As such, robosexuality of the future parallels homosexuality of the present.

The depiction of robosexuality in *Futurama* comically mirrors some current attitudes toward homosexuality in the twenty-first century. It’s this comical representation that allows *Futurama* to be obvious about its references, yet subtle in the way that it questions our current attitudes and assumptions. (Onishi 209)

I think this episode was created to show three things. First, the episode fully supported the LGBTQ movement and legalization of same-sex marriage. In the commercial shot, the episode criticizes anti-LGBTQ protestors for having no logical argument against same-sex marriage. The episode also used Bender and

Amy's "coming out" process to show those considering "coming out" that they will ultimately be shown support and love. Finally, it indicates that the only opposition to society's progression would come from people who had ill-founded prejudices or personal grudges against it. By the end of *Futurama*, society has progressed to accept and love any and all robosexuals, and the support for robosexuality paralleled the support that all of *Futurama's* writers hoped the LGBTQ community would have in the future.

In *Futurama*, robots have as much personality as humans. With distinct voices, moods, behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and opinions, diversity is not a struggle for robots. "Just like humans, they appear to make decisions, remember things they did in the past, and expect things to happen in the future" (Jenkins 60). Bender is egocentric while Reverend Preacherbot is altruistic. Calculus loves to exaggerate his emotions while Bender keeps emotional thoughts to himself (unless they are about others, then he blurts them out without hesitation). The Donbot is as Italian as any mob boss while The Crushinator has a distinctly Southern charm. Robots are different shapes and sizes, representative of all ethnicities, and have distinctly different personalities because *Futurama's* social critiques apply across all backgrounds and walks of life. Robots parallel humans' actions because the show's ideologies are so progressive that they were ahead of their time.

Futurama's issues are so broad that one form-fitting series of robots could never capture the complexity involved with them. As a result, the robots' diversity shows the wide variety of people that are impacted by its social issues. *Futurama* highlights that alcohol can transform a party from dull and depressing to happy and energizing. *Futurama* proves that Atheists and Christians can discuss religion as a social construct. Finally, *Futurama* showed that heterosexuals can

support LGBTQ rights with as much enthusiasm and fervor as homosexuals.

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CHAPTER 16

Irreverent Satire on South Park Addresses Foundations of Religion

GRIFF O'BRIEN

In 1995, college students Matt Stone and Trey Parker created “The Spirit of Christmas,” an animated short that became one of the first viral videos on the internet and led to *South Park*’s creation. Twenty years and 277 episodes later, the adventures of four children in a fictitious Colorado town have made the series infamous for its absurdist humor that satirizes hot button social, political, and cultural topics. *South Park*, known for its anti-partisan satire and relentless transgression of acceptable boundaries, has kept viewers from across the globe tuning in for over two decades. It has been nominated for 18 Emmy Awards, winning five, and a recipient of the prestigious Peabody Award for pushing the limits of free speech and fighting against censorship not only in the United States, but around the world. The show averages eight-million viewers weekly, has been translated into 30 languages, watched in 130

countries, and spawned a global merchandising industry that has generated hundreds of millions of dollars. Though two decades is an impressive stint on television, *South Park's* cultural impact will supplant its time on air as its stinging satire and relentless transgression of boundaries has and will continue to push the limits of free speech in popular culture for years to come.

South Park creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker are so irreverent in their analysis of religion that the heart of their humor lies in the religious foundations they are satirizing. While much of the show's success can be attributed to its impudent approach to American philosophies and identity politics, explicitly pushing the boundaries of taste, their approach to religion is somewhat nuanced. They use implicit rather than explicit messaging to challenge religious institutions and the abuse of authority within them, focusing on symbolism, imagery and extended metaphor to get their point across. Though Parker and Stone's critical method is not new and even has roots in the ancient world of religious iconoclasts who "destroyed images in order to destroy the deity or at least that particular manifestation of the deity" (Goethals 87), their willingness to challenge institutional corruption expanded the minimal role that religion had previously played in television. *South Park* analyzes religion through a critical, sophisticated lens that demonstrates contrasting arguments by connecting each episode's subject to the power – good and bad – that religion has in society. Through satire, metaphor, and explicit language, the writers focus on the irrationality of believers and power-hungry individuals and institutions manipulating them, not the beliefs and lessons the religion preaches. This argument is evident through three specific episodes in the series that portray the writers' ideology that the idea and tenants of religion are positive, but the way in which it is practiced and

structured is troubling by reinforcing three themes that are crucial to *South Park*: that religion is about the compelling message of looking beyond ourselves to help others and come together; the power of religion lies in the lessons it teaches and the strength it offers believers, not in its institutions; and, religion cannot and should not solve every societal and individual challenge.

