Cultural Themes of *Happy Days* and *That '70s Show*

By

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Two nostalgia-based television sitcoms, *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984) and *That '70s Show* (Fox 1998-2006), serve as cultural artifacts for the decades in which their narratives take place. Though set twenty years apart the similarities between the two series are striking. The setting for each is in Wisconsin with narratives that celebrate a specific time frame (1950s in *Happy Days* and 1970s in *That '70s Show*) as told through the lens of the experiences of a teenage male protagonist. Each show has an ensemble group of friends and family as central characters in the series. Both shows were tremendously successful for their respective network. *Happy Days* was one of the top-rated sitcoms of the 1970s (TV Guide) and *That '70s Show* was Fox's second-longest running sitcom in the network's history (People).

Despite the surface-level similarities, *Happy Days* and *That '70's Show* have a number of contrasting encoded messages, likely due to the distinctive cultural values of the eras in which they were produced. Textual analysis of both programs reveals a growing acceptance of images of drugs and sexual expression as well a more contentious display of familial relationships on television. These changes and the importance of the domestic sitcom cannot be understated. As noted by Timothy Pehlke, "Fictional families in non-animated television sitcoms model contemporary family life and have been viewed as important socializing agents, as they 'offer implicit lessons about appropriate family life'" (115).

Much of *Happy Days'* success is due in part to a nostalgic longing for idyllic post-war life of the 1950s by white, middle class audiences who had experienced great social and political change in the 1960s that included the Civil Rights Movement and the Watergate scandal. In his book *The Century of Sex* author James Petersen described the 1950s as, "The Fabulous Fifties. The Decade Deluxe. The Ike Age. These were the good old days, the happy days, the source of many an American's earliest, fondest memories and many of our postwar institutions. For the past two decades Americans had lived in the grip of poverty and war. Now they were ready for some giddy, goofy fun" (Inside Grease).

It was nostalgia that originally drove audiences to a new sitcom in 1974 called *Happy Days*. The program starred Ron Howard, who played Opie Taylor in *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS 1960-1968). By 1974 Howard was a teenager and audiences tuned into the January debut of *Happy Days* largely to find out what had become of Opie Taylor (McCrohan 251). Howard was four years old when he began his role on *The Andy Griffith Show* and literally grew up on television in front of American audiences (McCrohan 165). After the popularity of the George Lucas film *American Grafitti,* which starred Howard and centered on the life of 1962 high school graduates, ABC decided to apply a similar formula to television with *Happy Days*. In a *New York Times* article, then ABC West Coast Program Vice President Michael Eisner said, "People don't remember pain in the past,…the past is always green and lovely and frothy. 'Happy Days' was supposed to be to the Seventies what 'I Remember Mama' was to the Fifties, a look back at when our prime audience was growing up" (McCrohan 252).

Baby boomers were the first generation raised on television and as the mid-1970s approached and boomers grew into the attractive 18-35 year old marketing demographic it made sense for ABC to design a program that championed carefree elements of their childhoods. In

discussing television viewing habits from the early 1970s author Donna McCrohan notes, "Americans were fascinated with rediscovering themselves through nostalgia, camp, and trivia – all focused joyously and introspectively on the selfsame years. When baby boomers asked, 'where did I come from?' they didn't mean the womb. They meant Howdy Doody and Hula Hoops" (McCrohan 243).

Happy Days offered a sentimental look at life in the 1950s by way of a commonplace white, middle class suburban Midwest family. The series was set in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with narratives focused on the virtuous traditional nuclear Cunningham family. The family was made up of father Howard (Tom Bosley), mother Marion (Marion Ross), son Richie (Ron Howard), and daughter Joanie (Erin Moran). Eldest son Chuck (Gavin O'Herlihy, Randolph Roberts) appeared in eleven episodes and occasionally came into play narratively. Eventual family friend and rebel hero Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli (Henry Winkler) was an integral part of the series and one of its most well-known characters. *TV Guide* describes Fonzie as "A motorcycle-riding Casanova who became a pop-culture phenomenon." Richie's friends were Potsie Weber (Anson Williams) and Ralph Malph (Donnie Most).

