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## **THE POSTWAR ERA: AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE 40S + 50S**

### **Connecting to the Unit**

In the 1950s television entertainment included children's shows such as the "Lone Ranger" and "The Mickey Mouse Club" and situation comedies such as "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" or "Leave it to Beaver" for the whole family. Most sitcoms were set in suburban living locations.



### **Writing Directions**

Today, as in the 1950s, television reflects the values, concerns, and attitudes of society. First Read *Fat Guys and Hot Wives*.

Then, watch the television programs(s) assigned by your teacher during class and compare it with a television sitcom about an American family today. Your choices for more recent sit-coms are to watch either *Modern Family*, *Schitts Creek*, *Blackish*, *Fresh off the Boat* or *Fuller House*.

- a. Summarize the episode (both from class show and on tv now)
- b. What are some typical activities the whole family takes part in? Just the children? Just the adults?
- c. What are the roles and responsibilities of the husband? Of the wife?
- d. What are the problems and concerns of parents? Of children?
- e. What are the attitudes of parents towards children? Toward adults?
- f. Are African Americans and other minorities represented? If so, how?
- g. In what ways does this show present a realistic/unrealistic picture of a family in the 1950s/today?

### **Analysis**

In a couple of paragraphs, using the information that you have collected in letters A-G, compare what you have learned about the roles of women in suburban family life in the 1950s and what you know and have seen on television about family life today. Identify some similarities and at least three differences between lifestyles in the 1950s and today. Also, analyze the role of minorities and sexual orientation played in pop cultural television in the two decades.

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## “Fat Guys and Hot Wives”

NY Times, 1991, 2004, & Updated 2021

In 1998, during the second episode of the CBS sitcom [“The King of Queens.”](#) the husband, Doug (Kevin James), learns that the women in his wife’s family put on weight as they age. So even though Doug is fat — “I look like I’m in my twelfth trimester,” he says — he plots to keep Carrie (Leah Remini, a knockout then and now) slim.

The episode, which has aged about as well as a tub of expired cottage cheese, is fatphobic and unfunny. It also lays bare [a common family sitcom cliché](#): a husband who can appear infinitely schlubby and a wife who must remain incontrovertibly hot. In shows like these — shows that clearly inspired [“Kevin Can F\\*\\*k Himself.”](#) a caustic satire arriving Sunday on AMC+ — the attractiveness gap often yawns and it nearly always yawns one way.

On the HBO show [“Girls.”](#) a Season 2 episode featured Patrick Wilson opposite Lena Dunham and a corner of the internet reacted poorly, saying that a man with looks like Wilson’s would never sleep with a woman like Dunham. The commentary, from [both reviewers](#) and social media users, became so vicious that Wilson’s wife, the actress [Dagmara Dominczyk](#), felt compelled to respond. [“Funny, his wife is a size 10, muffin top & all, & he does her just fine,”](#) she tweeted.

As a former television critic, I’m no longer required by law to spot fall-season trends, but some are too disturbing to ignore. Like how seemingly most family sitcoms -- are about a fat guy with a hot wife.

From CBS, the network of “The King of Queens” and “Still Standing” comes “Listen Up,” the new Jason Alexander show, and “Center of the Universe,” starring John Goodman’s jowls. ABC, home of “According to Jim,” (as in Belushi) has a new comedy called “Rodney,” with a country comic named Rodney Carrington, who’s not exactly fat but definitely stocky. Fox has no new fat-guy offerings, but “The Bernie Mac Show” and “Quintuplets,” with Andy Richter, are both back. Not to mention Homer Simpson. Speaking of porked-out cartoon dads, the hefty hero of Fox’s uncanceled animated series “Family Guy” will return to the network next spring.

It’s not that there aren’t handsome or sexually desirable men on sitcoms, but these men are typically marked as terminal bachelors, like Ted Danson was on *Cheers* or Joey Tiibbiani on *Friends*.

And they’re not just fat. They’re lazy beer-and-TV slobs who never lift a finger around the house, have barely met their kids and think an emotion is something you only express on the Back Nine. Somehow they’ve landed these hot wives who look great in jeans -- the “Still Standing” dude bagged Jami Gertz -- and it’s been downhill ever since.

Whose fantasy of the American family is this: men’s, women’s or both? And does it bear any resemblance to reality?

Spike TV, cable’s “guy” network, did a nationwide poll of fathers. In it 72 percent said they’d rather spend time with their families than go for bigger and better jobs. They also said they devote more time to hanging out with their families than they do on sports, TV or their friends. There’s something poignant about all these men out there trying so hard to become more involved fathers (“Stress and the Superdad” was the headline of a recent article in Time) while they’re mocked and abused on TV as beer-gutted buffoons.

Maybe thin isn’t funny and fat is. Go back to the dawn of the sitcom, and you run smack into Ralph Kramden’s mammoth bulk. But the fat husband rule isn’t written in stone, even Flintstone. Dick Van Dyke was thin. Darren Stevens -- both of them -- managed to be thin and funny. Yet somehow it has come to this, that the archetypal sitcom couple is a “10,” the “1” being the woman and the “0” being -- Jason Alexander.

