
OVERVIEW

As long as there has been television, people have used it to relax and escape by watching the hilarious antics of TV characters. Such humorous programs are known as situation comedies, or sitcoms. Humor in situation comedies depends on the plot; the characters behave predictably. There is generally a basic premise to these programs, and it is out of this premise that the humor grows. The predictable reactions to the situation—no matter how outlandish—draw out the laughs.

Back in 1976, John Wiley Nelson (Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture) saw television as a secular ritual and celebration of the family and its beliefs. In contrast to the celebration of society at large in the movies, television was more domestic, providing a sense of security and comic relief for the smaller community represented in families of the 1950s and 60s. Much has changed since the times and television Nelson described. Families have undergone changes both in their forms and perception of themselves. David Elkind (All Grown Up and No Place To Go, 1998, p. 135) shows how "the sentiments, values, and perceptions of the modern nuclear family have been reconfigured into those of the postmodern permeable family."

Sitcoms in the 1990s provide viewers with comic relief and security that acknowledges blended families, dysfunctional families, and rebellious kids. The various types of living arrangements used by young adults or "twenties-something" needs attention in evening television. Research shows that many people in highly developed societies find their primary, face-to-face, community, not at home, at church, or in informal clubs or societies, but at work. So, the workplace has become more common in evening entertainment. To appreciate sitcoms at the turn of the century, it helps to consider their development in the past fifty years.

Most sitcoms offer a cast of appealing two dimensional characters who interact with one another from week to week. The cast may be a family, a group of office workers, teachers and students, or any other imaginable company of people. External circumstances facilitate the comedy component.

According to TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide by Brian Rose, situation comedy is the most durable of all genres in television, and television programmers consider the sitcom the center of prime time programming. Studying the history of the sitcom, a circular pattern emerges to satiate the tastes and styles of the viewing public.
The first television sitcoms were transplanted from radio. Familiar programs with their standard company of characters transitioned from radio, and television initially looked like a visual copy of its cousin medium. Programs such as "Amos 'N Andy," "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show," "The Life of Riley," "The Aldrich Family," and "The Goldbergs" were among the first hits of television.

In 1951, "I Love Lucy" premiered on the CBS network and the television sitcom (as we know it) was born. Each week, the everyday life of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo was threatened, normally by one of Lucy's crazy schemes to better their situation. The standard characters were there: the scatterbrained wife and her tyrannical, long-suffering husband. The formula of uniting normal situations and normal appearances to produce outlandish situations was perfected in "I Love Lucy." The program ran seven successful seasons and initiated television syndication.

Other family sitcoms emerged in the early 1950s. The American public loved "Ozzie and Harriet," "Father Knows Best," and "Make Room for Daddy." Each of these shows idealized the typical American family; family unity was seen as the paradise that should all have. This simplistic, ideal outlook soon became the norm for sitcoms; the generation of "baby boomers" grew up believing in the American family portrayed on television.

In 1955, the traditional family television sitcom was challenged by the premiere of "The Honeymooners." For the first time, a sitcom portrayed believable blue collar people; "The Honeymooners" portrayed an American family that held a reality unfamiliar to the typical view of the fifties.

More domestic comedies of an idealized American family appeared during the late 1950s. These sitcoms perpetuated the perfect family that was able to solve life's problems in a half-hour. "Leave it to Beaver," "The Donna Reed Show," "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis," and "Bachelor Father" exemplify this type of program.

During the 1960s, American suburbs multiplied; as more and more people lived closer to major metropolitan areas, the lure of the country became a part of the "American Dream." Television programmers decided to tap into to that dream, and the rural sitcom became typical fare during the early sixties. Extremely successful were stories of simple country folk whose small town ways reminded viewers of easier times. "The Andy Griffith Show," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Petticoat Junction," and "Green Acres" are all successful rural sitcoms of the sixties.

Another popular sub-genre of situation comedy during the sixties was the fantasy sitcom. Shows exploring themes like witchcraft, monsters, and other fantastic
Dream of Jeannie." Other sitcoms of the period tried to cash in on the success of
these shows.

The 1970s ushered another change in the sitcom. In 1970, CBS canceled all of
its rural sitcoms and began to target a younger, more sophisticated audience.
This daring move (although shows like "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Petticoat
Junction" were still widely popular) is referred to as the "sitcom revolution";
Norman Lear facilitated that movement.

