

Picking Up the Doormat:  
A Feminist Analysis of *The Brady Bunch*  
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## Introduction

Every child growing up in the 1960s and 1970s had the shared experience of coming home from school each day to watch afternoon television. Who wouldn't recognize these lyrics? "Here's the story of a lovely lady..." But did you have a "hunch" that there was more going on in this story than just "somehow [forming] a family." As America's norms and values around gender roles were shifting, so to was American television and its portrayal of these same issues of gender interaction.

*The Brady Bunch* is a classic American situation comedy, which ran on air for nearly five years, from September 26, 1969, until March 8, 1974. In the 1990s *The Brady Bunch* hosted a reunion follow-up special, as well. The show takes place in the suburbs of Los Angeles and follows the blended Brady family. On one side, there are the four Brady men: Mike, the father, an architect, and his three sons Greg, Peter, and Bobby. On the other side, there are four women: Carol, the mother, and her three daughters Marcia, Jan, and Cindy. During the first episode of the show, Greg and Carol marry, bringing the two sides together under one last name, one roof, and one big, happy family. The sitcom follows the family's everyday antics and struggles. In addition, the family has a housekeeper named Alice and a dog named Tiger. The two just add to the chaos in the house.

*The Brady Bunch* is a textbook definition of a sitcom -- it takes place in a familiar setting, there are everyday struggles in each episode that always get resolved within the 22-minute running time, it is sprinkled with humor, and it displays quirky and fun recurring characters. At the time of its debut, the late 1960s, American sitcoms were all the rage, and *The Brady Bunch* followed suit. Some notable characters of sitcoms in the 1960s and 1970s follow archetypes of

the bumbling men like the brothers in *The Partridge Family*, the wise dad like Andy Taylor from *The Andy Griffith Show*, the occasionally-witty maid that viewers would see occur in later times, like Fran Fine in *The Nanny* and Mrs. Garrett from *Facts of Life*. One reliable narrative from those recurring patterns is the coy woman who could slyly outsmart the men in her life, such as famously done by Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*. We observe that convention in *The Brady Bunch*, as well.

According to the Nielson ratings, *The Brady Bunch* never reached higher than the top 30 television shows during its prime time run, but the show has grown in fame well into the 21st century (R, 2013). At the time of its airing, it was ostensibly a children's show; it ended up being watched by parents as well. The show saw most of its fame after its completion. "Following syndication in 1976, it began airing every afternoon nationwide. The show was arguably more popular in syndication than it ever was in prime time, as evidenced by its rise to the number one slot on the TBS network" (Marinucci, 2005, pp. 509). Thanks to its success in syndication and its relatable characters, storylines, and references. *The Brady Bunch* is thought of to be one of America's all-time, most iconic television shows.

One interesting feature of the show is that it mostly stayed out of most political influence and conversation, even though the time of its airing in American life and history full of political turmoil. The Vietnam War was in full swing; the Watergate scandal had broken; Woodstock had changed the world and feminism was emerging, and yet, *The Brady Bunch* strived to remain a wholesome, welcoming show that could be enjoyed by many different audiences.

Yet, *The Brady Bunch* is worthy of study and analysis for many reasons, one of which is for its male versus female dynamics. At the beginning of the airing, the late 1960s, the roles of

men and women in the working world and the household were still relatively defined. Women were expected to stay at home, while men were supposed to be the breadwinners. As the decade turned, however, America started to see the first shift in these roles, as women were beginning to break the traditional female expectations by entering the workforce. While the women in the show still fit into the stereotypical female identity myths of the time -- being subservient to the men -- the show includes many instances throughout the episodes where the female characters bristle against this constraint and try to push these limits. Some may even argue that some of the characters in *The Brady Bunch* are some of television's first "feminists" (Cohen, 1981).

*The Brady Bunch* was a mirror of the times, as it grappled with the sexist viewpoints in the world when the show started in the 1960s but evolved over time as America became more liberated. As this shift in society occurred, so did the actions in the show. In the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time, *The Brady Bunch* was on the air, women were just beginning to have their voices heard in society. Although women got the right to vote in 1920, they didn't start to feel genuinely liberated until this time. The National Organization for Women was founded in 1966; the 'bra-burning' feminists boycotted the Miss America pageant in 1968; Roe v. Wade legalized abortion in 1973 and much more. The late 1960s to early 1970s were a turning point in the history of Second Wave Feminist women; for the first time, women were letting their voices be heard and standing up against male pressures. And *The Brady Bunch's* plots, ideas, and characters reflected these changing times.

