

Tasha G. Oren

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

DOMESTICATED DADS AND DOUBLE-SHIFT MOMS Real Life and Ideal Life in 1950s Domestic Comedy

The white suburban sitcom, a genre that emerged to a moderate success in the late 1950s and early 1960s, has had a curious afterlife. More than Westerns, adventure programs, variety shows or police dramas, these visions of stiff and dated domestic bliss continue to fascinate; the immaculately groomed housewife in pearls is 1950s TV for most Americans. Further, this image has also come to stand in as an icon for the 1950s decade in total. This conflation is then taken as proof of both television's easy compliance with dominant ideology and the suburban sitcom as mirroring 1950s reality—a reality of white nuclear families, shaped by strict gender divisions and quietly laboring under the weight of overwhelming restraint.

Befitting the genre's position as the signifier for the post-war era in popular memory, the suburban sitcom has been the subject of much critical attention. George Lipsitz and Lynn Spigel analyzed the television sitcom in terms of its representation of the family and its relation to an emerging consumer culture. Mary Beth Haralovich, David Marc and others pointed to the process of erasure of class and ethnicity, substituting these with white middle class families as both "the norm" and the only option. And many more have focused on the position of the woman within the late 1950s domestic sitcom, concentrating on her passivity, marginality and oddly formal brand of femininity. While many of these examinations have been concerned with these representations as sites of ideological pressure, conservative rhetoric has deployed these popular cultural images as memory, positing the late 1950s household as an ideal and "natural" American model for social formation and pining for "those good old days" before everything went so terribly wrong. Working against this slippage between representation and reality, many historians have already begun to argue that it is in the late 1950s, while the repre-

sentation of the happy nuclear family proliferated, that this very structure was already embattled on all fronts.

In what follows, I will return to this mythic genre of American television, tracing its development as a popular discourse within a specific historical moment. My aim is to offer a reconsideration of this popular television genre and its subtext by tracing its development in terms of its relationship to social struggle. This analysis will demonstrate how a text's attempts to negotiate various ideological pressures brought to bear on it can often produce complex and surprising results.

"The Ladies are Getting Ahead" (Newsweek, 1958)

Popular discourses about women's history have little to tell us about the 1950s. The smooth narrative of progress holds the decade in contempt as a "black hole" that sucked dry any momentum gathered in the 1940s when women entered the wartime workplace in unprecedented numbers. This often-hailed bright spot in women's history, the narrative continues, was abruptly extinguished as women were pushed back into the (suburban) home in the 1950s, donned aprons (and pearls?), and were never heard from again until the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s. While this (admittedly caricatured) account has some historical validity, many historians have already challenged this version as not only exaggerated in its totality but also myopic in its scope, addressing only the experiences of some middle-class, white women.

Throughout the 1950s, women of color and working-class women were organizing in large numbers and agitating for social equality and better work conditions.¹ Susan Lynn has argued that the 1940s and 1950s "represented a watershed in women's social reform activism, one that would lead to more general challenges to discrimination based on race and gender."² And, as Dorothy Sue Cobble reports: "Far from being an era of retreat for women's activism, working class feminism flowered in the postwar decades, due in part to the steady increase in wage-earning women and the rise of union power."³

1. Interestingly, this brand of working-women's feminism was often opposed to the middle-class militant feminism of the day—most associated at the time with the National Women's Party and its advocacy for the Equal Rights Amendment. In a move that would anticipate "difference feminism," these working-class activists advocated women-specific legislation such as maternity leave and opposed the ERAs as essentially harmful to working-class women's interests.

2. Susan Lynn, "Gender and Progressive Politics," *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 106.

3. Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Recapturing Working-Class Feminism," *Not June Cleaver* (ibid.), 58.

