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That '70s Show: A Realistic Depiction of Sexism

Abstract

Overview: I have been a loyal viewer of the hit sitcom, *That '70s Show*, for years. In total, I have probably watched the entire series two or three times. However, it was not until recently that it struck me how sexist the show was. Upon first watching *That '70s Show*, I thought it was a surface-level sitcom celebrating the colorful and hazy 1970s. After rewatching and evaluating the stances presented in multiple episodes, however, I see that it is more representative of society's view on women than I originally thought. I believe that both the subtle and obvious sexism in *That '70s Show*, which is shown throughout the entire series, is an accurate representation of the time period the show is based on and made in, but many of the viewers, including myself, overlook the problematic nature of the show because it is shown in a light hearted and joking manner.

Author's Reflection: My name is Meleah Hartnett, and I am a Media and Communication major here at St. John Fisher College. I minor in Film and TV Studies. My research paper focuses on the sexism shown in *That '70s Show*. I wrote about *That '70s Show* because it has been a favorite of my family's for years; we actually have the box set of all of the seasons on DVD. I was rewatching it, for probably the third time, when I was deciding what I wanted my 199 research project to be, and finally caught on to the sexist undertones of the show. The process of writing this paper was more enjoyable than I anticipated it would be, probably because the majority of my research involved watching a show. A challenging aspect of the process was finding perfect moments in the show to illustrate my point. There were plenty of sexist scenes to choose from, but I wanted ones that had a punch to them. It was also very time consuming. When it came to writing, I found it difficult to focus on a few major topics. Once I started looking for issues in the show, it was hard to stop. Originally, I was going to also discuss the issue of race and racism in my paper, but my professor advised me to narrow my focus. The 199 experience has helped me grow comfortable with writing in a more structured form. I have always loved writing, but had never found it enjoyable to write in a research-based writing style. This class taught me that there could be just as much freedom and creativity in this style of writing as creative writing. The intimidation of writing in such a long form has also lessened after taking this class.

Professor Styr's Reflection: Meleah was a very focused student. She grasped the course's emphasis on how we depict other times quickly and went immediately to the topic of *That '70s Show*. The most impressive element of her progress was her dogged pursuit of sources; as you can imagine, '90s TV does not have a lot of scholarly material written on it yet, and so she had to rely extensively on primary documents mixed with her own cogent analysis. One of her main areas of work was on her counterargument, where she had to do a lot to portray the opposing voices carefully and fairly.

Keywords

Chicago Style, American culture, American Studies, English, WGST, Writing

That '70s Show: A Realistic Depiction of Sexism

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English 199C

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Hartnett 1

I have been a loyal viewer of the hit sitcom, *That '70s Show*, for years. In total, I have probably watched the entire series two or three times. However, it was not until recently that it struck me how sexist the show was. Upon first watching *That '70s Show*, I thought it was a surface-level sitcom celebrating the colorful and hazy 1970s. After rewatching and evaluating the stances presented in multiple episodes, however, I see that it is more representative of society's view on women than I originally thought. I believe that both the subtle and obvious sexism in *That '70s Show*, which is shown throughout the entire series, is an accurate representation of the time period the show is based on and made in, but many of the viewers, including myself, overlook the problematic nature of the show because it is shown in a light hearted and joking manner.

Before I can discuss the realistic depiction of sexism in the show that is based on the 1970s, I should first explain what the 1970s were like as a whole. Bell bottom pants and *Star Wars* are the first two things that come to mind when I think of the 1970s. However, there was much more to the decade than fashion and fun. After years of protests in the United States, the Vietnam War was drawing to a close, and President Nixon lost the trust of the entire country after the Watergate Scandal. However, what I find to be most important in the 1970s is that women, along with other marginalized groups, continued to fight for their rights.

Sexism was a major issue in the seventies within the United States, and globally. Although women had fought for and gained the right to vote in 1920, there were still inequalities that demanded attention. The wage gap between men and women, along with an abundance of other issues, upset many and led feminist groups to protest for equality. The issues of abortion,

divorce, and birth control contraceptives were debated heavily during the 1970s. Ultimately, cases like *Roe vs. Wade* legalized abortion within the first trimester of pregnancy,¹ and *Eisenstadt vs. Baird* legalized the use of contraception throughout the United States.² The passing of these laws did not end the ongoing oppression of women. These laws simply allowed them more freedom over their bodies. These cases were massive steps forward in the feminist movement, but there was still work to be done and laws to be passed. Inequalities between men and women still crippled the nation, and some of these inequalities exist today. There continues to be a disparity between wages of men and women who work the same jobs. Along with that, women are still treated as less than men in and out of the workplace.

