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Situation Comedy

Hancock's Half Hour Steptoe and Son Till Death Us Do Part Love Thy Neighbour Are You Being Served? The Fosters Butterflies **Fawlty Towers** The Young Ones Yes Minister **Only Fools and Horses** Birds of a Feather Blackadder Goes Forth One Foot in the Grave **Absolutely Fabulous** Men Behaving Badly Dinnerladies The Royle Family The Vicar of Dibley The Office Allo Allo And Mother Makes Five The Army Game The Blackadder Bless this House Bootsie and Snudge **Bottom** Bread Curry and Chips Dad's Army Duty Free The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin Father Ted For the Love of Ada The Good Life Hancock **Keeping Up Appearances** Last of the Summer Wine Man About the House Mind Your Language My Family Nearest and Dearest On the Buses **Phoenix Nights** Please Sir Porridge Rab C Nesbitt **Red Dwarf** Rising Damp A Sharp Intake of Breath Some Mothers Do Ave Em Surgical Spirit Hancock's Half Hour **Steptoe and Son** Till Death Us Do Part Love Thy Neighbour Are You Being Served? The Fosters Butterflies Fawlty Towers **The Young Ones** Yes Minister Only Fools and Horses Birds of a Feather **Blackadder Goes Forth** One Foot in the Grave Absolutely Fabulous Men Behaving Badly Dinnerladies The Royle Family **The Vicar of Dibley** The Office Allo Allo And Mother Makes Five The Army Game The Blackadder Bless this House Bootsie and Snudge Bottom Bread Curry and Chips Dad's Army Duty Free **The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin** Father Ted For the Love of Ada The Good Life Hancock Keeping Up Appearances **Last of the Summer Wine** Man About the House Mind Your Language My Family Nearest and Dearest On the Buses Phoenix Nights Please Sir **Porridge** Rab C Nesbitt Red Dwarf Rising Damp A Sharp Intake of Breath **Some Mothers Do Ave Em** Surgical Spirit Hancock's Half Hour Steptoe and Son Till Death Us Do Part Love Thy Neighbour **Are You Being Served?** The Fosters Butterflies Fawlty Towers The Young Ones Yes Minister Only Fools and Horses Birds of a Feather Blackadder Goes Forth One Foot in the Grave Absolutely Fabulous **Men Behaving Badly** Dinnerladies **The Royle Family** The Vicar of Dibley The Office Allo Allo And Mother Makes Five The Army Game The Blackadder Bless this House Bootsie and Snudge Bottom Bread Curry and Chips **Dad's Army** Duty Free The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin **Father Ted** For the Love of Ada The Good Life Hancock Keeping Up Appearances Last of the Summer Wine Man About the House Mind Your



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TV Heaven Plus: Situation Comedy

Introduction to TV Heaven

The first viewing facility of its kind in Britain, TV Heaven invites National Media Museum visitors to select and watch any of the classic television programmes in the TV Heaven collection completely free of charge. Open to the public since June 1993, the TV Heaven archive has grown to include over 900 programmes, encompassing the last 60 years of television broadcasting history. These include classic comedies, childhood favourites, soaps, hard-hitting documentaries, memorable plays and dramas, and much more.

TV Heaven Plus Showreels and Teacher's Packs

The aim of the TV Heaven Plus packs is to provide Media Studies groups with contextual information and a wide range of illustrative extracts from non-contemporary television programmes to assist their exploration of specific television genres.

TV Heaven Plus packs have two parts;

- 1.) A DVD of extracts available to view in the TV Heaven Viewing Room. The TV Heaven Plus Situation Comedy DVD includes extracts from 20 different British situation comedies spanning over 50 years of television history.
- 2.) This accompanying teacher's pack, detailing the conventions of the 'sitcom' genre, the historical and social context of each featured programme, and a series of student worksheets to take away or complete on-site.

Both the DVD extracts and the supporting information are arranged chronologically by date.

TV Heaven Plus visits are designed to be teacher-led, offering groups the independence and flexibility to tailor their visit to their own specific needs. The TV Heaven Plus DVD has the option to both 'play all' extracts, or alternatively you may select desired chapters.

The TV Heaven collection includes a large number of British situation comedies and these form the basis of this TV Heaven Plus pack. Occasional reference is made to American sitcoms in terms of their relationship to the British model.

Should a member of your group wish to return to TV Heaven to watch any programme in full, they are welcome to do so. A list of the other situation comedies available in TV Heaven can be found in the 'Other Resources' section at the end of this pack. Visitors are welcome to call in to TV Heaven at any time, and our viewing spaces can be booked in advance by calling the TV Heaven desk directly on (01274) 203433.