Further, white middle-class women—and popular discourses—were not entirely removed from this process; historians such as Joanne Meyerowitz and Susan M. Hartmann have begun to challenge the totalizing accounts of complete female domestication and subjugation presented by Betty Friedan and Elaine Tyler May. Their work suggests a much more complex ideological climate for women in the post-war era. According to Hartmann, the mid 1950s saw the rates of female workers match those of the war period. Numbers of married women in the workplace grew by 42% during the mid-1950s, and the fastest employment rate was that of middle-class women.⁴

In fact, the changing status of women was a major preoccupation in the popular press all through the 1950s, appearing as a persistent undercurrent to celebrations of domesticity. Joanne Meyerowitz's examination of popular women's magazines of the period reveals themes of professional and personal achievements that belie Betty Friedan's accounts,⁵ as do various news magazine articles of the period. Addressing concerns about the breakdown of gender roles, a 1951 *Saturday Review* editorial responded in bold terms:

The decision is no longer childless spinster-hood versus marriage but a far more complex problem. The talented girl who leaves college [...] and goes to work [...] may decide to defer marriage until the job or profession have turned into a sound career, or she may decide to marry first...It is the fact that she is now given a choice to mold her own life that is significant rather than the decision she finally makes. This is the final accomplishment of the revolution: that women have at last become free members of society, prospectively men's equals [...] now that American women are on their way to becoming the equals and partners of men we are building a society that, because it is more united, is more secure than ever before, come hell or high water.⁶

The 1950s saw not only the emergence of the businesswoman as more than an occasional anomaly, but also cultural discourses that, very explicitly, articulated the very feminist claims to be later leveled against the 1950s by the organized feminist movement of the Sixties. As early as 1951, the magazine *Independent Women* (renamed *American Business Woman* in 1957) ran extensive reports on equal pay legislation, profiled successful professional women, informed readers about business and career opportunities, and educated women organizers on how to lobby for state and federal legislation. Each issue urged women to get involved in both business and politics, arguing, as one article did, that political ignorance or indifference “will almost surely cost us money and may cost us our freedom and our lives.”⁷

4. Susan Hartmann, “Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal”, *Not June Cleaver* (Ibid.), 87.

5. Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” *The Journal of American History* (March 1993).

6. “The Queen is Dead, Long Live the Queen!”, *The Saturday Review* (June 30, 1951): 20.

The debate over women was further galvanized with the 1953 American publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Receiving much attention, the book and its author became common subjects of debate in the "higher end" of popular magazines—such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, which published numerous reviews and responses to the book by the likes of Margaret Mead, Philip Wylie, university professors, and "housewives".

In 1957, *Business Week* first reported the results of the National Manpower Council study, determining that women's share in the workplace had grown considerably from 1940 to 1956, and contrary to popular belief (which may have been supported by common representation of the young, single "working girl") 60% of the female labor force was married, with one half over age 40. In total, "the 22 million women in the workplace today represent more than one-third of the working population."⁸ Perhaps most surprising was the range of jobs occupied by women: only a little over 1/3 held traditional "women's jobs" such as clerical, secretarial, and sales-oriented positions. Finally, "The council found that career girls, in yesterday's sense of a woman who sought to make a life's work out of her job, have all but vanished," indicating that more than ever before, women were combining domestic and professional lives. A 1958 *Newsweek* article entitled "The Ladies are Getting Ahead" informed its readers that :

Already one third of the country's women are at work, but experts say millions more are needed—from production line clear up to the executive suite [...] now, nine out of ten American women hold jobs at some time. The average high-school girl today can expect to spend 25 years of her life at work on jobs ranging all the way from waitress to broker to board chairman.⁹

The growing contestation over the role of women is perhaps most succinctly illustrated in a reader's response to an article asserting female superiority in biological and social terms: "Sir, I don't know about the 'natural superiority of women'. But I do know they're getting to be damn superior. Lambert Fairchild, New York, NY."¹⁰

The "distaff clown" vs. the "chowderhead"

As Lynn Spigel documents, the 1950s middle-class move to the suburbs corresponded with the broad introduction of television into the home. Drawing mostly from radio as a source of talent, early television tended to feature va-

7. Ernest Weir, "Can You Afford to Stay Out of Politics?", *Independent Woman* (February 1952).

8. "Woman's Place in the Work Force", *Business Week* (March 16, 1957): 161

9. Blake Ehrlich, "The Ladies are Getting Ahead," *Newsweek* (September 22, 1958).

10. "Letters to the Editor", *Saturday Review* (May 3, 1952).

riety and comedy shows, loosely based on the format of “skits” familiar to radio listeners. As a visual medium, television also initiated a return to the vaudeville style of physical comedy, improbable situations, and ethnic humor, so prominent in the 1920s and 1930s. These influences, combined with the domestic arena as the preferred location of the TV sitcom, facilitated the rise of the female comic, most identified in the personas created by Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen, whose early and enduring success spawned countless female (and male) imitators.

