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Who's Laughing Now? From Lovable Lucy to Top-of-the-Rock Tina: How Women in Comedy Changed from 1950-2014

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Who's Laughing Now? From Lovable Lucy to Top of the Rock Tina: How The Role of
Women in Comedy Changed From 1950-2014

By

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ABSTRACT

HERSHEY, CAROLINE Who's Laughing Now? From Loveable Lucy to Top of the Rock Tina: How the Role of Women in Comedy Changed From 1950-2014

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This thesis discusses the evolutionary progression of women in comedy from the 1950s to the present day. By looking at the stand-out female comedians and entertainers from each generation, the change from Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* to Carol Burnett as host of *The Carol Burnett Show*, to Tina Fey and the multitalented new group of women in comedy. By examining the cultural and political climate of the time and how it influenced the unique style of comedy associated with each individual, a clear progression emerges. I would like to present my chapter on Tina Fey to highlight how far women on television have come since Lucille Ball's time and the bright future for women in entertainment—as actors, writers, directors and influencers. In refuting Christopher Hitchens' claim that “women aren't funny” because of the child-bearing implication of their sex among other criticisms, I will argue that women have succeeded and continue to succeed in the world of comedy by tracking this progression.

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I. Provocation & Prologue

In a 2007 *Vanity Fair* article, British-American author Christopher Hitchens boldly said, “Women aren’t funny.” Not only did he claim that females lack the necessary confidence and intelligence to generate humor, Hitchens argues that the comedy-killing “seriousness” of a woman is the result of her role as child-bearer. With the weak support of stereotypical female personalities and a backward perception of gender reasoning, Hitchens shocks and provokes with his ultimately misogynistic view of women’s inferiority in the comedy profession.

But how can this even be an argument, when the success of American female comedians is so apparent? How can Hitchens deny that women’s role in entertainment has evolved and shattered these imposed limitations decades ago? It appears as though Hitchens is blinded to the fact that humor is a universal characteristic, which can come in different varieties from culture to culture, not a gender quality, and that women’s progression and political movements over the past 60 years have debunked most, if not all of his claims.

In distinguishing between a man’s idea of what is funny, and a woman’s, Hitchens, with no evidence, puts the two groups at opposite ends of the spectrum, categorizing them as welcoming to or hostile to crudeness and mockery:

Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone's expense, and understands that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste. Humor is part of the armor-plate with which to resist what is already

farcical enough. (Perhaps not by coincidence, battered as they are by motherfucking nature, men tend to refer to life itself as a bitch.) Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is.¹

By dividing male humor and female humor into these two groups, Hitchens clearly has a vision of the world in which gender is an all-powerful force affecting every aspect of life. While there are obvious biological differences between men and women, the way in which female interests and concerns are perceived is solely a consequence of how society has assigned and imbedded gender roles. The idea of an ambiguous and inaccurate perception of women's social behavior was recognized long before Hitchens asserted his view, in English philosopher John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay, *The Subjection of Women*:

Neither does it avail anything to say that the nature of the two sexes adapts them to their present functions and position, and renders these appropriate to them. Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. If men had ever been found in society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing — the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.²

Since women have been oppressed throughout American history, there is no way to truly know the nature of a woman, or the nature of her ability to make jokes. Instead, Hitchens' judgment is the direct result of our gender-reliant and sexism embedded culture.

Furthermore, Hitchens says that we live in a society where not only can women not make or tell a joke, but they can't take one either, all because they would rather not

¹ Christopher Hitchens. *Why Women Aren't Funny*. Vanity Fair. 2007

² John Stuart Mill. *The Subjection of Women*. 1869.

be tainted by the cruel realities of life. But what is he basing this perception on? It seems that Hitchens is projecting some sort of convoluted fantasy that women are two-dimensional, delicate characters that there is just no way for them to compete in the harsh “man’s world” of comedy, and the harsh reality of life itself.

Astoundingly, his reasoning for this is that men are so intimidated by the power and reproductive role of the opposite sex that they feel as though they must defend their superiority through the game of comedy. Hitchens believes that it is this battle that differentiates the cause and effect of humor—once again with no proof:

Men are overawed, not to say terrified, by the ability of women to produce babies.... It gives women an unchallengeable authority. And one of the earliest origins of humor that we know about is its role in the mockery of authority. Irony itself has been called "the glory of slaves." So you could argue that when men get together to be funny and do not expect women to be there, or in on the joke, they are really playing truant and implicitly conceding who is really the boss.³

The biological argument that Hitchens presents echoes male theory from centuries ago, when Martin Luther, German monk theorized about the different bone structures of the two sexes and how that naturally indicated their chosen role in 16th century society:

Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips; thus they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and wide hips; therefor they ought to be domestic; their very physique is a sign from their Creator the he intended to limit their activity to the home.⁴

Both of these claims, while ridiculous, illustrate and reflect the social reality of then and now, which is important in the evaluation of comedy and the way social conditions augment it.

³ Christopher Hitchens. *Why Women Aren't Funny*. Vanity Fair. 2007

⁴ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, p.49.

While Hitchens' gross generalization that all men are "overawed" by women's ability to produce babies is far-fetched and exaggerated, the idea of attacking and jeering at an "unchallengeable authority" is not. In looking back to the earliest origins of comedy in ancient Greece, the ritual draws attention to the male foundations of comedy.

In ancient Greece, Aristophanes wrote *The Birds* in 414 BCE and *The Clouds* in 423 BCE. In both of these plays, mockery of authority and power, by criticize the supposedly all-knowing Socrates and satirize the gods. In the ancient Greek world, where men held all political power, it is not surprising that the very beginnings of comedy were centered on the idea of laughing at the ones who intimidated the most or had the most clout.

One widely accepted theory suggests that the word comedy originated from the Greek word *komos*, which refers to the god of revelry and merrymaking and was a ritualistic drunken procession performed by revelers in ancient Greece. Though we do not know much about this ceremony, some evidence shows that during this celebration, there was a possible focus on phallic dancing and "bawdy and ribald songs or recitations regarding of phallic processions and fertility festivals or gatherings"⁵ and men and women exchanged clothes. Essentially, gangs of men and boys went around the neighborhood or village hurling abuse at people, and the fake phallus aspect suggests a self-centered male celebration.

With the origin of comedy stemming from male abuse, it is unsurprising that the tradition, though it has evolved from phallic dancing, continues to prevail. In the ancient world, dominated by patriarchy, many traditions in addition to comedy arose in a male-

⁵ Aristotle. trans. S.H. Butcher. *Poetics*. Section 1449a. 350 B.C.E.

only environment. Because of this, the classic texts known as the Western canon are often the source of the blatant sexism and apparent social norms that remain in 21st century religion, society, and culture. The continuity of sexist comedy and culture has persisted from Aristophanes' time to modern times:

If the writers [surveyed here] weren't themselves criminals, much less vicious monsters, they nonetheless created or perpetuated poisoned images of both men and women (and the way women should be treated and thought of) that are with us still. The canon is the calling card of patriarchy...⁶

Sexism in the Western canon inevitably has had an influence on our modern interpretations of gender roles. Specifically in holy religious texts, such as the Qur'an, which "established the woman's infantile status (as we continue to do with the phrase mechanically yoking "women and children").⁷ These historical moments have collectively built our perceptions.

Hitchens' rhetoric echoes the earliest kind of comedy, and shows how his claims cannot be legitimately applied to modern times. In ancient Greek and Roman society, there were no roles for women as writers or any other occupation and they did not partake in the Komos or any other men's debauchery, and since that was thousands of years ago, modern critics', like Hitchens, arguments related to this oppressive biological compensation are nonsensical.

Hitchens' biological argument that women's role as child bearer and the resulting intimidating "authority" goes back to the same sentiment that gave birth to the earliest forms of comedy. Hitchens is shifting an age-old view to today and using it to posit an

⁶ Peter Heinegg. Bitter Scrolls: Sexist Poison in the Canon. 2012. p.3.

⁷ Ibid. p.43.

exaggerated and inequitable gender gap in 21st century comedy. He sees his case as indisputable:

If I am correct about this, which I am, then the explanation for the superior funniness of men is much the same as for the inferior funniness of women. Men have to pretend, to themselves as well as to women, that they are not the servants and supplicants. Women, cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates.⁸

While notorious for his periodically controversial and vitriolic articles, Hitchens is not at all alone in this contemporary patriarchal attitude towards comedy. John Belushi, an original *Saturday Night Live* cast member who was known for sabotaging skits written by women on the show and who said “women are just fundamentally not funny.”⁹ Following suit, comedian Adam Carolla received a lot of backlash when he said, “Female comedy writers are always the least funny.”¹⁰

Centuries earlier, in 1695, British playwright William Congreve, who famously said, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” noted in his treatise, *Concerning Humor in Comedy*:

I must confess I have never made an Observation of what I Apprehend to be true Humour in Women...Perhaps Passions are too powerful in that Sex to let Humour have its course; or maybe by reason of their Natural Coldness, Humour cannot Exert itself to that extravagant Degree, which it does in the Male Sex.¹¹

⁸ Christopher Hitchens. *Why Women Aren't Funny*. Vanity Fair. 2007

⁹ Melissa Silverstein. Women and Hollywood. “Women Are Just Not Fundamentally Funny.” Indiewire. 13 April 2011.
http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/women_are_just_not_fundamentally_funny_john_belushi

¹⁰ Aaron Couch. “Comics Bash Adam Carolla For Saying Women Not as Funny as Men.” The Hollywood Reporter. 19 June 2012.
<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/adam-carolla-man-show-women-funny-339320>

¹¹ Gabrielle Moss. “A Brief History of “Women aren’t funny.” Bitch Magazine. 29 April 2013. <<http://bitchmagazine.org/post/a-brief-history-of-women-arent-funny>>

Such talk about female “seriousness” and “natural coldness” has helped to create a popular bias about women performers.. However, it must not be forgotten that these perceptions stem from nurture, not nature. For time immemorial, and decades of history, society has told women, and men, how to behave.

The issue with these canards is that they have caused critics to lose sight of the evolution, and the actual progress in female equality that has occurred. Why conclude that women can’t be funny when the public opportunity to be anything other than an oppressed partial citizen and a subservient wife was non-existent? In the heavily patriarchal society of the past, women were taught to keep quiet and look pretty. Women were told they wouldn’t appeal to men if they were assertive—and women are still often told this today. The media and advertisements of the mid 20th century promoted and spread these images, which permeated American culture and tried to keep women from entering any male professions.

The idea of an assertive or threatening woman is what Hitchens and the critics of women in comedy reject the most. Over time, the role of the female character has become increasingly more active and free. There is no longer a need for executives and networks to censor content to please male expectations or to act unthreateningly harmless. The balance of power in the world of comedy and entertainment has drastically shifted over a period of the last 60 years, and men no longer have society’s permission to control the show. As Christopher Hitchens states, “It could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not as rivals.” It is precisely this feeling that has anchored male domination in the comedy world for decades. However,

over the past 60 years, the role of women in comedy has become increasingly more aggressive, not only making women major rivals, but in many instances, dominant and more successful.

In response to the various claims that have been made that women aren't funny and are unwanted in the comedy sphere, Chelsea Handler, comedian and host of *The Chelsea Handler Show*, retorted "That's like saying you cant do math if you're not Asian."¹² The broad categorization of women as the less funny sex is just another stereotype that has dug its way into society's consciousness. In arguing that female humor has forever existed, Whitney Cummings, comedian and actress, said "Women have always been funny, just like gay people have always been gay."¹³

And the list goes on. The domain of American comedy is immense, and comedy itself cannot be reduced to a single form. There is simply no way to explain how a joke is funny without killing it, or why certain unexpected things make us laugh. However, while essayists, authors and comedians alike have argued for and against the topic of women's ability to do comedy for years, and have endlessly debated the gender theories, no one has looked back through time and systematically analyzed why and how these issues arose. The two most notable books on the subject, Yael Kohen's *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (2012), and Susan Horowitz's *Queens of Comedy* (1997) look at the careers of individual female comedians through interviews and their personal

¹² Jenna Goudreau. "Chelsea Handler Laughs Her Way To Power." *Forbes Magazine*. 7 October 2010. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2010/10/07/chelsea-handler-laughs-her-way-to-power/2/>>

¹³ Jenna Goudreau. "Women Aren't Funny and Other Hackneyed Marketing Ploys By Washed Up Male Comedians." *Forbes Magazine*. 19 June 2012. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2012/06/19/women-arent-funny-and-other-hackneyed-marketing-ploys-by-washed-up-male-comedians/>>

lives and challenges in the male-dominated comedy sphere. While they provide a good account of how each reached success and the various issues involved over different decades, they do not address the major issues of deep-rooted cultural sexism and the significance of shifting times and standards for women.

These shifts have been occurring in the United States since the mid 19th century, when feminist movements began to make waves. Throughout its various stages, the goals, definitions, and demands inevitably changed over time. The issue of representation played a large role in women's developments and progress in comedy, as greater autonomy and equality meant greater opportunity. However, with each generation's different ideas of what feminism means to them, there has been a shift towards women seeking to define themselves individually, as opposed to collectively. In an article titled *Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Politics of Representation* by Theresa Man Ling Lee, the subject of representation and how it has changed over time is discussed. "At the core of feminism is the issue of representation. Historically, feminism has always been a struggle for the proper representation of women. Postmodernism questions this agenda by questioning the very identity of womanhood itself."¹⁴ The identity of womanhood is a subjective matter, by which comediennees of the 21st century have defined through their own unique styles of comedy and their own representations of themselves and the characters they play. The complicated matter of feminism is an important component of the political shift that has occurred throughout the past 60 years and is still shaping

¹⁴ Theresa Man Ling Lee. "Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Politics of Representation." University of Guelph. Women & Politics. Vol. 22 (3) The Haworth Press, 2001.

women's roles today. Lee refers to the constantly evolving applications of feminism and its historical efforts as a "paradox:"

Thus, both politically and philosophically, feminism is a paradox. On the one hand, feminism exposes universality as a "fictitious construct" by pointing to the reality of particularism. On the other hand, at least historically, embraces universalism as an ideal in order to denounce exclusion and demand inclusion.

However, no matter how it is defined or understood, the politics of representation in feminism does not need to be clear-cut and set in stone. Inevitably, ideas change with time and progress. The representation of women does not have to be overtly political or confrontational, since the mere presence of an active woman not defined by clichés is itself political, even though people may not realize it.

In focusing on the major figures and defining points of each decade from 1950 leading up to the present day, I will survey the widespread and undeniable success of women in comedy, which disproves claims that women cannot compete on the same stage as men and show how significant the changing role of their character has been. From Lucille Ball, to Carol Burnett, to Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, the undeniable change in on-screen character reveals a steady progression and movement towards genuine, unabridged female representation in comedy. Beginning with singular standout stars that defined their respective decades, contemporary culture has evolved and expanded to include a multiplicity of diverse and uniquely characterized female talent, holding promise for the future of female comedienne. Claims about women's inferiority in comedy can hardly be seen as valid, when so many women have repeatedly proven their talent.