In "All About Mormons," the writers poke holes in the story behind the creation of Mormonism and diminish its importance while implying a belief in religious pluralism that "personal transformation occurs through love and compassion" (Arp and Decker 92), which should be at the basis of any belief and should aim to unify people of different faiths. The Harrisons, a Mormon family new to town, is depicted as a stereotypical Mormon family that, in contrast to other families in South Park, is unusually close and joyful. Although Stan is encouraged by the other boys to beat Gary up after attending the Harrison's "Family Home Evening," Kyle is so taken aback by the family's togetherness and politeness that he leaves their home curious and intrigued by Mormonism. After conveying this message to his parents, Stan's father fears that his son has been brainwashed, and like Kyle, he visits their home with the intent of beating up Gary's father but is so stunned by their way of life that he decides to convert his family to Mormonism. Though the initial response to the Harrison's way of life is positive, the show's characters have lingering suspicions about the sincerity and validity of the religion and the principles it preaches. The uncertainty is expressed throughout the show in two main ways: the first being the show's characters mocking the virtuous deeds of the Harrisons; and the second, and most important, repeated questions about the creationist story behind Mormonism. The show's tone quickly changes as it delves into the founding of Mormonism with voices frequently interrupting

in a chant of “dumb, dumb, dumb,” during the actual story of creation, and “smart, smart, smart” throughout the sections that the show satirically makes up, proclaiming the flaws in the religion’s origins. Stan and Randy, believing the tale is implausible, go back to their Christian roots, and Stan takes it a step further, stating that he can’t be friends with Gary because of his beliefs.



The Picture-Perfect Harrison's

Though the show demonstrates that the story of John Smith is a myth, the ultimate message is in Stan’s intolerance and bigotry, as Gary evokes sympathy from the viewer when he acknowledges that “Maybe Mormons do believe in crazy stories that make absolutely no sense,” and “All I ever did was try to be your friend, Stan, but you’re so high and mighty you couldn’t look past my religion and just be my friend back. You’ve got a lot of growing up to do, buddy. Suck my balls.” The episode ends with Cartman, who can be defined by his ignorance toward others, saying, “Damn, that kid is cool, huh?” The underlying message, which Arp and Decker refer to as “Religious Pluralism” (92), conveys that although the basis of the religion may not be credible, it provides people like Gary with belief in a higher

power and a system that promotes unity and help toward others, and by recognizing that, Gary, not Stan, is in fact “cool.”

Stone and Parker approach “Red Hot Catholic Love” in a similar fashion as “All About Mormons” when they criticize outdated scripture and the leaders of the Catholic Church. Having placed their trust in the authority of the church’s leader, many South Park Catholics abandon the Church as the worshippers fuse the weight of the institution with the authority of the Bible. Parker and Stone condemn the individuals who run away from Catholicism entirely because they focus on the Vatican traditions that scare them rather than the emblematic parameters that unify them. According to David Scott, Stone and Parker’s approach of mocking “not the belief, but the believer” (Scott 154), as they do in this episode, exemplifies their pragmatic approach to religion. The episode quickly identifies father Maxi, the towns’ Roman Catholic Priest, as the protagonist when he confronts the church’s hierarchs over their dogmatism and reliance of ancient manuscript, the “Holy Document of Vatican Law,” which they contest doesn’t prohibit molestation. *South Park* shows no sensitivity regarding this highly contentious subject, as Cartman reaffirms his theory that ingesting food through his anus would conversely cause his mouth to excrete, a grotesque thought that holds significance later in the episode, by stating after finding out if his theory holds true, “Is that something I’d want to do? Is the Pope Catholic and making the world safe for pedophiles?” The episode uses satire and an innovative metaphor to damage the Catholic Church using a queen spider who oversees “The Holy Document of Vatican Law” that cannot be found or changed and a group of atheistic aliens that have embraced Cartman’s theory of defecation. This outlandish representation points out two subtle, but important, points that Stone and Parker are making; the first is that to defend child molesters, you’d have to

be from a different universe, and the second is that atheists are literally spewing a “bunch of crap out of their mouths.” Although the episode highlights the unchanging and ancient nature of certain texts and figures, as Maxi puts it, “We’re here to bring the light of God, not harm the innocent!”



