"Father Knows Best" and "The Cosby Show":
Nostalgia and the Sitcom Tradition
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We began to think about this paper when, watching episodes of "The Cosby Show," it occurred to us that we had somehow been there before. As new-looking and as upbeat as "Cosby" seemed, we were often reminded of the enormously popular 1950s-60s television sitcom "Father Knows Best" (hereafter FKB). We weren’t alone in that observation, of course; at the height of "Cosby’s" popularity in the mid-eighties, that comparison was made several times in TV Guide and elsewhere. But the comparison was always superficial. How could it be otherwise? "Cosby" was hailed by some as a new role model for African-American families; one recent scholar has proclaimed it "atypical of American television fare" because "media images of Americans of African descent have ranged from the blatantly to the latently racist" (Downing 46). What could "Cosby" possibly have in common with FKB, a series with a lily-white cast which personified the family myths of the McCarthyite, pre-civil rights fifties?

That FKB apparently reflected what 1950s America wanted to believe was its typical family was evidenced by its long run (1954 to 1964); the Emmies won by its adult stars Jane Wyatt and Robert Young; and even its commission, in 1959, by the United States Treasury Department for a special episode to be shown in "schools, churches, civic organizations" to promote U.S. Savings Bonds by showing "the importance of a strong American democracy" (Brooks and Marsh 279). FKB featured a white, middle-class family living in Springfield, Anywhere, USA (20 states have a Springfield). Most episodes featured one of the three children getting into basically innocent scrapes which father Jim, a successful insurance broker, and mother Margaret, an incarnation of the Victorian Angel in the House, helped to resolve. Again, what could a hip, upbeat program of the eighties like "Cosby" have in common with this postwar icon?

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Indeed, “The Cosby Show” does superficially seem very different, even in ways other than race. “The Cosby Show” is not as constrained by sexual taboos as FKB was—Clair and Cliff’s sexual relationship is not disguised, for example—and in other ways the Huxtables are free from the fifties decorum we see on FKB; we could not imagine, for instance, the Andersons, not even the kids, participating in the comic dance routine which takes place during the credits on every Cosby episode. Unlike Margaret Anderson of FKB, Clair Huxtable is a career woman (an attorney) and along with her older daughters Sondra and Denise is a self-proclaimed feminist. And the Huxtables are decidedly urban, upscale; instead of a traditional house in small-town Anywhere, USA, they live in an urban townhouse.

Still, despite these differences, the similarities seem to us even more striking, so much so that there are too many for us to fully explore here. We will have to mention several briefly and then emphasize the one we find most interesting. The first is that we have in “Cosby,” as in FKB, the “normal” nuclear family, despite the fact that in the time between FKB and “Cosby” we have seen in America a tremendous increase in divorce and other social factors leading to a rise of one-parent and other forms of the non-nuclear family. Yet “Cosby” presents the mother-father-children model as the norm, just as did FKB. When so many Americans, women, men, and children, are perforce not living in the traditional nuclear family but need for their sense of belonging to feel they are part of a family, “family” for many good reasons has undergone redefinition (on television, “Kate and Allie,” “Who’s the Boss,” and other programs reflected this redefinition for the eighties). But “Cosby” undercut all of this. Our point is not that anything is wrong with the traditional nuclear family or that it is not a good institution, but rather that its presentation on “Cosby” (as on FKB) as a privileged norm may inhibit a healthy, newly-emerging, pluralistic sense of family.

Second, the Huxtables like the Andersons are a family of affluence. Though neither family is presented as wealthy, neither family is ever threatened by poverty or even the continuing financial problems that beset the working class—this despite the intervening upsurge in the seventies of sitcoms which explored fairly realistically the problems of working-class Americans. Robert Sklar (1980) has pointed out (he cites in particular certain episodes from “Laverne and Shirley” and Fonzie episodes of “Happy Days”) that the seventies sitcom explored the real values and problems of working-class Americans without violating the
sitcom requirement that the program be funny. Yet “Cosby” returns us, like FKB, to a sense that the “representative” American family is middle-class and affluent, free from those concerns that beset the family life of so many Americans.

