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Social History of Television

### **Series Analysis: The Brady Bunch**

In 1966, Sherwood Schwartz conceptualized the idea for his new show, *The Brady Bunch*, after reading about the rising divorce rate in America, also learning that thirty percent of married couples had children from other marriages. The sitcom born of this societal aspect has since become one of the most recognizable shows on television. After creating and producing *Gilligan's Island*, Schwartz hoped to make another hit series, this time focusing on the lives of a blended middle-class family. After pitching his idea to three separate networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, the show was seen as too unrealistic and put on the backburner. The far-fetched idea that a man living on an architect's salary and supporting a wife, six children, and a maid while living in a posh two-story home wasn't what network executives were looking to air. However, after the success of *Yours, Mine, and Ours* in 1968, the show was put into action (Winans). Network executives saw similarities in the film and sitcoms' blended families, and ran the pilot episode on September 26, 1969 on ABC. *The Brady Bunch* never managed to top the rating lists or gain any critical acclaim during its five year run time, and much of its popularity didn't occur until the 1990's (Newton). Yet unlike edgier, more progressive shows like *All in the Family*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Brady Bunch* lacked a certain freshness,

stubbornly clinging to the morally-centered traditional family life of the 1950s post-war era of television.

Consequently, most of what separated *The Brady Bunch* from other sitcoms of the 1970s was its aversion to take any sort of in-depth look at social issues. Sherwood Schwartz was quoted saying "There are so many damn dysfunctional families in America that I think it's a longing for a more innocent, pleasant life, for that family was very functional" (Newton). While this may have been a sentimental idea, Schwartz' omission of grit made the show's view on life look hopelessly naïve and somewhat ridiculous. Rarely is any sort of racial diversity shown, and even when it is, they appear more as tokens than as actual characters. Only in a select few episodes is gender equality mentioned, and then only to be dismissed as much too radical for the Bradys' liking. In recent years, adult viewers have watched re-runs of *The Brady Bunch* with a sort of fond nostalgia, but it hasn't been taken seriously. The show often oversimplified family issues, and no episode faced any challenge that couldn't be neatly wrapped up within 30 minutes. The formulaic operation of was reminiscent of Bob Mosher's *Leave It to Beaver*, which also focused on a firmly idyllic middle-class family in which the parents knew exactly how to handle their children's trivial problems. Each episode ended with either a stern talking-to or a moral lesson, which the kids candidly promised to take to heart. Of the sitcoms of the 50s and 60s, Richard Butsch states that "to sustain a mass audience, the networks preferred blandness in sitcoms. Each network had a censorship office, called standards and practices, to weed out

anything controversial...No threatening world impinged on these families, not Vietnam, riots, protests; not sex or drugs. These families seldom struggled.”

The appeal of *The Brady Bunch* lies in its escapist universe. They lived in a perfect and safe world where everyone knew their place and there was a place for everyone (Winch). None of them smoked, drank, or participated in anything remotely resembling promiscuity. Not only did the show avoid controversy, it aimed to suggest that there *were no controversies to begin with*. One could briefly forget the toils and troubles of their everyday lives and the radically changing society around them by watching an episode or two of *The Brady Bunch*. In addition, the target audience was children, who could find themselves akin to the Brady kids with more ease than adults could with Carol and Mike. The show’s six teen actors were often featured on magazine covers and posters, turning them into idols as well as actors (Newton). The improbable nature of the material itself had little to do with the cultural icons that were made of its stars. “The Brady Bunch, while not very good, would define the way many kids of the era thought of themselves” (VanDerWerff). It isn’t hard to see why so many young viewers watched the show; it depicted a loving family who was unfailingly supportive, parents who were never too busy or distracted to listen to their children, and siblings who were always ready to back each other up. Even if the dialogue and sets have aged badly, the Brady values are timeless.

Even considering the complete lack of social liberalism, *The Brady Bunch* has still been deemed a success in the span of time since its first airing. Its attempt to return to the simpler, more wholesome times of the 50s' seems warmly quaint upon reflection, especially when stacked up against shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *M\*A\*S\*H*, which ran during the same years as *The Brady Bunch* and carried vastly more progressive messages and themes of anti-war sentiments and women's liberation. As a whole, *The Brady Bunch* tried arbitrarily to remind America of a time when life made more order to it and any problems could be painlessly solved between commercial breaks.

## Bibliography

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