As Lizz Winstead, comedian and co-creator of *The Daily Show* pointedly said, “I think the stereotype will always exist. With this new crop of women, it is changing, and those that believe [that women aren’t funny] are becoming the exception. But sometimes the exceptions have the loudest mouths.”¹⁵

Cultural and Political Overview

In the 1950s, one in three women in the United States worked outside the home.

¹⁵ Jenna Goudreau. “The Year of the Female Comic.” *Forbes Magazine*. 24 September 2010. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2010/09/24/year-female-comic-snl-amy-poehler-tina-fey-kathy-griffin-joan-rivers-women-are-funny/>.

This was the era of the “happy homemaker,” where the purpose of going to college was to get an “MRS degree,” since finding a husband, getting married, and having children had a higher priority than education and career. In 1950, the average marriage age for a woman in the United States was 20 years, which was the youngest it had been in the previous 60 years.¹⁶

The Cold War also played a major role in women’s lifestyle during this time. Propaganda emphasized how the American nuclear family was superior to the Communist way of life.

American propaganda showed the horrors of Communism in the lives of Russian women. They were shown dressed in gunnysacks, as they toiled in drab factories while their children were placed in cold, anonymous day care centers. In contrast to the "evils" of Communism, an image was promoted of American women, with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the fruits of capitalism, democracy, and freedom.¹⁷

The idea of a comfortable, and well-kept home, where women took care of the children, cooked, and above all ,made sure that her husband was happy and satisfied was at the center of the 1950s ideal. For a woman to work instead of staying at home when extra income was not needed was viewed as selfish. Sexism in advertising was at its peak during the ‘50s, with popular taglines like “Keep her where she belongs” and “Show her a man’s world.” In an ad for Dacron Leggs men’s pants, the line “After one look at his

¹⁶ Median Age at First Marriage: 1890-2010. US Bureau of the Census. <census.org>

¹⁷ People & Events: Mrs. America: Women’s Roles in the 1950s. PBS.
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peopleevents/p_mrs.html 1999.

Mr. Leggs slacks, she was ready to have him walk all over her” appeared below a picture of a man with his foot literally stepping on a women’s head.¹⁸



The political message sent by Eisenhower and the Cold War propaganda, perpetuated by advertisements and media, was directly reflected in the era’s pop culture and entertainment. Specifically in television, the state of the country and the norms of every day life in America were ever present. *I Love Lucy* was the most watched show in the United States during the 1950s in four of its six seasons, and was the first to end its run at the top of the Nielson Ratings. In 2007, it was listed as one of *Time* magazine's

¹⁸ 10 Most Sexist Print Ads from the 1950s. Business Pundit.com
<<http://www.businesspundit.com/10-most-sexist-print-ads-from-the-1950s/?img=21454>>

"100 Best TV Shows of All-TIME."¹⁹ *I Love Lucy* remains popular, with an American audience of 40 million each year.²⁰ Lucy Ricardo, brilliantly played by Lucille Ball encapsulated the housewife stereotype and reflected the American culture of the decade.

The social changes that occurred from the late '50s and into the '60s were monumental. Arguably the most significant moment of the progression of women's rights and social mobility was the invention of the birth control pill. In 1960, the FDA approved the pill for use and just five years later, 6.5 million American women were on the pill, making it the most popular form of birth control in the United States.²¹

The '60s were the decade of sexual liberation and the start of feminist movements across the country. Since the pill freed women from unexpected and unwanted pregnancy, they had more choices in their personal lives. Women fought for equal pay, an end to domestic violence, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and for shared responsibility for housework and raising children.

The central text of this generation was Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*. Credited for setting off the spark of second-wave feminism and finally initiating discussion of "the problem that has no name" of women's unhappiness and dissatisfaction as housewives:

The problem . . . was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for

¹⁹ James Poniewozik. The 100 Best TV Shows of all TIME. 2007 September 5. <<http://entertainment.time.com/2007/09/06/the-100-best-tv-shows-of-all-time/>>

²⁰ Stephan Battaglio. "I Love Lucy Goes Live! - Today's News: Our Take". TVGuide.com. 2011-09-14. <<http://www.tvguide.com/News/Love-Lucy-Live-1037282.aspx?rss=breakingnews&partnerid=imdb&profileid=01>>

²¹ Alexandra Nikolchev. A brief history of the birth control pill. <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/health/a-brief-history-of-the-birth-control-pill/480/>> 7 May 2010.

groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, . . . lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?"²²

Friedan brought much needed attention to the fact that women were not fulfilled by the lives that men had constructed for them. All of the magazines, television shows, and editorial content of the '50s and early '60s were controlled by men, which created the "feminine mystique" of housewife happiness. Friedan also noted the earlier history of the gender gap and the issue of falsely classifying women's interests. Friedan rejects Freud's theory of "penis envy" and blames it for the misconstrued labeling of women. She notes that Freud saw women as childlike and as destined to be housewives, once pointing out that Freud wrote,

I believe that all reforming action in law and education would break down in front of the fact that, long before the age at which a man can earn a position in society, Nature has determined woman's destiny through beauty, charm, and sweetness. Law and custom have much to give women that has been withheld from them, but the position of women will surely be what it is: in youth an adored darling and in mature years a loved wife.²³

Friedan also points out that Freud's notion of "penis envy" had been used to label women who wanted careers as neurotic, and that the popularity of Freud's work and ideas elevated the "feminine mystique" to a "scientific religion" that most women were not educated enough to criticize.

The feminist revolution of the 1970s sought to erase the notions of the '50s and 60s and inspire women to pursue opportunities outside the home and dramatically change

²² Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

²³ Ibid.

their role in society. Major progress in the movement was marked by introduction of laws which allowed women to report cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 which allowed a woman to keep her job if she was pregnant, and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 which made it possible for women to apply for an independent credit card, resulting in more financial independence. However, women were still earning 45% less than men in the same position.²⁴

“A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle”²⁵ was a slogan coined by activist Gloria Steinem, who spread the message of women’s autonomy and right to independence and liberation. In August 1970, 100,000 women marched across the country to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 19th amendment, which gave women the right to vote.²⁶ The 1970s, which saw so much progress for women’s rights, also witnessed change in women’s roles as comedians.

The start of women’s liberation opened doors for Carol Burnett, who fought CBS executives for her contractual rights to host her own comic variety show. Inspired by Lucille Ball, Burnett went on to redefine the possibilities for women in comedy and inspired several other stars that would follow her. *The Carol Burnett Show* starred Burnett along with Harvey Korman, Vicki Lawrence, Lyle Waggoner and Tom Conway and ran on CBS from 1967, to 1978, for an impressive 278 episodes. The series won countless awards and proved to men and women across the country that a woman could

²⁴ Women Moving Millions. “Facts.” <http://www.womenmovingmillions.org/how-we-do-it/facts/>

²⁵ Susan G. Hauser. The Women’s Movement in the 70s, Today: ‘You’ve Come a Long Way’ But...” [workforce.com http://www.workforce.com/articles/the-women-s-movement-in-the-70s-today-you-ve-come-a-long-way-but](http://www.workforce.com/articles/the-women-s-movement-in-the-70s-today-you-ve-come-a-long-way-but) 15 May 2012.

²⁶ Susan G. Hauser. The Women’s Movement in the 70s, Today: ‘You’ve Come a Long Way’ But...” [workforce.com http://www.workforce.com/articles/the-women-s-movement-in-the-70s-today-you-ve-come-a-long-way-but](http://www.workforce.com/articles/the-women-s-movement-in-the-70s-today-you-ve-come-a-long-way-but) 15 May 2012.

absolutely complete in the “man’s world” of comedy. Burnett broke down boundaries with her spontaneity and outgoing style, and her constantly changing roles bypassed the previous standards of women on television as seen in the sitcoms of the past decades. As Lucille Ball was ladylike and lovable on *I Love Lucy*, Carol Burnett was over-the-top goofy, moving away from the assumed characterization of women in entertainment. At a time when the sub-culture was radical and politics were unpredictable, Burnett proved to the women the country that she could be what she wanted to be and so could they.

As sketch comedy evolved from slapstick and physical comedy, *Saturday Night Live* was born in New York City in the mid ‘70s, a place and time where liberal democratic culture and edgy social commentary were alive and well. Transitioning from season to season, the cast changed from a predominantly male “boy’s club” to a more diverse group of talent. In 1997, when Tina Fey, an aspiring improv artist in Chicago interviewed for a writing position on the show, everything changed. Fey often praised Carol Burnett for opening the doors for her and inspiring her as a child to be a sketch comedian and play a variety of different characters. Fey worked her way up at SNL and became head writer in 1999. During her time at the show she honed her own unique brand of comedy, more sophisticated and explicitly feminist, than those women before her. A jack-of-all-trades, Fey has written, acted and directed sketches, sitcoms, and movies. As a woman in the 21st century, she has proved that there are no longer limits for women in comedy. With the rise of third-wave-feminism, female political candidates, and strong career-driven women, the era from the ‘90s to the present day are a culminating chapter in the record of progress that has been made over the last 60 years.

Lucille Ball

Lucille Ball's legendary role as Lucy Ricardo has gone down in history as brilliant and unmatched. "Lucy, I'm home!" became a household saying and everyone could hum the catchy opening theme song. *I Love Lucy* was the most watched show in the United States in four of its six seasons, and was the first to end its run at the top of the Nielsen ratings. *I Love Lucy* is still syndicated in dozens of languages across the world and continues to charm. The black and white sitcom starring Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance, and William Frawley, originally ran from October 15, 1951 to May 6, 1957 on CBS. The show was the first scripted television program to be shot on 35 mm film in front of a studio audience, and won five Emmy Awards. The show ranked third on *TV Guide's* "60 Greatest Series of all Time" behind *The Sopranos* and *Seinfeld*.²⁷ In 2007, it was listed as one of *TIME* magazine's "100 Best TV Shows of All-TIME". The legacy of *I Love Lucy* lives on, with an American audience of 40 million each year.²⁸

Lucy's adorable innocence and fiery red curls, her tendency to plot ridiculous schemes, which always got her into trouble, and the physical comedy of *I Love Lucy* painted a picture of a harmless and loveable housewife, childish and foolish, and entirely dependent on her husband. While in many aspects, Lucy portrayed the typical stereotype of a woman of the era—always secretive about her age and true hair color, and careless with her husband's hard-earned money, Lucy subtly defied the standards and conventions

²⁷ Bruce Fretts and Matt Roush. TV Guide Magazines 60 Best Series of All Time. 13 December 2013. <http://www.tvguide.com/news/tv-guide-magazine-60-best-series-1074962.aspx>.

²⁸ John Green and Alice Gomstyn. 'I Love Lucy Voted Best TV Show of all Time,' 18 September 2012. http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Best_In_TV/love-lucy-voted-best-tv-show-time/story?id=17263942.

of the 1950s through the vehicle of comedy. Lucy's comedic style was sharp and manipulative in a way that allowed her to be strong, yet charming and feminine at the same time, and her signature moments of utter chaos and ridiculous bouts of physical comedy got a laugh out of everyone in the audience. While Lucy was far from intimidating or threatening, she planted the seeds for subsequent female stars, and set a major precedent for future women in comedy. Lucille Ball was so successful and undeniably funny, that in the following decades, new stars would try to emulate her style and further break the boundaries for women on television.

Lucy was the star of a show named for her, which was a novelty and elevated her to major fame and fortune. The script was always centered on her and the show's name *I Love Lucy* was by no means satirical—everyone really loved her. As a female comedian, Lucy not only starred in a beloved sitcom, she went on to co-host the *Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* which consisted of one hour specials which continued the *I Love Lucy* show with the same major cast members, as well as managing Desilu Productions with her husband Desi Arnaz, and hosting *The Lucy Show*. Even when the politics of the entertainment industry limited what could be aired and what was acceptable for Lucy's character to do on screen, *I Love Lucy* appealed to audiences, especially women, because for many, her issues were an exaggerated portrayal of their everyday lives. Though the show is classified as pre-feminist, and many episodes involved extremely sexist plotlines, *Lucy* highlighted major cultural issues of the decade such as marriage inequality, which signaled a cultural awakening for American women. As scholar Lori Landay describes in her book *Millions Love Lucy: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon*:

Lucy pointed out the power relations between men and women, making it a participant in the proto-feminist mentality that was building in American culture

at the time. Lucy's attempts to escape the private, domestic realm and gain autonomy usually failed and became sources of amusement, but hints of equality in the Ricardo marriage shone through. Combined with audiences' knowledge of the stars' real life marriage and creative partnership, the possibility of a truly different and equal kind of marriage further called into question the "ideal" marriage of the time²⁹ ("Millions 'Love Lucy'" 26-7).

Marriage was the source of one of the show's biggest initial controversies, as Lucy and Ricky's relationship was not representative of conservative middle-class white America. Unlike other popular 1950s sitcoms, like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, *I Love Lucy* starred a mixed race couple. Originally, CBS doubted the viewing audience would accept a Latin American bandleader with an American wife.³⁰ In addition, Lucy was older than Ricky, which was also seen as non-traditional.

I Love Lucy was a product of its time, and its themes reflected the post-war culture and the domestic oppression of women. Since there were so many limits on women's freedom and autonomy, Lucy's character in many ways had to fit the housewife stereotype in order to be relevant for television, but Lucy was able to use humor to defy the expectations of her gender, and mock the circumstances imposed upon her. As explained by Nancy Walker, author of *Humor and Gender Roles: The "Funny" Feminism of the Post- World War II Suburbs*:

²⁹ Lori Landay. Millions "Love Lucy:" Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon. From: NWSA Journal Volume 11, Number 2, Summer 1999 pp. 25-47 | 10.1353/nwsa.1999.0013

³⁰ "100 Facts about Lucille Ball celebrating what would have been her 100th birthday" Examiner.com 6 August 2011. <http://www.examiner.com/article/100-facts-about-lucille-ball-celebrating-what-would-have-been-her-100th-birthday>.

The overt message embodies acceptance of the role society has assigned; daily life is presented as an elaborate game with the woman as the perpetually amused loser – defeated, smiling, by a world that constantly demands more than she can handle. Yet beneath the façade of the humor is a serious challenge to societal expectations (112-3).³¹

This picture of daily life “presented as an elaborate game with the woman as the perpetually amused loser” could be found in all corners of 1950s American culture. From advertising to fashion, every role was categorized by gender, and housewifery was idealized. In order to build this stereotype, marketing played a major role in promoting lifestyle propaganda that labeled women as simple, weak, and content with the role in which they had been cast. It is undeniable that these popularized images influenced how Lucy performed on the show and how audiences understood and appreciated her scheming. In the context of this sexist and gendered culture, *I Love Lucy* episodes provided a short social commentary on the state of the status quo. In an Alcoa Aluminum ad for a new kind of ketchup bottle, we see the incompetence and incapability seen as inherent in all women³²:

³¹ Nancy Walker. Humor and Gender Roles: The "Funny" Feminism of the Post-World War II Suburbs. *American Quarterly*. Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor The Johns Hopkins University Press: Spring, 1985. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712765>

³² Lorne Pike. “Advertisng Hall of Horrows. 15 October 2010. <http://www.lornepike.com/pikespeak/advertising-hall-of-horrors-part-2>.