Situation comedy is a television genre that pushes boundaries, often playing with social taboos for comic effect. As a result, some of the programmes featured in this pack and accompanying DVD contain references which may be offensive to some; sexually suggestive dialogue is used in the *Are You Being Served?*, *The Young Ones*, *dinnerladies*, *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Men Behaving Badly* extracts, and *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* contain racist language. Teachers can choose to omit these extracts if they are concerned about the content. Please call ahead or ask at the desk if you want to check the suitability of any extract for your group.

At the end of a pack you will find a glossary featuring forms of humour referred to in the pack and an evaluation sheet. Please complete this and hand in to the TV Heaven desk before you leave.

Introduction to Situation Comedy

Sitcom Conventions

Many critics agree that it is the stability and simplicity of the situation comedy (or 'sitcom') genre that has ensured its continued success and popularity on British television.

Theme tunes are often light in tone and catchy. They can also communicate something about the tone of the comedy or its narrative focus. Ronnie Hazlehurst (1928-2007) was a particularly prolific and well-noted composer of sitcom theme tunes, having composed them for *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973-), *Are You Being Served?* (1973-1985), *Some Mothers Do Ave Em* (1973-1978), *Yes, Minister* (1980-1984), *To the Manor Born* (1979-1981), *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin* (1976-1979), *Butterflies* (1978-1983), and *The Likely Lads* (1964-1966) among others.

Opening credits are designed to give a flavour of the tone of the comedy to come and introduce the key characters and situations.

Locations are usually simple, easily identifiable and set the tone of the programme. The action tends to centre around this one location during a series, although sometimes others will be added. Often sitcoms use interior locations and film in a studio as this can be more cost-effective and allows greater control of the environment. Such interiors are usually domestic or work-related. Filming outside of the studio 'on location' allows for a greater sense of realism and offers a greater variety of backdrops for the comedy.

Situations tend to follow the theme of being physically or emotionally trapped, and all are geared towards fulfilling comic potential. Sitcoms tend to focus on families, or at least symbolic families. As with sitcom locations, situations tend to be domestic or work-related.

Characters in sitcoms tend to fall in to three groups; central characters, those the audience is encouraged to identify with; supporting characters that usually function as a comic foil for the central character; and characters that only appear for one or two episodes. Relationships between these characters are essential to the comedy and to audience identification, and so rarely change.

Dialogue is finely crafted with a foundation of perfect comic timing, but successful timing is only possible when the writers and actors work well together. Like other types of television comedy, popular sitcoms can spawn well-known catchphrases, such as Del Boy's "This time next year, we'll be millionaires!". These catchphrases tend to reveal something about the themes or tone of the sitcom itself.

Humour can take many forms including slapstick, satire, farce, witty word-play and bitter-sweet humour with an element of pathos. Humour is very much dependent on where the sitcom has originated from; British sitcoms are often thought to be wittier, with a greater use of wordplay than American sitcoms, which tend to use more obvious humour and slapstick. Also, trends in sitcom humour change over time, for example farcical comedy - particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s - is now less popular than dialogue-based humour. There must always be a steady flow of humour in action, situation and character in any sitcom.

Actors in sitcoms do not need to be well-known television stars, but over the years some have made names for themselves within the genre, appearing in several different series. For example, in the DVD extracts Nicholas Lyndhurst can be seen in both *Butterflies*(1978) and *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-1996). Sometimes, these actors play similar roles across different sitcoms. All successful sitcom actors exhibit an excellent sense of comic timing and the ability to carry occasional dramatic moments of pathos.

Storylines are rarely on-going and are usually resolved by the end of an episode. There is usually narrative closure at the end of a series.

Values exhibited by sitcoms are usually class-orientated and generally reflect those of either the middle class e.g. *The Good Life* (1975-1977), *To the Manor Born* or the working class e.g. *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974), *Bread* (1986 -1991). Later sitcoms brought both classes together to create humorous situations (*Birds of a Feather* (1989-1998), *Keeping up Appearances* (1990-1995)).

Sitcom Institutions

The BBC was the original home of the television sitcom and has been responsible for a large number of sitcoms since the 1950s. Since then the increasing number of terrestrial and digital channels has had an impact on the scheduling of the sitcom; many series are now repeated in order to fill daytime schedules and they are shown at all times of the day, rather than being reserved for the traditional primetime scheduling slots.

In recent years there has been a move in television programming towards so-called 'reality TV'. Because of the high viewing figures reality TV shows attract, it has made it more difficult for other types of programme - even the ever-popular sitcom - to be successful. However, the fact that sitcoms can still be seen on our televisions after sixty years is a testament to their continuing popularity and easily recognisable conventions, which remain familiar to audiences, yet flexible enough to be moulded to any given historical moment and target audience. For example, some sitcoms have themselves adopted the characteristics of reality television e.g. *The Office* (2001-2003) and *The Royle Family* (1998-2000), which serves the double purpose of establishing a situation for the comedy to take place, while satirising the reality TV trend itself.