Lear’s "All in the Family" was the grandfather of the modern sitcom. Exploring
ideas like bigotry, sexuality, morality, and disjointed families, "All in the Family"
was a runaway hit in the early-to mid-seventies. It spawned many spin-offs,
including "Maude," "Good Times," and "The Jeffersons."

"The Jeffersons" is notable as one of the first and longest running black
television series.

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show," another notable program, resulted from the
sitcom revolution. The program explored the premise of a single working woman
whose "family" was her coworkers and friends. This idea opened new avenues
for television programmers; the show boasted two spin-offs: "Rhoda" and
"Phyllis."

In 1972, one of the all-time popular television sitcoms premiered. "M*A*S*H*"
shared the story of a group of army medics stationed together during the Korean
War. "M*A*S*H*" did not look like a sitcom in the classical sense. It very
effectively married two genres of television, the comedy and the drama. Its
heroes had a clear sense of purpose and the ability to distinguish right from
wrong. The series lasted long enough to develop originally flat characters to very
round and three dimensional.

The alternatives to these deeper sitcoms were the lighter shows of "Happy
Days," "Laverne and Shirley," and "Three’s Company." These wildly popular
shows were not designed to encourage viewers to think; they were merely
available to entertain.

During the 1980s the tastes of the American public drastically changed. Sitcoms
were replaced as the viewers first choice by genres like cop programs and the
action-and-adventure shows. Although shows like "Cheers" and "Kate and Allie"
were successful during the early eighties, the sitcom was waning as an
endangered species. Then, in the mid-eighties, a new phenomenon dawned:
"The Cosby Show" starring Bill Cosby began its successful run.
"The Cosby Show" was not new or unique. It returned to the basic element of the financially stable, family sitcom. Although the family was black, the show was color blind in its approach and look. "The Cosby Show" carried television full circle; thus, it should be unsurprising that the next big hit of the late eighties was, again, a sitcom about a blue collar family, "Roseanne."

In the early 1990s, a major innovation produced sitcoms as animated cartoons. These animations broke out of the constrained "sets" (same rooms, furniture, and doors) and allowed characters to go to the park, ballgame, drive to the city, or whatever. The cartoon characters may also have allowed for greater universality of identification. Fox Television's "The Simpsons" (slated originally opposite "The Cosby Show" to ignite a viewing war that led to "The Cosby Show's" demise) depicts one working class family: father who doesn't know best, son with no respect for his authority, daughter who may be naughty or nice, and badgered mother who tries, usually unsuccessfully, to hold it together. Still, they hang together in their dysfunction. "Beavis and Butt-head," "King of the Hill," "Daria," and "South Park" have followed and represent the continued popularity of animated, postmodern characters.

Television sitcoms urge us to take a look at how we are really living, our real hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, beliefs and doubts. If we can't laugh at ourselves, we can't really communicate and perhaps we can't fully love.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What has been your favorite sitcom in the past? If you have never watched any or don't now, why is that? If you do, what do you get out of it?
2. What, in your judgment, constitutes good, clean fun in a sitcom? When does it cross the line and become hurtful and objectionable, either to individuals or to society at large?
3. How would you process sitcoms with children, and with young people, who are watching them consistently?
4. Did you find this article helpful? What in it would you like to discuss further?

**IMPLICATIONS**

1. While it may move through various changes in form and style, the situation comedy appears to be able to thrive as an entertaining, dynamic television genre.
2. Now that the networks have discovered over the last forty years what works and what doesn’t, television viewers will continue to see circular patterns in programming. Sub-genres of the sitcom may come and go, but
the constants—family situations and family units—will continue as the focus.

3. Sitcoms reflect segments of society. In the next decade, viewers may see homosexual families, bi-sexual families, more and more unmarried couples living together, and other non-traditional premises on television. Youth workers must help teenagers process these different representations of society. It is important that a young person’s faith and belief be integrated even into his or her entertainment without being overserious or too critical about it.

4. The television sitcom family is increasingly becoming the standard to which today’s families compare themselves. If this becomes the ideal that teens accept, those working with young people must prepare to answer the confusing questions posed to them by the television culture.

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