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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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Conclusion



Tolstoy Was Wrong; or, On the Queer Reception of Television's Happy Families

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* famously begins by identifying the narrative potential percolating in familial discord: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."¹ This opening line, one of the most renowned in literary history, relies on a dour assessment both of kinship and of narratology, assuming that only dysfunction breeds stories worth telling, whereas contentment requires little attention and would likely bore audiences. In a similar moment of familial and narrative pessimism, Lionel Shriver's protagonist Eva in *We Have to Talk about Kevin* muses over the necessity of conflict for tale telling, as she recounts the devastation wreaked by her homicidal son: "Not that happiness is dull. Only that it doesn't tell well. And one of our consuming diversions as we age is to recite, not only to others but to ourselves, our own story. I should know; I am in flight from my story every day, and it dogs me like a faithful stray. Accordingly, the one respect in which I depart from my younger self is that I now regard those people who have little or no story to tell themselves as terribly fortunate."² Hungry for the banal happiness of others, Eva sees both family and narrative anew, in the quotidian joy of stories without striking emotional impact but merely a gentle satisfaction. Indeed, fairy tales end at the moment of marriage and the assurance of a "happily ever after" resolution, presumably because conflict has been vanquished from the protagonists' lives, so what story is there to tell about the presumed monotony of a "happily ever after"?

As a whole, America's family sitcoms transpire during this "happily ever after" of the parents' marriage while eschewing any deep antagonism to inspire their story lines, thereby disproving the necessity of conflict for telling engrossing tales and demonstrating the limitless narrative possibilities predicated on a homey contentment and lives relatively free from adversity. Yet this innovative narrative structure—revolutionary in its reframing of conflict's necessity—has not preserved the genre from stinging critiques. As is well known, various cultural commentators have long derided television as bereft of cultural value, such as in Newton Minow's famed and blistering admonition, "Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland."³ Within this degraded medium, family sitcoms have long received particular opprobrium. Heather Havrilesky aptly summarizes a dismissive vision of the genre, lambasting "the old formula of goofy dad, nagging mom and adorable, supernaturally clever kids gathered around the couch," which she derides as "so tired and stale."⁴ Tellingly, even David Marc's praise of literate sitcoms, or "litcoms," eschews those focusing on families, as apparent in his discussion of the genre's evolution in the 1970s and 1980s: "In the eighties, sitcom attention shifted away from single people . . . and back toward the genre's traditional center: the family. Family and 'family values' shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes*, *The Facts of Life*, *Silver Spoons*, and *Family Ties*, and later, *The Cosby Show*, *Who's the Boss?*, and *Growing Pains* defined the state of the art. Meanwhile, however, series such as *Taxi*, *Cheers*, and *Brothers* . . . continued the litcom tradition, making it into a kind of prestigious, if commercially limited, subgenre."⁵ Within this tacit binary of litcom versus domestic sitcom, the family finds disfavor owing to its apparent lack of wit and sophistication, in contrast to programs liberated from the protocols of domesticity. Indeed, family sitcoms occasionally defame themselves, such as when in *Family Guy* Lois defends television to Peter, who has momentarily forsworn its pleasures: "Don't you miss TV just a little? The familiar stories, the broadly drawn characters, the convenient plot turns that bring a character around at exactly the right moment?" ("I Never Met the Dead Man"). The apparent simplicity of the form encourages an abundance of critical and metacritical derision.

Family sitcoms must endure the slings and arrows directed at this multiply maligned genre, for, in addition to their status as a comic form, they commonly feature didacticism and sentimentalism, and they belong as well to the realm of children's media. Even a brief survey of these genres' histories testifies to their denigrated aesthetic statuses. Comedy's secondary position to tragedy is long established. Few scholars mention William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It* as his finest works, preferring instead the dark themes of his tragic masterpieces *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. In film the Academy Awards repeatedly lionize drama over humor, with only a handful

