

Gender and sitcom



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This paper will explore in detail, the concept of gender and its relation to the situation comedy (sitcom), analysing both masculine and feminine gender roles within this popular genre of television. To gain a basic understanding of the theory included in the representation of gender in the sitcom, this paper will mainly draw on the research of television theorist Bret Mills. The well-known sitcom 'Friends' is the main television show I will extract examples from to demonstrate gender roles (stereotyped or not) throughout this paper.

In order to distinguish what is meant by the term 'gender', it is important to initially define at a basic level what gender embodies in its meaning. So, when referring to gender, we refer to masculinity and femininity which is culturally determined. People do however confuse gender with 'sex' as sex is biologically determined (male/female) which can also be considered 'fixed' as opposed to the flexibility of gender. Biology need not be assumed to determine gender.

This is to suggest that, while what makes a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, the precise ways in which women express their femininity and men express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture. Edgar, A. Sedgwick, P. (2000: 158) Now that we've distinguished what is meant by 'gender', we need to analyse the term 'genre' in relation to the situation comedy. Audiences are able to identify with the type of television programme, better known as 'iconography', arguably one of the most important codes used by genre (Lacey, 1998).

When referring to genre in these terms, media text may be deemed predictable, however, when creating a genre piece, popular conventions

must be incorporated so the viewer is able to relate to the events that occur. There has been some dispute about the portrayal of sitcoms. Stereotypically, they are based around people's lives, some with high levels of realism included and others with lower levels. In addition, comedy value plays a part in this genre.

Contrary to this, William argues that comedy isn't a running factor in sitcoms. 'I think there is a common misconception that sitcoms are made up of jokes: they're not' William, S (2005) in Mills, B (2009: 24). Spangler sums up the sitcom emphasising the comedy factor: For more than fifty years now, prime-time network television's most consistently popular genre, the situation comedy, has been inspiring laughter and tears. Spangler, L. (2003: 1)

Although William rebels against the stereotype of sitcoms, Wachman and Picard have demonstrated the straightforward and apparent characteristics of the sitcom genre and the codes and conventions which define it as 'sitcom' will be tangible with a 'notable lack of confusion about how to make sense of it' (Mills, B (2009: 44)): Joshua S. Wachman and Rosalind W. Picard select sitcom to test technology which can analyse television images because it's 'characteristics have distinctive movements' whose 'mannerisms are exaggerated' (2001: 257).

It's important to consider cultural differences in relation to genre as audiences may have read the series quite differently. For example, American students... were surprised to hear British students referring to Ugly Betty as a comedy, just as, in return, the British students were surprised to hear the American ones insisting it was a drama. Mills, B. (2009: 33) This is a clear

example of the fact that producers need to make sure they are aware of the fact that audiences perceive genres differently in different countries.

Although, *Ugly Betty* was seen to be a drama, the television show still proved to be popular with American audiences. There are many aspects of everyday life that we as a society generalise in terms of gender stereotypes. For example, when we think of the sports rugby, we think of it as a masculine sport as it requires a lot of muscular strength and endurance and is also perceived as a violent sport which isn't part of the stereotypical feminine culture. However, although still perceived as masculine, the sport has now been introduced to many females and will continue to be as an increasing number of females are interested.

In a particular scene of *Friends*, Ross is invited to participate in a game of American football which is the English equivalent of rugby. Ross is very aware of the fact that he may not be physically capable of taking part in the game but does anyway in order to impress his girlfriend Emily and demonstrate his masculinity. Because of the fact that the captain of the team is Emily's ex boyfriend, Ross is under more pressure to join in so he doesn't feel his masculinity is inferior to Emily's ex boyfriend with regards to the prescribed gender role created by society.

In the end, Ross ends up severely injured but the fact is that if he hadn't of participated in the game, he would've felt that Emily would've thought less of him and maybe not thought of him as a 'real man' in comparison with her ex boyfriend. The gender role of masculinity does cause social pressures in everyday life and this scene strongly reflects this issue. Verisimilitude is the term used when something appears to be 'real' which is apparent in *Friends*

as viewers can relate to the situations and issues which are shown and how they are dealt with.

Also, cultural verisimilitude is present in Friends to an extent. Basically, the episodes reflect the cultural understanding of American society the producers have gained. The themes and issues play upon particular social concerns. For example, the storyline of Ross' ex wife was that she was homosexual which was the reason for their divorce. Years ago, this storyline wouldn't have even crossed the minds of producers as this was seen to be unacceptable and in a sense, abnormal.

Another example from Friends is the fact that Joey and Chandler often refer to pornography or women they have slept with whereas the female characters are more concerned with long term relationships and marriage. ' Many of the ways in which men and women are portrayed in sitcom relate to the comedy's obsession with sex and how this affects male-female relationships' (University of Sunderland 2010). Friends however, has a lot of jokes about sex rather than love or relationships. The masculinity of the three main male characters (Ross, Joey and Chandler) is very different.

The most masculine of the three is Joey as he is the most sexually active. Chandler, on the other hand finds it difficult to gain female attention which comes across as failed masculinity until he falls in love with Monica. Ross is able to find partners quite easily but fails to maintain a relationship and rushes into marriage on several occasions which demonstrates the dysfunctionality of his masculinity and the inability to cater for the needs of women. So given these examples, it's important to analyse which gender the situation comedy is trying to entertain.

First of all, the comedy factor is seen to be aligned with the feminine in culture whereas the tragedy is seen to be aligned with masculinity in culture. Comedy's interest in the social, as opposed to tragedy's interest in the individual, aligns it with the values that are conventionally associated with 'the feminine'. Rowe, K. (1995: 104) Contrary to this, Rowe also argues that comedy can be turned against the masculine and influence the more weaker groups such as women because of the masculine 'drive to level, disrupt, and destroy hierarchy, to comment on and contest the values that tragedy affirms' (Rowe 1995: 101).

In the history of comedy, men were portrayed as 'subjects' of male-centered comedy whereas females were seen as 'objects'. For instance, to entertain the male form, it was at the expense of the female form and the stereotypes which surrounded the feminine gender role in the past such as the idea of dumb blondes, ugly hags and the most popular, women lacking a sense of humour which brings about the dismissal and marginalization of comedy by women. Basically women in the past represented the idea that they were devalued in society and 'the joke was on them'.

This is not apparent nowadays as femininity and masculinity are much more flexible and society has and will continue to modify the culture within it. Referring back to the 'dumb blonde' stereotype of women, Phoebe in the sitcom 'Friends' represents this stereotype as she has blonde hair and often acts in a ditzy, inconsiderate manner. However, this stereotype implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. Sex is immediately referred to along with her societal status, relationships with men and irrational behaviour.

In the sitcom, ' Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Ashley and Hilary talk in many instances about love, long term relationships and marriage where it is clear that Carlton and Will speak mostly about tactics to date a girl which is seen to be more short term). This shows the similarity between one sitcom and another (i. e. Friends). In conclusion, it is very clear what the current stereotypes are within our society in terms of gender roles. To an extent, situation comedies do reflect this societal change with regards to, for example, homosexuality and careers.

The rare exploration of the relationship between an individual and society as a whole means that the majority of sitcoms fail to establish this relationship so sitcoms could be perceived as reflective routine behaviour and the level of ' realism' could be questioned. To finish, it's important to ask the question: whose reality is the situation comedy and what fundamental elements are producers willing to compromise to accomplish the reflection of today's culture, and at what cost? With consideration to avoid as many ethical concerns as possible.