Positive Scapegoating is Significant in Successful New Sitcoms

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"Bill Cosby and his talented cast resuscitated the fading sitcom genre with a comedic approach that emphasized the loving relationships of a large family. Americans were obviously hungry for such a treatment as *The Cosby Show* went on to become the third most popular show of the year (1984-85)," stated Jeff Borden, a writer for the Knight-Ridder newspapers.

During 1985-86, *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, paired with it by NBC on Thursday nights, have consistently week after week been the top two audience-draws.[1] A scapegoating technique is a prominent feature of *Family Ties*. It is a technique of some importance on *The Cosby Show* also. I believe that this use of positive scapegoating is a significant and largely new development. In the past negative scapegoating (at least in a mild form) was frequent in sitcoms.

Arts critics generally refer to a purging or scapegoating technique without any qualifiers. They do not differentiate between positive versus negative scapegoating.[2] I will analyze the concept of scapegoating in the beginning of this article. My purpose is to clarify the distinction between the two forms of scapegoating.

According to Harvard psychologist Gordon W. Allport in the classic study of scapegoating, **The Nature of Prejudice**, "The term 'scapegoat' originated in the famous ritual of the Hebrews described in the book of Leviticus (16:20-22). On the Day of Atonement a live goat was chosen by lot. The high priest, robed in linen garments, laid both his hands on the goat's head and confessed over it the iniquities of the children of Israel. The sins of the people thus symbolically transferred to the beast. It was taken out into the wilderness and let go. The people felt purged."[3]

Allport states that today we have two kinds of scapegoating—religious and secular—each with three similar steps. The holocaust was an example of secular scapegoating: (1) Frustration generates aggression (the Germans were frustrated over defeat in World War I). (2) Aggression becomes displaced upon relatively defenseless "goats" (Jews were physically easy to recognize, resented for professional success and have been frequent scapegoats throughout history). (3) This displaced hostility is justified and extended (Hitler extended the already existing verbal scapegoating to justify imprisonment and eventual murder of German Jews).

Religious scapegoating has these three steps: (1) personal misconduct, (2) a feeling of guilt related to one's misconduct, and (3) displacement of the guilt to a scapegoat.[4]

I believe that there is a positive fourth step in religious scapegoating regarding both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The fourth step involves admitting one's wrong-doing and resolving to do better in the future. The solemn ritual and fasting of the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) contains this positive element. The Christian concept of Christ as savior (ultimate scapegoat) and master of one's life (and the related doctrine of a sanctification process which matures the believer) also includes this positive fourth step.[5] The scapegoating ritual provides a strengthened sense of self-worth, enabling one to face personal guilt.

In my opinion the most important distinction in considering an example of scapegoating should be whether it is the negative (responsibility—evading) versus the positive (responsibility—accepting) form. History has shown the negative form can lead ultimately to war and holocaust. According to psychiatrist Scott Peck, truly evil persons are those who continually blame others and refuse to accept responsibility for their mistakes. On the contrary, being realistic and responsible regarding personal errors or flaws is the epitome of good mental health.[6]

Positive scapegoating could provide positive role modeling for TV viewers that would inspire and aid them toward the mentally healthiest level of behavior. (Various studies show that youth, in particular, tend to imitate either the cooperative or the destructive behavior they see modeled on TV.)[7]

There are two major ways for positive scapegoating to occur in a drama. In both, a leading character ultimately scapegoats himself. He might do this by taking responsibility for his error or flaw. A variation is for a major character to make a self-sacrifice for the positive benefit of another character.

Many TV sitcoms, until the 1984-85 season, have depended on at least mild, negative scapegoating of ethnic, religious, or occupational groups, or situational roles. For instance, mother-in-law jokes and jokes about the masculinity of the man of the house have been common staples on many comedies. Sexist humor has also been a frequent fixture on these programs.

In **Changing Channels** Charren and Sandler comment on the extensive scapegoating of minority groups in present and past sitcoms. "Black viewers have found few positive role models in TV situation comedies or adventure shows, where black characters are often depicted as buffoons or placed in demeaning situations. . . . By continually airing old programs in which Hispanics are portrayed as lazy, shiftless and inarticulate, or American Indians are seen as drunken, cowardly savages, television is perpetuating stereotypes."[8]

Prime examples of negative scapegoating in the "old comedy" were contained in *All in the Family*. Archie Bunker scapegoated blacks, Jews and other ethnic groups. He also scapegoated his wife, Edith, whom he called "dingbat," and his son-in-law, whom he named "meathead." This was easier for Archie than facing the complexities of a changing world and his diminishing importance within it.

Creator Norman Lear designed Archie as a caricature of bigotry. His prejudices and his scapegoating of individuals and groups were supposed to be rejected—not emulated—by the viewing audience. However, a study in **The Journal of Communication** demonstrated that persons who agreed with Archie's world view and who watched *All in the Family* became more intensified in their prejudice against the groups Archie scapegoated. Only those who already agreed with Lear's viewpoint were slightly persuaded further in the direction of the attitude change he was trying to instill.[9]

As of 1984-85, *Family Ties* has been recast by principal writer and producer, Gary David Goldberg. It no longer emphasizes an intergenerational struggle. It stresses, instead, better self-understanding and better interpersonal relations among characters,[10] as does *The Cosby Show*. These are the "new positive comedies" of 1984-86.