You mean a woman can open it?

Easily—without a knife blade, a bottle opener, or even a husband! All it takes is a dainty grasp, an easy, two-finger twist—and the catsup is ready to pour.

We call this safe-sealing bottle cap the Alcoa HyTop. It is made of pure, food-loving Alcoa Aluminum. It spins off—and back on again—without muscle power because an exclusive Alcoa process tailors it to each bottle's threads

after it is on the bottle. By vacuum sealing both top and sides, the HyTop gives purity a double guard.

You'll recognize the attractive, tractable HyTop when you see it on your grocer's shelf. It's long, it's white, it's grooved—and it's on the most famous and flavorful brands. Put the bottle that wears it in your basket . . . save fumbling, fuming and fingers at opening time with the most cooperative cap in the world—the Alcoa HyTop Closure.

Alcoa 
Aluminum

ALUMINUM COMPANY OF AMERICA
 Pittsburgh, Pa.

The woman's red lips and dumbfounded expression, the amazed look in her eyes, and her dainty polished fingers perfectly present the image of an ideal housewife—always beautiful and put together, though shocked to be able to independently complete a task as “manly” as opening a bottle. The text of the ad insults a woman's intelligence and suggests just how limited their lives were in this context.

While Lucille Ball had the pinned curl up-do of a classic 1950s housewife, she was far from typical, and her enormous personality was too big for the confines of a kitchen stocked with easy-to-open ketchup bottles. By addressing and challenging societal expectations with comedy, *I Love Lucy* revived the ancient power of comedy as a tool to mock authority and gain power. The female “intimidation” factor can cause men to assert themselves aggressively in order to insure superiority; but in the case of *I Love Lucy*, the comedic tension existed in this very battle for equality and balance. Lucy refused to sit on the back burner while her husband took all of the control and proved how funny and clever women could be even in the man's world of the 50s era.

In this chapter, I will analyze specific episodes that illustrate Lucy's performance style and the pervasive themes of the *I Love Lucy* series. Lucy's quick and spontaneous schemes with her best friend Ethel, her determination to stand up for herself, and her relationship with her husband Ricky all played a major part in the success of her comedy and its enduring influence.

In the season one episode “Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Murder Her”³³ which first aired on November 5, 1951, Lucy becomes so engrossed in a murder mystery

³³ *I Love Lucy*. “Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Murder Her” Season 1. 5 November 1951. http://www.cbs.com/shows/i_love_lucy/video/?pid=1fncTEErOLN.

book she is reading that she becomes wildly paranoid about death. After her best friend Ethel comes over and shows Lucy how she has learned to tell fortunes with playing cards, she becomes even more suspicious when her fortune shows that someone is going to kill her. She soon becomes convinced that Ricky must be plotting her murder. During the chaos that ensues, Fred suggests that Ricky slip Lucy some sleeping powder in a glass of water to calm her down, which she sees and thinks is poison. At the end of the episode, Lucy is relieved to find out that he wasn't actually trying to kill her, and it was all just a big mix-up.

Themes in this episode touch on several aspects of the 1950s myth that women's minds are fragile and child-like and they should stay home to avoid getting into trouble. Lucy's irrational and dramatic reaction to the murder mystery novel sends a message to the audience about how reading can be dangerous for the naïve mind of a woman, and it is always the husband's right to fix the situation—in this instance, by drugging your hysterical wife to sleep.

Although this fear seems ridiculous, Lucy's paranoia should not be viewed as absurdly exaggerated. In the 1950s advertising and popular culture widely portrayed in advertising, jokes and references to domestic violence and the fear a woman should feel about not dissatisfying her husband. In this ad for the Putney-Bowes Postage Meter, an angry boss reprimands his secretary for presumably not working the machine properly or not sharing his respect for the new office equipment:³⁴

³⁴ Lorne Pike. "Advertisng Hall of Horrows. 15 October 2010.
<http://www.lornepike.com/pikespeak/advertising-hall-of-horrors-part-2>.



This image exemplifies the episode's themes of the incapable and weak mind of a woman and the right of a man to take action in whatever way he feels is best. "Is it always illegal to kill a woman?" is the unbelievable question that clearly relays a message of who is in charge, while threatening the "weaker" and passive gender. The woman's expression seems to say "dumb and proud of it" as if no one should expect anything more from her. In another ad for Chase and Sanborn coffee, we see a very similar situation:



Here, the husband is shown spanking his wife and punishing her as if she were a child over something as trivial as buying the wrong brand of coffee. In the text of the ad, wives are warned to “stop taking chances on buying flat, stale coffee” as if they should be scared of how violently their husbands will react. Once again, the cultural images that appeared in magazines and on billboards make Lucy’s fear in this episode realistic and sadly relatable for audiences watching.

In addition, the idea of women’s minds as too fragile and impressionable to read books is emphasized in the episode “Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Murder Her.” Such prejudices had been around for decades before *Lucy*, resulting in the media’s repeated exclusion of intelligent and independent thinking female characters. William Hill Brown’s 1789 Sentimental Novel *The Power of Sympathy* tells the story of woman becoming irrationally engrossed and carried away by reading. The themes in this episode emphasize childlike innocence and strongly enforce gender roles.

An emphasis on patriarchy was ever present, partly part due to the show’s

predominantly male staff of writers and also because of strict broadcast rules from CBS. However, few people knew that Madelyn Pugh Davis, the show's only female writer, wrote some of most popular and widely watched episodes. While it can be assumed that the other writers had chairs that simply read "writer," the photograph below shows the sexist distinction that marked Madelyn's chair:



Madelyn Pugh Davis was the brains behind the show's most hysterical physical comedy situations such as Lucy's standing on stilts, coping with a house overrun by baby chicks, and the classic chocolate conveyor belt scene.³⁵ Lucy was a professional actress, and she performed whatever she was asked. It wasn't until after the real-life divorce of Ball and Arnaz that Lucy had to take on a bigger role in managing the production of the post-*Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* show, *The Lucy Show*. When she had to take charge and be confrontational with her staff, she reportedly said, "That's when they put the 'S' on my name."³⁶ Woman writers and directors were highly unusual, even when the woman was the star of the show.

No matter what the scene involved, Lucy rarely hesitated to perform what was written for her. In a late New York Times interview with Davis, conducted just before her death in 2011, she reflected on Lucy's attitude towards the script³⁷:

"Lucy would do anything we suggested," Ms. Davis said.

Really?

"The only time she ever said she didn't want to do something was when she saw an elephant on the set and ran up to her office," Ms. Davis recalled.

The script called for her to retrieve \$500 from under the elephant's foot.

"Then the phone rang and it was Vivian Vance," Ms. Davis said. "Vivian said, 'It's O.K., I told Lucy that if she didn't want to do that funny thing, I'll do it.' And Lucy said, 'O.K., I'll do it.' So she talked into the elephant's trunk and got it

³⁵Dennis Hevesi. Madelyn Pugh Davis, Writer for 'I Love Lucy,' Dies at 90. 21 April 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/arts/television/madelyn-pugh-davis-writer-for-i-love-lucy-dies-at-90.html?_r=1&.

³⁶ PBS Pioneers of Television. *The Friendship of Carol Burnett and Lucille Ball*. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/pioneers-of-television/video/the-friendship-of-carol-burnett-and-lucille-ball/>.

³⁷ Dennis Hevesi. Madelyn Pugh Davis, Writer for 'I Love Lucy,' Dies at 90. 21 April 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/arts/television/madelyn-pugh-davis-writer-for-i-love-lucy-dies-at-90.html?_r=1&.

to lift its foot.”

Whether the scripts were written by men or women, what really made the show were not the lines read off the page, but the way in which Lucy so brilliantly brought them to life with her over the top animation and energy. As for protecting the image of the Lucy character, Davis knew as a woman that she had to make sure that Lucy always stayed within the boundaries of acceptable television. According to Tom Gilbert, a journalist who interviewed her several times over the years, “...it was clear she respected limits. She knew what a woman could and could not do and remain a lady (a desirable trait to many at the time) because she was the genuine article.”³⁸ These limits made sure that there was no room for controversy on the show. Due to the conservative nature of Hollywood and the television industry at the time, *I Love Lucy* was not allowed to use the English word “pregnant,” so the episode title “Lucy is Encinta” announcing the pregnancy used Spanish instead. Ricky and Lucy were always shown sleeping in separate beds, which made sure that no aspect of a sexual relationship between the couple, clearly in an attempt to preserve a traditional cultural image and preserve female “innocence” and purity on television. While these restrictions tried to protect the housewife norms, Lucy always found other ways to defy them.

Sex was taboo, which made one of the sitcom’s most watched episodes “Lucy Goes to the Hospital” widely popular and a breakthrough for television. The episode first aired on January 19, 1953, a date chosen to purposely coincide with Lucille Ball's real-

³⁸ Tom Gilbert. “The Woman Behind Lucy’s Laughs” 5 August 2011.
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/arts/television/madelyn-pugh-davis-the-woman-behind-lucys-laughs.html?adxnnl=1&ref=lucilleball&adxnnlx=1389463331-F9Wgr2ZUfcysPAx9l/ROEA&_r=0.

life delivery of Desi, Jr to increase publicity.³⁹ The fact that Lucille Ball was actually pregnant and still working through her entire pregnancy made the character even more powerful in showing America how bearing a child didn't mean having to quit work.

"Lucy Goes to the Hospital" was watched by more people than any other television program up to that time, with 71.7% of all American television sets tuned in, topping the 67.7 rating for Dwight Eisenhower's inauguration coverage the following morning.⁴⁰

I Love Lucy head writer and producer, Jess Oppenheimer writes in his autobiography *Laughs, Luck...and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*, "...deciding the sex of the Ricardo child was initially problematic. *Lucy* scribes initially wanted the Ricardos to have a boy, feeling that a boy would allow for more comical plot lines."⁴¹ Even in the midst of *I Love Lucy's* success, with its female star, 1950s culture still didn't fully accept funny women and their potential. The feeling that "a boy would allow for more comical plotlines" shows just how limited and predetermined gender roles were. It didn't matter if the child had turned out to be a girl; the writers had already decided that the Ricardos would raise a son.

This theme of male importance and control appears again in another episode titled "Be a Pal," in which Lucy follows the advice of a book (written by a man) that says when husbands aren't showing their wives much attention, it is the wives' fault for

³⁹ Donna Bowman, Genevieve Koski, Erik Adams, Todd VanDerWerff, Phil Dyess-Nugent & Ryan McGee. "More than 60 years ago, a pregnant Lucille Ball couldn't even call herself pregnant." 24 July 2013. AV Club. <http://www.avclub.com/article/more-than-60-years-ago-a-pregnant-lucille-ball-cou-100629>.

⁴⁰ C. Hingham. *Lucy: The Life of Lucille Ball*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1986.

⁴¹ Jess Oppenheimer. *Laughs, Luck...and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*. Syracuse University Press: 1996.

neglecting their appearance or doing other things wrong.⁴² Lucy, nervous that her “honeymoon phase” with Ricky is going to end, takes the advice of a book called “How to Keep Your Honeymoon from Ending” to extremes by doing things like turning the apartment into a Cuban paradise and dressing up to cook breakfast.⁴³ As always, Lucy’s attempts fail miserably, garner lots of laughs, and everything is happily resolved.

An actual book published in 1948 entitled *Marriage for Moderns* by Henry A. Bowman, give the same sort of advice. In typical 1950s relationships, it was supposedly of the upmost importance that the woman did everything she could to please her man, as shown in a *1950s Guide to Dating* video based on Bowman’s book⁴⁴ (see link in footnotes). In the short twelve-minute segment, the narrator Mary goes to her friend Eve to get dating advice. Eve tells her about all of the bad dates she has had and the relationships that have failed. Mary tells her friend that it is actually *she* who needs to change, not the men, because her personal style is simply too demanding (e.g., telling the men where she would like to go on their outings, preferring not to stay inside and watch them build boats, and expressing frustration when they flirt with other women).⁴⁵ Making sure that the man is happy always comes first.

In Lori Landay’s *Millions “Love Lucy:” Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon*, this same focus on the theme of domestic anxiety and pressure is shown:

⁴² “Millions ‘Love Lucy’: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon.” *NWSA Journal* 11.2 (1999): 25-46. JSTOR.

⁴³ *I Love Lucy*. “Mama yo quiero: Be a Pal”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlndNoogYnI>.

⁴⁴ Alessandra Ram. “Finding Mr. Right: A 1950s Guide to Dating.” 5 April 2013. The Atlantic. <http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2013/04/finding-mr-right-a-1950s-guide-to-dating/274670/>.

⁴⁵ Alessandra Ram. “Finding Mr. Right: A 1950s Guide to Dating.” 5 April 2013. The Atlantic. <http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2013/04/finding-mr-right-a-1950s-guide-to-dating/274670/>.

Overall, the series offers consumption as the solution to Lucy's dissatisfaction, an example of the consumerist-ethos that presented private solutions to public problems. However, at the same time that the phenomenon participated in the mass consumer economy, the show's comedy played on conflicts and anxieties about consumption and domesticity.⁴⁶

By using her comedy to “play on conflicts” Lucy created a new and innovative style of entertainment. Even when situations got out of control and she was left scrambling to pull things together, *Lucy* episodes were always full of laughs, and the issues were perfectly resolved. The conflicts on which Lucy “played on” often involved matters relating to her marriage to Ricky Ricardo. Lucy regularly defied Ricky’s dominance in their relationship and defended her rights through her sweet yet demanding tone.

One example of this is Season One Episode Three "Equal Rights."⁴⁷ In it, Ricky gets tired of Lucy’s “making all the decisions” and tells her that he is in control and she must do what he says. At first, Lucy sweetly replies “Sí, Señor,” but quickly storms back in to the room and puts Ricky in his place.

Ricky: We're going to run this house like we do in Cuba; where the man is the master and the woman does what she's told.

Lucy: I don't know how you treat your women in Cuba but this is the United States and I have my rights!

Ricky: I am the first one to agree that women should have all the rights they want. As long as they stay in their place!⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Lori Landay. Millions “Love Lucy:” Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon. From: *NWSA Journal* Volume 11, Number 2, Summer 1999 pp. 25-47 |

⁴⁷ *I Love Lucy*. “Equal Rights” Season One Episode 3.

http://www.cbs.com/shows/i_love_lucy/.

⁴⁸ *I Love Lucy*. “Equal Rights” Season One Episode 3.

http://www.cbs.com/shows/i_love_lucy/.

Lucy's quick "Sí, Señor," quip shows her careful yet hard-hitting style. By using comedy to mock obedience to Ricky, she stops just short crossing the line of being disrespectful and just shy of talking back. In this way, Lucy uses comedy to subtly challenge and show power by defying Ricky's rules and asserting herself.