Injustices towards women, like those that actually occurred during the 1970s, are portrayed in *That '70s Show* as jokes. It is as if the women in the show are only there to be mocked or belittled, if not blatantly then subtly, sometimes almost indistinguishably. An example of this subtle sexism is seen in the character Kitty, the housewife mother. She is seen in a stereotypically feminine profession, nursing, and spends most of her time worrying about household tasks. Whenever the family sits down to have a meal, she is the one in the kitchen cooking it. In one episode, she is called in to work the night shift as a nurse, which her husband is not happy about; he exclaims with concern, "Kitty you work so hard as it is. I do not want you working double shifts."³ Kitty disregards this and explains that she is going to take the shift, and

¹ Legal Information Institute. "Roe v. Wade." Cornell Law School. 1992. Accessed March 10, 2018, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/410/113?qt-_none_=0#qt-_none_

² Sheraden Seward, "Eisenstadt v Baird (1972)," The Embryo Project Encyclopedia, March 12, 2008. Accessed March 19, 2018, <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/eisenstadt-v-baird-1972>

³ David Trainer, *That '70s Show*, Season 2 episode 8, (1998; Los Angeles, CA: CBS Studio Center), Netflix.

that she will need to prepare a meal before she goes because her husband is unable to do so. Her husband objects, claiming that he can cook; later he is seen “preparing” dinner for Kitty, which ends up being take-out food. The idea of Kitty’s husband cooking is, apparently, laughable. He offers to take over the kitchen duties and the audience is prompted to laugh by a laugh track. I assume the punch line of the joke is the idea of a husband cooking dinner.⁴ The joking manner of this situation takes attention away from three sexist views in these scenes. The first view, masked in comedy, is that Kitty should not be working as hard as she is because she is a woman. Second, it is implied that her husband has any say in how much she works, even though, if the roles were reversed she would not question him working overtime. The third is that Kitty’s role in the family is to cook meals.

Tropes similar to the ones presented in *That ‘70s Show* can be seen throughout television history. In fact, Erica Scharrer observes that family dynamics have been a center point in sitcoms for decades.⁵ She makes an argument that there has been “slow and inconsistent” progress made on television in regard to the sexist portrayal of dynamics between men and women.⁶ While I understand why she makes this assertion, given that some progressive shows such as *Will and Grace* aired about the same time as *That ‘70s Show*, I would like to counter that sexism in television was still exceedingly prevalent when *That ‘70s Show* was on air. Shows like

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Erica Scharrer, “From Wise to Foolish: The Portrayal of the Sitcom Father, 1950s-1990s,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 1 (2001): 23-40, accessed March 21, 2018, Academic Search Premier (4422440).

⁶ Ibid.

Futurama, *Family Guy*, and even *Friends* have sexist messages throughout the seasons.⁷ Scharrer does make a claim within her paper with which I agree. She discerns that television portrayed women as working outside of the home more frequently at the time when *That '70s Show* aired than in previous decades.⁸ This can be seen in *That '70s Show*, as Kitty, for part of the show at least, works as a nurse in the hospital.⁹ Although, even when she is seen in a progressive light by working outside the home, she still faces sexism because she is told that she works too hard by her husband and is expected to spend more time in the kitchen.¹⁰ As a whole, while there may have been a few exceptions to the norm, the shows made in the 1990s displayed just as sexist of views as shows made in the decades before.

That '70 Show writes some cultural references of the 1970s into some of the episodes. Some discuss *Star Wars*,¹¹ others mention Ford's pardoning of Nixon.¹² However, the one that stands out to me is the single episode that mentions the feminist movement. In the episode, Donna, a main character, takes her boyfriend, Eric, to a feminist rally. The writers of the show could have left stereotyping out of the episode, but following suit with the rest of the show, the women taking part in the feminist demonstration are portrayed as unattractive, hyper-masculine,

⁷ Janna L. Kim et al., "From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television," *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 2 (2007): 144-157, accessed March 10, 2018, Academic Search Premier (25138348).