Family Ties is interesting in that it features a major example of positive scapegoating in many episodes. It seems to me that this is the most significant technique of the revised series. The positive scapegoatings usually center around the chief character, Alex Keaton. Alex is a caricature of ultra conservatism and obsessive materialism. Alex, however, learns from his errors and excesses. Ultimately he scapegoats himself, rather than others.

In a recent episode Alex attacks a friend as too immature to get married, and he implies that his friend's fiancee is unsuitable. Alex finally states that he was wrong on both points. He admits his behavior was actually motivated by fear that he and the friend would end their friendship after the marriage.

In another episode, Alex signs up to work at a crisis center. He thinks he will earn three "easy" credits in psychology. Alex changes his mind about easy credits after he gets involved in talking a young man out of suicide. Alex humbles himself before this young man, and before his crisis center partner and college rival. He admits specific fears and feelings of inadequacy that he has experienced in meeting life's problems. Alex has sacrificed his pride and his "cool image" in order to try to save the young caller's life.

Several elements help to explain the success of *The Cosby Show*. Alex Haley comments on one of them. "The show's appeal and its laughs depend less on one-liners and intricate plots than on the affectionate ribbing between family members."[11]

Bill Cosby (who is creator, co-producer and executive consultant as well as the star) thinks audience identification is the key to the program's success. "So many people identify with what goes on in the Huxtable household. They ask themselves, 'How did they find out what's happening in **our** house?' Other times a situation will click and a parent will use it as a teaching tool."[12]

I believe that Cosby and Haley have found the two chief keys to the program's success. I have noted that occasionally positive scapegoating is an important additional technique to aid self-understanding and/or better interpersonal relations. The following example accomplishes both purposes, and provides Theo, Cosby's TV son, with significant insights about his father.

Theo wanted to buy an expensive high fashion shirt for an important date. Huxtable told Theo it was too expensive, and he could not buy it. Theo's sister, Denise, overheard this conversation. She offered to sew a shirt of the desired type, if Theo would buy the material.

Denise proved to be a poor seamstress. The shirt she sewed did not fit well and had numerous flaws. Theo became quite upset. At this point Dr. Huxtable had a talk with him. He told Theo he knew how the sewing project would turn out, so he had bought the high fashion shirt for Theo. Huxtable stated, however, that a few years earlier, Theo had given him a gift tie. It was quite outlandish, but Theo had wanted his dad to wear it when he gave an address to a medical convention.

Huxtable said he knew he would have to bear many strange and disapproving looks when he got up to speak. yet he decided he would put up with this to please his son and to show him that he valued his gift. Moreover, when he got to the substance of his talk people would realize that was the important thing, not what kind of tie he was wearing. At this point, Theo decided to wear the shirt that Denise had lovingly made for him.

Notes

[1]Jeff Borden, *"Cosby," "Miami Vice" Big TV Season Winners*, **Kingsport Times-News** (May 28, 1985), 10 B. and Fred Rothenberg (AP TV writer) *Same Ole Story: "Cosby" Leads NBC to No. 1*, **Johnson City Press** (February 19, 1986), 8.

[2]Kenneth Burke, **A Grammar of Motives** (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 406-408. Burke, who is an important theorist for rhetorical, literary and other arts critics, states that religious scapegoating has additional elements (which he implies could be more positive). He does not, however, go on to develop this aspect of scapegoating-purging. See also use of purging in general in an arts critique: Claude J. Smith, Jr., "Clean Boys in Bright Uniforms: The Rehabilitation of the U.S. Military in Films since 1978," **The Journal of Popular Film and Television** 11 (Winter, 1984), pp. 148-149.

[3]Gordon W. Allport, **The Nature of Prejudice** (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), p.236.

[4]Ibid., pp. 325-334

[5]Merrill F. Unger, **Unger's Bible Handbook** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), pp. 116-117 and pp. 612-618.

[6]M. Scott Peck, M.D., **People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), The entire book supports this line of interpretation, but see especially p. 129 and p. 162.

[7] Peggy Charren and Martin W. Sandler, **Changing Channels: Living Sensibly with Television** (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 6, 199, 208 and 220.

[8]Ibid., pp. 53, 54.

[9]John C. Brigham and Linda W. Giesbrecht, *"All in the Family:"* Racial Attitudes, **Journal of Communication 26** (Autumn, 1976), 69-74.

[10]Kenneth Turan, *When an "Ugly Runt" Upstages the Stars—and the Storylines Go Sour,* **TV Guide** 33 (April 27, 1985), 12-15.

[11]Alex Haley, *Talking with Cosby,* **Ladies Home Journal** 102 (June, 1985), p. 32.

[12]Ibid.