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He Said, She Said: The Rhetoric of Gender Politics

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What Makes You a Wo/Man?

I. Growing up with certain societal expectations

I remember sitting at the lunch tables in middle school, dreaming with my friends about the qualities we imagined our ideal boyfriends would have. Tall, handsome, muscular, sweet, sensitive, musical, caring, we named it all. Oftentimes, we would name characters from popular movies and TV shows as the basis of our speculations. I quickly started to realize how many demands my friends and I had for the person we hoped to be with someday. What was influencing our expectations for that one special person? Were these expectations even realistic? Had it always been so complicated? Had society’s members always expected this much for the “ideal” man and woman?

Apparently these sorts of expectations weren’t just limited to my lunch group in middle school. When professor and writer Nancy Coney asked seventeen year old Ashley what her ideal boyfriend would be like, Ashley replied, “I want a real man. Someone who is tall, hopefully good-looking, and athletic, a manly man. I love it when guys are muscular. Oh, but, he also has to play an instrument, and sweetly serenade me the way Heath Ledger sang to Kat in *The Ten Things I Hate About You.* That would be so dreamy” (Coney 3). In conducting research among present-day teenage girls on their dream boyfriend, Coney noticed that this type of pronouncement was not out of the ordinary. In her essay, “Gender Role Behavior and Attitudes,” Coney commented that more often than not, girls desired a mixture of both physical strength and emotional understanding in a person of the opposite sex (15). Analyzing Ashley’s statement of what constitutes a masculine male, a “real man” must be handsome, strong, taller than herself, yet able to sensitively play her music. Remarks like these show how prevalent an effect popular culture has on society today in presenting images that are devoured by the youth of these times, but also show how confusing, complicated, and changing the definitions of masculinity and femininity are today.

As time passes, society changes in thought, value, appearance, and ideology. As society undergoes transformations, expectations and gender roles slowly morph as well. What makes a man masculine? What do people consider a “typical” man, and what should an ideal man be like? How does one become society’s ideal woman? What does being feminine entail? Questions like these and their answers have been changing over time, since there isn’t a single consistent response to either.

Popular culture is a good indicator of this change, because as times change, the change in the depiction of males and females change as well. In fact, this representation of the times and society’s portrayal of the times is adeptly shown through the metamorphosis of television.

II. Television as a means to analyze gender stereotypes

This paper will be exploring the differences and transitions in portrayal of masculinity and femininity using the popular sitcom from the 1950s and 1960s, *Leave It to Beaver*, and comparing it to the contemporary comedy *Modern Family*. The argument within this paper is twofold. Firstly, this paper asserts that the view of the roles of females and males within society in the late fifties and sixties adhered to more “traditional” definitions. These customary definitions include the beliefs that men should be the strong, protective, and head of the household, while women should be pretty, domestic, maternal, docile, passive, and physically curvy. Secondly, stemming from the claim that this view no longer applies to modern society, today’s ideal for typical men and women embodies both traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” traits, as seen in the 1950’s and 1960’s, but each also includes aspects of the other sex’s traditional depiction. In fact today’s roles for males and females, in some aspects, also completely challenge parts of traditional expectations, by addressing and creating new expectations for non-traditional or previously taboo relationships, such as homosexual relationships and relationships between people of significant age differences. Both of these claims will be supported through a variety of sources, but close analysis of the characters in *Leave it to Beaver* and *Modern Family* will be especially crucial to this argument. These shows will serve as the basis for the argument that there has been a change in the portrayal of gender roles, and provide evidence of change in gender stereotypes.

III. Why comedy, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Modern Family*?

The reason comedy is the genre chosen to observe the depiction of masculinity and femininity in particular is because comedy often uses stereotypes relevant to the time period as sources for humor, therefore helping justify any observed changes in gender representation. Further justifying the subjects of study chosen to support the claims within this paper, *Leave it To Beaver* is among the top five most watched shows of the 1950’s and 1960’s (Goudreau 3). Its legacy is clear from the multiple attempts to create spin off shows, to Television Today calling the Beaver family “the quintessential fifties post-war family,” making it a viable candidate for analysis and support (Goudreau 3). Through its popularity and lasting impression on its viewers, it is clear that *Leave it to Beaver* was a mark of popular culture, and therefore a good show to use to show the depiction of the popular thoughts on gender roles of the time.