The family bond of the Cunningham family was at the heart of the narratives. Richie triumphed over most of his adolescent strife with the understanding and counsel from his parents, Fonzie, and occasionally words of wisdom from younger sister Joanie. In "Richie's Car" (Season 2 Episode 2) Richie wants to get his own car, calling himself a "social outcast" without one. Richie, Howard and Marion gather around the kitchen table to talk through the problem. As Howard and Marion sit at the table, Richie paces around the kitchen, calmly laying out his argument, asking Howard, "Did you ever try walking a girl five miles to Arnolds, or walking a girl into a drive-in?" Marion sides with Richie, noting the family could benefit from having a

second car. Though Howard initially opposes the idea, he eventually relents and the family comes to a compromise. Howard agrees to throw in $200 towards a decent second car to be shared by the family, telling Richard, “It better not be anything like that heap you and Potsie tried to fix up last year.” Though Richie’s independence spurred the discussion, the resolution is one that benefits the entire Cunningham family. The family’s discourse is pleasant with the discussion playing out as a problem-resolution construction rather than Howard making a decision without input from the family, even though he ultimately has the final say.

The unyielding support of Richie’s parents was a recurring theme in the texts of *Happy Days*. In “You Go to My Head” (Season 2, Episode 4) Richie is frustrated with his struggles in talking to girls. Fonzie advises him to pretend being crazy like actor James Dean to attract women. When Richie tries Fonzie’s advice on a girl he likes at school, she reacts adversely and gives him a copy of her abnormal psychology textbook. After reading the book Richie begins to think his fear of talking to strange women, daydreaming, and fantasizing about being Mickey Mantle are signs of abnormal adolescent behaviors and decides to see a psychiatrist. In a scene somewhat darker emotionally than the typical *Happy Days* diegesis, Ralph finds Richie hiding in Richie’s bedroom closet reading the book by flashlight. Richie confides in Ralph, “This book has illuminated the dark recesses of my mind and I see a lot of trouble in there.” Later in the episode when Richie is hesitant to tell his parents about his psychiatrist visit, Marion asks, “Haven’t you always been able to confide in us?” After Richie acquiesces and tells his parents about the visit, Howard tells him, “If you have a problem we have a problem too, so we’ll go see him (the psychiatrist) and we’re not upset.” The issue of trust is directly addressed in “Haunted” (Season 2, Episode 6). Richie, Ralph and Potsie decide to throw a Halloween party in a supposed haunted house known as The Old Simpson House. On the way home from school Richie stops by the

house to see if it fits the bill of being scary enough for the party. While investigating the inside of the eerie and empty house Richie thinks he sees something in a closet. He is noticeably upset when returning home and fears no one will believe him. After rejecting his father's inquiries regarding what he saw, Howard responds with, "Don't I always believe you? Of course I'll believe you." The conversation ends with Howard putting Richard's mind at ease, blaming the strange surroundings of the house and telling Richard he is old enough to look at the situation logically.

The construction of Howard Cunningham as an altruistic patriarch contradicts the findings of a 2004 study which examined themes of father involvement in the modern sitcom. In a content analysis of twelve sitcoms in the fall of 2004, Pehlke et al. observed that "several of the images of fatherhood set forth by the family-based sitcoms in our sample included representations that reflect unsupportive and manipulative father-child interactions." Despite the findings, Pehlke suggests the construction of the modern sitcom father may be improving compared to prior research, which reported "concerns about lack of gender equality, incompetent fathering, and other negative views of family dynamics that questions the overall health of fictional families presented on network television" (136).

Though the romantic life of Richie Cunningham was popular material for *Happy Days* narratives, mentions of sexual expression was limited and, when present, were often veiled expressions. Inspiration Point is a common romantic location within the *Happy Days* diegesis that the characters often hope to visit with their dates. In "Richie's Car" (Season 2, Episode 2), Richie's date Gloria (Linda Purl) expresses disappointment when he takes her to his garage instead of Inspiration Point. In the episode Richie wrestled ethically with driving the car, having found out it had been reported stolen just prior to Gloria asking for a ride. Rather than driving to