## **Organizational Approach & Thesis**

In this paper, I will take a feminist perspective in analyzing how *The Brady Bunch* used the tools of the narrative plot and characters, the signs and signifiers such as setting, dress, and language, and finally the male-female interactions that illustrate the emerging shift in women's perspectives that mirrored the changes in family roles and feminist attitudes.

This analysis will be organized by looking at a handful of episodes as the show progressed, identifying in the text of recognizable plotlines, archetypes, and signs, and observing how the writers' clever use of comedy and non-confrontational discussion of topics that could have otherwise been polarizing towards feminism were shown to audiences in a more subtle and palatable way. By developing these archetypes, *The Brady Bunch* was able to create viewer empathy towards the females' perspectives, so they could be seen as the heroes or underdogs of the series, leaving audiences pulling for the female characters in many of the everyday situations that arose. This created cultural sympathy around the women striving to be treated better, without explicitly making the show a gender-battle. As the times began to change, the show started to evolve, as well. The women began to move from subservience to beginning to assert their expectations equality.

## **Literature Review**

As *The Brady Bunch* has been thought of as an American classic television show, many critics have discussed similar topics as they relate to the show.

In her 2019 article "Making Room for The Brady Bunch: The Syndication of Suburban Discomfort," author Janna Jones explores the dynamics of the different characters in the Brady

home, noting that the show displays everyday character struggles that have “helped to share popular memory, staging and then syndicating the competing desires for autonomy and interdependence inside the suburban home” (Jones, 2019, p. 3).

“Television, Generation X, and Third Wave Feminism: A Contextual Analysis of *The Brady Bunch*” discusses the connections between *The Brady Bunch*, Generation X, and Third Wave Feminism, highlighting *The Brady Bunch*’s importance to Generation X’s childhood culture, and how its messages culminated into the viewers’ outlooks and perspectives. Author Mimi Marinucci argues that the show took place is a time when changes were happening in America, including increasing divorce rate, people were starting to explore their sexuality more, and the rise of third wave feminism. All of these factors came to play in *The Brady Bunch*, allowing viewers to be influenced by the show’s meanings.

Tyson Pugh is the author of two different articles analyzing queer innocence in *The Brady Bunch*. First, in “The Queer Innocence of The Brady Bunch” (2005), Pugh argues that there is a sense of innocence when it comes to the characters’ sexualities and homosexualities, due to the fact that at the time of its airing, topics of sexuality were taboo, especially in terms of children. In his second article, titled “Queer Innocence and Kitsch Nostalgia in *The Brady Bunch*,” Pugh uses *The Brady Bunch* to explore “how sitcoms use sexuality as a source of power, as a kind of camouflage, and as a foundation for family building” (Pugh, 2018, pp. 51).

In addition to academic research published on these topics, much popular media have discussed similar issues in *The Brady Bunch*. According to a 1981 article in The Washington Post, author Richard Cohen explains that although feminists have become more empowered,

sexism clearly still exists on television. Although this article was published in the 1980s, many of the points still ring true today. For example, Cohen writes, “Television has changed and women have gone from insipid to sex objects, although on some shows a little reality is allowed to intrude” (Cohen, 1981, pp. 1). More recently, a 2016 article in *The Wall Street Journal* by Tunku Varadarajan discusses the significance *The Brady Bunch* has had on American values -- showing “American society as an exemplar of sanity...offering avenues for reinvention...brought together by shared values” (Varadarajan, 2016, pp. 1).

Lastly, many authors have written about Florence Henderson, the iconic American actress who played the mother on *The Brady Bunch*, Carol Brady. Nelson Price (2016) notes that she was “America’s Mom,” playing one of the first women to display a blended family on television and generating much of the show’s success thanks to her character. Hank Stuever (2016) discusses Carol’s character in saying that she helped to create “the original safe space, even if the Bradys looked or acting nothing like you” (Stuever, 2016, pp. 2). The beloved character of Carol added to the show’s overall charm and lovability.