Currently, *Modern Family* is the sixth most watched comedy among the shows of today, according to Forbes Magazine (Pomerantz 2). It is also an excellent primary source which depicts the new “male to female” dynamic. *Modern Family* also won the Emmy for the best comedy of 2011, clearly showing its prevalence in popular culture today (Pomerantz 2). *Modern Family* is also a suitable show for the topic of this paper as it shows a new perspective on family life, portraying the dynamics of a typical suburban family with kids, a gay couple, and an interracial couple with significant age difference, using the stereotypes of today to portray “modern families.” *Modern Family* is a great show for assessment of depiction of males and females in a family setting. It is perfect to use as a means of comparison with *Leave it to Beaver*, as both shows are about families that were quintessentially symbolic and representative to their respective times.

IV. Introduction to the Characters

Before beginning analysis, however, it is important to introduce the characters of all these shows. *Leave It To Beaver* is a show about a single family (and more specifically, the escapades of the youngest son, Beaver) in post-World War II America. The family is comprised of a stay-at home mother, June, Ward, a white-collar professional, and sons Wally and “Beaver.” *Modern Family*’s cast is comprised of three different but related families. Jay, a successful businessman, is married to Gloria, a much younger Columbian homemaker. Gloria also has an adolescent son, Manny, from a previous marriage. Jay has two full-grown adult children, Mitchell and Claire, who both have families of their own. Mitchell, and his male stay-at-home partner, Cameron, have an adopted Vietnamese baby, Lily. Claire and her husband Phil have three children: eldest daughter Haley, middle daughter Alex, and youngest son Luke. Both of these shows have in common the genre of comedy, as well as stereotypical depictions of males and females and their interactions.

V. 1950s and 1960s Depiction of Femininity and Masculinity

If presenting the traditional, or as some would call it, outdated, definition of femininity, a very feminine woman would symbolize “objectiﬁcation, passivity, infantilization, pedestal-perching, and mirror-gazing,” or the traits that “women have in modern times denounced as trivializing and humiliating qualities imposed on them by a misogynist culture” (Faludi 18). As Susan Faludi, creator of the “backlash theory,” explains, women in the media and women that girls aspired to be in the fifties were often shown as housewives, attending to the needs of their husbands, always vigilant in the upkeep of their households (Faludi 12).

June Cleaver is the perfect representation of this “outmoded” school of thought that was present in the fifties and sixties. Right from the opening credits, June is a good example of that typical and ideal household woman in the 1950s. The show credits start with June opening a door; she then walks into a room carrying a perfectly organized tray with jars of food, water, and napkins. She is wearing a pristinely ironed and sophisticated dress, her hair and makeup are perfectly done, and she is sporting pearl earrings and a necklace. Even upon her first appearance, June exudes an aura of that put-together stay at home mother, taking care of her family while maintaining that flawless appearance, ready to attend to her family’s needs at the drop of a hat (*Leave it to Beaver*, “Untogetherness”).

If analyzing a single episode of Leave it to Beaver, multiple of these stereotypes of a fifties housewife can be found. In the episode, “Untogetherness”, besides being shown as the quintessential fifties mother in the opening credits which are present in every episode, June is immediately thrown into the role of concerned and stay-at-home mother. Once again she is seen wearing pearl earrings and necklace, cultured clothes, and subtle but refined makeup falling into the stereotype where women had to maintain a pristine appearance to symbolize that picture perfect family life. Within the first two minutes of the show, when elder son Wally is dejected, June immediately asks Wally: “Is something wrong?...You look like something is bothering you,” exuding a concerned motherly attitude. While trying to fulfill her motherly role here, she is also arranging flowers **(***Leave it to Beaver,* “Untogetherness”). June’s sphere is depicted to be in the home, catering to her family’s needs; she keeps the house pristine while maintaining her family’s well-being by keeping them together. Later in the episode, she begs her husband Ward to help her talk to Wally. Wally wants to skip the family vacation, and so instead of trying to talk to Wally herself, June exclaims to Ward: “This is terrible! Nothing like this has ever happened before. Can’t you fix it?” (*Leave it to Beaver,* “Untogetherness”) This short excerpt perfectly exemplifies how June relies on Ward for help, while trying to preserve the family unit. June falls into her role of relying upon the “man” of the household, subjecting herself to infantilization, and putting Ward in control. June is less in command and puts Ward on a pedestal when deeming herself unworthy to deal with the situation with Wally. June in fact asks Ward for advice multiple times throughout the episode, making herself seem inferior in intelligence and elevating Ward. This fits Faludi’s definition of classic femininity, since June was not only the cookie-cutter wife of the fifties, staying and keeping the home a family haven, but also making herself reliant on the working man(Faludi 9). Later in the episode, while getting ready to eat breakfast together, June is in the kitchen, making dishes and serving the family while wearing her perfectly groomed dress and apron. Similarly, when talking to Wally about his girl problems, June is seen baking a cake. She later transitions into knitting, while Ward lectures her about how to deal with Wally. This is the perfect place to transition to talking about the traditional definition and portrayal of men in the fifties and sixties.