Inspiration Point or going to the police, Richie took the middle ground of driving straight home as instructed by Fonzie. In "Haunted" (Season 2, Episode 6), Fonzie tells Richie he is taking his date (dressed as Tonto for a Halloween costume party) to Inspiration Point to make smoke signals. The mention of homosexuality in "You Go to My Head" (Season 2, Episode 4) prompts a laugh track when Richie says in a discussion with a psychiatrist, "There's this boy…I mean, there's this girl, and she's having trouble asking girls out for the first time." In a textual analysis of four episodes from season two of *Happy Days*, the most aggressive for of sexual activity observed was when Fonzie passionately kissed his date on stage during a theater performance in "A Star is Bored" (Season 2, Episode 10). In the scene, the actors' faces are turned away from the camera and the audience only sees the back of Fonzie's head. Even this modest inclusion of sexual expression was a change from the television texts of the 1950s. It is noted in *Prime Time, Our Time* that 1950s sitcoms shied away from any type of necking on dates "for fear of setting a negative example" (254). In the mid-1970s, a decade in the midst of a sexual revolution, it was no big secret that necking went on and was more socially acceptable for television audiences.

There were cracks in the façade of the 1950s suburban bliss portrayed in *Happy Days* and television played a central role in the cultural shift during the 1960s. Post-war social and political awareness gained momentum as television brought images of racial tension and the Vietnam War into American living rooms. A growing counterculture rejected many of the social norms of the 1950s, opposing racial segregation and America's involvement in Vietnam. In describing the 1960s author Aniko Bodroghkozy says, "It has become commonplace to describe that decade as a rebellious decade, characterized by protest and confrontation, turmoil and social division" (217). By the 1970s this counterculture movement grew to include the sexual revolution, psychedelic rock music and drug use (Hirsch 434). This cultural transformation applied to

television as well. Douglas and Olson assert that "the television family looks different in 1992 than it did in 1952; single-parent and minority families are more common and parents, both mothers and fathers, are more frequently seen outside the home" (Douglas & Olson, 1996). By the mid-1970s topics such as drug use and sexual expression, which are commonly seen in *That '70s Show*, had replaced the kind of post-war family values demonstrated in *Happy Days*.

That '70s Show wasn't borne out of audience thirst for nostalgia but rather a self-serving purpose for its creator Mark Brazill. Regarding the burgeoning egoist culture of the 1970s, Tom and Sara Pendergast explain:

> When journalist Tom Wolfe surveyed the changes that had swept America in the past few years, he gave the decade a label that has stuck: "The Me Decade"…More and more Americans turned inward, seeking comfort in spiritual renewal or seeking insight by visiting therapists, reading self-help books, or exercising. Many people gave up trying to perfect the world and tried instead to perfect themselves. (947)

It is in this vein that Mark Brazill created a sitcom that captured the elements from his 1970s childhood. Brazill told the *New York Times* that the basement where protagonist Eric Forman and friends hang out is modeled after the attic in his boyhood home in Fredonia, New York, adding, "Eric is basically me" (Meisler).

The sitcom is described by New York Times reporter Andy Meisler as *Happy Days* meets *The Ice Storm*, a film about Nixon-era families. Unlike its television predecessor *Happy Days*, however, *That '70s Show* offered a more bawdy and lascivious look at Midwestern teenage life.

It was a bold celebration of 1970s popular culture, both socially and with a nod to the television era of which it its narrative is set. The show often featured guest stars from 1970s television including Betty White and Mary Tyler Moore from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and Tom Bosley and Marion Ross from *Happy Days*. The series is set in fictional Point Place, Wisconsin, and chronicles the exploits of seventeen-year old Eric Forman and his friends. His family is made up of father Reginald "Red" Forman (Kurtwood Smith), mother Kitty Forman (Debra Jo Rupp), and Sister Laurie (Lisa Robin Kelly). Eric is surrounded by a host of eclectic friends that Meisler describes as "The light of Eric's life Donna, an intelligent, attractive redhead who alternates maddeningly between treating him like a friend and like a boyfriend" (Laura Prepon), "the handsome, empty headed Michael" (Ashton Kutcher), "Michael's pushy, status-seeking girlfriend Jackie" (Mila Kunis), "the studiedly disaffected 'rebel' Hyde" (Danny Masterson) and the "politically incorrect exchange student" Fez (Wilmer Valderrama).