Ricky and Fred agree that women and men have different places. Fred remarks that there are two types of people, the people who earn money and the people who spend it—"better known as husbands and wives." This comment angers Lucy and Ethel and they demand to have equal rights. The wives tell their husbands that they want to be treated as if they were men, and chaos ensues as usual.

Although the equal rights experiment doesn't work out in the Lucy and Ethel's favor because they don't have any money of their own, their desire to be treated as independent and equal reflects what many American housewives across the country were feeling. In Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 about six years after the *I Love Lucy* series finale, this dissatisfaction with housewifery is addressed:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night — she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question — "Is this all?"⁴⁹

Lucy always wanted more, especially when it came to show business, and she was never content to be bored. At this moment in time, progress in equal rights would not be seen for many years, but references to change were addressed lightly on the show. Continuing with sense of yearning for equality and the restructuring of gender roles, one of the

⁴⁹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

show's most memorable episodes, Season Two, Episode Four "Job Switching"⁵⁰ experiments with the idea of men and women trading places and women getting out of the house, as Friedan advocated. Lucy and Ethel and Ricky and Fred want to prove to each other that they are capable of switching roles. Lucy and Ethel get jobs to earn money and Ricky and Fred take on the job of household chores. In the end, Lucy and Ethel get fired from their jobs at the candy factory and Ricky and Fred fail miserably at cooking and cleaning the house.

Throughout this very funny episode, Lucy's expertise in physical humor shines though. While trying to quickly wrap the chocolates on the fast moving conveyor belt, Lucy's performance is priceless and the laughter from the live studio audience is abundant. Lucy is determined to do the job no matter what it takes—eating the chocolate, stuffing it into her blouse, and filling her hat with it. Even when in the end it doesn't work out, Lucy's determination to prove her husband wrong and her refusal to succumb to his "better judgment" represented the start of a revolution. Lucy's style of physical comedy is used in this episode as a way to show her relentless determination. It doesn't work out in the end, and the two couples agree to go back to the way things were, a small step was taken and a foundation laid for women on television and women watching television.

Lucy addressed matters subtly, and with humor, to avoid appearing too bold and "masculine" for the time. Her wide-eyed expressions and innocent looks made her both

⁵⁰ *I Love Lucy*. "Job Switching" Season Two Episode Four.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FLpXmxTbbM

lovable and powerful while ratings soared. *I Love Lucy* was a monument in the evolution of women in comedy because of Lucille Ball's unmatched performances and her unstoppable success. In the decade to come, the '60s would bring greater cultural complexity and freedom for women. Near the end of Ball's life, she spoke in a February 1980 *People Magazine* interview about who her favorite current comediennees were. She responded, "Carol Burnett—she heads my list, absolutely. That girl can do anything."⁵¹ The standout star that would follow Lucy, her close friend, Carol Burnett became the first woman to host her own variety show, *The Carol Burnett show*, and cited Lucille as a profound influence and mentor.

⁵¹Peter Lester. "Ask Her Anything About Desi Sr., Divorce, Drugs, Gay Rights—Lucy Ball Hasn't Become Bashful at 68." *People Magazine*. Vol. 13. No. 6. 11 February 1980. <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20075802,00.html>.

Carol Burnett

When Carol Burnett decided she wanted to launch her namesake variety show in the 1960s, one TV executive told her the genre was "a man's game."⁵² She proved him wrong with an 11-year run that averaged 30 million viewers each week.⁵³ The variety show featured short sketches in which Burnett played a range of characters alongside Harvey Korman, Vicki Lawrence, Lyle Waggoner, and Tim Conway and ran on CBS from September 11th, 1967, to March 29th, 1978, for 278 episodes. The series won 25 prime-time Emmy Awards, was ranked #16 on *TV Guide's 50 Greatest TV Shows of All Time* in 2002, and in 2007 was listed as one of *Time* magazine's "100 Best TV Shows of All Time." In 2013, TV Guide ranked *The Carol Burnett Show* #17 on their list of the 60 Greatest Shows of All Time.⁵⁴ Burnett also won two Golden Globes for Best TV Actress.

Carol Burnett had previously gained popularity on *The Garry Moore Show*, the CBS variety series that ran from 1950-1967 and helped launch her career as well as in her guest appearances on various programs, and her role as Princess Winnifred in the Broadway production *Once Upon a Mattress*. In a 2013 interview with Larry King, Burnett expressed how startled Mike Dan, one of the heads of CBS was when she first

⁵² Variety Is A Man's Game: How Carol Burnett Fought Sexism Larry King interview <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3ar3Uzx8mE>

⁵³ Carol Burnett wins top humor prize at Kennedy Center. The Christian Science Monitor. <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Latest-News-Wires/2013/1021/Carol-Burnett-wins-top-humor-prize-at-Kennedy-Center>. 21 October 2013.

⁵⁴ The Carol Burnett Show (TV Series 1967-1978) Internet Movie Data Base. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061240/>

called him with her request to host her own show.⁵⁵ Burnett recalls him listing the men that dominated the world of comedy at the time, such as Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Dean Martin, and Jackie Gleason, and instead trying to persuade her to do a new sitcom pilot called *Here's Agnes* instead. Burnett refused to accept the unexciting and standard women's role and pushed for the variety show where she would be able to play different characters each week. Thanks to a forgotten clause in her contract, which stated that if she wanted, CBS would have to allow for the production of her own show for at least 30 days, Carol Burnett became the first female variety show host. In an interview with AARP, she explained the clause and how she persuaded CBS to let her go on with the show:

Q. When you look back, what kind of obstacles do you see that you faced as a woman in comedy?

A. The obstacle was when I wanted to do my own variety show. I had it in my contract with CBS, a very weird clause that was never written before and certainly not since, that if I wanted to do a variety show within the first five years of the contract, CBS would have to put it on for 30 shows. I never thought I'd want to do it. But it was the end of the fifth year, the week between Christmas and New Years, and my husband and I looked at each other and he said, "Maybe we should push that button and exercise that clause." We were in California and I remember calling one of the CBS vice presidents in New York, and I said, "I think I want to push that button." There was a long pause, then he said, "What button?" He'd forgotten. He said, "Oh, wow, let me get back to you." And I'm sure he got tons of lawyers away from Christmas parties that week. [Laughs.]

Thankfully, due to that contractual obligation, the network had to go ahead with *The Carol Burnett Show* project. With this extraordinary opportunity in hand, Burnett was not going to sit back and let CBS give her only minimal necessities for a variety show. "I want to be different people every week. And to have sketches and music

⁵⁵ Variety Is A Man's Game: How Carol Burnett Fought Sexism Larry King interview <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3ar3Uzx8mE>

especially, and guest stars and a rep company and dancers and singers and an orchestra — you know, the whole thing." And I said, "This is all I know, all I want to do."⁵⁶ Burnett, in many ways, got everything she wanted and more. As a pioneer for American women in comedy, Carol Burnett, the young girl who had idolized Lucille Ball as a role model, became an idol herself for then young and aspiring sketch comedienne Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. When Burnett received comedy's most prestigious award, *The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor* in 2013, friends, fans, and co-stars were present to praise her profoundly influential career and lifetime of accomplishments.

Speaking about the relationship between Ball and Burnett, and the impact that they had on one another was Lucie Arnaz, daughter of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

Arnaz spoke of her mother Lucille's impact on Carol's success and vis-a-versa:

...That's what truly funny people are, they're believable. My mother understood that, and she had that quality I think, and that's one of the reasons she loved Carol Burnett. Carol has always known that. That's why they worked so well together. But to us, Carol was more than funny. She was family. And ours was a pretty "normal" family, much like yours, I'm sure [Laughs].... Carol was a frequent guest on my mother's "The Lucy Show" and then the later "Here's Lucy" show.. every body loved when it was a Carol Burnett guest week,..My mother was always so much happier and more relaxed whenever you were there, Carol. Carol, for years you have graciously continued to thank my mom for her support and always being there when you needed her, but I gotta tell you, I feel the same way about you. I'm very honored to be here representing that family tonight, and the incredible honor that is being bestowed upon you.⁵⁷

The work that Ball and Burnett did together was remarkable collaboration, and the mixing of the two talents was delightful for the audience. Ball's mastery of physically

⁵⁶ Christina Ianzito. "What's So Funny About Carol Burnett?" AARP interview. <http://www.aarp.org/entertainment/television/info-01-2013/whats-so-funny-about-carol-burnett.html> 4 January 2013.

⁵⁷ "Mark Twain Prize of Carol Burnett" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO67yltcpFc>.

comedy clearly rubbed off on Burnett, and the chemistry between the two of them was apparent in their appearances together. Both women were pioneers for a new age of comedy, and in the years during which their careers coincided, they had many memorable moments on television.

In Burnett's early career, before her own variety show had been established, she had a role on a CBS special that aired in 1966 in which she starred alongside Lucille Ball in a sketch called "Chutzpah."⁵⁸ The sketch begins at the William Morris Film Agency with the voices of two women discussing issues with the budget and actors for an upcoming movie. Ball and Burnett emerge from the office door as cleaning ladies, Emily and Evelyn, not movie executives as expected, and continue to talk about the movie budget as if they were in charge. When Burnett tells Ball that she's engaged to her boyfriend, a door man at Paramount, Ball jokes "you know how I feel about show business marriages. Don't come crying to me when your careers clash." When Burnett says that they're just fooling themselves because they're not really in show business, they're just a couple of "unimportant cleaning women," Ball launches into a speech about how they are just as important as anyone in show business and have a "special something" inside them. Burnett and Ball then break into song and dance, boasting that they have "chutzpah," the confidence, drive, charisma, excitement, and ambition to be big time in the industry. "We're movin' up where we belong," they sing as they shatter glass vases, throw papers around, and dump their cleaning supplies all over as the office while marching around with their mops.

⁵⁸ Lucille Ball & Carol Burnett- Chutzpah! (Full Sketch) *Carol* +2.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3XB4XXYhDs>

The lively performance shows the seamless interaction between the two women and the attention they commanded as a duo. This particular sketch not only serves as a highly comical musical performance, it is also a major testament to the “moving up” attitude that many women besides comedienues were passionate about, but as American women were striving and fighting to “move up” in their professions, their marriages, their right to equal pay and education, and virtually all areas in which they were oppressed by men. Ball and Burnett play ambitious maids at the film studio who want to have bigger, more important roles in the film industry. The movie budgets, the casting of major actors, and other “men’s work” is exactly what the sketch defies. Ball exclaims that they are not quitters, and that they have the “chutzpah,” the outrageous “nerve”, to make their mark on the world. Lyrics from the song proclaim “It means here I am, Get out of my way, I’m comin’ on strong/ It means look out, we’re movin’ on up where we belong,” a strongly feminist message and a clear declaration of power and opportunity for women. At one point in the sketch, Emily (Ball) tells Evelyn (Burnett) that she shouldn’t be the one to end her career in show business because it conflicts with her boyfriend’s. Outside of the boundaries of the *I Love Lucy* show, Ball clearly had more freedom to express progressive ideas.

What truly distinguished Burnett’s career from Ball’s was the fact that, as a 50s housewife character—having to please your husband, take care of the family errands, and be content with the homemaker role—Burnett was completely free to be herself, with no worry about offending anyone, and she didn’t have to be charming and dotingly feminine. Instead she was bold, and loud, and free to express herself on her own show.

As the host and star of a variety show, Burnett could play a completely different character each episode, and she had the support of her co-stars, which also happened to be her real-life best friends. While physical comedy and lovable innocence defined Ball's signature style, Burnett was versatile and unpredictable in her approach to entertainment. Famous for her witty responses during question and answer sessions⁵⁹ she often engaged in with the live audience at the beginning of the show, Burnett's impressive ad-libbing skills and on-the-spot comedy defined her spontaneous persona.

Known for her infamous "Tarzan yell,"⁶⁰ she often made strange noises and contorted faces at any given moment during a sketch. Her characters were never shy and always had strong opinions. For a woman, these outlandish acts defied the conservative image of the ladylike characters of the 50s, and the fact that the format of a variety show gave Burnett the freedom to constantly change is likely what initially worried CBS. However, sexist CBS executives were not the only ones who had doubts about the success of a female sketch comedian. Burnett's own mother, Ina, was not supportive when her daughter began to take an interest in acting. In her 1986 memoir *One More Time*, Burnett describes how her mother thought that she should be a writer because, "You can always write. It doesn't matter what you look like." This idea that the only way a woman could succeed in the entertainment industry was if she was beautiful was a standard that was just beginning to be broken in the 60s, as sexist attitudes in entertainment began to relax somewhat. Burnett often used self-deprecating humor to her advantage by mocking her own appearance for the sake of comedy and make jokes about

⁵⁹ Q and A (Questions and Answers) Carol Burnett.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvcxibuf9uk>

⁶⁰ The Carol Burnett Show. Tarzan Yell Montage.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvcxibuf9uk>

the fact that she didn't have the glamorous celebrity look of some her guest stars, Cher and Lucille Ball. Burnett's persona was unintimidating and relatable, making her one of the first tangible and relatable female TV stars.

As with *I Love Lucy*, the writers' room for *The Carol Burnett Show* was dominated by a male staff. Not only were female writers still rare during this decade, there also remained a sense of gender placement in the behind-the-scenes politics of the show. Although the show was hers by the look of its name, Burnett still felt a sense of hesitation and passivity when it came to taking charge of the show's production:

The writers were mostly men. We had two women. A lot of them moved out from New York to be with us who were on *The Garry Moore Show*. To me, it never became to be a boys' club. But on the other hand Sid Caesar or Gleason might go in and say, "Hey guys. This stinks...Let's make it better. It ain't working." But I would call the writers down to the rehearsal hall and I'd say, "Gee, I don't know, I think we need some help here. I'm just not getting this as well as I should. I would go in the back door. I just didn't want to castrate anybody because a woman doing that in those days would be considered bitchy. Whereas a man would be assertive."⁶¹

This fear of being called a "bitch" for simply acting in a position of power was a problem that unfortunately remained throughout the next decade. However, the predominantly male group of writers never blocked off Burnett's freedom to express herself without bounds on the show. Her lovable goofiness shattered all "ladylike" expectations and completely transformed the traditional role for a female character on television. In the earlier seasons of the show, sketches often involved over-the-top crazy slapstick humor that proved the plasticity of Burnett's characters. As the show progressed seasons, she noted how her characters grew with it:

⁶¹ Yael Kohen. *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York: 2012. p.94.

I started out as the goofy nerd. Zany, kook. And I would swoon over Lyle and make faces and so forth. After I think about the fourth year I started to grow up—on the show—and not be kooky but still be funny. And so I think our sketches got funnier, and some more sophisticated. Some still very slapstick, which I love too.⁶²

This goofiness earned her the title of “The Woman of a Thousand Faces” and the woman who raised goofiness to a “high art.” Burnett was hugely entertaining, and likeable for a wide audience of Americans of all ages and politics. Even as the show “matured” in later seasons, the slapstick humor that first brought Burnett to fame was still a feature of her most loved and famous sketches.

