
Controversial Issues In The Television Sitcom "All In The Family"

Racism or bigotry? Bigotry or prejudice? Controversial titles that are almost certain to grab someone's attention standing around the water cooler. While most people find these words offensive, perhaps it was those debatable issues that All in the Family sitcom producers Norman Lear and Alan Yorkin thought could conceivably gain their network more viewership as well as ignite universal conversations that would spark change. All in the Family was created in the 1970's with the goal of introducing "shock-value" programming with realistic, subjective battles. Some described that decade as a turbulent time when marginalized groups such as Gays and Lesbians along with African Americans were fighting for equal opportunities in the world.

This paper will discuss how television sitcom All in the Family tackled taboo controversial subject matters through comedy in the 70's and set a precedent for some of today's prime-time line-ups decades later. Despite the American public's contrasting views on social issues and feelings of disappointment towards the government, sitcom producers Lear and Yorkin saw All in the Family was the ideal platform, though risky, to showcase such divisive topics. Lear hoped by giving controversial topics a face, it would possibly help set a tone among the American public that created freedom with individual transparency. Lear also realized that his intent may or may not be understood or received by his audience.

All in the Family's storyline is largely told through the viewpoint of family patriarch, Archie Bunker. The Bunker household consisted of his sweet, but "loony" wife Edith, daughter Gloria, and her husband Michael Stivic. Bunker is a bigoted, hard-working, family man from Queens, New York, who in his mind could not catch a break in life. Archie is a proud World War II veteran who ignores anyone who doesn't agree with his view of the world, which is conservative and heterosexual. Bunker is upset with how the American society he once knew is changing. He blames the advancements made by minority groups like Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews for the sacrifices made by himself and the other lower middle-class whites. Opposing that harsh viewpoint was Archie's wife Edith. Edith usually endured Archie's ranting to prevent arguments. That was hardly the case with Archie's live-in, liberal son-in-law, Mike Stivic. Both were notably strong in their beliefs; however, Stivic became the punching bag for Archie's bigotry. This guaranteed heated tug-of-wars between the two and provided the show with its comedic part of the storyline.

That storyline heavily depended on Archie being politically incorrect, conservative, and socially misguided, while Mike was completely opposite; his portrayal was liberal and understanding to

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the concerns of the disenfranchised and oppressed. Politics weren't the only issues All in the Family pushed the envelope on. When an African-American family of three moved in next door to the Bunkers, Archie's racial stereotypes and bigotry, become reoccurring themes. Over the course of the show, Archie's blatant racism became visible. Archie felt he was losing control of his "all white neighborhood" and showed that fear by referring to his black neighbors with derogatory innuendos like "yous people."

The show skillfully combined these serious topics with laughable moments. One of those movements happened when singer Sammy Davis Jr. visited the Bunkers. Even though Sammy was a celebrity and Archie was excited to have him in his home, the color of his skin was still a problem. The gotcha moment of the show happened when Archie asked Mike to take a picture of him and Sammy to show the guys at work. Just as Mike snaps the picture, Sammy leans in and kisses Archie, capturing an appalled Archie for the world to see.

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