Father Maxi Rips Apart “The Holy Document of Vatican Law”

Stone and Parker’s bigger metaphor is that the Spider and the Gelgameks, which represent the administration of the Church, are an “other worldly” phenomena that we can’t understand in modern society and that Priest Maxi, who embodies the voice of Catholicism, is not trying to undermine Catholicism but rather preach the importance of its values and discredit the institution that surrounds it. Many critics, including Scott, have noted that Stone and Parker utilize metaphor to accentuate their argument, which in this case is how the Vatican is “dogmatic and distant from the daily lives of worshippers” (Scott

158). The episode concludes with Maxi finding and tearing the document, which accompanies the collapse of the Vatican. South Park's ultimately pragmatic view of religion is suggested by the fact that only after the institution is discredited and torn down does Maxi's diatribe recognize the "limited value of sacred texts as moral guidelines" (Scott 159), which allows them to, as they often do, mock not the belief (Catholicism) but the ignorance of the believer in taking the scripture too literally. *South Park* ultimately credits Maxi's diatribe when they realize the show's overarching message that Catholicism is not about any one document, person, or building but rather good-natured, ethical practice that provides strong moral guidelines for virtuous living (Scott 160).

In "Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus," *South Park* criticizes those who believe prayer and belief will solve all of life's troubles by showing the inherent humor in the similarities between the attempts Stan and Jesus make to claim God's help. The episode takes place around New Year's Eve as South Park's residents anticipate a momentous event will take place to ring in the new millennium. Jesus, acknowledging the loss of faith among many, believes he can mount a "comeback" if he can convince God to make an appearance. Instead of having answers for the people, Jesus is presented as a susceptible and uncertain arbitrator between humanity and God, more concerned with a desire to be heard than divulge truth or meaning to South Park's residents. This narrative is intertwined with Stan's troubles as the only kid in school who isn't getting his "period," as the other boys mistake a stomach flu with the beginning of puberty. After the attendees of Jesus's New Year's Party realize it's a Rod Stewart concert, they try to crucify Jesus a second time, which leads him to pray and beg for his father's appearance to no avail because God is not ready to intervene for Jesus. Stan, more

worried about his personal troubles, asks Jesus why his wishes were not heeded, to which Jesus responds:

Well, God can't just answer every prayer and suddenly give you everything you want. That takes all the living out of life. If God answered all our prayers, there'd be nothing left for us to do ourselves. Life is about problems, and over-coming those problems, and growing and learning from obstacles. If God just fixed everything for us, then there'd be no point in our existence... That's why he wouldn't show up to my New Year's party.

This quote clearly aims to show the contradiction in what Jesus is practicing and what he preaches. Stan and Jesus are both trying to enlist God's help but for very different reasons. Jesus asks for God to appear on earth to make the people believe in him again, and Stan wants to menstruate and begin puberty. Jesus's roles become reversed as he is initially the student as God teaches him a lesson by forcing him into a coming-of-age story, which parallels Stan's misery and literal coming-of-age story that places Jesus in the role of the teacher.



South Park's Residents Angrily Awaiting God's Appearance

Decker and Arp argue that Jesus's religious message is necessary, but his inability to breach social and institutional

constraints to advance his message is a result of the show's low ratings, which makes him resort to marketing strategies (such as the concert) to combat the waning support of his constituents. As in "Red Hot Catholic Love," characters blame South Park's residents for Jesus's inability to address complex moral quandaries, and they mock the intellect of the individuals who need to see a miracle for Jesus to disseminate his message. In framing the episode in this context, *South Park* aims to place the blame in Jesus's contradiction between what he practices and preaches about the constraints established by South Park's residents rather than the religion itself. Jesus ultimately comes to the realization that he, like other mortals, must work through life's challenges without intervention from God. While Jesus is depicted irreverently, he ultimately becomes a mechanism for the critique of American religiosity rather than of Jesus himself. The critique places blame on Jesus's followers as they fail to realize what Jesus did and see the ethical practice that is preached, to understand that challenges in life are inevitable and necessary in one's personal development, and to realize if everything in our world were fixed by God, "there'd be nothing left for us to do ourselves."