⁸ Erica Scharrer, "From Wise to Foolish: The Portrayal of the Sitcom Father, 1950s-1990s," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 1 (2001): 23-40, accessed March 21, 2018, Academic Search Premier (4422440).

⁹ David Trainer, *That '70s Show*, Season 4 episode 18, (1998; Los Angeles, CA: CBS Studio Center), Netflix.

¹⁰ Ibid Season 2 episode 8.

¹¹ Ibid Season 1 episode 20.

¹² Ibid Season 1 episode 3.

and acting irrationally.¹³ It is not surprising, given the show's sexist history, that they would turn this opportunity to discuss more of the huge feminist movement of the 1970s into a joke pointed at women. In the show, when Eric and Donna are at the rally, they are expressing public displays of affection and there is some sort of misunderstanding. The girls at the rally are then seen chasing off Eric because they believe he was trying to sexually harass Donna, despite both Eric and Donna trying to calm them down.¹⁴ This paints them in an unrealistically irrational way, just to get a laugh. It is probably for the best that the show did not discuss other issues feminists faced in the 1970s because the topics likely would have been tarnished with ill-advised jokes that do not represent feminist women of the 1970s as the intelligent, passionate activists that they were.

Despite some progress being made in the seventies, the nineties were still a time of sexism; and unfortunately, many of the gains for gender equality fought for during the 1970s were undermined within the government and Hollywood during the 1990s. Cases like *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) show that women were still treated as not only the inferior gender, but as incapable to make their own decisions. The main points in the case were that women should not be allowed to get abortions because it could be harmful to their bodies. However, one of the main arguments within the case was the "spousal notification provision."¹⁵ Pro-life activists tried to argue that women should not be allowed to get abortions without informing their husbands first, and minors needed at least one parent to consent in order to get an abortion. The

¹³ Ibid Season 7 episode 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jessica Waters, "Women's Leadership in the Reproductive Rights Movement," *Gender and Women's Leadership: A Reference Handbook*: Chapter 77, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org.pluma.sjfc.edu/10.4135/9781412979344.n77>

freedom women gained over their own bodies from *Roe v. Wade* was jeopardized during this case; the choices they could make about their own bodies was now lessened because the court ruled in favor of spousal notification and parental consent.

Another governmental issue worth noting that arose during the making of *That '70s Show* was the George W. Bush Administration's restrictions on access to birth control for women and sex education for schools. In his first year as president, Bush tried to retract laws that required insurance companies to cover birth control for millions of federal employees, withdrew funding from family-planning groups providing contraceptive and abortion services, and pushed for abstinence only education in schools.¹⁶ His defense for these injustices against women was funding problems, but I believe it is fairly clear that he had old fashioned, conservative views about women and their bodies. In a position of power, he was able to negate the work that the feminist movement had done in the 1970s. These governmental issues heavily contrast, and challenge, the progress that was made in the 1970s regarding women's rights.

Not only was the government regressing to a time before the 1970s feminist movement, but the television and film industry of Hollywood had little progression in women's rights since the 1970s. The industry in Hollywood can be a cruel one to women, and it has been that way for decades. In recent years, many women working in Hollywood have come forward to discuss the sexual injustices they have experience within the past. It has become a huge movement and thousands of women have shared their stories. Some women have come forward and accused

¹⁶ Kelly Mangan, "Bush Administration Blocks Birth Control Access at Every Turn," *National Women's Liberation*, 2005, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.womensliberation.org/priorities/abortion-and-birth-control/position-papers/22-bush-administration-blocks-birth-control-access-at-every-turn>.

Danny Masterson, the man who played Hyde in *That '70s Show*, of sexual assault in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁷ He would have been filming *That '70s Show* at this time. It now seems even more distasteful to know that one of the main characters on the show was sexually assaulting women off camera, and “jokingly” treating women in the show with little respect. Thankfully, when the accusations arose, he was cut from his most recent project, which was a show he had been starring in with Ashton Kutcher, Kelso in *That '70s Show*.¹⁸ I believe it is crucial for producers to take actions when serious allegations like this one are brought to their attention.