Third, we see in both programs the relative exclusion of forces from outside the family that would threaten its solidarity, although between the time of FKB and that of “Cosby” America has seen remarkably more pressure on teenagers to rebel against the family and its values—in the use of drugs, to take just one dramatic example. As on FKB, the Huxtable kids are not often seen in interaction with their peers, and on those occasions when peer pressures or other outside pressures come to bear on them, the problem is made to seem minor and easily dealt with. The serious difficulties parents increasingly experience, as an outside world more and more impinges on and threatens family solidarity, are handled very lightly. Indeed, in a rare “Cosby” episode which actually explored these outside pressures, when a joint was found in one of Theo’s school books, it turned out to have been planted on Theo by a classmate, a hardened “tough guy” user, who after one afternoon with the Huxtable family repented and changed his ways. For many American families, preserving family values and solidarity against the hegemony of the less ideal world outside is not so easy.

All these issues raise the question, we realize, of the basic nature and function of the sitcom. It is meant to be funny, to make people laugh, and it consequently has a different set of requirements and conventions than other forms. It is not, we know, meant to be a documentary. The question of how far it can go in realism and still be funny is a complicated one which leads to still another. If the sitcom is to function educationally, as the U.S. government apparently thought FKB did in the fifties, and as many think “The Cosby Show” now does (Cosby himself apparently feels it does, since his name in the credits is followed by Ed.D.), then the question arises of whether such a show can best educate and uplift by dealing directly with harsh social realities or by showing a family functioning so ideally well that these problems do not occur (Jameson’s view of the “fantasy bribe” required of popular culture, of course, suggests different directions). We have seen many “Cosby” episodes which we feel have presented valuable messages; to take but one example, the episode about the Hillman College graduation may have shown many young people how desirable and satisfying it would be to graduate from college. But we do feel that such a show goes beyond mere entertainment to shaping the ideas and expectations of
many, and we are consequently concerned with how viewers see themselves and reflect upon their own lives as a result.

Of especial concern to us in this regard, and the issue we particularly want to examine in this paper, is the representation in both programs of gender roles and relationships. Despite the remarkable difference we have already noted, that Margaret Anderson was a traditional housewife while Clair Huxtable is an attorney, we think that gender roles and relationships are being portrayed in both programs as essentially the same, and that gender stereotypes as they function within the family, harmful ones we think, are still being enforced in "The Cosby Show." Before we begin to explore this issue, however, we first need to comment on the sample we are working with. As anyone working with television criticism must by now realize, it would be impossible under book length to adequately represent all the episodes of a whole, long-running series. We have viewed and taped many episodes from both series (and allude to several), but we have selected one episode from each series as being representative of ongoing tendencies in each that we want to discuss.

A brief plot summary of each is as follows:

FKB: Bud wants to leave the house for an important baseball game his church team is playing. Margaret reminds Jim of his own rules, that Bud's chores must be done and his poem (to be recited at the Church's youth service) memorized before baseball. Bud tries to sneak out, but is foiled. Later, however, Jim sees the church team is losing and that Bud is needed; with the tacit approval of the minister, he now becomes Bud's accomplice in escaping the house. Margaret catches them in the act, but gives up any hope of enforcement. In the game, Bud rallies the team in a losing cause, but becomes a moral hero, praised by the minister in church, for his honesty about a disputed call at the plate.

Cosby: In the first plot of a double-plotted episode, Sondra's sexist boyfriend Elvin is trying to impress Mrs. Huxtable by learning to cook. When his first project, a cake, turns out to be a disaster, Cliff joins him in a plot to fool Mrs. Huxtable by cheating—creating what she will believe to be homemade spaghetti sauce from a jar of barbeque sauce. In the end, Clair reveals that she sees through the plot, having humored Elvin through dinner. In the second plot, Clair and the family attend an art auction where she successfully buys back a painting done by her grandfather; her independence in this act provides material for comic confrontation with Elvin's sexisms.
The first point we will discuss is gender-assigned roles or jobs in the family. Patricia Mellencamp has written that the domestic situation comedy of the fifties portrayed the “comic containment of women” in traditional domestic roles (81). Postwar women reenacted a version of the nineteenth century Angel in the House, whom Virginia Woolf once claimed to have killed, but who made a strong resurgence in the 1950s. A major part of this sacrificial, angelic role involved homemaking chores—cooking, cleaning, housekeeping, care and supervision of the children. Margaret Anderson of FKB is such an angel; she is always on duty, preparing meals, cleaning house, attending to the children’s needs, sewing, arranging flowers—her hands are never at rest. (So powerfully is this “women’s role” enforced on FKB that in one interesting and rare episode in which Margaret rebels and takes a day off for herself, Jim, belatedly getting the point after suspecting “another man,” orders teenage Betty, not teenage Bud, to take over Mother’s duties so that Margaret can have one evening out.)