Beneath *South Park*'s irreverent satire is an overarching theme of mocking religion that becomes clear during the three episodes I analyzed; Stone and Parker mock not the belief itself but the ignorance and at times irrationality of the believer. By "taking on people who are powerful," (Michael Tuth Interview) and mocking everything and everyone, including Kyle, the Catholics, and the Christians in the episodes I analyzed, *South Park* conveys a deeper meaning or moral lesson in each episode. If *South Park*'s characters did not reject and challenge convention while tackling trivial matters, an approach that John Fiske refers to as "an alternative semiotic strategy of resistance or evasion" (Television 240), Stone and Parker would not be

able to tackle meaningful, hot-button cultural issues effectively. *South Park* is consistent with the postmodern culture favoring personal religiosity over, and at the expense of, institutional religious worship, which ultimately poses a bigger question of whether Parker and Stone believe in the philosophical position known as pluralism, which I believe they do. John Hick (1922-2012), a notable pluralist, says that because there are so many religions around the world and so many of them produce religious experiences for religiously minded people, we should consider these religions to be roughly “on par” with one another in terms of their truth. In other words, we shouldn’t claim that one religion is better than another because this disagreement hinders each religion’s ability to foster the greater good of humankind. Hick’s beliefs are consistent with the larger message Parker and Stone aim to get across in not only the three episodes I analyzed, but throughout the entirety of the show, that differences about specific doctrines, history and ideas about the divine should be deemphasized, and, instead, we should focus on the truth expressed in all religions.

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[South Park Wikia](#)

CHAPTER 17

Unwarranted Expectations on King of the Hill

RYAN EDWARDS

King of the Hill, created by Mike Judge, provides its viewers with a sitcom starring an “All-American” family man named Hank Hill. Hank is a manly-man, the guy who grills and catches fish, drinks beer, and puts his own meat on the table. Packed with comedic action of day-to-day adventures and encounters, *King of the Hill* raises an important question regarding stereotypes and expectations of masculinity in America. Amanda Lotz describes how the depiction of men such as a straight white man, are “fostering perceptions of gender roles and how they have done their work by prioritizing certain characteristics.” These characteristics are unwarranted and throughout the episodes of *King of the Hill*, a pattern emerges depicting how television has told us men should be. This pattern represented by Hank, his son Bobby, and others on the show, paints a generalized picture while developing expectations of masculinity and gender roles for the shows viewers. Overall, the expectations are degrading at best and regardless of each of the characters

true story, regardless of who they actually are, the show consistently points out what men should and should not be through its commentary and day to day activities. How can all men be expected to be one way or another? Shows such as *King of the Hill*, simply present in inaccurate representation of what masculinity means and how it should be depicted to viewers and, most importantly, the young men watching.

As an angler and outdoorsmen myself, I grew up in an environment similar to that of Hank Hill. My grandfather taught me how to fish, my Dad taught me how to play sports, how to fix things, build things, and even clean and put meat on the table, cooked on the grill, of course. To be honest, everything I grew up doing would fall under the category of "manly," and my question is, "What does it really mean to be manly?" Bryan Rindfleisch describes Southern masculinity as the "prized landed independency, mastery over female, child, and slave dependents, the use of violence to enforce patriarchy, and the importance of honor to unite the South's white male community." Though not all aspects apply to *King of the Hill*, Rindfleisch's depiction is extremely accurate when discussing gender roles and the representation of how men should act. In "Jumpin' C,rack Bass," Bobby doesn't take to fishing. Bobby even asks, "Why don't we just buy the fish" and though this episode takes a comedic turn in an entirely different, humorous, drug use direction, this episode highlights the fact directly that Bobby isn't manly. This stereotypical and limited definition of what masculinity means is a poor representation of what it truly means to be a man.