That '70s Show demonstrates this unacceptable treatment of women throughout the series. One of the show's central comedic elements that is displayed throughout the series is the female character's stereotyped personalities. The main cast is divided between five males and three females, and every woman is boiled down to a single dimensional character. In other words, none of the women in the show are dynamic in the way that the men are. There is a rich snobby girl, a literal girl next door, and a housewife mother, all very obvious stereotypes that the makers of the show do very little to develop any further than such. The men, although similar stereotypes exist, at least have more of a focus on their storylines throughout the show.

¹⁷ Natalie Stone and Christine Pelisek, “*That '70s Show's* Danny Masterson Is Being Investigated by LAPD Over Sexual Assault Claims,” *People Magazine*, March 3, 2017, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://people.com/celebrity/danny-masterson-being-investigated-sexual-assault-claims/>

¹⁸ Sara M Moniuszko, “Danny Masterson fired from Netflix's 'The Ranch' amid multiple sexual assault allegations,” *USA Today*, December 5, 2017, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2017/12/05/danny-masterson-fired-netflixs-amid-all-egations/922500001/>.

An example is in the seventh season of the show when Eric, a high school graduate with little ambition, takes a year off to decide what he wants to do with his life. This storyline is brought up time and time again in the season as multiple people ask him what he wants to do and why he is still not doing anything with his life.¹⁹ Donna, the stereotypical girl next door, went through a period where she too did not know what she was doing with her life. In the beginning of the sixth season, she was supposed to go to college but then, at the last minute, decided not to. In fact, she stayed for Eric. She gave up the opportunity to go to college for a boy. Her life decisions after this were not followed nearly as closely as Eric's were. The episode after she decides not to go away to college, it is briefly mentioned that she is attending community college but does not enjoy it.²⁰ That is all that is said about that part of her life. Instead, the show focuses on Donna's hair, because she dyed it blonde. The boys in the show fixate on Donna's new hair. Hyde, one of Eric's friends, refers to Donna's decision to change her hair as "fixing herself up all whore-y."²¹ The idea that a woman's hair is indicative in any way of her sexual promiscuity is absurd, and in my opinion, is not a laughing matter. A striking contrast to this is that men of the show would never be slut shamed based on their hair, or any of their other characteristics. This indicates that the writers of the show use the male and female characters in two very different ways; the women are written as sexual objects and the men are to have more full character development, while objectifying and ridiculing the women.

¹⁹ David Trainer, *That '70s Show*, Season 7 episode 1, (1998; Los Angeles, CA: CBS Studio Center), Netflix.

²⁰Ibid Season 6 episode 4.

²¹ Ibid Season 7 episode 1.

This problem of watering down the female characters' personalities stems from the writers of the show putting the majority of the focus on their bodies. This may seem like a quick conclusion, and without evidence, it would mean nothing. However, there is no shortage of exclamations made to or about women in this show to prove that their bodies are objectified over and over. One shining example of this is in an early episode when Eric, Hyde, and Kelso discuss Jackie, Kelso's girlfriend, and how her body compares to others.²² They tell Kelso that he should date somebody less annoying with a better body.

That moment starts a trend of the boys discussing the women's bodies in crude terms that persists throughout the entire series. Janna L Kim and the other authors that contributed to *From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television* point out that the men in this show are sexual instigators²³. This means that the men of the show are the ones "making the first move" or initiating the suggestive and, often times, sexual encounters. I would like to add to this observation that sometimes the sexual passes the men make towards the women are uninvited. In the example that Kim uses, Kelso squeezes a woman's behind as she is bent over, unaware of Kelso's presence.²⁴ The woman is uncomfortable at first, but is then flattered.²⁵ Scenes like these are less than amusing, and it is uncomfortable to think about this happening in real life and being taken as a joke. It is still sexual harassment even if a laugh track tries to convince viewers otherwise.

²² Ibid Season 1 episode 4.

²³ Janna L. Kim et al., "From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television," *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 2 (2007): 144-157, accessed March 10, 2018, Academic Search Premier (25138348).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David Trainer, *That '70s Show*, Season 4 episode 6, (1998. Los Angeles, CA: CBS Studio Center), Netflix.

