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The Nanny to Roseanne: Portraying Social Class in American Sitcoms

The topical focus of our research project is the portrayal of social class within the American media. At the heart of the American dream lies a promise that if you work hard, you will ascend the social class ladder (political, cultural, or economic). Media, within its many forms, convey this message very well. Alternatively, media also portrays the opposing situation just as well and more frequently. If you don’t work hard or try to lift yourself up, you will be unsuccessful and unhappy. How are these situations portrayed within the umbrella of media? Who are the faces within the makeup of these class structures? Media often guides us on how we should run our lives by incorporating hot topic issues within their pieces through connecting consumers with characters.

The object of study we will be American sitcoms on television. This is an important set of data to analyze because television is such an incredibly influential part of our everyday lives. Sitcoms are a mainstay in American television; focusing on and critically analyzing this specific genre is paramount. The representations of social classes (upper, middle, and lower) in sitcoms have arguably become the reality in which people identify themselves with; creating an image of other individuals within a particular genre of class. This situation becomes problematic when sitcoms visually and vocally insult or belittle any demographic. Sitcoms construct and reinforce generalizations and stereotypes about hard hitting social issues, mostly centered in class relations within a 30 minute window which tends to leave the viewer without any real solution.

The specific secondary data that I am analyzing focuses on the evolution of the sitcom and how it frames class. I will be utilizing mostly scholarly articles with a few general informative sources from online publications. Through key word searches like “evolution of sitcoms,” “sitcom history,” and “social class sitcom,” utilizing Google Scholar, UW Libraries, and general search engine I was able to find strong supporting articles for our argument.

A few scholarly articles found range from “You’re Gonna Make It After All”: Changing cultural norms as described in the lyrics of sitcom theme songs, 1970 – 2001 by Katherine A. Fross; “Sitcoms” by Ronald Berman and Globalization, Media Hegemony, and Social Class by Lee Artz. In order to analyze these articles, I conducted close readings and notes.

Sitcoms create a fun, lively and entertaining environment at any given time and moment. Specifically when you draw on particular occurrences of your favorite moment; relaying that message or story to another to share that joy is a natural occurrence. The characters, theme songs, and catch phrases are easily relatable to those who identify with them in multiple ways which is centered with classism. Sitcoms’ (short for situational comedy) content has evolved over the years from its start in the 50’s. However, the formula which creates a sitcom has remained the same. “Sitcoms show a problem solved and or a lesson learned in half an hour, usually with a strong foundation of laughable humor (Taflinger, 1999).” Taflinger identifies three distinct genres within the situation comedy; actcom for the action comedy, domcom for the domestic comedy, and dramedy for the dramatic comedy. These three distinct genres of sitcoms hold special characteristics where social class is explored and perceived in different ways. Taflinger defines these genres as,

“The actcom is the most numerous type of sitcom on television, and can be based on a variety of themes: the family (I Love Lucy or The Golden Girls), gimmicks (Bewitched, or Alf), places (Gilligan’s Island), and or occupations. In any case, the emphasis is on action, verbal and physical. The domcom is more expansive than the actcom, having a wider variety of events and a greater sense of seriousness. It involves more people, both in the regular cast and in transient actors brought into individual episodes. Examples of the domcom include Father Knows Best, The Andy Griffith Show, Roseanne and The Cosby Show. A dramedy is the rarest and most serious type of sitcom; its entire being is not devoted to evoking laughter from the audience. Its emphasis is on thought, often presenting themes that are not humorous: war, death, crime, aging, unemployment, racism, sexism, etc. The humor is more comic intensification than an end in itself (All In The Family) (Talfinger, 1990).”

Every society can be characterized by how the necessities of life are produced by nature; by social relations that organize production, distribution, and consumption. Class structure only set the probabilities for social formations. “One cannot group anyone with anyone while ignoring fundamental differences, particularly economic and cultural ones (Artz, 2003).” Sitcoms advocate particular ideas and attitudes. Ever since the 50’s to the current year, majority of the sitcoms that have lasted longer than two seasons conform to the usual hegemonic values and norms of exploitation of gender, race and class. A key finding from the data set gathered, Brook concludes that,

“The general thrust of mid-fifties America and American television was overwhelmingly inimical to interventionist maneuvering on issues of ethnicity, class, or gender. The Goldbergs' move to Haverville in 1955 and its official cancellation in 1956, far from an anomaly, was part of an industry wide trend toward elimination of the urban, ethnic working-class sitcom that had flourished in the days of early TV. Of the other major examples in this subgenre, Life with Luigi left the air in 1952; Amos 'n' Andy was canceled in 1953; Mama, like The Goldbergs, ended in 1956; and The Honeymooners lasted until 1957 (Brook, 1999).”

This provides a great historical track to follow in order to understand how class is no longer observed as an important social issue. Class only provides more comic relief to major media producers.

 The topic of the research is portrayals of class within media, specifically American sitcoms. Some key points that were found within our research data were that there are three genres in which sitcoms can be broken down into to gain a deeper, more focused understanding. We also found that one of the first sitcoms, The Goldbergs, eliminated the working class easily allowing other shows, similar and greater in popularity, to follow suit. This understanding of the history of sitcoms, combined with our current understanding of today’s sitcoms allows us to evaluate and grasp how the working class is framed within them and why there are limited if any alternatives to the negative portrayals of class, the working class specifically.

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**Summary**

In 1938, Orson Welles, an actor writer and director, who broadcast a science fiction based radio drama that convinced many listeners that a gas raid from mars eminent. Even though numerous times prior to the broadcast, it was announced this was a fictional depiction, listeners still panicked and flooded emergency response lines. This event signified the power that radio had and its perception as a corroborator of the truth. Increasing in popularity with the sci-fi genre was the situational comedy or sitcom.

 The sitcom first appeared on radio and audiences loved it for its charm, humor and wittiness. Television shows that successfully transitioned from popular radio programming maintained heavy emphasis on the content of catchy entertainment value in order to gain advertisers and sponsors for the shows. The first television sitcoms involved incorporated themes of religion, ethnicity and status. “In *The Life of Riley,* William Benedix played one of the first blue collar workers to appear on television… Many of these characters were portrayed as good hearted schnook who sought more legitimacy in their lives (94).” *The Honeymooners* featured Ralf, who with his buddy Norton, would conspire these schemes that would back fire, which usually involved to getting rich. However, they always seemed to be omitting or rearranging their actions from their wives for majority of the show. Once the wives were well informed, they reinforced the portrayal of the husbands as incompetent and liars. This along with other types of negative portrayals of the working class has increased within the sitcom genre and has become either complex or straight forward. Maintaining a myth that working class is not a respectable status through depicting the never ending goal for power and wealth, from the point of view of the working class looking up at upper class members; establishes a pride for executives in particular shows in which they will sponsor and eventually schedule during prime time.