### **Analysis - Tools of plot and character**

Although there was much change in society going on during the airing of *The Brady Bunch*, the show stayed pretty far away from making direct comments about the political climate of the times. At the same time, the convention of the sitcom made it a comfortable place to display critiques of society in a way that viewers almost didn’t realize it was happening. Many of the show’s viewers had grown to love the plotlines, so the producers had the unique opportunity to be able to be effective in the messages they were trying to communicate to the audience. An

example of a typical sitcom plot is as follows: Cindy's favorite doll goes missing, the kids all accuse each other, and it turns out the dog took it after all (Season 1, Episode 7, "Kitty Karry-All is Missing"). It follows the formula of dilemma and resolution reached in 22 minutes.

The series begins with archetypal characters. The Bradys are portrayed as an all-American family. There are no villains, just misunderstandings and entanglements that get worked out with everyone happy in the end. Carol is a stay-at-home mom; the family has a live-in housekeeper; the girls listen to the boys. The male characters are often the dominant ones, being portrayed as the breadwinners and decision-makers. Viewers feel as if they have a relationship with these characters, almost as if they were the "kids next door." Therefore, it gave the writers a subtler way to convey changes in society in a comfortable and welcoming environment. In the earlier seasons of the show, the classic female personas are very prevalent, which was typical for the late 1960s. In the later seasons, which took place in the 1970s, the women of the show tend to push the male characters' buttons a little more, stand up for themselves a little more and try their best to get what they want a little more.

### **Analysis - Setting, dress, and language**

Among the notable feature of early episodes is the use of the set, the style of dress and the language that reinforces the cultural norms during those periods of the show. The setting of the house is an archetypal, upper-middle-class, large California house. It is a modern, split-level, well-kept, stylish house with the latest decor. Alice is always maintaining the home, cooking meals, and making sure everything is in order. The Bradys don't seem to have any financial problems with six kids, a maid, and a mom that stays home. It portrays order,



properness, and the American Dream; it is an aspirational house for a lot of Americans. The setting conveys that patriarchal time in history.

When it comes to wardrobes, in the earlier seasons, the writers used period-appropriate costumes to reinforce changes in the time and where the narrative was heading. Seasons 1 and 2, which took place in 1969 and 1970, the characters dress relatively conservatively. The women wear very modest tops, their dresses are longer, and their hair is neat and tidy. The men wear ties with proper button-down shirts and have clean hair and grooming. Their language is also representative of the time period. In the earlier episodes, the children are always acting on their best behavior, saying “yes, ma’am,” and obeying their parents' orders. Then the characters' clothing and language begins to shift as the show goes on. In the later seasons, we see the characters wearing notable 1970s clothing -- bell-bottom jeans, unbuttoned shirts that show the men's chests, and women with long, wavy hair. The kids start to use terms like “groovy,” and they're not quite as respectful and behaved as before. Interestingly, the house and setting didn't actually change much. The one thing about the household that did evolve overtime was the reduced reliance on Alice as the household servant. They began to rely on her less, as she grows from a maid to a member of their family. These shifts were representative of the show attempting to stay up-to-date on the changing times. The show's producers wanted the characters to continue to be relatable and personable, which meant they needed to grow and develop as the 1970s progressed. These changes were almost to the point that they were too cheesy, but they were trying to display the modern thinking of the times.

**Analysis - The male-female dynamic**

At the beginning of the show, the women were seen to be more passive, but almost to the point of being passive-aggressive towards the male characters. While the female characters act as if they are subservient to the males, they are really acting clever and manipulative to try to get what they want. For example, in Season 1, Episode 6, titled “Brady for President,” Marcia and Greg find themselves running against each other for student body president. Marcia ends up forfeiting the race to Greg, claiming that he is a year older, therefore more qualified for the position. This situation displays the passiveness of the women at the beginning of the show. Marcia realizes that although deep down she wants the job, subsiding to Greg is still the proper thing to do. This shows that the women are flirting with the idea of standing up for themselves, but they slowly back away and reinforce those gender norms. At the end of the episode, however, we find out Cindy has beaten out Bobby for crossing guard, proving to the audience that the women were able to come out on top of something after all, even if doing so in a friendly way.