When analyzing the traditional depiction of men as well, Ward Cleaver too fits the stereotypical definition of a “masculine” man, or what a typical man should aspire to be.According to Reimers, the typical masculine man is a symbol of “stoicism, integrity, reliability, the desire to protect and provide, and sacriﬁce” (108). When examining Ward’s position in the family, Ward is not only the breadwinner, but also the moral backbone of the family. As shown within the aforementioned examples of June’s behavior, June always comes to Ward when she has a problem or questions for Ward to answer. She relies greatly on Ward’s advice, apparently showing Ward’s integrity and reliability. Ward is also the head of the household, the protector and provider. He is the disciplinarian, often a role enforced by June’s desire to rely on Ward’s support. When June is making breakfast and setting up the table in the episode Untogetherness, Ward is the one who yells for Wally and Beaver to come down, enforcing his status as the disciplinarian. When June wallowing in sadness about Wally skipping their family vacation, Ward lectures: “Now June, I am just as anxious for Wally to go with us as your are. But I’m not going to make him go” (*Leave it to Beaver*, “Untogetherness”). Here, Ward’s tone is patronizing and infantilizing. The finality of his statement shows his position as head of household, and as one who makes all the final decisions.Similarly, when going off to vacation, Ward is the one who drives the car, while June’s responsibilities include packing and making sure everyone is happy. Ward’s position and typical fifties man as the head of the family is reinforced multiple times throughout the episode.

VI. Depiction of Modern Day Women

Men and women today are consistently not being shown in such a manner. If analyzing women, the claim that women’s roles and expectations in society have changed since the fifties is supported by the analysis of author and teacher Peter Tragos. He explains that the second wave of the feminist movement within America challenged traditional views of women, and so what was expected of women changed as well, especially as shown through the media. Though women were no longer expected to be completely demure and submissive, a new expectation for women to be “strong, independent, and beautiful” emerged (Tragos 542). Yet, in redefining womanly sexuality and being, women currently deal with conforming to an image where they have to appear pretty and curvy by retaining a womanly figure, yet also embody typically male qualities such as independence, athleticism, and confidence (Reimers 2).

In fact, confirming Tragos’s assertion, author Valerie Reimers observes that the depiction of women within popular culture, especially sitcoms and comedies, has shifted as well. Reimers argues that though women still are shown as pretty, possessing society’s optimal bodies, their personalities have evolved with the changing decades to be more commandeering and influential. This particular claim is especially interesting as Reimers notes that comedies are more likely than other types of television shows to use stereotypes as a prevalent part of their script, since many people find them funny. Following this line of thought, she continues on to say that the fact that many comedies are starting to highlight women in this new manner just goes to show that these new traits have become accepted as stereotypically female. Then, by acknowledging that these traits are thus stereotypes, it can be shown that society’s view of a stereotypical woman has indeed morphed since the 1950s, especially as indicated through comedy shows (Reimers 14).

VII. The Modern Day Mother

If specifically analyzing analogous motherly roles, then Claire and Gloria from *Modern Family* provide direct contrast to June Cleaver’s image on *Leave It To Beaver*. Though all three women are stay-at-home mothers, Claire and Gloria represent the advent of the modern day woman as strong, beautiful, assertive, dominant, and intelligent women.In fact, confirming this portrayal of Gloria and Claire, author Valerie Reimers states that in the current day, a new respect for women has emerged and traditionally motherly and subdominant roles are now replaced with women who head the household.