While *I Love Lucy* and earlier sitcoms portrayed the 1950s in its representation of women’s roles, relationships, and popular culture, the 11-year span of *The Carol Burnett Show* worked as a distraction from the reality of the political and culture changes which occurred during the show’s run. This tumultuous period in United States history was not reflected in entertainment, and certainly not in comedy. Every Saturday night at 10 p.m., millions tuned in to CBS to watch Carol Burnett and the tensions and transitions of the time were palliated by television for a half hour. America in the 1960s and ‘70s was in turmoil, both culturally and politically. While the “Swinging 60s” saw a relaxation of the racist and sexist attitudes of years past, the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and the sexual liberation of the decade defined major struggles in the United States. Demonstrations in protest of the US involvement in Vietnam and the Nixon administration spread throughout the nation and there was a deep sense of anger and distrust in the government felt. Struggles for equality and an end to segregation further divided the country. Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech

⁶² Yael Kohen. *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York: 2012. p.93.

in 1963 during the March on Washington calling for an end to racism and defining the Civil Rights Movement.

For women, the fight for financial equality was in full force. With access to the revolutionary birth control pill, more women were able to enter the paid workforce, but they became increasingly unsatisfied with their unequal salaries and sexist treatment in the office. In the 1960s, just 37 percent of women with high school diplomas were enrolled in college, but by the mid 1970s, enrollment had already reached 50 percent. Still, up until 1970, most colleges did not accept women, including Colgate University, Williams College, University of Virginia, Johns Hopkins University and Union College.⁶³

The increase in educated and unmarried women played a pivotal part of the feminist movement. Since more women had college degrees and were entering the work force, there was a decline in marriage and the birth rate. Many women were no longer focused on finding a husband as a top priority. The official incorporation of the title “Ms.” as opposed to “Miss” or “Mrs.” represented not only a step towards non-sexist language, but also an acknowledgment of respect for a woman as an independent part of society. The history of the word goes back to 1961 when Sheila Michaels, a member of the radical New York City feminist group *The Feminists* was looking for a title for a woman who did not ‘belong’ to a man:

Sheila Michaels knew the separation of the now common terms *Miss* and *Mrs.* had derived from "Mistress," but one could not suggest that women use the original title with its now louche connotations. Her efforts to promote use of a new honorific were at first ignored. Around 1971, in a lull during a WBAI-radio interview with *The Feminists* group, Michaels suggested the use of *Ms.* A friend of Gloria Steinem heard the interview and suggested it as a title for her new magazine. *Ms.* magazine's popularity finally allowed the term to enjoy widespread

⁶³ Years that Men’s Colleges Became Coed.
<http://www.collegexpress.com/lists/list/years-that-mens-colleges-became-co-ed/366/>.

usage. In February 1972, the US Government Printing Office approved using "Ms." in official government documents.⁶⁴

Incorporating non-sexist language and expressing the autonomy of women through a title that did not attach them to a man or a sexual connotation constituted further progress.

Gloria Steinem, in her widely read *Ms. Magazine* strongly advocated contraception as well as abortion rights. Just before the title "Ms." came about, in 1969, Steinem wrote an article published in *New York Magazine* titled "After Black Power, Women's Liberation," in which she fervently expressed the widespread, discriminatory pay gap burdening women's progress across the country:

For instance, there is hardly a hierarchy in the country—business, union, government, educational, religious, whatever—that doesn't discriminate against women above the secretarial level. Women with some college education earn less than men who get as far as the eighth grade. The median income of white women employed full time is less than that of white men *and* Negro men. The gap between women's pay and men's pay gets greater every year, even though the number of women in the labor force increases (they are now a third of all workers). Forty-three states have "protection legislation" limiting the hours and place a woman can work...⁶⁵

Gloria Steinem's leading role in the Women's Liberation Movement called attention to the lack of social and political freedom for women 1960s and '70s. The first issue of *Ms. Magazine* that hit the stands in July 1972 sold out nationwide with 300,000 copies sold in the first three days.⁶⁶ Steinem's political activism included the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus with other feminist leaders including Betty Freidan, Shirley

⁶⁴ "Ms.: Etymology." <http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Ms..html>.

⁶⁵ Gloria Steinem. "After Black Power, Women's Liberation." *New York Magazine*. 4 April 1969.

⁶⁶ *Ms. Magazine* Blog. "About" <http://msmagazine.com/blog/about/>.

Chisolm and Bella Azbug. As a leader of the caucus, she delivered her memorable

“Address to the Women of America:”

This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race because they are easy and visible differences have been the primary ways of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups and into the cheap labor on which this system still depends. We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.⁶⁷

Despite all of the progress made during those years for women’s rights, feminism still struck some people as too radical and too liberal. Unfortunately, the word “feminist” conjured negative connotations for the conservative majority of the general public, especially the diverse, nation-wide audiences of a popular CBS show. To this day, women and men are reluctant to proclaim themselves as feminists, even though the word itself simply proclaims the equality of the sexes. According to a poll conducted by *The Economist* in 2013, a shocking 72 percent of Americans said that they do not consider themselves feminists,⁶⁸ probably due to the negative associations and stereotypes made with the word that suggest behavior such as radicalism and lesbianism. In a *Harvard Political Review* article published in 2013 titled “Coming out... As a Feminist,” the origin of this problematic stigma is examined:

In large part, the stigma of feminism is rooted in the common, and somewhat archaic, perception of feminism as a radical concept. People believe feminism is radical because it challenges the status quo of a patriarchal world that oppresses women and denies them of equal rights. Others, however, believe that feminism is outdated because sexism no longer exists in the modern world, at least in the

⁶⁷ Gloria Steinem Addresses the Women of America. History.com. 10 July 1971.
<<http://www.history.com/speeches/gloria-steinem-addresses-the-nwpc>>

⁶⁸ Jennifer Harper. “Feminism may be dead: 72 percent of Americans say they’re not ‘feminists.’” The Washington Times. 1 May 2013.
<<http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2013/may/1/liberated-72-percent-americans-say-theyre-not-femi/>>

United States and other developed nations. As a result, society tends to view feminists as passionate and angry bra burners, men-haters and rabble-rousers, rather than advocates for equality and social justice.⁶⁹

Because many still have this perception of feminism nearly 50 years after the beginning of the first movement, it is easy to imagine the backlash that a major network would receive if it were to openly promote any political or social issue. Looking back on her career, Carol Burnett explained her initial introduction and personal connection to causes of the feminist movement and how she acted on and outside of the show in a 2008 PBS interview:

Q: You were one of the first female hosts of your own TV show, and many of the female characters you created were as strong as they were funny. Back then, did you consider yourself a feminist?

A: I really didn't at the time, until the Equal Rights Amendment came about. And the person who got me very interested in the ERA was Alan Alda. He's a feminist, and he took my husband and me out to dinner one night and he started talking about the ERA and what it was about. I was rather apolitical then but I said, "Well, that's not right. Women should be equal in the eyes of the law." So I got on the bandwagon. With our show, as we got a little more sophisticated, I wouldn't do negative jokes about women, or men, really. You know, we could do some funny put downs in character, but I wouldn't do it for real.⁷⁰

Despite protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience, The Equal Rights Amendment, that declared equality under the law regardless of sex, it failed to receive the requisite number of ratifications before the final deadline mandated by Congress.⁷¹ Carol Burnett was astounded when the amendment didn't pass, yet surprisingly many women viewed

⁶⁹ Johanna Lee. "Coming Out...As a Feminist." *Harvard Political Review*. 2013

⁷⁰ The Carol Burnett Interview.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/carol-burnett/a-woman-of-character/90/>

⁷¹ Roberta W. Francis. History of the Equal Rights Amendment.
<<http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/history.htm>>

the ERA as a threat rather than a positive and logical step for the advancement of women. In ERA support meetings Burnett attended, she remembers that there were women who feared that with the passing of the legislature, there would be a total change in social norms, specifically recalling one woman's remark, "well then my husband won't open the door for me."⁷²

During this time of grief and tension caused by the uncertain and unstable future of the country, comedy served as an important tool to provide relief and reduce stress. In a recent study conducted at Radboud University in The Netherlands, research showed how humor could successfully be used as a coping mechanism:

Humor has shown to be effective for increasing resilience in dealing with distress and also effective in undoing negative affects. Madeljin Strick, Rob Holland, Rick van Baaren, and Ad van Knippenberg (2009) of Radboud University conducted a study that showed the distracting nature of a joke on bereaved individuals. Subjects were presented with a wide range of negative pictures and sentences. Their findings showed that humorous therapy attenuated the negative emotions elicited after negative pictures and sentences were presented. In addition, the humor therapy was more effective in reducing negative affect as the degree of affect increased in intensity. Humor was immediately effective in helping to deal with distress.⁷³

This idea of "humor therapy" however, is nothing new. In 1916, Freud published one of the earliest scholarly works on the psychotherapeutic effects of wit and humor in his book *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. He wrote, "Wit is the best safety valve modern man has evolved; the more civilization, the more repression, the more need there is for

⁷² Makers "Carol Burnett Makers Moment: Supporting the ERA"

<http://www.makers.com/carol-burnett/moments/supporting-era>

⁷³ "Major Theoretical Approaches to Humor."

[http://www.reachinformation.com/define/Humor%20\(positive%20psychology\).aspx](http://www.reachinformation.com/define/Humor%20(positive%20psychology).aspx).

wit."⁷⁴ It is unsurprising that during the 60s and 70s, *The Carol Burnett Show* was so successful, not just because of Burnett's hysterical performances but also because of the perennial need for light-hearted entertainment and laughs.

In Freud's view, people told jokes when the conscious self allowed the expression of thoughts that society usually suppressed or forbade and the superego allowed the ego to generate humor.⁷⁵ Carol Burnett released everything that society suppressed through humor as a free woman on television; and, looking back to the ancient Greek origins of comedy that stemmed from male abuse, the origins of female success is inevitably traced to the moment when a woman was finally freed from male abuse, and given "permission" to host her own show.

The Carol Burnett Show showcased Burnett's signature performance style of flexibility and improvisation. Burnett's elasticity and the genuine connection she made with her audience turned her into a household name and set the stage for the female sketch comedienne that would credit her decades later.

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In the show's early seasons, Carol Burnett's "goofiness" prevailed. In a Season One "Dating Game Parody" sketch⁷⁶, Burnett plays a reluctant contestant on a dating game show called *The Rat Race*. The host introduces the three eligible bachelors and then welcomes the "beautiful" bachelorette Annie Spooner onto the stage. Burnett is dragged out onto the stage, completely disheveled and clutching her purse, wearing wide rimmed

⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud. *Wit and Its Relation To The Unconscious*. 1916.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1905)

⁷⁶ The Carol Burnett Show. Season 1. "Dating Game Parody"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQSinx5rJ4Q> 1967.

glasses and an ill-fitting dress and screaming that she doesn't want to date because she had a bad experience with a man. The host tries to keep her on stage as she repeatedly tries to run away. When she begins asking the bachelors questions through the wall, she tries to climb over to see them, revealing her underwear and causing the audience to explode with laughter. When she finally chooses bachelor number 3, he is revealed to be the man that she previously dated and complained about in the beginning of the show.

This seven-minute sketch encapsulates Burnett's knack for physical comedy and impersonation. When she put on the costume, she instantly transformed into that character. Her voices were constantly changing, and she was completely unpredictable at all times. The point of Burnett's goofy character, such as the dorky game show contest was not only to get laughs from the audience, which it certainly did. By being completely ridiculous and over-the-top in her performances, Burnett completely broke down barriers for what women could do on stage. Audiences never knew what was coming next. While sitcom stars like Lucille Ball also performed physical comedy, they remained a single character, and always came back to that reality. Burnett, however, was free to change at any moment, and her sketches were not limited by a full-episode script. From one sketch to the next, she transformed her personality, her appearance, and her presence. By looking completely disheveled, showing her underwear, and practically throwing a tantrum on stage, Burnett erased all conceptions of women performers having to be pretty, charming, and ladylike.

Similarly, in the Season 14 “Fireside Girl Book Signing”⁷⁷ sketch Burnett brings back a character from earlier seasons, the persistent and annoying Girl Scout. Burnett is dressed in a dorky scout uniform and hat, with round glasses and speaks with a heavy lisp as she cleverly swindles a famous author into donating money to her cause by spilling the secrets and mistakes of his book and sabotaging his personal affairs, all the while stealing the spotlight on a TV segment featuring his newly released mystery novel. Goofy characters were in many ways Burnett’s signature, and were an essential part of her success in winning the hearts of her loyal, nationwide audience.

Another key to Burnett’s comedic style was her knack for parody. Throughout the reign of the show, there were many parodies of famous shows and movies, arguably the most memorable moment of these spin-off sketches took place during the “Went With the Wind” episode, a spoof of *Gone With the Wind*. Burnett comes down the stairs wearing a dress made out of a curtain, meant to parody the iconic green velvet dress worn by Scarlett O’Hara made from drapes in *Gone With the Wind*. After receiving a compliment on the gown, she says, “I saw it in a window and I just couldn’t resist.” This scene received one of the longest laughs of the show’s history, and propelled Carol Burnett to even greater status of American cultural significance and appreciation. The dress was recently donated to the Smithsonian museum in 2009.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ The Carol Burnett Show. “Fireside Girl Book Signing.” 1975.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaZoJLkWcBw>

⁷⁸“National Museum of American History Collects Legendary Burnett Costume.” *Newsroom of the Smithsonian*. <http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/national-museum-american-history-collects-legendary-burnett-costume>. 12 May 2009.



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While ridiculous and silly characters were popular on the show and undoubtedly some of Carol Burnett's most unforgettable performances, her versatility never failed to impress, as she was able to flawlessly jump from one character to the next. In the Season 9, *No Frills Airline* sketch⁸⁰, Burnett's goofiness is nowhere to be seen. In this sketch she plays an all-business flight attendant who does not hesitate to put the passengers in their place. The scene stars Carol, Harvey, and Tim and takes place on a plane. Tim is seated in Economy class, just one row behind Harvey in First Class, and gets drastically

⁷⁹ Carol Burnett's "Went With the Wind" curtain dress.

⁸⁰ The Carol Burnett Show. "No Frills Airline."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCz8he36hsk>

different treatment as a result. Burnett is sweet and accommodating to Harvey, but immediately turns mean and frustrated whenever Tim has a request. She ropes him to his chair when he complains there's no seatbelt, bunches up his jacket to make a pillow for Harvey, kicks his leg because it's on the rug that belongs to the First Class section, and whispers the flight safety instructions to the First Class passengers so that he can't hear them. The sketch ends with Tim asking what time they will be landing and Burnett opening door of the plane for him to exit mid-flight.