Rebecca Feasey, in *Masculinity and Popular Television*, points out an extremely valuable model that clarifies the major issue with the depiction of characteristics and expectations of men. She states, "The model of masculinity is said to be the ideal image of the male against which all men are judged, tested and qualified." In the episode "Goodbye Normal Jeans," viewers get the full picture of how Bobby doesn't meet the model's standards. He is a talented son who isn't an outdoorsman, a mechanic, or a manly-man. Bobby is someone who has other interests, and it looks as if Hank misses out on these opportunities to build a stronger relationship with his son. He misses these opportunities because of his inaccurate and misunderstanding of masculinity. For example, Hank hears about Bobby taking a home-economics course and failing then states, "Of course you're failing home ec. You're a guy." Though many fathers who have a son hope that their son will take to sports, there are countless other activities that a young man can aspire to be and take up on a daily basis, including cooking.

In the grand scheme of things, the main point is that the

activities, words spoken, and what a man physically does does not make him a man. What makes one a man is one's character, and that should be the point of judgement. *King of the Hill* does not depict this initially, and for most of the show, there is a disconnect between hopeful expectations and disapproval of other actions that are, in fact, just as manly. Even though I believe in the importance of teaching young men how to fish, hunt, and even something as simple as changing a tire, I do not believe that *King of the Hill* gives the proper description of what a man can and should be. In fact, the irony is that *King of the Hill* encounters an issue typically only discussed about women, and what women can and should be.



Now, on a positive note, *King of the Hill* is extremely funny. The comedy is relatable to me and how I was raised. Over time and by viewing more and more episodes, I have come to see how this sitcom can be viewed as misleading and even

degrading. Again, in “Goodbye Normal Jeans,” Hank’s wife Peggy is frustrated with the fact that Hank is enjoying Bobby’s cooking over hers. At one point, Peggy even feels as if her only role left in the house is to please Hank in bed. This sitcom reinforces gender stereotyping, and I firmly believe the show misses its opportunity to destroy these stereotypes instead of extending them. A fresh catch has to be cooked, and who’s to say the woman can’t fish and the man can’t cook.

When looking at *King of the Hill*, the big question is whether or not the sitcom portrays one type of masculinity, and it is important to separate portrayal of masculinity from who the characters actually are as individuals. Though Dale is not a stud, and many of the sitcom’s characters aren’t exactly the so called “perfect definition” of manliness, the show paints this standard and inaccurate picture of what masculinity looks like. In “I Am Not Down With That’: *King of the Hill* and Sitcom Satire” by Ethan Thompson, the author states that the show’s debut includes “a bag of pork rinds and a Weber barbeque grill.” Thompson goes on to tell us that show was targeting a young audience and that the NASCAR demographic quickly became a fan base for the series. In addition, everything about the show relates to Texas, including the creator, Mike Judge, a native of the Lone Star State. Overall, the show consistently has fundamental values that go into developing this of who the characters are trying to be and how a generalized version of what masculinity should be understood (Thompson 38).



Finally, Joshua C. Shepherd advances his own thesis regarding masculinity and, specifically, masculinity in *King of the Hill*. Shepherd's paper, "There Better Be a Naked Cheerleader Under Your Bed," includes the statement, "In short, Bobby does not embrace the same markers of masculinity as Hank, which causes disruption, complication, and alleviation from episode to episode." This thesis aligns with mine: Bobby is the source of this conflict because the boy is everything but his father. Shepherd calls Hank Hill a stereotypical Texan, a father figure who loves football, fixing his truck, drinking beer with his makes friends, and supporting conservative political and social issues. The deeper viewers look at Hank and Bobby, the more they are able to see the disconnect, the painted picture of one way over another, and an image of a son who isn't everything his father hopes for him to be. This is where *King of the Hill* is wrong. *King of the Hill* did not hit the bullseye in making its mark of breaking down this idea of a generalized expectation of masculinity (Shepherd).

In conclusion, *King of the Hill* aligns directly with the standard definition of men that television has historically depicted. The show has followed the footsteps of many others that utilize comedy as a way to create entertaining content at the expense of reality and truth. The fact is, men don't have to be an outdoorsman; not all men want to fish, and men should not be defined by the depictions of Hollywood and what sells advertising time. On the contrary, new shows are beginning to break this longstanding trend, and I am optimistic that they will hit the mark and seek comedy that breaks the standard degrading women, certain non-white people, and non-straight people while placing unwarranted expectations on men. The characteristics of men that should be standard are respect, honesty, and equality. Power, control, and violence are not what it takes to be manly.

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