While *Happy Days'* protagonist Richie Cunningham relied on family support to solve his problems, Eric is often left to resolve conflicts in spite of his family. In "Eric Gets Suspended" (Season 2, Episode 9), Eric takes the blame for his girlfriend Donna when a teacher sees him holding her cigarette on school grounds. The action results in Eric's suspension from school. He later questions his decision while fearing his father's reaction, stating, "Getting suspended is right up there with backing over my mom." Red confronts Eric while the family eats at the dinner table, asking, "Are you getting dumber?" When Eric tries to tell his parents he doesn't smoke, Red says to Kitty, "The way he's screwing up his life, death will be a sweet relief." This episode reveals a great disparity of family discourse and hierarchy compared to the Cunningham family. In the *Happy Days* texts everyone is accorded an equal voice and Howard and Marion exhibit an absolute trust in their son. In "Eric Gets Suspended" Kitty and Eric are voiceless and

Red not only refuses to believe Eric but mocks him in front of the entire family at the dinner table. The episode concludes with Donna confessing to Red and Kitty that the cigarette was hers and Kitty prompting Red to apologize to Eric. Red agrees, but refuses to apologize in front of Kitty. His eventual apology to Eric consists of, "Ok, I'm going to say I'm sorry, but you do lie a lot."

The conflict in "Eric Gets Suspended" is similar to that of "Richie's Car" from *Happy Days* where Richie intentionally drives a stolen car to impress his girlfriend. The way the father in each episode handles the conflict is very different. When Richie confesses his guilt, "I knew the car was stolen but I drove it any way. Only Once. For this date in my garage," Howard immediately deflects Riche's guilt to the person that sold Richie the car (Fonzie). After Richie apologizes for not admitting the truth, Howard responds, "Oh that's alright Richard, I'm a lot happier that it wasn't stolen." In *That '70s Show*, Red refuses to believe his son until he receives definitive proof and follows up with a passive-aggressive apology which still lays part of the blame on Eric for being intrinsically dishonest.

The relationship between Richie and his father in *Happy Days* is very different than that of Eric and his father in *That '70s Show*. Richie deals with external conflicts by relying on his father for trusted counsel. Eric's father is often a source of conflict and the two have a somewhat adversarial relationship with occasional moments of father-son bonding. In three of the four *Happy Days* texts examined, Richie relies directly on advice from his father to help him overcome the conflict presented in the episode. In the four *That '70s Show* texts examined, Red serves as the conflict for Eric in one episode, has zero interactions with Eric in another, and gets an underage Eric drunk in a third. In "Red's Last Day" (Season 2, Episode 2) Red calls the family's hometown of Point Place a "crap hole" and later calls Eric a "dumbass," a recurring gag

throughout the series. In a flashback to 1957 during "Halloween" (Season 2, Episode 5), Red's mother, Grandma Bernice Forman – played by *Happy Days*' Marion Ross – has already let herself into the house. Red and a friend show up in costume with beer and Kitty asks for help in dealing with his mom. Red, without acknowledging his mother is in the room, says he's going to the garage to "get plowed" and leaves Kitty to deal with Bernice. Later in the episode when Kitty tells Red she is pregnant with their first child, Red responds, "Oh no! I mean…oh, crap."

Does this shift in the construction of the sitcom father from loving supporter to begrudging companion represent a new cultural norm? Pehlke claims television serves as a mechanism for learning about paternal roles through information processing theory. When new character constructs appear in television, "the 'new' information is considered in a way that 'fits' with previously held beliefs. In other cases, the schema is modified to accommodate new information. These schemas are formed and modified throughout life; media serves as a likely influence, as the previously held schema guides interpretation of encounters with TV characters" (115).

In "Eric Gets Suspended" there is also a very different dynamic seen between siblings compared to that of *Happy Days*. In the episode, Laurie is the one who tells Red about Eric's suspension after receiving the call from the school. When Red eventually apologizes to Eric, Laurie storms off mad that her brother won't be in trouble. This tumultuous family life is a very different one than that of *Happy Days'* Richie and Joanie Cunningham. Researchers William Douglas and Beth Olson examined parent-child and sibling-to-sibling relationships, sampling nine Nielsen Top-Twenty programs that first aired between 1950 and 1994.They concluded that "the experience of television children appears to have deteriorated across time. In the present study, the general relational environment was rated more conflictual and less cohesive—that is,

less supportive, less satisfying, and less stable—in modern families than it was in earlier television families" (Douglas & Olson, 92).