The comedy in this scene arises from Burnett's complete domination of helpless Tim and the humor in her strict demeanor, especially funny for an audience that knows the "real" Carol Burnett. In earlier comedy, a woman would never flatly disrespect a man's requests and get away with it. If we look back to *I Love Lucy* and recall how after telling Ricky that in America, women are entitled to equal rights, the episode ends with the women back in their place, at home, with their husbands proving them wrong. Subtly but surely, *The Carol Burnett Show* started to show more "woman in charge" sketches where Burnett's characters were women who could be powerful while being funny at the same time, debunking Christopher Hitchens' claim, that "Women, cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates."⁸¹

Themes of female power and feminism continued to come up throughout the rest of the show. In a Season 9 episode of the recurrent "As The Stomach Turns"⁸² soap opera parody of "As The World Turns," Carol plays Marian, a dissatisfied woman who lives alone in a beautiful house and ponders what is missing from her life. Cher, the episode's

⁸¹ Christopher Hitchens. *Why Women Aren't Funny*. Vanity Fair. 2007

⁸² The Carol Burnett Show. "As The Stomach Turns."
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzTA78ChXfE>

guest star, plays Pocahontas Pirelli, the town “half-breed—half-Indian and half-dressed” who tells Marian about Warren Pretty, the town’s new “swinging hair dresser.” Marian immediately books an appointment with Warren, played by Tim Conway, and hopes that he will satisfy her needs.

Sexual jokes are made throughout the episode, as Warren is interested in doing everyone’s “hair” but Marian’s. Throughout this sketch, Burnett tells Warren what she wants and doesn’t take no for an answer. Although on the surface, the sketch seems light-hearted and over-the-top for the sake of mocking the soap opera, there are also strong feminist undertones. The fact that Burnett’s character and the three other “clients” of Warren Pretty are actively pursuing sexual pleasure, as free and independent women was progressive and daring for the time. The sexual theme of the women-dominated sketch marked an important feminist moment, which was rarely seen in comedy shows during the ‘60s and into the ‘70s.

Cher’s revealing outfit, modest by today’s TV standards, exposed her belly button, which was extremely controversial and legally forbidden up until the mid 1970s. Cher became the first woman to expose her navel in television history, on *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*.⁸³ At the time, CBS worried that the exposure would cause public outrage and a legal case at the network.

The Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, banned the exposure of the navel because it simulated an “ergogenic orifice”. The navel was censored in women and not in men because the simulation or upward displacement from vagina to navel was commonplace and obvious in women.⁸⁴

⁸³ Linda Bilyeu. “Cher- Random Fun Facts” <http://sunshine625.hubpages.com/hub/Cher-Random-Fun-Facts>.

⁸⁴ Bob Mondello. “Remembering Hollywood’s Hays Code, 40 Years On.” NPR. 8 August 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93301189>.

Strict censorship laws, which had a major influence on the characters and plots portrayed on all types of television broadcasts began to loosen in the mid to late 1970s. This statement made by the Museum of Broadcast Communications looking back at the difference between the television programming of the 50s and the 70s shows how the laws adapted to cultural changes:

Whereas censorship in the 1950s and 1960s was based on the presumed standards and tastes of the white middle-class nuclear family, censorship in the 1970s became a process of balancing the often conflicting values of marginal social groups.⁸⁵

The diverse views and morals of a more progressive and culturally open-minded audience allowed for television to get real. *The Carol Burnett Show* didn't write sketches to appeal to one kind of conservative viewer; in fact they didn't even have ratings in mind. During the first season of the show, when CBS had no confidence that America was going to watch a sketch comedy run by a woman, Burnett spoke of how the cast performed without any inhibitions in an interview:

In our time-slot, come February, there was a question mark, which meant that had no faith. They had no faith in us. I remember saying to Vicky and Harvey let's not think about ratings, let's not think about anything except going out there but having fun. So we didn't think about anything we just went out and put blinders on and let it fly.⁸⁶

Carol Burnett's free spirit made her the ideal model of a liberated woman on television. Not only in the field of comedy, but also in the name of women's rights and

⁸⁵ Media History, Media Today. "Big Changes for TV Censorship in the 1970s" 28 June 2010. <http://befird2mediahistoryblog.blogspot.com/2010/06/big-changes-for-tv-censorship-in-1970s.html>.

⁸⁶ Makers Profile: First Woman Variety Show Host. Makers. <http://www.makers.com/carol-burnett>.

independence, Burnett showed America how “anything goes.” By changing characters from sketch to sketch and constantly surprising the audience with her spontaneity, she truly proved that she was absolutely equal to her male co-stars, in fact, she was the most loved and most successful. Carol Burnett admired the work of her predecessors, like Ball, but took it one step further to make comedy a theoretically boundless domain for women. During the cultural shift that occurred during the years of the show, Burnett’s status as an American icon defined a new chapter for women in comedy, as her show was the first and the last of its kind.

With Burnett, and her predecessor Ball, to thank, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler’s *Saturday Night Live* careers propelled them to stardom, not only as boundless, witty comedians but as writers, directors, producers, award show hosts, and cultural icons. *Saturday Night Live*, which premiered on NBC on October 11th, 1975 completely transformed sketch comedy with a liberal agenda and sharp-witted parodies of current political and cultural events. The slapstick sketches of *The Carol Burnett Show* were replaced with comically offensive impersonations of real-life politicians, news desk mockery with *Weekend Update*, and a diverse cast. While *Saturday Night Live* struggled with sexist discrimination as women were still fighting for their place on the comedy stage and behind the scenes, Fey became the show’s first female head writer from 1999-2006, bringing more women onto the cast, notably Amy Poehler, and marking a huge milestone for women in comedy.

Tina Fey

As a producer, screenwriter, actress, author, and comedian, it's hard to keep up with all of Fey's accomplishments. As a multi-talented entertainer and mother of two, Fey has proven that in today's day and age, there truly are no limits for women in comedy if you're willing to turn a blind eye to the sexist industry remnants of the past and prove them wrong. As she remarks in her book *Bossypants*, "As an improviser, I always find it jarring when I meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. "No, we can't do that." "No, that's not in the budget." "No, I will not hold your hand for a dollar." What kind of way is that to live?"⁸⁷ Fey's success is not only a testament to the progress that women have achieved from the 1950s world of Lucille Ball to the start of women's liberation of Burnett's time, it is also an indication that a new era in comedy has begun.

Fey has received eight Emmy Awards, two Golden Globe Awards, five Screen Actors Guild Awards, four Writers Guild of America Awards and has been nominated for a Grammy Award for her autobiography book *Bossypants*, which topped the *The New York Times* Best Seller list for five weeks. In 2008, the Associated Press gave Fey the *AP Entertainer of the Year* award for her satirical portrayal of Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in a guest appearance on *SNL*.⁸⁸ Fey's critically acclaimed sitcom *30 Rock* aired from October 11, 2006 to January 31, 2013 and is ranked #21 in The Writer's Guild of America best-written shows of all time. In 2010, Fey was the recipient

⁸⁷ Tina Fey. *Bossypants*. Little Brown, 2012.

⁸⁸ Jake Coyle. "Tina Fey: Entertainer of the Year" 24. The Huffington Post. 24. December 2008. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/23/tina-fey-entertainer-of-the-year_153078.html.

of *The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor*, the youngest-ever to win the award at 39 years old.

Getting her start at the improvisational comedy group The Second City in Chicago, Fey traveled to New York in the late 90s to try and get her foot in the door. Looking back on her first audition for *Saturday Night Live*, she jokes about the irony of being considered as a “diverse” candidate for the job.

In 1997 I flew to New York from Chicago to interview for a writing position at *Saturday Night Live*. It seemed promising because I’d heard the show was looking to diversify. Only in comedy, by the way, does an obedient white girl from the suburbs count as diversity.⁸⁹

After landing a spot on SNL, the rest was history. In just two short years, Fey was appointed as its first female head writer in 1999 by the show’s creator and producer, Lorne Michals. Fey continued to write, perform, and direct sketches until leaving the show in 2006 to work on her own project, *30 Rock*.

Throughout her career, Fey has had to deal with gender discrimination issues, that although have drastically improved from Ball’s and Burnett’s time, are still somewhat embedded in comedy show culture. When asked the dreaded question, “What is like to be a *female* comedian?” Fey has conjured up many clever, jeering responses. In her memoir, *Bossypants*, she says, “Here’s the truth. There is an actual difference between male and female comedy writers, and I’m going to reveal it now. The men urinate in cups. And sometimes jars.”⁹⁰ Fey’s jokes about the “boy’s club” atmosphere and the frat house environment of the writer’s room at *Saturday Night Live* reveals how physically out of place women were meant to feel and how unwelcoming SNL was when Fey first started

⁸⁹ Tina Fey. *Bossypants*. Little Brown, 2012. p.119.

⁹⁰ Tina Fey. *Bossypants*. Little Brown, 2012. p.138.

working there. In addition, former SNL cast member Jane Curtin has criticized her treatment as a woman on the show. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, she said, "You'd go to a table read and if a woman writer had written a piece for John [Belushi], he would not read it in his full voice. He would whisper it. He felt as though it was his duty to sabotage pieces that were written by women."⁹¹ Curtin continued to comment on how the male staff's attitude towards women reflected the cultural issues that were on the rise during the start of her time on the show in the mid- '70s, and went beyond the writer's room.

Women's liberation happened in the 60s, and so women were going out into the workforce and challenging men," she said. "Well, it was not necessarily embraced by the male population — understandably so. They were threatened by the fact that there were all these women going out into the workplace and they were going to have to compete with them as well as the other men."⁹²

Although Fey did not join the show until decades later, and has since proved herself one of the best, it's inevitable to encounter male critiques who still refuse to accept the change that has come. Belushi, who has been known to make sexist comments regarding women in comedy such as "women are just fundamentally not funny"⁹³ goes along with Hitchens, whose 2007 *Vanity Fair* article "Why Women Aren't Funny" received a direct

⁹¹ Melissa Maerz. Tina Fey and the 'SNL' Cast on 'Oprah:' Was John Belushi Sexist? *Los Angeles Times*. 13 April 2011. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2011/04/tina-fey-and-the-snl-cast-on-oprah-was-john-belushi-sexist-.html>.

⁹² Melissa Maerz. Tina Fey and the 'SNL' Cast on 'Oprah:' Was John Belushi Sexist? *Los Angeles Times*. 13 April 2011. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2011/04/tina-fey-and-the-snl-cast-on-oprah-was-john-belushi-sexist-.html>.

⁹³ John Belushi A Mysogonist? Jane Curtin tells Oprah Star Sabotaged Women's Work." 13 April 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/13/john-belushi-sexist-jane-curtin_n_848646.html.

response from Fey, who is quoted in the 2008 follow-up article “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” saying, “It is an impressively arrogant move to conclude that just because *you* don’t like something, it is empirically not good. I don’t like Chinese food, but I don’t write articles trying to prove it doesn’t exist.”⁹⁴ This short response gets straight to the point and makes Hitchens’ rash generalizations about an entire gender and his ridiculous claims about women’s lack of evolutionary “need” to be funny even more so, which is precisely how Fey has succeeded in becoming so unfazed by this chauvinism. In one incident with SNL co-workers Jimmy Fallon and Amy Poehler, Fey tells a story about how Poehler responded to Fallon’s telling her to stop something that was perhaps not “appropriate” for a woman to do, and again reacts to the male behavior with a simple lesson to women.

...She impugns the male tendency to pigeonhole female performers, again with comedy. This time, it's a story about Amy Poehler's early days at *Saturday Night Live*. Poehler did something lewd at a meeting, which prompted Jimmy Fallon to exclaim: "Stop that! It's not cute! I don't like it." As Fey tells it, Poehler then spun around, vehemently responding: "I don't fucking care if you like it." From this exchange, Fey draws a salient lesson for all women: "Do your thing and don't care if they like it." Don't dwell on the dogma of nonbelievers like Hitchens, John Belushi, and Chevy Chase. Work so hard that even Oprah questions your schedule.⁹⁵

By staying focused on her personal goals, as well as her goals for women, Tina Fey has been able to knock the disbelievers out of her consciousness and let no one stand in her way. Fey refuses to stoop to the level of her male counterparts and critics, allowing her confidence to define her success. In an article featured in *The Observer*, correspondent Paul Harris commends Fey for not giving into the nonsense:

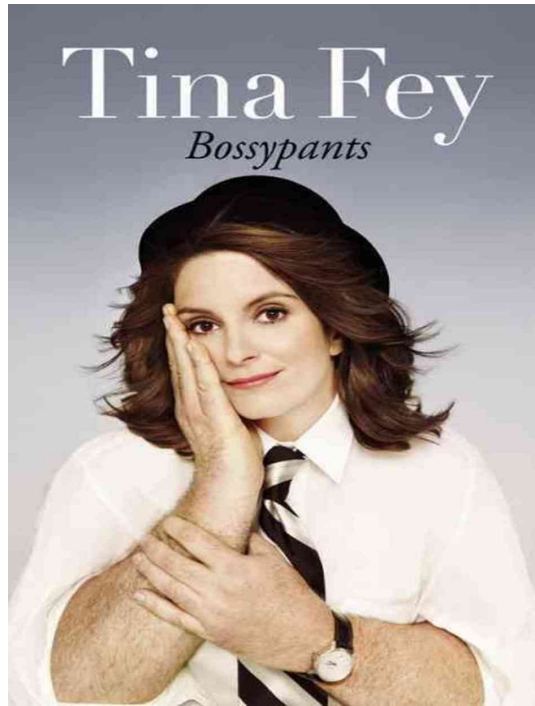
⁹⁴ Who Says Women Aren’t Funny? Vanity Fair. 2008

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Weingarten. Tina Fey: Comic Genius. Slate Magazine. 26 July 2011.
http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/top_right/2011/07/tina_fey_comic_genius.html.

Fey is not afraid to give as good as she gets in her working environment, which perhaps explains why she has done so well. Unlike some successful female comedians, such as Sarah Silverman, Fey has not had to outswear and outoffend her male rivals to do well. Instead she sticks to her strengths, trusting that her sly intelligence will carry her through.⁹⁶

What has made Tina Fey stand out in the crowd of other women in the comedy field today is this unwavering ability to stay true to herself and consistently write and perform her own unique brand of comedy that is not altered or influenced by men. Fey's signature style, proudly inspired by female comedy pioneers before her—specifically Carol Burnett—has become synonymous with confident and powerful women, cutting edge satire, and ultimately honest, candid real-life humor. Fey's comedy has masterfully combined feminist messages with light-hearted ridiculousness that makes her appeal to both men and women. Fey's comedy is not directly threatening, yet its intent does not go unnoticed. By poking fun at serious contemporary women's issues, among politics, relationships and a variety of other topics, Fey has perfected a style that is limitless and directly reflective of our modern cultural happenings. As clear as the cover of her 2011 autobiographical book, *Bossypants*, Tina Fey has literally and metaphorically “morphed” into a new kind of comedian:

⁹⁶ Paul Harris. Tina Fey has the last laugh as she conquers the male world of comedy. The Observer. 2 April 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/apr/03/tina-fey-television>.