The female comedienne’s new centrality and star status is perhaps best illustrated by George Burns in his opening monologue for the widely successful *The Burns and Allen Show*:

I’m George Burns, Gracie Allen’s husband...I’m known in the business as a straight man...as the comedian gets through with the joke, I look at the comedienne and then I look at the audience (he demonstrates). That is known as a pause. I’m famous for my pauses...There’s another thing every straight man must know and that’s to repeat everything the comedian says. For instance, if Gracie should say ‘a funny thing happened on a street car today’ I say ‘a funny thing happened on the street car today?’ Naturally, her answer gets a scream, then I do one of my famous pauses...”

Here Burns not only defines, in self reflexive terms, his role, calling Gracie “the comedienne” but also, in a parody of self-conscious begrudging, admits that it is she who really is the center of the show. He goes on to say, “You see, in order to be a straight man you have to have a talent, you have to develop this talent, and you have to marry her, like I did!” In a different episode, after Gracie exits the room with a joke, George mutters to himself: “I suppose if she would have made sense, I’d still be selling ties.”

In a 1953 double page spread in the *New York Times Magazine*, Jack Gould proclaimed the arrival of the female comedian to newfound prominence:

Women comics, however brilliant, have always been outnumbered by the male of the species on the stage and screen. One of television’s accomplishments has been to bring the distaff clown into virtually equal prominence with the males. The rise of the comedienne on TV may be attributed to the nature of the medium itself. Since the TV audience is the family at home, the domestic comedy, revolving about the woman of the house, is a natural formula.¹¹

Since, as critics observed, most female comics were placed within the setting of the domestic sphere, this predicament became the source of much of their material. Married life and (the avoidance of) housework, as well as their relationships with their husbands and trusty neighbors provided the setting and

11. Jack Gould, “TV’s Top Comediennes,” *New York Times Magazine* (December 27, 1953).

background for their antics, yet their comedy often worked to destabilize the very notion of their placement in the domestic scene as, in Gould's words, "a natural formula". A 1954 reviewer had observed that sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *I Married Joan* "hold a somewhat grotesque mirror up to middle class life."¹² The two performers often poked fun not only at domestic duties but the institution of marriage itself. One running gag on *I Love Lucy* concerned Lucy's attempt to "impersonate" a docile housewife after particularly angering her husband, Ricky. Each such attempt would have Lucy, wearing drab clothes and a zombie-like expression, trailing after Ricky, mumbling assent or sitting in a corner, knitting. Inevitably, Ricky would be appalled by such uncharacteristic behavior and be moved to announce his forgiveness. As Lucy would race happily out the door and into the arms of trouble or a spending spree, Ricky would beam behind her and exclaim, "That's my Lucy!"¹³ Similarly, Joan Davis as Joan Stevens, a show girl turned wife of a domestic court judge, would often state sarcastically how marriage had tamed her "wildness" and turned her into "just another happy little housewife."¹⁴

Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen have referred to the suburbs as "parodies of independence (and) of leisure"¹⁵ yet, as the few times in which Joan or Lucy actually "attempt" to perform household chores illustrate, house work itself, and the ease in which women were supposed to perform it, was also parodied here. It is no wonder that Lucy kept trying to escape the domestic sphere into a much more exciting world outside. The home, as these early sitcoms testified, was no place for a woman¹⁶.

As television hit its stride in the mid-1950s, concerns over masculine authority began to appear with increasing frequency. A 1952 review of *I Love Lucy* presented an early—and tame—example of a critique that grew more shrill in the years to come. Beginning with an extensive description of Ball's

12. "Sassafrassa, the Queen," *Time* (May 26, 1952).