Moreover, many of these roles are accompanied by men who seem “to be in awe of their wives… and maybe even slightly fearful” (Coney 5). This statement by Coney just further validates the depiction of Claire and Gloria, as both have large amounts of influence over their spouses. Whenever Claire speaks, she usually has the last word or the most influence over everybody else within her family. For example, in episode “Manny Get Your Gun”, when Claire was trying to mobilize everyone to get ready for Manny’s birthday, Phil was busy trying to write out his agenda for his annual “family camp.” Claire exasperatedly told him, “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go, let’s go. Honey, not now!”, dragging Phil out of the room. She even complains that “Phil is seen as the fun one… since the kids and Phil always have to listen [to me]” (*Modern Family,* “Manny Get Your Gun”)**.** She often challenges her family into listening to her, and Phil claims that he lives “in fear of displeasing [his] wife.” The kids and Phil are also often thrown in the middle of Claire’s neighborhood projects, and end up having to try to please Claire; for example, Phil and the kids assembled themselves to get 50 signatures for Claire’s campaign to put up a stop sign in a particularly dangerous intersection, even though they were all busy doing other things (*Modern Family*, “Door to Door”). While Claire is not the breadwinner of the family, and stays at home to run the household, she is the dominant one in the family. Phil even states, “You know I love your mother, but I think you also know a certain look she gets that says ‘just listen to me, I’m always right’” (*Modern Family*, “Manny Get Your Gun”).This shows a change in thoughts towards women’s roles in the family, as in the fifties, women were docile and domesticated and always listened to the man figure in the house. Before, as seen with Ward Cleaver, the man was the disciplinarian, but Claire does all the disciplining and is the nagging mother. Reimers agrees with this transition in portrayal of women, stating: “contemporary mothers have traded June Cleaver’s and Donna Reed’s pearls and frilly aprons for jeans and sweaters or suitable business attire and moved toward further voicing of their opinions,” instead of being subservient to their overriding spouses as in the 1950s and 1960s television shows (118).

Similarly, Gloria too exerts a large amount of influence over Jay. Just in the few short months that Gloria has been married to Jay, she has been able to change many of his family traditions, such as incorporating Columbian traditions into Jay’s very traditional and established Christmas (*Modern Family*, “Undeck the Halls”). She was also able to coerce him into buying her a very expensive car, and is usually on equal status with him when they fight. For example, in the episode “Manny Get Your Gun,” Gloria and Jay have a fight about where the car keys are. Instead of Jay simply yelling or reprimanding her—as would have likely happened had this been a fifties show—Gloria held her ground and shouted right back at Jay. In those moments, she wasn’t a docile housewife, seeking to preserve the happiness and picture perfect appearance of her family—as June Cleaver was always attempting to do—but she held her own.

Yet, Gloria and Claire are still extensively beautiful, possessing typically traditionally feminine bodies, supporting the claim that the modern woman still must embody certain traditional characteristics. Though popular culture’s women have evolved with the changing decades to be more commanding and dominant, they still are shown as pretty, possessing society’s traditionally optimal bodies. In fact, Claire and Gloria both still possess multiple traditional “feminine” qualities. Yet what does one define as traditionally feminine? When taking polls among current teenagers and people in their sixties in Southern California, both age distributions ranked being pretty, curvy, good with kids, fashionable, within their top five associated character traits for feminine women (Nath, “What Constitutes a (Wo)Man?”). In fact, between 80 and 85% of the hundred surveyed for each age group said that an ideal woman would be pretty, with good physique and feminine falling in second and third place at ~50%, and fashionable and curvy coming in fourth and fifth place in the high thirty percents. When looking at Claire and Gloria, both are motherly figures within *Modern Family*. Gloria is always trying to take care of Mitch and Cam’s baby, Lily, and is extremely close with her son, Manny, for whom she declares “I would do anything… I love Manny with all my heart… He and I have been through so much together” **(***Modern Family*, “The Old Wagon”**)**. Claire too consistently expresses love for her children, though often in means of concern, whether over Haley’s boyfriend, Luke’s childish and sometimes foolish antics, or concern over Alex’s excessive studying. This shows how both Claire and Gloria possess the traditionally feminine “motherly” trait. Similarly, both women are viewed as gorgeous by those around them. In the Real Estate Agentepisode, Phil accidentally gets his car painted in a way that it looks like he is “pimping out” his wife and daughter, when he meant to advertise his business. It is clear that Claire is viewed by most as beautiful, since there are many over-eager callers wishing to “purchase her for a night”. Gloria too says she suffers from stereotyping as “people often judge [her] for wearing low cut clothes, having big boobs, and marrying Jay” (*Modern Family,* “Starry Night”). Clearly her physique is a large factor in defining her as an object of jealousy for other women, who view her as a very stereotypical woman, containing many attributes of a “feminine” woman.

VIII. Modern Day Father

As stated earlier in the paper, Riemers called the typical masculine man a symbol of “stoicism, integrity, reliability, the desire to protect and provide, and sacriﬁce” (108). Faludi, an author whose views are similar to Reimers, argues that this culture has been usurped by a showy culture for men: ‘‘In a culture of ornament, by contrast, manhood is deﬁned by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and ‘props,’ by the curled lip of petulant sulk and ﬂexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy” (Faludi 62). Though Faludi’s definition is considered by some to be exaggerated, her idea that generally men of today have moved away from such static roles, and started to embody traditionally female characteristics is supported by all the male characters in *Modern Family*. As Reimers and Faludi both suggest, society’s ideal males today incorporate a nuanced and varied set of behaviors, including both sensitivity and dominance.