of comic movies named Best Picture (e.g., *It Happened One Night*, *Annie Hall*, *Shakespeare in Love*). After decades of neglect, domestic and sentimental fictions of the American nineteenth century—Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand*, Louisa May Alcott’s *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, among many others—are being appreciated anew, for their female authors, heroines, and subject matter relegated them to an aesthetically inferior caste. A similar historical shift in reception is evident in the cinematic melodramas of actors (e.g., Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck) and directors (notably Douglas Sirk). Didactic and children’s media are denigrated simply by their generic status, with the moralism of the former and the targeted audience of the latter eliciting assumptions of their lack of sophistication. Given the confluence of maligned forms within its overarching genre, it is hardly surprising that the family sitcom, as a whole, receives scant praise.

It would be facile to end this volume with a stirring proclamation that family sitcoms are an underappreciated master form of American television, yet it is equally facile to dismiss the genre as inherently lackluster. And as discussions of criticism, aesthetics, and popular culture have repeatedly demonstrated, high-culture and low-culture artifacts erect and dissolve borders between them, as Pierre Bourdieu describes: “Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation—literature, theatre, painting—more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe ‘naively’ in the things represented. The pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world, which may take the form of moral agnosticism.”⁶ Bourdieu’s analysis provides a key to understanding the enduring appeal of family sitcoms, in that they invite naive and intellectual readings both simultaneously and over the passage of years. Representation and reception are never static but always kaleidoscopic, and family sitcoms highlight the vagaries and pleasures of viewing over one’s lifetime, as a viewer’s personal biography develops alongside the families watched on television.

More so, family sitcoms, through their multiple and oscillating appeals to various family members, as well as through their surface innocence and their symptomatic subversions, invite spectators to inhabit queer positions and subjectivities in response to their pleasures. Many media theorists explore television’s strategies for influencing viewers, plumbing the ways in which television “molds our vision of the outside world and informs our socialization within it.”⁷ Of particular relevance to family sitcoms are the effects that viewing and popular culture wield on children and their purportedly impressionable young minds. Donald Roberts’s vision of children “who have clearly fallen prey to . . . negative images” echoes numerous studies cautioning against the media’s effects on young viewers.⁸ At the very least, as Ron Lembo details, audiences

may practice a range of viewing strategies, including narrative-based viewing, critical viewing, and image-based viewing, among others.⁹ As Judith Mayne theorizes of film spectatorship, in a formulation that applies equally well to television viewing, desire and pleasure pique many viewers' experience of visual narratives: "Film theory has been so bound by the heterosexual symmetry that supposedly governs Hollywood cinema that it has ignored the possibility, for instance, that one of the distinct pleasures of the cinema may well be a 'safe zone' in which homosexual as well as heterosexual desires can be fantasized and acted out. I am not speaking here of an innate capacity to 'read against the grain,' but rather of the way in which desire and pleasure in the cinema may well function to problematize the categories of heterosexual versus homosexual."¹⁰ One may well read family sitcoms "against the grain," and find deep pleasures in so doing, yet as Mayne posits, the deconstruction of the categories of heterosexual and homosexual is inevitable virtually in their enunciation. Family sitcoms, whether they dramatize erotic normativity or its subversions, open inherently queer spaces for spectators to query the presumed limits of the American family and thus to create a praxis of spectatorship unmoored from the erotic discipline implied throughout America's history of heteronormativity. In another milestone theorization of gay spectatorship, Brett Farmer proposes that "the fantasmatic represents gay spectatorship as a processual activity in which the forms of gayness (the fantasies, desires, discourses, relations, practices, and knowledges that constitute gayness as a site of psycho-cultural subjectivity) figure as determinative categories but in ways that are wholly provisional."¹¹ As Mayne problematizes the heterosexual/homosexual dyad, Farmer locates provisional identities circulating around various ephemeral sites of desire, with both theorists dismantling narrow assumptions of identity and pleasure in viewing.