“Cosby” seems different, but is it? We rarely see Clair functioning as an attorney, and though cooking and housecleaning are rarely observed, when it is done at all, it is Clair we see at it. The episode we have singled out is an especially interesting case in point, precisely because on the surface it seems to be trying to make an opposite statement. Though Sondra’s boyfriend Elvin is much abused by Denise and Sondra for calling cooking “woman’s work,” and Denise points out that her dad and a lot of men cook, when we do see food being prepared, it is Clair, not Cliff, who does it, and it is to Clair, not to Cliff, that Elvin sets out to prove that he can cook. Cliff, far from enforcing the point that he cooks also, undertakes (in a long and funny monologue) to teach Elvin how, like himself, to fake cooking and fool the women. When Clair, not fooled, reveals that she recognizes both Elvin’s and Cliff’s “secret” spaghetti sauce as coming out of Mrs. Farber’s jar, she gets the comic last word and reminds the audience that she is an attorney (“as an attorney, I would suggest that you get Mrs. Farber’s permission [before marketing this]”). But the overall message of this sequence serves to reassure the audience that real cooking is still a female role, that a male would not seriously undertake it, that the kitchen has not basically changed. The earlier, apparently up to date, feminist-liberated assertion that “my dad cooks. A lot of men cook” is radically undercut, and the audience is reassured that this fundamental gender chore-division in the family has not altered. This undercutting is part of “The Cosby Show’s” weekly sleight of hand. We seem to be hearing a statement that as
women pursue their talents outside the home, males, without loss of masculinity, can share in the family chores. But the action and conclusion of this program tell the audience that this is finally only a joke, and that traditional family role expectations are still firmly in place.

Another role of the "traditional wife" was to be the spiritual and moral arbiter of the house, the upholder of values. Literature and legend from comic to serious, however, have portrayed the female carrying out this role as an unpleasant nag, who is rightfully resisted, especially by men who collude, often across the generations, to undermine this role. This situation makes the female the butt of much male humor, humor depending on the reader/viewer's sympathy for male attempts to subvert woman's moral strictures which spoil so much fun. Generations have been expected to sympathize with lazy Rip finally ridding himself of nagging Dame Van Winkle, with Huck Finn's discomfort as Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas read him his catechism, with comic-strip husbands from Jiggs to Andy Capp who arrive home late from a bit of inebriated fun with "the boys" to confront an angry Maggie or "Pet" at the doorway, with W.C. Fields as he sneaks away from his bullying wife to attend the wrestling match, with all of James Thurber's misogynistic fantasies. If readers' sympathies are in the right place, they get the joke and laugh.

In our episode of FKB, the nag role is first given to Margaret and later extended to all the females in the family. Margaret is the one who must actively invoke the household rules (although, as she reminds Jim, "you typed these rules yourself"), and who worries about becoming the "villain" but worries more that Bud has become "irresponsible," that he may "run wild." Jim agrees, but only reluctantly. After all, "a baseball game is pretty important to a boy," he reflects as he gazes wistfully off camera—and then reminds us of the female joke-role as nag: "I remember when I was a kid. There were times when I thought my mother was the most unjust person in the world." When Jim and Margaret observe Bud's first attempt to sneak out of the house, Jim observes with a chuckle that Bud "doesn't give up," while Margaret, not so amused, worries that Bud is now defying his parents. The role of nag is soon extended to the daughters as well: Betty, coaching Bud on his poem, repeatedly reprimands Bud in the face of his comic attempts to interrupt the session; little Cathy, whose chief role is to provide cute little-kid humor (like Rudy on "Cosby"), is sent to the ballgame to remind Daddy of his duty, going to the grocery store. When Reverend Swain asks Cathy if she has "trouble" with "the menfolks at your
house,” Cathy responds (to predictable laugh track roars), “Yes, we’re disgusted to all of them.”