In this image, Fey casts an unthreatening gaze, with delicate, feminine make up and gentle shoulder-length waves, all while her head is superimposed on a man's body dressed in a white button down shirt and tie, complete with large hairy forearms and hands and a fedora. While ridiculous and humorous, this image does more for its audience than invoke a laugh. This image is a perfect visual representation of Fey's groundbreaking, fresh approach to all of the "comedy is a man's game" critics, i.e. Christopher Hitchens. By not only dressing like a man, but super-imposing her face onto a man's body, Fey goes beyond the shock value and challenges and mocks society's imposed standards for a woman to be successful. Women in all professions are often told that in order to be taken seriously, they need to essentially become more masculine. In one book review, this assumption that Fey is mocking is addressed:

Even though she's been dubbed the "thinking man's sex symbol," she still shrugs at her at the title. Plus, it takes the trite *Cosmo* cross-dressing advice ("wear your man's clothes with bright red lipstick for a sexy feminine look!") and reveals how ridiculously overdone it really is.⁹⁷

By simply calling Fey as “the thinking man’s sex symbol” the aspect of her sexuality as part of how she is interpreted and judged as a comedian adds yet another sexist stereotype to the mix. “Bossypants” which refers to someone who bosses other people around, further plays on the patriarchal commentary of the cover. For decades, the title of boss in any profession in the United States has generally been associated with men, since it is a position of the highest power. While education and employment equality has drastically changed, there still remains a glass ceiling, with women currently holding just 4.6 percent of the Fortune 500 CEO positions in 2014.⁹⁸ Fey has absolutely no hesitation in calling herself bossy, having successfully held positions as head writer for a major network show, and written and directed award-winning movies and shows. While Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett were shielded from these behind the scenes roles, and called a “bitch” or “growing balls” when trying to command authority, Fey is not only free to champion virtually all aspects of any production she is a part of, she is widely respected and recognized for doing so. *Bossypants* sold over one million copies in the United States, and topped *The New York Times* bestseller list for five weeks, making it a true testament to Fey’s countless talents and accomplishments beyond the comedy world.

While Fey herself has been the inspiration and motivation for countless other comics of her generation and younger ones too, she is enthusiastic in her praise for the

⁹⁷ Katy Kelleher. *Judging a Book by its Cover: Tina Fey’s Bossypants*. Jezebel.com 2010 October 9. <http://jezebel.com/5659898/judging-a-book-by-its-cover-tina-feys-bossypants>.

⁹⁸ Fortune 500 CEOs

woman whose earlier career helped pave the way for her incumbent success. It was only appropriate for Fey to attribute her courage and success as a comedian to Carol Burnett as she presented her with *The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor* at The Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. In her speech, she expressed her deep gratitude and appreciation for all that Burnett had accomplished before her, and lauded her as her idol:

Ms. Burnett, Carol if I may, I am so honored and thrilled to be here to present this award to you. You mean so much to me, that I love you in a way that is just shy of creepy. And a lot of female comedians are gonna come out here tonight and say “Oh, I love you so much, you were my idol, I watched you when I was growing up,” but I’m saying it first, which means that I am the most sincere. Anyways, I can’t believe that I’m in a room where I get to talk right to you like this. This to me still seems like something I would have been pretending was happening when I was a little kid..... The point is, is that I watched your show and I thought “I could do that,” I could have a show where I sing and dance and play lots of different characters and it turns out that I was wrong.. but I did find a way to work at a sketch comedy show for 9 years and I fell in love with sketch comedy watching your show.⁹⁹

Burnett was truly a pioneer for women in comedy, and the versatility of Burnett’s show clearly had an impact on what the younger generation, like Fey and Poehler, saw was possible to achieve. In her speech, Fey added, “And I think you’re super smart because you were smart enough to know that only in sketch comedy does a woman get to get dressed up like Scarlett O’Hara, The Queen of England, Norma Desmond, a girl scout, and Mrs. Wiggins all in one night...” The excitement of transforming into different characters inspired women and disproved the age-old theory, as supported by Hitchens that reduces all women to members of a two-dimensional, serious sex.

Now, nearly 40 years since the end of female host breakthrough on *The Carol Burnett Show*, sketch comedy for women has completely transformed itself. Looking at

⁹⁹ The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor.

the most popular example, *Saturday Night Live*, as a lens for how women's roles have changed over time, creator Lorne Michaels, the man credited with making the move to hire Tina Fey as the show's first female head-writer, put it simply; "The consciousness has changed."¹⁰⁰ Now that we live in a time when everything from politics, to sexuality, to race and religion is more publicly and openly diverse, it only makes sense that the style of popular humor has followed suit to become more eclectic and uncensored as well.

Especially for women, rises in social status have contributed greatly to the rise of the powerful female voice in comedy. Most famously, Tina Fey's spot-on impersonation of Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin displayed not only her uncanny resemblance to the Alaska governor's physical appearance and mannerisms, the ongoing satire also mocked the double standards for professional women. In the first impersonation sketch, titled "A Nonpartisan Message from Governor Sarah Palin & Senator Hillary Clinton,"¹⁰¹ which aired on SNL on September 13, 2008, Fey played Palin in a debate with Hillary Clinton, played by Amy Poehler.¹⁰² While the two candidates go back and forth taking about the presence of sexism in the 2008 United States Presidential election, issues of appearance and credibility are addressed¹⁰³:

POEHLER: But Sarah, one thing we can both agree on is that sexism should never be allowed to permeate an American election.

FEY: So please, stop Photoshopping my head on sexy bikini pictures...

POEHLER: And stop saying I have "cankles".

¹⁰⁰ Vanity Fair Who Says Women Arent Funny

¹⁰¹ "A Nonpartisan Message from Governor Sarah Palin & Senator Hillary Clinton. Saturday Night Live. 13 September 2008.

FEY: Don't refer to me as a MILF.

FEY: Reporters and commentators, stop using words that diminish us, like pretty, attractive, beautiful...

POEHLER: Harpy, shrew...boner-shrinker...



The snappy back-and-forth between the two candidates was extremely well received by critics and won loud laughter from the live audience, and the thousands people around the world that viewed the viral video online. The sketch not only displayed Fey's masterful impersonation skills, which earned her a Prime Time Emmy award, it also used humor to address a serious women's issue, as Fey often does. The sketch brought attention to the fact that the country, while politically divided between the Republican and Democratic Party, was also divided by another factor: Objectifying candidates based on appearance, and therefore diminishing and disregarding their qualifications. Throughout the sketch, Poehler (Clinton) is mortified by how much media attention Palin (Fey) has been receiving and emphasizing that the two have nothing in common aside from the fact that they are both female. Even on the professional political level, women are still highly criticized by the public and the mainstream media for their appearance. While the real-life Sarah Palin's media comments were subject to debate and

her legitimacy and capability as a candidate was sharply questioned, the sketch mocks how the media focused so closely on her attractiveness and took away attention from important campaign matters.

Sexism as a hindrance to women's success in politics carries over to issues beyond seats in the White House. Fey often satirizes these issues by putting a comedic spin on feminist points. Repeatedly in her award-winning sitcom *30 Rock*, feminist themes are played upon in order to bring attention to their seriousness by making them the center of jokes.

On the show, Fey plays Liz Lemon, is a single woman working full-time as head writer of the fictional NBC sketch comedy show *TGS with Tracy Jordan* (an obvious connection to her real life experience as head writer for SNL). She deals with the TV network's top executive, Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin) and has to juggle her time between managing the writers, interns, Tracy Jordan, Jenna Maroney, and her personal life. In many ways, her "I can do it all" role sends a feminist message and often proves that she is more competent than much of the male staff on the show. In Season 4 episode 5 titled "Problem Solvers,"¹⁰⁴ Liz Lemon learns that the Chinese edition of her newly published book has translated her name to "Lesbian Yellow Sour Fruit," and the title *Dealbreakers* to "The book for you, man no good" emphasizing the feminist stereotype of feminists angry and man-haters. Since Lemon is now a "valuable commodity" because her book is number 14 on the bestseller list, Jack Donaghy wants to partner with her for a new talk show based on the book. At first, Lemon is enthusiastic in

¹⁰⁴ "Problem Solvers" 30 Rock. Season 4 Episode 5.
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B002WSCLGE/ref=atv_purch_to_dp?ie=UTF8&ASINS=B002WSCLGE&a=B002WSCLGE&h=2b4c8041cf0b03656d9a1b1fdc4c91e9&o=B002WSCLGE&orderID=D01-7768443-7324525&t=1393182517000

taking the deal, but after being warned by Tracy Jordan and Jenna Maroney that Donaghy may be taking advantage of their relationship, they advise her to get an agent and make sure she gets the best offer for the show, she goes back to Jack and tells him that she needs to evaluate all of her options before committing to working with him. As the boss of the network, he is offended by Lemon not trusting him and tries to sabotage her by moving on with the show and replacing her with someone else. When Lemon walks on the set she has a confrontation with Jack about going on with the show without her. He says, “We could just do the show with you but that door is closing. She responds, “Well close it. You think you can bully me like this? Well you don’t know me. Two can play at this game, Jack!” Lemon fires back and tells Donaghy that she is going to sue him and he proceeds to try and prove that he can go on without her. In the end, he realizes that he wants to work with Lemon, and he needs her, so the two agree to do business together. In this episode, Liz Lemon fights for equality in the workplace, and doesn’t allow her male boss to take advantage of her or threaten her with his power at the network.

This issue, as we have seen in Ball’s real-life experience with *I Love Lucy* and Burnett’s at *The Carol Burnett Show*, male-dominated executive positions and writer’s rooms had negative impacts on female comedian’s freedom and mobility in the past. By showing women’s power and authority in the work place, Fey’s character is strong-willed, smart, and does not depend on the approval or permission of her boss to do what is best for her, even though he often mocks her. In the first episode of Season 5, Jack describes Liz as a “New York, third-wave feminist, college-educated, single and pretending to be happy about it, over-scheduled, under sexed, you buy any magazine that says ‘healthy

body image' on the cover, and every two years you take up knitting for a week.”¹⁰⁵ In the end, Lemon accepts Donaghy's apology and the decision for them to work together on the *Dealbreakers* show is mutual.

The topic of female sexuality is addressed in Season 5, Episode 16, “TGS Hates Women.”¹⁰⁶ In this episode, Liz Lemon is angered by a website called JoanofSnark.com calls 30 Rock's show-within-a-show “TGS” sexist for not employing enough women. In response, Lemon hires Abby Flynn (played by Cristin Milioti), a infantile, girly character who Lemon soon realizes is extremely stereotypical and is playing men for approval. In order to “help” her, Lemon explains to her, in front of a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt, that she doesn't have to put on a baby voice and do her hair like a little girl in order to be valued. Abby tells Liz that her voice is not fake, and “the whole sexy baby thing isn't an act ... I'm a very sexy baby!” Abby then questions Liz's claim and the fact that she is judging her based on the way she looks and talks, and wonders how her infantilized appearance is any different from Liz wearing glasses to convey that she's smart. This episode touches on the idea of female sexuality as a controversial “tool,” especially in comedy. Comediennes who use their sexuality to appeal to men are “often credited by male critics for their comedic talent while those women who don't make their sexuality the most salient part of their personae get ignored or dismissed.”¹⁰⁷ However, although she is an attractive woman, Liz Lemon (and real-life Tina Fey) does not use her sexuality

¹⁰⁵ 30 Rock. “Jack Donaghy analyzes Liz Lemon”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4ZFv6jsUMg#t=10>

¹⁰⁶ 30 Rock. Season 5 Episode 16 “TGS Hates Women.”

¹⁰⁷ Rebecca Traister. “30 Rock Takes on Feminist Hypocrisy—And Its Own.” Salon. 25 Feb 2011. < http://www.salon.com/2011/02/25/30_rock_jezebel_feminism/>

in place of her wit, and fervently supports women, as said by one of the show's famous lines "I support women! I'm like a human bra!"

It is important to note that it is only possible for this woman-centered, feminist perspective comedy to exist in the culturally progressive society that we live in today. Liz Lemon is a single, career-focused woman of the early 2000s, unlike Lucy Ricardo whose main role in the settings of the 50s was to be a loving wife and homemaker, and Carol Burnett whose constantly changing sketch platform made her completely spontaneous and oftentimes "goofy" as a testament to the rapidly changing and unpredictable world of the 60s and 70s. Beginning in the early 90s and classified as "third-wave feminism," or what some critics of the show have deemed "Liz Lemonism," the way in which independent women are defined has drastically evolved from the earlier movements. Authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards of *Manifesta*, the book that first introduced the idea of third-wave feminism address the shift that has occurred:

The fact that feminism is no longer limited to arenas where we expect to see it – NOW, *Ms.*, women's studies, and red suited congresswomen – perhaps means that young women today have really reaped what feminism has sown. Raised after Title IX and *William Doll*, young women emerged from college or high school or two years of marriage or their first job and began challenging some of the received wisdom of the past ten or twenty years of feminism. We're not doing feminism the same way that the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn't mean copying what came before but finding one's own way-- a way that is genuine to one's own generation.¹⁰⁸

This new form of feminism, that is unique to the individual woman and the current generational culture and goals accurately encapsulates what Tina Fey has asserted

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2000. p.130.

through various avenues of comedy projects. Leaning away from the traditional stereotypes of what feminism really means, Fey has found a way to stay true to her personal feminist ideals without off-putting her audience with heavy messages that would distract from effective popular comedy. The two major cultural moments of the 70s mentioned here, Title IX, the constitutional amendment made in 1972 which states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance...”¹⁰⁹ and *William’s Doll*, a children’s book by Charlotte Zolotow¹¹⁰ published that same year, about a young boy who asks his father for a doll and challenged gender norms also go to show how third-wave feminism has moved away from the more obvious statements of equality to more subtle, yet no less effective mediums.

As Liz Lemon on *30 Rock*, this hard-to-define type of feminism is apparent in the fact that her on-screen character is so closely tied, and almost inseparable from her true self, which marks a major feat for women performers whom in the past have had to sacrifice this freedom. In an NPR segment titled “Doing the Work: What *30 Rock* Meant for Women on Television,” Linda Holmes points out how Fey’s work on the show has in fact contributed to and created this new form of “hand-in-hand,” genuine style:

Certainly, Tina Fey became famous as a writer hand-in-hand with her portrayal of Liz Lemon, and that performance has been much decorated and is one key to the show's success. But *30 Rock* has such a bent, frantic, absurdist tone that it reads as a tremendously specific comedy style unto itself, and it's a style that is understood, here and everywhere, to belong to Tina Fey the writer, not just Tina Fey the

¹⁰⁹ History of Title IX. Title IX. <<http://www.titleix.info>>

¹¹⁰ Charlotte Zolotow. About *Williams Doll*.
<http://www.charlottezolotow.com/willilams_doll.htm>

performer. While she obviously collaborates with other writers in executing that style, it belongs to her, it travels with her, and it's benefited other performers, especially Alec Baldwin and Tracy Morgan (not to mention what it's done for Jon Hamm, Matt Damon, Jason Sudeikis, James Marsden, Will Arnett, Carrie Fisher, and countless others), at least as much as it's benefited her.¹¹¹

By suggesting that Fey's style has benefitted a long list of other performers who are mostly men, Holmes brings important attention to the fact that Fey's "bent, frantic, absurdist tone" goes beyond just her performance on *30 Rock* and extends to the entire world of entertainment, which proves how much power she has as a woman in the industry. The fact that this style is so aligned with Fey and so true to herself acts as a further feminist symbolism. About the reasons for the widespread success of the show, Holmes adds:

I think it's been one of the most important, helpful, meaningful, landscape altering shows for women in the history of television for one simple reason: whatever the positives and negatives of the show's voice and aesthetic, it is Tina Fey's voice and her aesthetic, and everyone knows it.¹¹²

In 2004, four years before *30 Rock*, Fey wrote the screenplay for the top-grossing teen comedy movie *Mean Girls* and co-starred as Ms. Norbury, a high school math teacher. Fey clearly wrote the script with feminist messages in mind, again by cleverly using humor to present serious woman-to-woman issues. The drama that surrounds the cliquey "mean girls" teaches lessons including "never pretend to be less intelligent than a

¹¹¹ Linda Holmes. *Doing the Work: What 30 Rock Meant for Women on Television*. Monkey See: Pop culture News and Analysis from NPR. 31 January 2013. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/01/31/170753743/doing-the-work-what-30-rock-meant-for-women-on-television>.