13. A particularly interesting version of this skit was performed on the *Danny Thomas Show*, in which Lucy and Dezi guest-starred. In this episode, Lucy "corrupts" Danny's wife, imploring her to spend Danny's money with impunity and recognize that "Marriage is War!"

14. One *I Married Joan* storyline featured a criminal named the Blonde Bandit, a female outlaw that Joan first impersonates and then, unwittingly, befriends. At least one reference in this program indicates that women's agitation for better work conditions was not entirely absent from the news of the day. While reading in the paper about the exploits of the Blonde Bandit, Joan informs her husband that "She's struck again," "for what, better pay?" asks the judge. This joke surely meant more to an audience aware of female unions and their mobilization for equal pay at the time.

15. Ewen, Elisabeth and Stuart, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (Columbus: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

16. The scope of this paper prevents a more in-depth discussion of women performers in early television, yet it is important to note here that "wife" was not the only role open to them—many serving as hosts of variety or other entertainment shows. Further, other situation comedies provided settings such as an immigrant community or the urban work place.

wild performance and physical antics, the reviewer made sure to add: “Cuban-born Dezi Arnaz gets enough masculine authority into his role to keep *Lucy* from degenerating into a Dagwood and Blondie farce.”¹⁷

A 1954 review entitled “Daddy With a Difference” began: “In television’s stable of 35 home life comedies, it is a rare show that treats Father as anything more than the mouse of the house—a bumbling, well-meaning idiot who is nothing but putty in the hands of his wife and family.”¹⁸ Another stated: “Even more than in life, the TV female is deadlier than the male. On practically every husband and wife show, the husband diminishes to a straight man while the wife moves front and center, grabbing the best lines... TV wives always know best and their most crackpot ideas turn out better than their husband’s commonsensical thoughts.”¹⁹ A third proclaimed: “As every dial-turner knows, television inundates the American home daily with a peculiar message. The message says that the American father is a weak-willed, predicament-inclined clown whose business and social life would go to pot in an instant if he were not saved from his doltishness by a beautiful and intelligent wife and his beautiful and intelligent children.”²⁰

The positioning of the husband as both “straight man” and an ordinary, conventional figure to his wife’s zany and imaginative one (a TV tradition beginning with *Ethel and Albert*, *George Burns and Gracie Allen*, *I Love Lucy* and *I Married Joan*, and reemerging in the mid 1960s with “magical women” shows like *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*) may have also been reinforced by a show like *The Continental* in which a suave Italian bachelor sweet-talked female viewers at 11:30 at night. What is interesting about the show (and bears notice despite what seems like an unimaginably silly premise) is that the Continental’s (Renzo Cesana) manner of address to women constructed them as married (“I haven’t any right to do the things I do”) and as partners in a clandestine fling (“Don’t be afraid, my darling, it is only a man’s apartment²¹”). Along with his playful manner and many viewers’ tongue-in-cheek replies²², the show did reinforce the notion that women’s lives lacked excitement and their dull husbands were to blame.

A *Saturday Review* article entitled “Who Remembers Papa?” had quite a lot to say about the stock representation of gender roles in contemporary domestic comedies. In a review reminiscent of Whyte’s diatribe in *A Generation*

17. “Radio and Television,” *Time* (February 18, 1952).

18. “Daddy with a Difference,” *Time* (May 17, 1954).

19. “Mr. Peepers,” *Time* (June 7, 1954).

20. Kenneth Rhodes, “Father of Two Families,” *Cosmopolitan* (April 1956): 124-127.

21. “Latin Lover,” *Time* (November 5, 1951).

