contemporary situation comedies they have been disappeared as central characters, and remain, if they do at all, as marginal characters whose main function is a brief comedic interlude. There are two dominant types. One type is an engaging and quixotic older person who lives in the house of one of the main characters. The second type is a bitter, angry, cynical neighbor, family relation or coworker. These characters are imagined in similar ways, they, first of all, are not subjects of a life: they do not work and are therefore dependent; they exist only in relation to the lives and conflicts of the main characters; and the anger and cynicism of the latter character are clearly related to their age, life and the experience of aging has made them bitter, cynical and angry.

The imagining of aging has changed in contemporary situation comedies. In early television sitcoms like Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, I Love Lucy, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, September Bride, Our Miss Brooks and I Married Joan, aging was imagined as both chronological age and a process whereby wisdom is gained. In these early situation comedies, the main characters were adults, and the characters were played by adult actors. They were adults in the broad sense, not just in terms of physical age, but in terms of maturity and life experience. Many had jobs and other social roles that they were competently fulfilling; they had families and friends, and they had gained wisdom from their life experience. The children were played by child actors and the characters were depicted as immature, callow youth, who needed to mature as persons. In other words, youth was defined by what it lacked in relation to aging, to being an adult. It was as if television situation comedies, at least on a superficial level, had accepted stages of development theories. Much of the humor and conflict, such as there was, centered on the situations the children got themselves into because of their youth. The resolution to that situation was usually mediated by the wisdom of the adults. The idea was that growing up, was not just growing older, but was a learning experience. Wisdom, if it did come, would come with aging.

An example of this is Father Knows Best. The show starred Robert Young as the father. The character he played was and Young himself was. His wife played by Jane Wyman was also an adult. They had three children, Bud, Sissy, and Kitten. Their family lived in a two story house in the suburbs with all the modern appliances. The stories frequently focused on situations that the children got into and finally had to be solved by Robert Young, the father who knew best. Kitten had found and taken care of a wild bird, but the bird was now healthy. Kitten wanted to keep the bird because she had cared for it and did not want to lose it and was worried that it might get hurt again. In a conversation, in her room, Young explained to Kitten that the bird was wild, that it should not be kept in a cage, and it should be let go. He essentially explained the idea of “freedom from” to Kitten who agreed with this wisdom and freed the bird..

Not all adult characters were mature in the sit coms of 1950s, even some of the main characters were immature adults. For example Lucy in I Love Lucy, or Joan in I Married Joan existed in a state of immaturity which created the comedic situations of each episode. But much of the humor derived by playing off the immaturity of the main character against the norm of a mature adult represented by other main adult characters.

The tendency now is to “disappear” nbjmnhexperience of aging. The majority of the main characters in contemporary sitcoms are young, as are the actors; they are what are called “twenty-somethings.” And when the actors and characters are older, they still behave as if they are “twenty-somethings.” One can argue that this transformation began with a specific situation comedy, Happy Days. In Happy Days, set in the 50s, but one of the most popular sitcoms of the 70s and early 80s, the main characters were high school students. There are however still adults as central characters, the parents of two of the main characters. In the early years of the show, the father was and adult, the mother was “ditsy,” but in the latter years the father became a comedic figure and wisdom was imparted to the young through the ageless character called Fonzie.

By the nineties, the most popular sitcom, was populated by young “twenty-somethings” alone who lived in New York. This was Friends, and no main characters were adults or the aged. The characters and the actors in the show mirrored the desired demographic group and the “world” of the show mirrored the “world” of the advertisers, an upper class, homogenous world of young, upwardly mobile, “white” (in New York) consumers. The parents of the main characters had no life of their own and were only introduced into the show to create comedic conflict in the lives of the main characters.

When there are older characters, adults, in sitcoms, they are not adults in the sense of the 1950s. They are simply older chronologically. There development has been arrested; they behave as if they were adolescents, even if they are married and have jobs and the obligations of other social roles. Frequently, the arrested development is accompanied by an almost total inability to comprehend and act in the “world.” Older characters are the “butt of jokes” so to speak. They are the source of audience humor, but also the ridicule humor of the younger characters who are now endowed with wisdom. In the popular situation comedy Two and a Half Men, the two adults, “the men” are in a state of perpetual adolescence, while the “half man,” the child, is the wisest and the most mature of the three.

The best example of this imagining of aging and the aged in contemporary sitcoms is a popular and now almost cult television show, ironically called Arrested Development. There are seven main characters, five adults and two adolescents. Of the five adults, only Michael, the main character is an adult in anything beyond the age. The stories all revolve around Michael trying to hold the family and the family business together. Michael’s father is a corporate criminal, falanderer, with no sense of obligation, social responsibility, and absolutely no moral compass. At the beginning of the series, he is in prison. Michael’s mother, a racist, who has, and continues to, ignore the obligations of parenthood, lives off the very generous illegal income from the family business. She inhabits an upper class mean spirited, self-involved bubble. The other three adults exist