

In-out-and back in the closet: sex, humor and ellen degeneres



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The female performer, particularly in comedy, has long faced a tougher crowd than their male counterparts. Female comedians have used different styles to break barriers about taboo topics. When looking at comedic style divisions, we find that how sex and sexual identity are addressed happens to be the main dividing line. Most female comedians discussed sex, but did not broach the topic of sexual identity prior to Ellen DeGeneres, when in 1997 both her and her sitcom character on ABC's *Ellen* came out as lesbians. The 'outing' had immediate deleterious effects on her career, but only temporarily. Her returning focus to her original style of performance, which did not involve addressing the issue of sex and sexual identity, would return her success.

Ellen was born January 26, 1958 in Metairie, Louisiana. Being born and raised in such a small town on the outskirts of the 'bible belt' would create little accepted opportunity to reveal her sexual identity and find future success in the performing arts. Ellen began her stand-up career a few years after high school at the urging of friends. Her comedic style was neither brash nor bold. She did not rely on sexual reference or innuendo to get laughs.

Instead she embodied the role of "the kid" as described by Joanne Gilbert in *Performing Marginality* (96). She performed with the awkwardness and innocence of a child and her references to sex in her comedy acts related on this same level in that there really were not any. She was known for her quirky observational humor and it was how she performed that made her funny. Bob Newhart one of her great admirers once said in an article for *Time* magazine, "Benny once shared an old saying with me: A comic says funny things.

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A comedian says things funny. DeGeneres says things funny” (2006). Saying things funny would earn her the distinction of being Showtime’s Funniest Person in America in 1986 and would get her the first female comedic invite from Johnny Carson to join him on couch the first time she performed The Tonight Show. Ellen moved from the stand-up arena to television in 1989 and by 1994 she was starring in her own sitcom, The Friends of Mine, on ABC. The show was a success and the following year was changed to the name Ellen after the shows leading character Ellen Morgan.

In 1997 the sitcom and her popularity would reach controversial new heights when her character would come out of the closet on the show. Days later Ellen also came out to the public and would become an instant spokeswoman for gay rights. The ‘outing’ would filter into her sitcom’s ongoing storyline. It would focus more on her lesbian relationship and fell prey to ABC’s decision to inflict ‘Parental Advisory Warnings’ at the shows opening; Ellen’s show dropped in ratings and was cancelled the following season.

“ Even the lesbian activist Chastity Bono found the show to be ‘too gay’” (EllenDeGeneres. nfo, 2006). The implication of her sexual orientation did not really coincide with her comedic style that had gained her success. “ Not forgetting the nosedive her lucrative network television show took, Ellen would later re-establish herself as a successful talk show host, this time projecting no particular sexuality and avoiding the topic altogether” (EllenDeGeneres. info, 2006). Returning to her comedic style as “the kid” and simply avoiding the topic of sexuality, Ellen is able to regain her appeal and restore her audience following.

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Instead of focusing on the controversial, Ellen relays her involvement in the everyday that we can all relate too. " Frailburg notes, ' Quite simply, she tells what seem to be embarrassing stories about herself, but then sutures audiences in a mass position of identification with her. " (Gilbert, 98). This is important because where many women have chosen to exploit sexuality as, " the bawd, the bitch, the whiner or the reporter", Ellen has chosen to act the innocent which has gained her more mass appeal and respect from the male oriented stand-up community as an equal (Gilbert, 96).

Her choices with regards to her sexual orientation and to how she would deal with such a controversial topic have led to a greater trust of the comedian as a performer and representative of our culture. In an interesting turn that would reignite her career Ellen hosted the 2001 Emmy Awards. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the show required a newer, more somber tone that at the same time allowed viewers to temporarily forget the tragedy. DeGeneres delivered this, receiving several standing ovations for her performance that evening. She memorably delivered the following line: " We're told to go on living our lives as usual, because to do otherwise is to let the terrorists win , and really, what would upset the Taliban more than a gay woman wearing a suit in front of a room full of Jews ? " (EllenDeGeneres. info, 2006) It is one of the very few times that Ellen has addressed her sexual orientation as a stand-up, but was able to successfully do so because she had gained the trust of her audience.

Ellen has successfully created a dual role for herself through her career. She established herself early on as an honest humorist and chose a form of comedy that allows the audience to relate to her on a very human level. In <https://assignbuster.com/in-out-and-back-in-the-closet-sex-humor-and-ellen-degeneres/>

doing so, she eased the transition of introducing her controversial sexual orientation and helped to increase acceptance due to her already established rapport with her audience. She then chose to not focus on sexual orientation to win her audience back who were either over with or overwhelmed by the issue. In this way she was able to move beyond the issue of sexual orientation and in doing so has become a far more successful performer.