22. One viewer wrote: “My husband is asleep in the bedroom and you have put me in such a mood I wonder if the fool realizes what he’s missing...”

of *Vipers*, and similarly invoking issues of nationalism and national pride (as well as displaying broad cultural ignorance of other national traditions) the article stated:

Mom, of course, is the great lesson giver of our national culture. First at her navel, then at her breast and at her feet, at home and in school we learn our morals and designs for living [...] Unlike Europeans and Asians, we are, it has been noticed, a silver cord people. Mom, wise, loving, lovable, is the mother persona of our popular literature. Mom—on radio and on TV—is never iconoclasted. Pop, on the other hand, is a boob. Pop is a sucker, a jerk, a scuff, the butt, the fall guy.²³

Continuing to identify a by now familiar motif to TV audiences, the article proceeds to attack representations of masculinity on both television and radio (including the radio incarnation of *Father Knows Best?* starring Robert Young, which, in its radio version, stayed true to the question mark in its title, removed in its TV incarnation): “Pop is at the apron strings, getting into jams, playing pranks, being scolded. Pop to Mom is not husband, he is son” [Ibid.].

Bill Gale of *American Mercury* had written an even more blistering critique of the male representation calling the typical father on the domestic comedy a “grotesque burlesque of the American male animal.” Although he addressed the TV dad in particular (because of the image’s deleterious effects on “junior”), Gale accused TV of a much broader discrimination as “TV comedies take aim and let go—custard pie fashion—at men in general, suggesting that we’re all little boys at heart and not very bright little boys at that.” While practical Mom looks on, “Dad is pictured as a helpless, hopeless, overgrown boy who, left to his own devices, couldn’t possibly last the year out.” While Gale doesn’t identify or single out any particular shows, implicit in his critique is the placement of Mom as the central, parental figure who keeps it all from falling apart.

It is true that motion pictures in years past also presented the American family man in pretty much the same dismal light. However, no single movie ever held the same impact for the small fry as a weekly video series viewed in their homes. Here on the video screen we’ve got a bungler de luxe with whom the kiddies are so familiar that he has become a flesh-and-blood personality.²⁴

Gale’s critique positions TV as an educator and arbiter of status quo as he draws connections between TV situations and a preferred “real life”: “After all, the stock situations into which the TV dad is usually dumped, while grossly exaggerated, nevertheless do have their roots in situations that actually

23. “Who Remembers Papa?”, *Saturday Review* (October 13, 1951): 43-44.

24. Bill Gale, “TV makes a Fool out of Dad,” *American Mercury*, Volume 84 (February 27 1953): 35-39.

take place in most homes, so it isn't difficult for the kiddies to see definite similarities between the blustering and ineffectual oaf on the video screen and the head-of-house." The underlying fear that Dad is in fact feminized by his loss of control and centrality is made explicit as Gale cites a Dr. Irene M. Joselyn in a reference that abandons TV representation altogether and veers into the home: "the tendency of too many American homes to make Dad appear not as a 'competent, intelligent man that he is' but as a ridiculous caricature of a woman, the result of which might 'be that the child would cease to have a father. He would merely have a real mother and a substitute mother.'" In a further move away from TV and the domestic sphere, Gale goes on to forge a connection between TV representation, the domestic sphere, and man's place in the social world as he introduces a quote from an "eminent" British psychiatrist, B.D. Hendy, who states that Dad's role is to "represent the outside world to those within the home (and so he) must be a man in the world of men" [Ibid.].

Here Gale begins with an article about television representation and (the rather justified claim) about the all but respectable representation of the TV dad. Yet Gale's rhetoric strategy is to link this observation not only to a "real life" effect on a child viewer as she or he may regard their father, but further with the male position in the world at large as he is in danger of losing his distinction as the "representative of the outside world for those within the home." This last quote invokes a reference to the mother much more directly than it does to children. Further, it also strains to define "the outside world" as indisputably a male domain. This convoluted effort alone may point to the strain this very premise was already subject to as women claimed spots in the workplace with increasing frequency. The author concludes, however, with an optimistic look forward: "Our only hope is that since TV is still wearing short pants itself, Dad might be allowed to grow up with it. And happily, there are some facts to indicate that this might not be too far off."

As this survey of reviews and press responses suggests, the development of the domestic suburban sitcom genre did not unfold without its share of critiques that directly linked television representations to gender positions within the American home. It also appears that the lion's share of the critical reproach was concerned less with the emergence of the female comic as thematic focal point and more with the precarious position of her husband and his diminished role as second banana or worse, an incompetent presence within the television household. In examining the industry's response to these cries to rehabilitate dad, it is important to consider not only the changing world of televisual domesticity, but also the growing presence of the married woman within the American work environment.