To theorize the queer viewing of family sitcoms, then, is not merely to suggest that gay, lesbian, and other queer-identified spectators can find pleasure in their homey domesticity, even when gays are absent from the screen, but that these programs cannot help but to summon such viewings and such viewers, for their problematic and provisional construction testifies to the always contingent nature of the erotic in the domestic sphere. Family sitcoms speak to the family, yet through their overlapping, conflicting, and simply numerous plotlines, they inevitably touch on that which they might aspire to avoid, including the queerness at their core. With all due respect to Tolstoy, television's happy families are all queer, and each is happy in its own, unique way, with this happiness disassembling the productions of normativity that crumble so readily.

At the very least, many viewers, queer or otherwise, proudly proclaim their long-standing allegiance to the television families of their childhood, with present-day nostalgia enhancing their affection for a program likely embraced before their critical faculties were finely tuned. Horace Newcomb proposes

the importance of continuity and intimacy in the experience of viewing television, suggesting that this intimacy “creates the possibility for a much stronger sense of audience involvement, a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see.”¹² The longevity of popular family sitcoms enhances this connection between audience and actors, for young viewers witness a family growing up over approximately five to eight years, as they mature as well. To watch a family sitcom during one’s childhood helps to formulate that very childhood, which influences how one perceives both television and family in the ensuing years. For queer child viewers, many of whom watched these programs before their adolescence and so likely did not yet grasp the meanings of queerness and its peculiar relevance to their own psychosexual development, the pleasure of family sitcoms can arise from the disjunction between representation and experience, the *jouissance* of difference recognized in the limitations of and personal affinities for the impossibility of the innocence depicted onscreen.

And, in turn, adults who naively loved a family sitcom during their childhood may grow to admire it intellectually for its steadfast naiveté complementing its metatextual discourses, appreciating the complexity of representing such determined innocence and its inevitably queer echoes. Also, even children who view programs naively do not uniformly submit to the messages encoded in these narratives, as various viewers respond to or resist the genre’s moralism. Rob Long, channeling film director Lionel Chetwynd, mordantly points out “the irony . . . that the generation raised on the sanitized, family-values-laden sitcoms of the 1950s grew up to take LSD and riot in the streets; whereas the generation that grew up on the Maoist sitcoms of Norman Lear voted twice for Ronald Reagan and once for George Bush. So much for the transformative power of television sitcoms.”¹³ To posit, following Bourdieu, that family sitcoms encourage both naive and intellectual readings over the passage of time highlights the possibility that naiveté and intellectualism are not binaries but rather contemporaneous continua, with viewers shifting in their audience positions depending not necessarily on their age but on their openness to the televisual text before them and to their openness to their and its queerness, as well. Adults often revel in naive pleasures, and children can be surprisingly sophisticated in their viewing choices. In eliciting naive and intellectual responses, family sitcoms open their doors to as wide an audience as the span of their characters’ ages, and then beyond, with viewers determining for themselves whether wholesome family antics reflect or distort the truth of the American experience, with this truth, as usual, lurking between the poles of realism and fantasy. Queer spectatorships are inherently elicited as well, whether from viewers who identify as gay, straight, or otherwise on the continuum of sexuality, for constructing normative visions of the family inevitably undoes the very normativity so solicited.

Looking to the recent past and present, the surface queerness of the American domestic sitcom is becoming ever more apparent. Building on the success of *Modern Family*, the short-lived *The New Normal* (2012–13) tells the story of a single mother and her daughter who move in with a gay couple when the mother decides to serve as their pregnancy surrogate. *The Goldbergs* (2013–) reframes the *Cosby*-era 1980s as a time of goofy, off-kilter, and personally humiliating moments in the life of adolescent Adam (Sean Giambrone), and *Raising Hope* (2010–14) begins with the execution of the baby’s mother for multiple murders, as the remaining family soon bonds over their new infant: “Jimmy, you almost killed it, and we both threw up on it” (“Pilot”). Most significantly, *Transparent* (2014–) introduces the issue of transgender lives to the family sitcom tradition, as the Pfeffermans’ matriarch, Maura (Jeffrey Tambor)—formerly its patriarch—explains to her daughter: “My whole life I’ve been dressing up . . . like a man” (“The Letting Go”). These programs depict with greater candor issues of human sexuality than those of yesterday, yet they also present the intransigent and symptomatic queerness of the American family sitcom, in various moments when the fantasies of genre, family-friendly programming, and innocent children collide in their creation of unique visions of domesticity.