The belittling and sexual harassment of women who appear as secondary characters goes beyond that of those who are main and reoccurring characters in the show. The female characters that appear in one or two shows are usually only seen as sexual object. In multiple episodes, the teenage boys in the show have seen a girl and commented on her body to get a laugh from their friends and the audience. The only purpose they serve is to be observed and degraded by the teenage boys. Oftentimes, they are not even given a backstory. In one episode, Fez throws a party to try to find Hyde a girl. Hyde is introduced to nine girls, each introduces herself in a fun and quirky way. When asked what he thinks about his options, he replies, “if I time this right, I can nail every single one of these girls... tonight.”²⁶ Not only does he crudely reduce these nine women down to their bodies, but he does so in one simple sentence. The worst part is that it is supposed to be taken as a joke, as prompted by the laugh track. The role these women played in show after this joke is over, and they are never seen again.

The creators of the show are missing out on comedic opportunity because they are focused on repetitive and degrading jokes pointed at women. Though, some would argue that the show should not be taken seriously. To a point, I agree with this. I understand that the writers of the show probably meant no harm, and honestly thought that they were writing funny material. However, when women are only placed in the show to be the butt of a joke, it becomes difficult to find the show funny. I believe the poorly done comedic insults directed towards women are a reason why the viewership count cut in half by the end of the series.²⁷ At some point, the jokes

²⁶ Ibid Season 4 episode 4.

²⁷ Christina Crapanzano, “Top 10 Shows That Overstayed Their Welcome,” TIME, March 29, 2010, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://entertainment.time.com/2010/03/30/top-10-shows-that-overstayed-their-welcome/slide/that-70s-show/>.

get stale and it becomes time to find a new point of interest that does not involve degrading and stereotyping a group of people. It is hard for a comedy to take on real issues and discuss them without seeming insensitive or harsh. It may be best, in this case, to stay away from putting women down for the sake of a joke.

Some overlook or misinterpret the sexism in the show entirely, which is a whole other issue. In a review of the show while it was still airing, a user criticized the show for its depiction of women as leaders. The commenter, in short, says “all the men are idiots; all the women are leaders”²⁸. According to this viewer, *That ‘70s Show* suggests that women are superior to men. I disagree and would like to point out how often women are belittled or objectified. While I find it hard to interpret this show the same way this viewer did, I can understand that possibly they misinterpret the show because of the dry humor that is occasionally used by many of the characters. However, it still does not seem possible for somebody to misunderstand the humor in this show entirely.

Another report where people completely miss the not-so-subtle digs at women is a CNN review of the show. It discusses how some thought the scenes where the teenagers hinted at smoking marijuana is “not so funny” but does not mention how inappropriate it is for women to be treated the way they are in this show.²⁹ The focused criticism on the display of recreational drug use, and not the mistreatment of women, is an indication of how women were viewed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. If the objectification of women can be overlooked so easily by

²⁸ LivingDog, “Castrating males continues at Fox,” *IMDb*, November 21, 2002, Accessed March 10, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0165598/reviews?sort=submissionDate&dir=asc>.

²⁹ “‘That ‘70s Show’ Gets Away With A Little Bit More Than Usual,” *CNN*, August 28, 1998, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/TV/9808/28/that.70s.show/>.

audiences, and it is seen as humorous instead, it gives the makers of the show permission to continue to portray women in this light.

While women have had to face inequality for decades, from all sides of society, be it the government or Hollywood, I feel as though today the feminist movement has only grown in size. Women and men, young and old, have gotten involved to try to end gender inequality. Women continue to speak up about sexual assault within Hollywood and protest for more freedom over their own bodies. However, shows like *That '70s Show* make it difficult for women to be taken seriously in real life because they are depicted as jokes on television. These sexist shows make it okay to objectify, harass, and mock women for their bodies and beliefs. It is no surprise that women have to work so hard to be treated with respect, given the way they have been represented in shows like this. Luckily, this show ended production in the early 2000s. I hope that as people continue to watch reruns of this show and shows like it, they realize how sexist it is and are able to learn that while they may find the jokes about women to be funny, they are a prime example of how not to treat women.

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