“Your place, Mister, is in the home, too” (Esquire, 1951)

In 1955, it looked like Gale’s prediction was coming to fruition as *Father Knows Best* was described as causing a “quiet revolution [...] over an actor who was merely trying to make fatherhood respectable.”²⁵ This newly configured representation of Dad was greeted with such enthusiasm in certain circles that it prompted newspaper critic John Crosby to announce that Jim Anderson was “The first intelligent father permitted on radio or television since they invented the thing!”²⁶

While conservative critiques decried the role of the father as a “boob,” “blustering chowderhead” or a feminized ninny, it is *domestic* knowledge that emerges in the ideal father, the iconic TV dad created by the mid-1950s in shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. Ward Cleaver and Jim Anderson are both domesticated dads whose masculine power comes from their ability to function knowledgeably within the home sphere. Thus masculinity itself undergoes an uneasy shift as the father becomes a warm, emotional, and understanding figure who chooses home-life over the workplace as his first priority and the center of his attention. One example of this is a *Leave it to Beaver* episode (“School Picnic”) in which Ward is caught between his commitment to take Wally fishing and his promise to Beaver to accompany him on a school picnic. Ward is portrayed as guilty and confused, afraid to hurt either son’s feelings. The plot concludes with Ward’s apologetic and loving conversation with both his sons, where he admits his mistake and promises to spend time with both.

With this new brand of sitcom character, the format itself was reformulated, becoming less of a show-case for comic pranks, rowdy humor, and emotional outbursts. Rather, this family sitcom genre strained to rehabilitate the household, and its male head, with much-needed respect. The fathers were rewritten as role models who expertly handled “any family situation without violent injury to their dignity” [Rhodes 126].

The push to domesticate the father and make him more of a participant in the home life of his family was not a new notion, as Margaret Marsh illustrates in her account of “masculine domesticity” emerging in the turn of the century with the first wave of American middle-class suburbs.²⁷ However, this representation of the 1950s father did offer a progressive image which blended the private and public spheres, often explicitly stating that professional careers and workplace achievement ought to take a back seat to both pa-

25. Kenneth Rhodes, “Father of Two Families,” *Cosmopolitan* (April 1956): 124-127.

26. Cited in Mary Beth Harolovich’s *Sit-coms and Suburbs*, *Ibid.* 114.

27. Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

rents' domestic duties at home—duties which included, above wage earning, emotional nurturing, and providing a loving presence. This blurring of the domestic and professional life may also have contributed to the growing acceptance of women's work outside the home, as 1950s domestic comedies actively rejected a strict separation between the two. This discursive tendency is well documented in Joanne Meyerowitz's critique of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. In Meyerowitz's extensive survey of popular magazines she finds that domestic ideals coexisted with "an ethos of individual achievement that celebrated non-domestic activity, individual striving, public service and public success [...] at the heart of many such articles lay a bifocal vision of women both as feminine and domestic and as public achievers."²⁸

It is further important to note that while these articles did labor to reinforce a distinction between the genders and were careful not to suggest that women reject their domestic responsibility, this emphasis in fact reinforced women's growing involvement outside the home since it was not constructed in opposition to the domestic sphere. In her 1954 *Management in the Home: Happier Living through Saving Time and Energy*, Lillian Gilberth makes plain the changing position of workplace and domestic space in the lives of women: "We no longer say, 'Woman's place is in the home,' because many women have their places outside the home. But the home belongs to the family, and it is still true that the family is Woman's chief interest, it is even more a privilege and a trust, whether she has an outside job or not."²⁹

However, the same emphasis on domestic involvement—at least through television and popular literature—was directed towards men, producing parallel expectations and a looser sense of domestic containment. In offering this analysis, I do not mean to reconstruct 1950s popular culture as a watershed of progressive notions that challenges then-dominant ideologies about gender roles, nor do I mean to claim that late 1950s and 1960s domestic comedies were, in fact, "resistant texts" that aimed to domesticate men and set women loose upon the world. Yet, I do suggest that the marginal role of mothers within the "Whitebread sitcom" testified not to their "ideal marginalization" in the home (a notion which would decidedly work against mainstream ideology), but rather to the centrality of the male figure as a *problem*. While caving in to pressures to reinstitute the father figure as head-of-household, the suburban sitcom text, did, by virtue of its primary location within the home, offer contested images of masculinity that took on decidedly "femi-

28. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *The Journal of American History* (March 1993).