With the women established as nags, the males in the episode collude against this same feminine assertion of domestic morality in the conflicting interest of masculine solidarity. When Jim sneaks into the house to undermine Margaret’s resolution and to send Bud off to the ballgame, he explains, “I don’t want you to let the guys down.” And when Jim queries Reverend Swain about the morality of allowing Bud to play baseball when he has neither done his chores nor learned his poem for the young people’s service, Reverend Swain at first demurs, then adds with a sidelong grin (and to loud laughter from the laugh track), “But we could sure use a couple of home runs right now.” Although Margaret herself is never portrayed as a violent or threatening person, much of the humor in this episode comes from the men’s treatment of her as though she were every bit as threatening as the comic stereotype of the bullying wife. Thus, when Jim hustles Bud out of the house to the ballgame, Bud hesitates momentarily—“But what about Mom?” The artificial audience chuckles as anxiety enters Jim’s face: “Er, I’ll take care of THAT PART of it” (emphasis ours). An anticipatory laugh, occurring when Margaret comes silently up behind Jim as he surreptitiously smuggles Bud’s baseball equipment out the window, becomes a roar at Jim’s startled double-take. Still, Margaret threatens no rolling pin here, but only submission. “I’m not agreeing,” she says as she hands over Bud’s catcher’s mitt, “I’m just giving up.”

Despite the many differences in plot and style, the same jokes and the same gender divisions underlie our sample episode of “Cosby.” Again, this is all the more remarkable when we observe that this particular episode is “about” feminist issues. In the opening scene, Sondra announces to Denise that Elvin has finally realized “that his attitudes about women could stand some improvement”; a few minutes later Denise rebukes Elvin for his remarks about cooking as “woman’s work.” Still later, when Elvin suggests that Clair needs her husband’s permission to buy an expensive painting, Clair informs him, “It’s okay if I buy this painting, but not because HE says so, but because it IS so. Okay?”

However, the division between the sexes, together with male collusion reminiscent of FKB, begins immediately. In the first scene, with Sondra and Denise still on camera, Elvin has proclaimed that he is learning to cook in order to increase his sensitivity to women. But as soon as the girls have exited, Elvin and Cliff are left alone. Elvin again asserts that he has baked a cake in order to become “more understanding
and [pause] sensitive [pause] as a man.” Cliff does not believe this for a
minute. With the women absent, he asks for the real reason: “Why did
you bake the cake?” Elvin admits, eyes downcast, that he really is trying
to impress Mrs. Huxtable, who dislikes his sexism. Although Cliff’s
behavior to his wife and daughters is never overtly sexist, he can share
his real attitudes now that the men are alone. When Elvin utters the
ultimate woman joke shared by males—“Well, you know how women
are”—Cliff says nothing, but breaks into a broad grin and guffaws. Now
the men share a secret—they “know how women are.” And it becomes
implicit that there is nothing ethically wrong with Elvin’s sexist
discourse. When Elvin worries that he might “say something stupid to
Mrs. Huxtable,” Cliff agrees that “you might say something stupid—like
you usually do....” Nothing is wrong with Elvin’s attitudes, the men
tacitly agree, but he simply must learn when to keep his mouth shut.