As previously noted, despite its narrative setting in the 1950s the mid-1970's sitcom *Happy Days* featured more sexual expression than seen on television two decades prior. This is a trend that continued into the late-1990s, as evident from the textual analysis of *That '70s Show*. Of the four episodes viewed, all contained multiple references to sex and sexual activity. In the opening scene of "Red's Last Day" Michael shows off his new van to his friends, calling it a "bedroom on wheels." Donna's father Don (Bob Pinciotti) shows up and says, "I had a Ford delivery van in high school. It's a lot of fun until somebody gets pregnant." Later in the episode while at the breakfast table Kitty asks Laurie to take off her University of Wisconsin sweatshirt as to not remind Red of the money the family spent on college, and Laurie begins to take the sweatshirt off in front of Kitty, Eric and Hyde, revealing her bra. In "The Sleepover" (Season 2, Episode 8) Eric has a dream in which he is a guest on a game show named "The $20,000 Virgin Octagon." Later in the episode Donna tells Jackie she slept in Eric's bed but didn't have sex with him, to which Jackie replies, "You mean you were in his bed and he didn't whine and beg for like two hours until you were so sick of hearing his stupid voice that you just gave in so he would shut up?" This cues a hearty laugh track that included audience clapping. In the final scene of "Eric Gets Suspended" Eric tells Donna that to get attention from their parents some girls go slutty. She agrees and says, "Let's have sex right now!" When Eric asks, "Really?" Donna says no. Eric playfully responds, "Quit doing that!" This is in reference to a continuing narrative in the first two seasons of the show teasing when Eric and Donna will finally sleep together (which finally happens in Season 2, Episode 16, "The First Time").

The contrast between *Happy Days* and *That '70s Show* is immense and reveals the fissure between what is admissible by television standards between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s. Regarding the creation of *Happy Days* for audiences in 1974, the show's Executive Producer Gary Marshall said:

> I couldn't figure out how I could do a realistic comedy about young people today and avoid drugs and avoid the sexual revolution, because I know they wouldn't put that on television. So I said, What's the use? It's not real, people are gonna watch it and say: 'Baloney, that isn't real life.' Then it crossed my mind – how can I beat this? I can do it if I push it back in time – to the Fifties. If I'm not doing drugs, and I'm not doing the sex things, then the audience will buy it and they'll say: 'That's right, it's not today, but that's the way it was.' (McCrohan 252)

This is a stark contradiction to the first two seasons of *That '70s Show,* where marijuana smoking is glorified, sex is constantly alluded to and teenage male characters celebrate promiscuous women (Meisler). It is not only audiences but also advertisers that approve of the transformation of content in postmodern television. In *Vulgarians at the Gate* author Steve Allen points out that an episode of the prime time sitcom *Just Shoot Me* (NBC, 1997-2003), debuting one year prior to *That 70s Show*, had multiple references to sex including a character saying he had "the hottest, wildest, oiliest night of crazy, freaky monkey sex this side of Bangkok," and "She's amazing. I felt like I was with three women – and I've *been* with three women." Allen examined what companies purchased advertising for this particular episode of Just Shoot Me. The list includes family-friendly companies like Milton Bradley, Target and Toys R Us (94).

Both *Happy Days* and *That '70s Show* captured the look of earlier generations from a mise-en-scène standpoint as well as many of the cultural artifacts associated with the 1950s and 1970s. *Happy Days* captured an idyllic decade by highlighting relatively blissful and carefree adolescent narratives and often times resembled a sitcom from 1950s. *That '70s Show* pushed the envelope to a greater degree in appealing to a modern audience now accepting of many of the elements associated with the 1970s counterculture movement, though from a content standpoint it looked much less like a sitcom you might see on 1970s television. The comparisons and contrasts of the two programs offer a picture of what popular culture authors, television viewers and advertisers deemed appropriate during two different eras of network television.

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