29. Lillian Gilberth, *Management in the Home: Happier Living Through Saving Time and Energy*, cited by Lynn Spigel in *Make Room for TV*, 34.

nine” qualities while devaluing male achievement in the work sphere. Furthermore, by presenting parenthood as the most weighty and worthy of adult responsibilities, these weekly narratives blurred the sharp lines that separated the domestic sphere and the public workplace, presenting a world where their successful merging is possible and desirable.

Thus, as many critiques have concentrated on the image of the mother as marginal caretaker and second fiddle (along with her impossibly formal appearance and docile perfection), few have pointed out that sitcoms of this nature promised the ideal father a central position of dominance in home *only* if he assumed an active role in the domestic sphere and placed it above work fulfillment or selfish pleasure. One *Father Knows Best* episode made this message explicitly clear. In this program, Jim’s old college friend, a successful businessman, reappears, providing Jim with a narrative motivation to re-evaluate his own professional achievement. In the same day, Jim is criticized by his boss who lectures him about being more competitive and aggressive and less preoccupied with family problems. After reading “How to be a Success in Business,” Jim decides that he is a failure in comparison with other men who throw themselves into their work. The show concludes first with Margaret assuring Jim that he is a success “as a man...a husband and father,” and later, with the appearance of his successful friend who is too busy to have dinner and tells Jim how distant he is from his own family.

While Nina Leibman reads this episode as full of longing for increased social status and material wealth,³⁰ the show also constructs being “a success” at home in opposition to the requirements of success in the workplace (his boss tells Jim to stop fixing his kids’ toys and start initiating business contacts). Even traditional masculine qualities such as aggressiveness, ambition and initiative are presented as outside the realm of the ideal dad. Masculine domesticity is a trade off, the show tells us, as Margaret’s declaration of love implies that Jim could not occupy such a central position at home had he tried to be a success at work. As I’ve argued above, Jim’s trade off is parallel to the suburban sitcom’s deal with masculine representation; as it attempts to insure it a central role in the narrative, it renegotiates gendered labor divisions to allow for the successful combination of work and parenting.

As television strove for a unifying address with which to capture an American majority, it also created an immediate “mainstream” through which notions of proper behavior and a desirable lifestyle were represented and communicated. Nowhere was this notion of mainstream normality more prevalent than the domestic comedy, whose fetishized focus on location,

30. Nina Leibman, “Leave Mother Out: The Fifties Family in American Film and Television,” *Wide Angle*, Volume 10, 4.

ownership and conformity worked to define the limits of the American dream. Yet, by the early 1960s, when the suburban comedy genre was at the height of its popularity, roughly a third of American women were employed,³¹ a majority of which were married, struggling to combine their work with domestic responsibilities that were so clearly defined as theirs, and theirs alone. The ease in which these ideal TV dads glided into the center of domestic goings-on after an invisible, unmentioned day at the office surely resonated with the steadily growing numbers of double-shift moms.

As I've suggested earlier, the relationship between the television text, its critics, and the surrounding social context often results in complex and unpredictable knots of meaning. In this case, the growing involvement of women in the workplace outside the home, and the televisual domestication of fathers in the suburban sitcom form just such a knot. Taken together, they provide an illuminating example of the unsteady capacity of television texts to juggle ideological pressures, commercial considerations, and social reality.

31. As Lynn Spigel, among others, has noted, the government-sanctioned middle-class ideal of a house on a tree-lined suburban street and a life of plentiful consumption produced the paradoxical effect of sending more women into the workplace in an attempt to make such an ideal living arrangement possible.