How Lucille Ball Fought the Patriarchy, While Lucy Ricardo (Indirectly) Contributed to Second-Wave (White) Feminism

Anam Rana Afzal, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Date of Degree
2-2018

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
M.A.

Program
Liberal Studies

Advisor
Karen Miller

Subject Categories
American Film Studies | American Popular Culture | American Studies | Arts and Humanities | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History | Other Film and Media Studies | Women's History

Keywords
Lucille Ball, I Love Lucy, Second-Wave Feminism, 1950s American History, The Feminine Mystique

Abstract
Author Stephanie Coontz argues that our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sitcoms. In actuality, the happy, homogenous families that we “remember” from America in the 50s were a result of the media’s denial of diversity. Also, women’s retreat to housewifery after working during WWII was in many cases, not freely chosen. In his study of sitcoms, Saul Austerlitz claims that once television arrived in American cities after the war’s end, its impact was immediate and incontrovertible, and no sitcom caught America’s eye as immediately, or as thoroughly as CBS’s I Love Lucy (1951-1957.) The show is remembered and admired for its physical comedy, hilarious writing, great talent of its actors, and of course, Lucy Ricardo; America’s favorite red head, the female lead who fought for herself, far from a June Cleaver type.

This paper will explore I Love Lucy in all of its contradictions. Unlike other studies, every aspect and impact, both positive and negative will be examined. Lucy Ricardo, a 1950s housewife, contested gender roles put forth by her husband and society, while simultaneously enabling the patriarchy (by being submissive at times and often needing her husband to “save” her.) Stefan Kanfer describes these two Lucys “the control freak whose comic alter ego thrived on chaos, the worshipful TV housewife whose real marriage ended in public disaster. Ball was one in a million, an exception, Lucy Ricardo represented the rule. While Kanfer argues the differences between the actress and character, I acknowledge their protofeminist similarities. I argue that Lucille Ball was everything Lucy Ricardo wanted to be, a powerful woman working in show business.

Beyond studying the two different Lucys, white feminism will also be discussed. White, middleclass, bored housewives longing for more could relate to Lucy Ricardo and were inspired by Ball. For example, Lucille Ball fought the patriarchy by marrying a Cuban immigrant, being a working, successful mother and eventually a divorcee. Ball’s platform gave birth to Lucy Ricardo. 1963’s publication of The Feminine Mystique sparked the second-wave feminism movement. I argue that Lucille Ball depicted and portrayed the
dissatisfied and domesticated women described by Friedan on her show throughout the 1950s. I examine the idea that Lucy Ricardo was a visual representation of these housewives facing the unhappiness issue that Friedan describes as "the problem that has no name," thus indirectly contributing to the start of the feminist movement.

However, the show was neither feminist, nor anti-feminist. Lucille Ball just was a real woman voicing her opinions, showing real feminine issues through comedy. There were no direct political statements being made. Ball claimed that her work was not politically motivated, but it certainly had important political resonances for some. In a magazine interview with Peter Lester in February 1980 for People, Ball stated, "They can use my name for equal rights, but I don't get out there and raise hell because I've been so liberated, I have nothing to squawk about." Ball was not a self-proclaimed feminist activist, but her contributions to America (Lucy Ricardo) helped lead to the 1960s feminist movement.

If The Feminine Mystique ignited the second-wave feminist movement in the early 1960s, I argue that by playing a character that depicted the issues women were facing as housewives on the most popular television show of the 1950s, both Lucys indirectly contributed just as much as Friedan. While there were aspects of the show that enabled gender roles, Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo did a lot for feminism-even if it was indirectly. The paper utilizes primary and secondary sources to examine the early sitcom era, popular culture, anti-communism, gender roles, motherhood, sexism, pregnancy, racial issues/tensions, family life and feminism in the 1950s and in the context of I Love Lucy; as well as both Lucys' impact on second-wave feminism and legacy.

Recommended Citation

Second: Second wave feminism still had the problems of struggling with intersectionality. To some extent, both the simple, clearcut issues of economics and the vagaries of culture were always defined by women whose primary barriers to success were being women: White middle-class women. It took third-wave and later feminism to push a more intersectional analysis. Third: By pushing women into the workforce while not really winning substantive changes to female domesticity, second wave feminism basically created the first shift to accompany the second shift. The "super-Mom" came about b Second-wave feminism is a period of feminist activity and thought that began in the United States in the early 1960s and lasted roughly two decades. It quickly spread across the Western world, with an aim to increase equality for women by gaining more than just enfranchisement. Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (e.g., voting rights and property rights), second-wave feminism broadened the debate to include a wider range of issues.