Dr. Haltzman said the couples in his practice tend to be evenly matched in the looks-poundage departments: “The attractive women who are married tend to have attractive husbands -- men other women find attractive.”

Crazy notion. A comedy about an attractive, equally proportioned married couple in which the husband isn’t the butt of every joke. Sitcoms, and family sitcoms in particular, occupy fewer prime-time slots now, but streaming and reruns mean that the gap persists. Here are a few of the more egregious examples.

### ‘The King of Queens’ Carrie and Doug

A paradigm of the schlubby guy snags hot wife trope, [the show](#) stars James as a UPS-style deliveryman, with Remini as his legal secretary wife. The Washington Post critic framed it this way: [“Hard-working shmoe](#) put-upon and set-upon by life’s

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complications and his own relatives.” The show makes a point of emphasizing Remini’s sex appeal. Conversely, as in a pole-dancing scene, James’s looks are usually played for laughs. (His tight shorts, too.)

Despite some fluctuations, James maintained a larger body size throughout, while Remini [received criticism](#) for her real-life pregnancy weight gain. During James’s follow-up sitcom, “Kevin Can Wait,” the series eventually killed off a first wife, played by Erinn Hayes, and replaced her with Remini, proving that the series saw slim brunettes with cute highlights as essentially interchangeable, if not outright disposable.

#### ‘Family Guy’ Lois and Peter

From [“The Flintstones”](#) on, prime-time cartoons have also engaged in the dishy wife, slobby husband template. (“The Flintstones” was itself a riff on the primordial marital sitcom — and arguable schlub/hottie exemplar — “The Honeymooners.”) Think Fred and Wilma, Barney and Betty, Homer and Marge, [Bob and Linda](#). [Seth MacFarlane’s](#) “Family Guy,” which debuted in 1999, depicts dad Peter as an multichinned chucklehead while sketching mom Lois with the ha-cha-cha figure of a catalog model.

As a Season 3 flashback reveals, he fell in love with her for her looks, while she loved his questionable humor and ample gut. Despite Peter’s incompetence and Lois’s occasional physical abuse, the show insinuates an active sex life between the two, with some very niche role play.

#### According to Jim’ Cheryl and Jim

The second-wave Blues Brother [Jim Belushi](#) stars opposite ’90s cutie-pie Courtney Thorne-Smith on this ABC show, which debuted in 2001. It has earned [an astonishing 14 percent rating](#) on Rotten Tomatoes and the marital mismatch inspired a lot of head-scratching. “If the wife is so damn smart, why did she [marry such a boob?](#)” a Variety critic wrote.

Belushi’s character — and maybe Belushi, too — seems convinced of his own charisma, even as the show gives him a halfhearted mullet and a wardrobe that fits him like a glove, a glove someone has repurposed as a balloon. “I’m in great shape,” Jim says. “What shape is that,” Cheryl replies. “A circle?” Thorne-Smith, of course, looks terrific throughout. Here’s an exchange from a Season 2 episode:

Jim: I married her for her looks.

Cheryl: I married him for his money.

Jim: Hah! I win!

#### ‘Parks and Recreation’ Gayle and Jerry

Most of the couples on [this affable series](#), which began on NBC in 2009, had equally good looks. (Though what Rashida Jones’s Ann ever saw in Aziz Ansari’s Tom remains an enduring mystery.) There was, however, one deliberate exception.

Jerry (Jim O’Heir), the office manager of Pawnee’s Parks and Rec Department, is flatulent, paunchy and pathologically clumsy. In the second season, at a Christmas party, his co-workers are [introduced to his wife](#), Gayle, played by the supermodel Christie Brinkley. As in “Modern Family,” the show deploys the hot wife trope self-consciously. The real joke — a sweet one — is that while Jerry remains the butt of every office gag, Gayle and three gorgeous daughters worship him as an ideal husband and father.

#### ‘Modern Family’ Gloria and Jay

This [zippy mockumentary](#), which debuted on ABC in 2009, starred Sofia Vergara as Gloria, a Colombian bombshell, and Ed O’Neill as Jay, a closet and blinds mogul, who looks a bit more like a bomb fragment. (O’Neill’s previous sitcom, [“Married With Children.”](#) also presented an attractiveness gap, though narrower.) The trope is deployed with some self-awareness. The Times critic, reviewing the pilot, complimented Vergara’s [“tonally perfect sendup.”](#) of the fiery Latina stereotype.

The family assumes that Gloria has married Jay for his money — the series’s fifth episode, “Coal Digger,” centers on this premise. But Gloria disputes this, minimizing the difference in their looks. In a Season 6 episode, she says, “A lot of people assumed that I married you for your money and that’s only a very, very small part of it. I married you because you’re sexy. You still are. Who knows how long that’s going to last for either of us?”

#### Summary & Analysis