Thus, just as in the FKB episode, the women become the
proponents of an established morality—structurally, feminism in this
episode serves in place of the traditional virtues of duty and
responsibility upheld by the women in FKB—which the men collude to
undermine. In this case, the major episode of collusion takes the form of
fooling Mrs. Huxtable. In both episodes, the chief female figure is
subverted by the men. Just as Jim and Bud (with even Reverend Swain’s
blessing) collude to subvert the household rules Margaret is trying to
uphold, Cliff and Elvin collude to evade Clair Huxtable’s feminist
principles. The scapegoating of women in both episodes highlights the
underlying joke of women as nag; Betty and little Cathy join forces in
the earlier show to enforce Bud’s rules and keep Jim about his duty;
Denise and Sondra lecture Elvin about his sexism. But if the nag role is
played for laughs, it also represents a threat that must be subverted. Bud
and Jim both exhibit anxiety as they evade Margaret, and Jim stammers
in her presence. And Cliff is grim as he hints to Elvin about Mrs.
Huxtable that the food he will prepare “BETTER be good!” In each case
we have a hint of mother as enforcer, the Big Nurse figure against whom
the males collude in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest or the
authoritarian Hot Lips in the original movie “M.A.S.H.” and in the
earliest TV episodes. In all these cases, female authority is represented
as a restrictive, pernicious force that male solidarity must confront.

The two programs, moreover, go beyond male solidarity to male
centrality and superiority. That this is the direction of these two shows
can be seen in their titles and introductions. The title “Father Knows
Best” speaks for itself. “Cosby” does not make this statement directly in
the title, but giving the title to the actor who plays Father is similarly patriarchal. The introductions to both shows cue the viewer that Father is the in-control central figure. In the FKB lead-in, it is Father that we first see, in front of the door, dressed for work and looking at his watch; this tells us that Father is the man-in-charge, who encounters the outside world, as opposed to the stay-at-home family, including Margaret, who next appears bringing him his briefcase. Her role as stay-at-home, subordinate, helpmate is thus underlined. The view of Father looking at his watch symbolically defines his role as well. The world is controlled and regulated by time, and it is Father who looks at his watch and is thereby associated with that controlling principle. As Jim and Margaret start to kiss goodbye before he leaves for work, we cut to the three children watching and giggling on the stairs, a device which introduces them; we then cut back to Jim and Margaret’s kiss. This sequence conveys a warm and valuable message that the parents are still in love and that the children are included in that warmth, but the overall sequence places Father at the controlling center. His first appearance which Margaret and the children relate to in turn shows that all have their being as defined by him and their relationship to him.

The Cosby lead-in, as we remarked earlier, seems surprisingly different and far more upbeat, yet in the dynamics of the sequence there is a strong similarity. Father first appears on the scene, then is briefly and individually joined by the others, starting with Clair, who is followed by each child in order of age. All in turn have their opportunity to dance with Father. Though he sometimes looks bemused, the dominant impression again is of Father as first and center, each family member deriving identity from relationship to him. The dance seems startlingly modern, but the centrality of the patriarch reaffirms older values.

In all the ways that we have discussed, we find it disturbing that an enormously popular program of the eighties like “Cosby” should in so many ways regress to the characteristics and values of a program like FKB, which exemplified family and gender stereotypes that needed to be outgrown. Does the immense popularity of “Cosby” represent some throwback to the morality of an earlier era, some nostalgia for the family as it once was, or at least was idealized? That is a plausible hypothesis for a decade that saw ERA defeated, that saw “parenting” become a buzzword, in which both a president and a religious right invoked “family” as a euphemism for conservative, antifeminist morals, in which “Cosby’s” popularity was contemporaneous with reruns of FKB twice a day on the Christian Broadcasting Network. Raymond Williams,
remarking on the “everyday world of conversation and exchange,” observes that “there’s an obvious relation between the whole joke world and certain kinds of comedy” (5). Certainly it is true that many traditional jokes, jokes which make females the butt of male humor, are firmly established in the traditional domestic situation comedy as it has evolved from earlier forms of entertainment like vaudeville into radio and television. Perhaps they are so deeply ingrained in our culture that audiences still respond to them, and writers hardly know how to write without them. What “Cosby” may represent, then, is not so much some major shift in political gravity, as the persistence, despite much ideological change in the past few decades, of some very traditional forms still embedded in our everyday discourse. Susan Horowitz, writing in 1983-84, called the “sitcom domesticus” a species endangered by social change: “the half-hour domestic comedy as a form, has barely survived the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family for which it was originally designed.” But the triumphant resurgence of sitcom domesticus in the form of “The Cosby Show”—not, as Downing claimed, “atypical” of its medium, but thoroughly immersed in it—ignored that social change to recreate, nostalgically, the world of FKB.

Works Cited


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