

All in the Family: Bigotry As Seen By Bigots

Show some scenes from Norman Lear's classic *All in the Family*. Do you find it easy or difficult to understand how as much as 30% of the audience thought Archie won the arguments?

Here we are with yet another show that I've never seen before. The sitcom *All in the Family* presents something of a different view of the lower middle class, a view which I was surprised could actually be aired on television. Even if some of the comments were made in jest, it still seemed like a racy show to be showing in the 70s. I guess society wasn't as uptight about TV programs as I thought back then.

All in the Family premiered on CBS in 1971 and ran for a total of nine seasons, ending in 1979. Even after the show ended, it's popularity warranted for a second sitcom called *Archie Bunker's Place* which lasted another four seasons, ending in 1983. The show's popularity was rather startling simply because of the approach it took to comedy, taking on topics that to date had been considered unsuitable for U.S. television. I was rather amazed to find that they addressed many topics such as racism, homosexuality, rape, abortion, menopause, and impotence. Considering how even some of those topics are still awkward in today's society, that must have been something to experience back then.

The sitcom appears to have done things quite well despite the questionable nature of their comedy. Every lead character won an Emmy Award and the show was rated #1 by Nielsen ratings from 1971 until 1976. Just to give an example of how popular the show was, the series finale was viewed by more than 40 million viewers. The only other shows that have achieved a #1 rating for five or more consecutive seasons are *The Cosby Show* and *American Idol*, neither of which I can understand as I don't enjoy either shows.

All in the Family gained a lot of its viewers through the controversial nature of the show. When something is controversial, obviously people talk about it. And when people talk about it, they get curious

to see what all the talk is about. So in a way, this was to the show's advantage because it attracted a large range of viewers. Sitcoms don't get an audience by coloring inside the lines. It's when you get outside of the boundaries of what is perceived as socially acceptable comedy that you tend to attract a following. But I'll add the clause that there comes a point when you can go too far outside of socially acceptable and drive people away. *All in the Family* manages to walk that fine line and kept the comedy tasteful while still edgy and interesting.

From the few hours of video clips that I've watched, it is immediately understandable why Archie is such a popular character. Despite his culturally intolerant nature and innate ability to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, he is still quite a lovable character. From all that I've read, everyone shares this opinion.

The sitcom made significant bounds in achieving what was their ultimate goal. This goal is best expressed by the disclaimer aired at the start of the first episode:

The program you are about to see is *All in the Family*. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter we hope to show, in a mature fashion, just how absurd they are.

CBS was obviously nervous about this new show and its content. It was addressing issues that had never before been brought up on a sitcom in an atmosphere of comedy. This was a very fine line to walk simply because attempts at jest could be misconstrued as levity. But how better to get over potentially awkward situations than by laughing at the silliness of it?

In 1971, Laura Hobson published a critique of the show, which apparently lit something of a fire under the show. She stated that the show did not use some of the worst racial slurs, which supported her claim that the show was a parody rather than a celebration of Archie's way of thinking. What really stoked the fire was her opinion that the series was creating "selective perception on a national scale" (p.72). In other words, the audience enjoyed watching the show because they thought it was confirming their own personal beliefs. The end result was that Archie had become a hero to these people, a person

they could look up to and emulate. Just based on Manjoo's paraphrasing of Hobson's review doesn't make this seem like a scathing review. So, let's look at the actual review.

To start, Hobson said that Archie Bunker didn't use enough bigotry. Throughout her review, she goes on to note the absence of the language that truly represents bigotry. The end result of this is that she feels this show is not being completely honest in giving us a lovable bigot. No bigot should be lovable in her opinion. She felt that the millions watching the show were being "conned into thinking that you can be." She ultimately wanted *All in the Family* to show "the real thing" before they accepted any praise about being an honest show getting honest laughter.

Okay, now I can see some scathe to the review. In a way, I think it's a bit unfair to say that they're not being honest. After all, what sitcom is an actual representation of how things are in the real world? Let's get real here. The moment we start using words the n-word and such, any audience is bound to get uncomfortable. The moment they "get real," they would lose a lot of audience because of how uncomfortable those words are. We're not going to get used to it.

Based on the research of two psychologists, we are given insight into the minds of students. The end result of this was that low prejudice people thought Archie was "a bigot, domineering, rigid, loud, and that he mistreats his wife." People of high prejudice saw him as "down-to-earth, honest, hardworking, predictable, and kind enough to allow his son-in-law and daughter to live with him." These are quite opposite viewpoints.

Getting back to the topic of the question at the start of this essay, I would have to say that I do find it believable that 30% of viewers thought Archie won the arguments. When we take into account the various prejudices that each of us has (because all of us are prejudiced about something), it stands to reason that we would have differing viewpoints. Let's face it, the nation will never be unanimous in any one viewpoint. We'll always have men who think that they're always right just like we'll always have women who think they're always right. The same goes for *All in the Family*. We have people who think Archie is a great guy and people who think he's scum.

The end result of this is what Hobson alluded to, namely selective perception. I won't claim that her assertion was anything new, because we've always had selective perception as a society. I think she simply objected to that selectiveness in this instance. We have selectiveness in everything though, so why take her seriously?

Well, let's take into account that 30% of people thought Archie was right in his arguments. What does this mean? It means that this selective perception is quite pervasive. When we watch an argument where Archie is arguing how a baseball team had a perfectly no hit game and Michael argued they didn't because it was "stolen from them" in the last inning, it makes a person wonder how you could agree with Archie. Then we see a scene where Archie is arguing with Gloria and Michael about how they need to make their child attend church before they grow up and teach them how to think rather than give them the freedom to choose for themselves. In a way, this is humorously ironic. Yet it's something I obviously agree with.

There must be some credence to the poll that was taken. Archie may be an opinionated bigot, but he's still got a point on some issues. Racial stereotyping may be socially unacceptable, but those stereotypes started somehow. It may be unacceptable for Archie to support those stereotypes, but he is much like the rest of this country: unafraid of expressing his opinion. Can we really hold that against him? I'm not the sort of person who gets easily offended, and I'll admit that I share some of Archie's views, which I understand may be quite unfair of me. But that's the kind of person I am. However, unlike Archie, I can hold my tongue.