In Season 2, Episode 19, titled “The Liberation of Marcia Brady,” we see another similar instance of the election, and involving a woman bowing down to a male character. This episode takes place during the women’s liberation movement, and a reporter comes to the school to get some opinions on the matter from the local students. He ends up interviewing Marcia, where she expresses her opinion on the fact that girls should be able to attempt whatever boys can. After hearing her opinion, Greg gives Marcia grief about thinking girls are equal to boys, and to get back at him, Marcia decides to join Greg’s Frontier Scouts. To get back at her, Greg eggs on Peter to join Marcia’s Sunflower Girls troupe. Throughout the entire episode, it is clear that

Carol and Mike are trying to maintain neutral, but they continue to take sides behind the kids' backs, with Carol expressing that she believes that women should be able to do the same things men can do and Mike calling Marcia "silly" for being so into the "women's lib stuff." After going through the whole training, test, and initiation process, Marcia later decides she doesn't want to join the Frontier Scouts after all. She says, "Chopping and tracking are nice, I guess, if you're a boy. I just wanted to prove to myself I could do it even though I'm a girl." And then she says to Carol, "Oh, did the new fashion magazine come yet?" This scenario is another clear example of the women succumbing to the male pressures, and displaying that the girls should really be worried about more feminine matters, like fashion. According to Marinucci, "The overtly feminist message that girls can succeed at so-called masculine activities is undermined by the subtle message that girls do not actually enjoy masculine activities" (Marinucci, 2005, 513). In addition, the parents' tiffs behind their kids' backs while they're grappling with the same issues shows that this "women's lib stuff" is relevant to women of all ages. An interesting detail about the parents' interactions is that whenever Mike is speaking, there is a laugh track put in place just after what he is saying, enforcing the times' ideals that women's equality is simply laughable. Whereas when Carol is talking, it is quiet and serious. This episode shows a similar instance of the women raise some issues in which they believe, but then backing away peacefully and playing nice as they feel they're supposed to do.

As the show progresses, however, the female characters become much more straightforward about their wants, needs, and desires to be treated as equals to the male characters. For example, in Season 4, Episode 22, titled "You Can't Win 'Em All," Cindy and Bobby compete in a competition where they take a test to star on a kid's quiz television show.

Before they take the test, Bobby continues to tell Cindy how he's smarter than her, and that he won't have to study for the test in order to succeed, and Cindy just takes it. Later, Cindy passes the test, and Bobby does not, which boosts her ego. Cindy then gives it back to Bobby and tells him the proof that she is smarter than he is. Another example takes place in Season 5, Episode 15, titled "The Driver's Seat." In this episode, Marcia and Greg compete to see who will score better on his/her driver's license test. Greg, teasing Marcia says "You outscored everybody in Driver's Ed? Even the guys?" and Marcia fights back in her response in saying, "Now that's a typical male-chauvinist reaction. You're prejudiced against women drivers." This kind of comment is radical, compared to how the females act in the earlier seasons of the show. Because these episodes take place in the more radical time periods of the mid-1970s, the women have progressed in their ideas and interactions with the men. They are less afraid to stand up for themselves, whereas, before, their goal was to try to get their way passively. This shift comes with the rise of the women's' liberation movements of the times.

## **Conclusion**

The 1960s and 1970s were some of the most radical times in American history, with fast-paced changes when it came to gender equality, the Civil Rights' Movement, and more. During this time was also the rise of television as a commonplace medium, allowing for the broadcasting of news and political statements all over America for the first time. While television was becoming a mode of communication, many of the television shows, whether we knew it or not, were communicating messages to their viewers about the climate of politics of the time period. And *The Brady Bunch* was no exception. While *The Brady Bunch* has been

commended for being an influential, family-centric, wholesome sitcom that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, many signifieds arise throughout the show that may have once slipped viewers' minds. While looking at the show through a feminist lens, it is evident that the women experience a shift as the show and its time's progress. At the beginning of the show, we see passive, but almost passive-aggressive women who are too afraid of their husbands and male counterparts and compromise their own wellbeing to be subservient to them. As the show goes on, and the 1970s women's liberation movement and activists began to create a movement around women's equality. Even everyday women's behaviors began to reflect these changes. Women began to stand up more clearly for themselves without letting the men create divides and pressures. While the show remains a family-favorite in syndication, these messages weaved throughout the show display a significant jump for women as they began to feel more confident and independent from male pressures. The women in *The Brady Bunch* refused to be doormats any longer. Although the series is gone, and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, it lives on in syndication, and it created televised role models for women grappling with early waves of feminism.

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