Phil, Claire’s husband, is not only less emotionally hardened in some ways than Claire, but he is the less dominant one in the family. He is in fact sensitive and in touch with his feelings, while still retaining some traditionally male characteristics. While Ward from *Leave it to Beaver*, was the male bulwark in the family, Phil is much less stoic, and a lot more emotionally in touch with his feelings, while still retaining the traditionally male characteristics of protectiveness, “desire to provide,” and status of breadwinner. For example, when getting gifts for their anniversaries, Phil shows his sensitive side when getting Claire a sentimental picture slideshow gift, with all their best memories tied into one gift. He ends the picture slides with a photo of a bracelet which Claire has never seen, which turns out to be the second part of his gift, which Claire loves (*Modern Family,* “Great Expectations”). Yet, adhering to the argument that modern day males also embody some traditionally male aspects in their personalities, Phil also is the breadwinner in the family, works out to keep in top physique, and likes traditionally male things such as building things, and watching sports games. Sometimes Phil feels the need to destress and so he builds things such as treehouses and birdhouses (*Modern Family*, “Treehouse”). Faludi states that this need for men to reassert their manhood lies psychologically in the postwar ages, due to American men feeling emasculated by “joblessness, feminism, corporate disloyalty, and the ornamental culture for men” (27). Tragos agrees with Faludi in this sense of a backlash against the “metrosexual” man, saying that “in a time of ambiguous notions about what it means to be a man, hypermasculinity is one attempt to reclaim traditional notions of manhood” (Tragos 546).

Tragos asserts that males, in an attempt to revert to the original definitions of masculinity resort to methods where they try to revert to their previous masculinity by involving themselves with activities in the garage, or through physically building things. Though such activities do not directly promote any sort of sexism or comment on the roles of women, this sort of activity does highlight the message that true traditional masculinity lies in physical and manual strength and labor.

Jayrepresents the older school of thought meshed with the younger. While he stills tries to act stoic and emotionally stable, as demonstrated by his strained attitude around his son Mitch and his partner Cam, Jay too embodies certain feminine characteristics while retaining masculine characteristics. While Jay is the main breadwinner in his family, tries to be very emotionally stoic**,** used to work out a lot in his younger days, he also has a certain “soft” side to him. He is unusually gentle at times with Manny, claiming that “I wasn’t really a great parent the first time around, but now I finally have a chance to redeem myself,” identifying himself with the character trait of being sensitive, family-oriented, and attempting to connect with kids. In fact, in the survey I conducted among teenagers today asking what makes an ideal man, being good with kids ranked as the 4th highest choice with 37.8% of people ranking it within their top five ideal qualities in a list of given traits. Being protective (57.1%), strong (51.0%), sensitive (49.0%), family- oriented (35.7%), and masculine (35.7%) ranked first, second, third, and tied for fifth, respectively. When asking the same group of people what words they associated with a traditionally masculine man, and asking them to rank their top five character traits among a list of given choices, the responses were overwhelmingly pointed at the words strong (92.9%), protective (76.5%), muscular (86.7%), dominant (79.6%), and breadwinner (42.9%). (Nath, “What Constitutes a (Wo)Man?”). These survey responses show how Jay is represented as a very typical man, in an ideal sense of the word: he protective of Manny and Gloria and family-oriented (as are all the characters on this show). He is also sensitive once opening him up a little; he always cries when watching his favorite Western films during Christmastime (*Modern Family, “*Undeck the Halls”). His masculinity, according to these survey results are apparent as well: he is not only the breadwinner, but also protective and dominant at times.

However, Modern Family also represents a new school of thought in the way that they are portraying types of stereotypical families that were never depicted in shows in the fifties and sixties. For example, Cam and Mitch represent today’s “quintessential gay couple”, while Gloria and Jay are an interracial couple with large difference in ages (Goudreau 4). Both of these types of couples were never shown in television shows back in the fifties or sixties and therefore represent an important deviation in types of stereotypical families as represented by *Modern Family*. It’s main significance is acknowledgement by modern popular culture shows such as *Modern Family* that such families do exist.

IX. Closing Significance

In closing, it is important to be aware of the surroundings that we, as people, are thrust into, and understand the roles that society expects from us. Though it isn’t always immediately obvious, by gaining such as understanding, society can move away from defined and restricting roles. With newfound understanding, people can grow into beings that they actually want to be. Through the examination of such transitions in popular culture, hopefully readers can gain an understanding of themselves, how far society has come and how much more needs to be done before true equality can be reached. Maybe then the future girls and boys of the middle school lunch tables can have realistic discussions about their future partners.

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