While these programs point to television’s increasing openness about matters of human sexuality—in its surface treatment of such themes—they also ironically highlight by contrast the queer symptomology of earlier incarnations of the American family sitcom. As is apparent, the queer symptomologies of the sitcom families receiving the lion’s share of attention in this study—the Cleavers, the Bradys, the Huxtables, the Conners, the Stewarts, and the Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys—prove the inherent dissimilarity of familial happiness, for each faced the unique challenges of representation during the era of their production. In *Leave It to Beaver*, the hints of queerness in Ward’s past, in Beaver’s present, and in June’s future similarly speak to parents and children conscripted into gender and erotic roles that stifle their more unruly desires. Hemmed in by chrononormative assumptions circulating throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as during this era’s subsequent reception, the Cleavers nonetheless display queer potential undermining the homogeneity of their era. *The Brady Bunch*, as it struggled with representing children’s innocence during a time of rapidly shifting social mores, clung to the past while its subtexts subversively acknowledged the changing times. Consequently, the program’s impossible innocence defied the shifting social codes of the 1970s while tacitly registering them and building a kitschy sense of nostalgia for the very impossibility of its suburban utopia. In *The Cosby Show* during the 1980s and early 1990s, the Huxtables’ financial comfort engendered critique for the very possibility of portraying a happy and wealthy black family. Nonetheless, in its determination to present a wholesome vision of African

American domesticity, the program could not overcome the queer tensions of erasing eroticism from its plotlines and critical reception, as it concomitantly expressed striking anxieties about the potential of sexuality to undermine its optimistic message, both within its staging and within metacritical discourses about stars Lisa Bonet and Bill Cosby. Along with the rise of the dysfunctional subgenre of the family sitcom in the late 1980s throughout the 1990s, *Roseanne* brought issues of teen sexuality and homosexuality to the surface of its story lines, theorizing queerness and blue-collar eroticism as means of resisting the financial inequities engendered by Reaganism. *Hannah Montana*, in the following decade, reinvigorated the trope of the innocent tween yet simultaneously pivoted to her queer alter ego in the creation and marketing of a teen pop sensation, with the Stewarts' adventures glorifying the teen as a preferred locus of innocence, consumerism, and allegorical sexuality in the 2000s. The Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys of *Modern Family* tackled the vagaries of queer representation during a period of increasing acceptance of gay marriage in the 2010s while recoding the political significance of stereotypes within a mostly apolitical genre. This program brought a gay (and ultimately married) couple to the screen, yet this family, facing criticism from progressives, testifies to the challenges of queer representation in a genre dismissed as inherently conservative yet one that, through its humor and carnivalesque spirit, infuses the family unit with a daring challenge to visions of erotic and domestic conformity.

Yes, as Tolstoy would likely agree, these are happy families, but perhaps he would concede that representing their happiness on television required endless negotiations about the meaning of kinship in their sociotemporal settings and in their sexual politics. The queer fantasies of the American family sitcom lingered in their creation and consumption, attesting to the challenges of representing domestic bliss in light of these families' shifting relationships to sexuality. In sum, America has seen itself and its changing sense of sexuality on the television screen, with queer representations both absent and depicted, both skewed and truthful, both exaggerated and recognizable, both metaphoric and realistic. The Cleavers, Bradys, Huxtables, Conners, Stewarts, and Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys inhabit a world removed from reality yet still true to the American experience, where sexuality builds families—even if, at times, any hints of eroticism appear to be expunged from the screen. At the same time, to see the queerness central to these various sitcom families reveals new insights into the very nature of the television archives and what lies hidden just below the surface. The paradox of sex, queerness, and family sitcoms, as with much of American culture, is that innocence coexists with experience, even when the nation's children sit watching, glued to the screen, with adults laughing right there beside them.