¹¹² Linda Holmes. *Doing the Work: What 30 Rock Meant for Women on Television*. Monkey See: Pop culture News and Analysis from NPR. 31 January 2013. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/01/31/170753743/doing-the-work-what-30-rock-meant-for-women-on-television>.

boy just to get his attention,” and in the famous gym meeting scene, when Ms. Norbury addresses the entire class of senior girls and proclaims, “You all have got to stop calling each other sluts and whores. It just makes it okay for guys to call you sluts and whores.”¹¹³ By viewing *Mean Girls* from a third-wave feminist stand point, it’s clear that the girls in the movie have established their own interpretation of what “girl world” means in the 21st century. Specifically, the rampant use of the words “slut” and “whore” by both men and women has given whole new meaning to the terms. They are used so often in the film that they seem to lose their harsh affect.

The "grrls" of the third wave have stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy. They have developed a rhetoric of mimicry, which re-appropriates derogatory terms like "slut" and "bitch" in order subvert sexist culture and deprive it of verbal weapons.¹¹⁴

These offensive terms, now re-appropriated, have become an almost natural part of the girl’s vocabulary. However, that message that Ms. Norbury is trying to send isn’t the issue of the girls casually calling each other names, it’s the idea that the boys will assume that if they’re saying it, than it must be okay for them to use the words towards girls as well. Ms. Norbury also encourages Katy to join the “mathletes,” an academic club that completes with only high schools in math competitions. Katy is highly gifted in math, but because she is so concerned with being popular and accepted by the exclusive clique of girls, “The Plastics,” that tell her joining the team would be “social suicide,” she tries to hide her smarts. Ms. Norbury scolds her for pretending to be bad at math in order to

¹¹³ *Mean Girls*. Dir. Mark Waters. Perf. Lindsay Lohan, Tina Fey, Rachel McAdams, Lizzy Caplan, Lacy Chabert, Amanda Seyfried. Paramount Pictures, 2004. Film.

¹¹⁴ Martha Rampton. “The Three Waves of Feminism.” Pacific Magazine, The Magazine of Pacific University. Vol. 41 No. 2, Fall 2008.

http://www.pacificu.edu/magazine_archives/2008/fall/echoes/feminism.cfm

flatter her crush, Aaron Samuels by pretending she needs his tutoring and threatens to fail her from the course unless she agrees to join the club.



Fey's *Mean Girls* script challenges gender norms and send a strong message to teenage girls about staying true to themselves warning of how disastrous things can turn out if you let your friends completely control you. Beyond her excellent performance in the film, her success in screenplay earned her a nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay at the 2005 *MTV Movie Awards*. Tina Fey's commitment to present strong female characters has won her widespread praise. As she continues to dominate, her career achievements and refreshing approach to feminism has made her not only a role model, but also a pioneer. In an article appearing in *The Observer* titled "Tina Fey Has the last laugh as she dominates the male world of comedy:"

By any standards it is a remarkable rise – but it is made more so because Fey is rocketing skywards as a successful woman in the overwhelmingly male-

dominated world of comedy. She is also doing it by dint of an intelligent, witty brand of humour that slyly undercuts the usual celebrity obsession with looks. Women across the US are taking notice and anointing Fey in perhaps her least expected role so far: that of feminist pioneer.¹¹⁵

A pioneer indeed, Fey's success has undeniably led to a wider appreciation for women and further "diversity" on screen. Since her sentimental exit from *Saturday Night Live* in 2008, the cast has further diversified, not only by adding more women to the cast, such as Noel Wells and Cecily Strong, and promoting Strong to the coveted position of *Weekend Update* anchor, but also hiring the first African-American female cast member, Sasheer Zamata in 6 years (Maya Rudolph is half black and half Jewish).

By crafting her own voice and style, Tina Fey has done something revolutionary. Instead of being narrowly defined by her production company or sticking strictly to the role of a performer, Fey has become known for much more than just that. Her creations as a writer are closely aligned her true self and have made her much more genuine.

Women in television comedy — even the great ones, even the icons — have traditionally been presented mostly as gifted performers or, at the very least, people whose sensibilities primarily advanced *their own* performing careers. They might run successful production companies, as Mary Tyler Moore did and as Lucille Ball did, and they've often been their own producers and had substantial power over their own shows, as Roseanne was and as Cybill Shepherd was. But they haven't generally become known for creating, as writers, a style of comedy that didn't have to revolve around their own performances and translated to writing for others.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Paul Harris. Fey has the last laugh as she conquers the male world of comedy. The Observer. 2 April 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/apr/03/tina-fey-television>

¹¹⁶ Linda Holmes. *Doing the Work: What 30 Rock Meant for Women on Television*. Monkey See: Pop Culture News and Analysis from NPR. 31 January 2013. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/01/31/170753743/doing-the-work-what-30-rock-meant-for-women-on-television>.

Conclusion

Tina Fey's unique brand of comedy has opened doors for other women who have recently come into the spotlight to do the same. Lena Dunham and Mindy Kahling are two examples of women who star in as well as write and direct their own shows. Dunham's *Girls* and Kahling's *The Mindy Project* both represent strong feminist plotlines. *Girls*, which airs on HBO has pushed limits with female nudity and "acceptable" on-screen body image, and *The Mindy Project* on FOX stars Kahling as a successful, high-earning doctor with power at the private practice. These two shows, which have both premiered within the last three years, will undoubtedly lead to an increase of similar female-focused comedy shows. Beyond TV, Fey's influence has been translated into movies, such as Disney's animated film *Frozen*. Disney princesses, stereotypically characterized as innocent, blonde and helplessly in need of a male savior or prince, are being completely reimagined with this new woman in mind. Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, songwriters for the film, spoke about the reimagining of the two sisters that star in the movie.

But the Lopezes saw the sisters – a Disney first, in terms of lead heroines – in a different way. "I said, 'You have a chance to make the first really funny Disney princess,'" Ms. Anderson-Lopez said. "I'm so excited about the potential that Anna has to sort of bring in the world of Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, the goofy self-deprecating female heroines that are in our culture" now.¹¹⁷

The idea that Fey and Poehler's personalities are transforming the decades-old Disney princess stereotype is a notion that will change how millions of children view female

¹¹⁷ Melena Ryzik. *How Tina Fey and Amy Poehler Inspired a Disney Princess*. The New York Times. 19 February 2014. http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/19/how-tina-fey-and-amy-poehler-inspired-a-disney-princess/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

roles. By seeing opinionated, funny heroines as princesses in a major Disney production, the younger generation will finally have some authentic ideas about women's comedy abilities to understand and appreciate.

Fey's influence has surely changed the "male dominated" world of comedy forever making that no longer the case in the very near future. Lo and behold, men are finally getting on board with the bright future for women in comedy. Famed comedian and actor Will Ferrell and *Anchorman* director Adam McKay have recently announced their plans to launch a new offshoot of their production company Gary Sanchez Productions that will be called Gloria Sanchez Productions to focus on female-fronted projects:

Headed by production executive Jessica Elbaum, the new division will work with established and emerging female talent. In a statement, Ferrell and McKay said: "When Jessica came to us with this idea, we thought it was fantastic. She has worked with some of the great female voices in comedy and has proven herself as a gifted producer who has a keen eye for material. Ferrell's move comes at a good time for female-led comedy in Hollywood. Two of the biggest comedy hits of the past few years at the box office, *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat*, featured female protagonists, and actors such as McCarthy and Kristen Wiig have been popular with audiences."¹¹⁸

Of course, the battle is never over. Women are still fighting for their equality on all fronts, and in entertainment especially, there still remains a male majority. A 2013 study by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute and Women in Film Los Angeles found only 4.4 per cent of the top-grossing Hollywood films were directed by women over the previous

¹¹⁸ Tatiana Siegel. "Will Ferrell Launches Female-Focused Film and Production Company." The Hollywood Reporter. 12 February 2014.
<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/will-ferrell-launches-female-focused-679716>

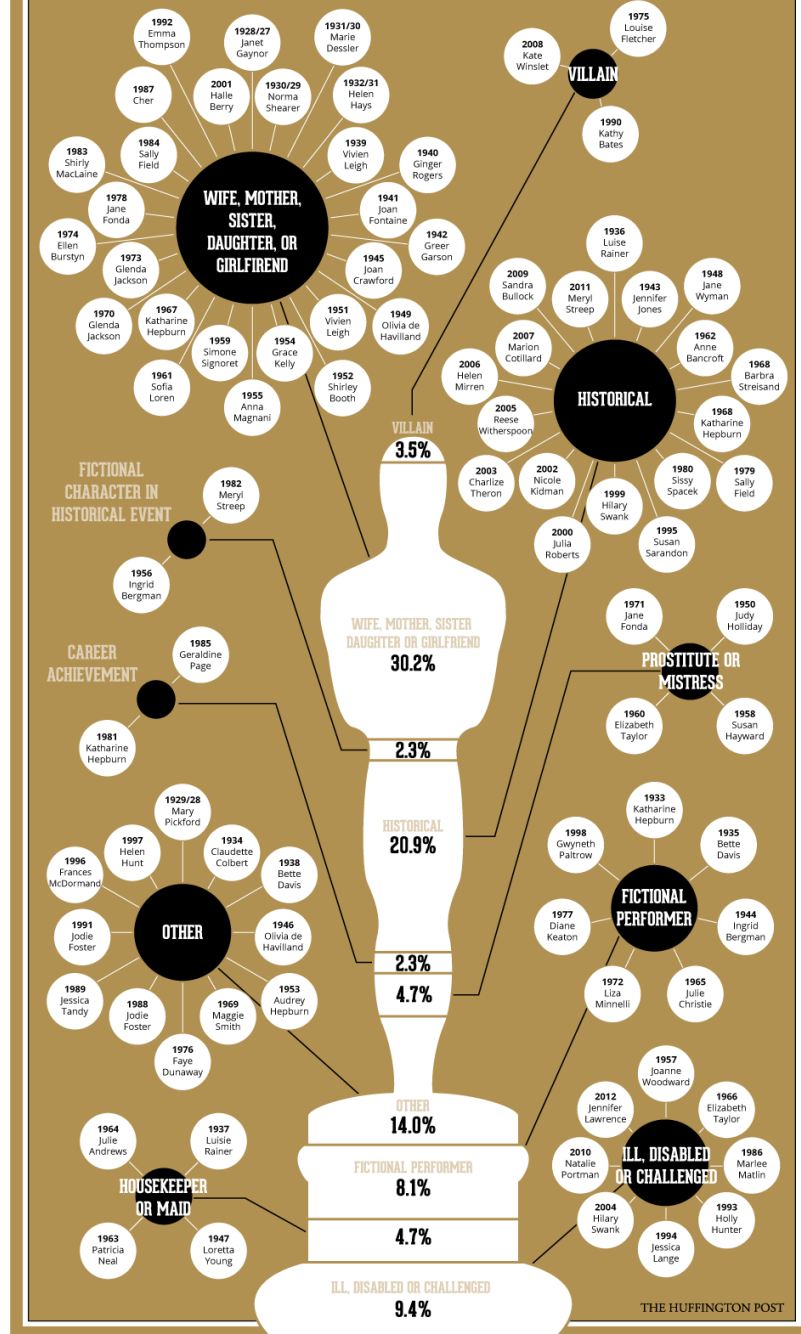
decade.¹¹⁹ There not only remains an imbalance in directing roles, but also highly segmented categories for women to be successful and award winning in movie roles. In this info graphic published by PolicyMic, the Oscar-winning roles played by women reflect unfortunate stereotypes and marginalize women to supporting roles:

¹¹⁹ “Will Ferrell and Adam McCay to form female-led production company.” Gulf News. 19 February 2014. <http://gulfnnews.com/arts-entertainment/celebrity/will-ferrell-and-adam-mckay-to-form-female-led-production-company-1.1292222>.

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Years of

OSCAR WINNERS

THE TYPES OF ROLES THAT EARN WOMEN ACADEMY AWARDS



THE HUFFINGTON POST

However the honors of hosting major awards shows have lately been given to women, like Fey and Poehler who have hosted the Golden Globes Awards for the past 2 years and are contracted to host again in 2015. This year, the show had nearly 21 million viewers, which was up 6 percent from the 2013 Globes telecast.¹²⁰ The duo's routine was huge success, as they mocked members of the audience like George Clooney. In her opening monologue, Fey joked, "'Gravity' is nominated for best film. It's the story of how George Clooney would rather float away into space and die than spend one more minute with a woman his own age."¹²¹

While it is not possible to predict the future, or to assume that progress is always indicative of permanent change, the ever-evolving standards of popular comedy, as well as the cultural influence and relevance behind successful comedy, suggest that women will continue to rise. It is hard to discern some major questions, such as; in what direction will feminism go next? and will more women be elected to positions of political power? These factors will decide what is to come for not only women in comedy, but women in all professions.

The progressive lineage of female comedians, from Ball to Burnett to Fey illustrates the ever-changing standard and the constantly evolving culture that have

¹²⁰ "Tina Fey, Amy Poehler Returning to Host 2015 Golden Globes." The New York Post. 5 February 2014. <http://nypost.com/2014/02/05/tina-fey-amy-poehler-returning-to-host-2015-golden-globes/>.

¹²¹ Breeanna Hare. "Golden Globes: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's Best Jokes. CNN." 13 January 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/13/showbiz/celebrity-news-gossip/2014-golden-globes-tina-fey-amy-poehler/>.

allowed these women to emerge. With all skeptics aside, it's undeniable that a generation's humor reflects its values, and change can only come when we accept equality of the sexes. As author Fran Lebowitz put it, "It's not that these girls are better than the girls who preceded them," "They're luckier. They came along at a time when the boys allowed them to do this. In comedy, timing is everything."¹²²

¹²² Alessandra Stanley. "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" Vanity Fair. April 2008. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/funnygirls200804>

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