Successful sitcoms are often developed into 'spin-off' television series. This reduces the risk for producers, as they are using characters who are already popular with audiences. For example, *Bootsie and Snudge* (1960-1963) was a spin-off of *The Army Game* (1957-1961), and, more recently, *The Green, Green Grass* (2005-) starred Boycie and Marlene, who were supporting characters in *Only Fools and Horses*. However, these spin-off sitcoms rarely generate larger audiences than the programmes from which they originated. Some popular sitcoms have also been adapted into full length feature films, including *On the Buses* (1971), *Man About the House* (1974) and *Please, Sir* (1971), all produced by Elstree Studios. Again, producers will be more confident of making a profit as they are hoping that audiences will want to see the characters they know from the television on the big screen.

Sitcom Audiences

The general target audience for sitcoms tends to be an 18 to 35 year old family audience. However, the sitcom form and conventions are flexible enough to be adapted to any age group, and are sometimes targeted at specific audiences. Generally, the intended audience can be identified by examining the lead characters, as sitcoms rely on audience identification with these characters to create humour and pathos. For example, *The Young Ones* (1982-1984) was written as part of the 'Alternative Comedy' scene of the 1980s to appeal to young people like its lead characters, Vyvyan and Rik, while *One Foot in the Grave* (1990-2000) particularly appeals to older audiences who can identify with Victor Meldrew's frustrations.

The time of day a sitcom is broadcast is also a good indication of who its intended audience is, although this is more applicable to its original broadcast time than when repeats of past episodes - now frequently used to 'pad out' digital daytime schedules - are screened. Family-orientated sitcoms are traditionally broadcast in the primetime scheduling slot between 7pm and 9pm, while slightly more risqué or controversial sitcoms appear after the 9 o'clock water shed.

Digital broadcasting has resulted in a decline of audiences across all channels and for all programmes because of the range of choice now available for an audience that has not grown any larger.

Sitcom Representations

Situation comedy's representations of different social groups have changed over time, often reflecting real-world changes in attitudes. However one criticism often levelled at sitcoms is that their representations are too simplistic. You might like to discuss as a group how these representations are influenced by when a sitcom was made and who its intended audience was.

Race

A criticism of both British and American sitcoms is that they fail to represent people of different ethnic groups adequately. In Britain, there were a number of sitcoms in the 1960s and 1970s that are today considered racist in their representations, such as *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-1976), and *Curry and Chips* (1969). Sitcoms in the 1980s and 1990s made some progress in providing fairer representations, for example, ITV's *The Fosters* (1976-1977) - the first sitcom to feature an all-black cast - and Channel 4's *Desmond's* (1988-1994), but these still received some criticism.

Sitcoms have also tended towards overly-simplistic representations of different nationalities, for example *'Allo 'Allo* (1984-1992) has been criticised for its stereotypical depiction of French, German and British characters, all of whom speak with outrageously over-the-top accents.

Gender

Depictions of men and women in sitcoms have also changed over the years. In most early sitcoms female characters were generally relegated to supporting roles, simply functioning as comic foils for the male leads. For example, Else Garnett and Sybil Fawcett are given some good dialogue, but usually only in order to set up a funnier punch line for their husbands. Even some sitcoms in the 1980s and 1990s such as *Only Fools and Horses* and *Red Dwarf* (1988-1999) only included reoccurring female characters in their later series, preferring to focus on the dynamic within a tight-knit male group (Del Boy, Rodney, Granddad / Uncle Albert and Lister, Rimmer, Cat and Kryten). In some sitcoms women have been stereotyped for comic effect. In *'Allo 'Allo*, for example, women are either depicted as sexually attractive conquests (Yvette and Helga) or nagging battleaxes (Edith and her mother), but rarely anything more complex.

In recent years, female characters have been given more attention by writers, and some feature a woman as their lead, for example, *Keeping Up Appearances* and *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007). Carla Lane is a comedy writer who is well known for her in-depth characterisation of female lead characters, with sitcoms such as *The Liver Birds* (1969-1996), *Butterflies* and *Bread* focusing on the anxieties of contemporary women.

The Family

Notions of what a 'normal' family is have also changed considerably over the years, and this is reflected in the sitcom family. You might like to consider how family life in *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975) compares to that in *The Royle Family*, for example.

Age

Sitcoms cater for many different target audiences. What particular age group a sitcom is aiming to appeal to can often be guessed from the lead characters, as previously discussed with *The Young Ones* and *One Foot in the Grave*. But are sitcom representations of different age groups - anarchic kids and moaning old men - too simplistic to be realistic?

Key Questions

The purpose of Situation Comedies is to be humorous and so it is important to investigate what makes us laugh. You might like to explore with your group;

- What makes people laugh?
- How does this vary between different places, countries or people and why?
- How do sitcom writers use dramatic irony or enigma?

Also, while viewing each of the following extracts, it will be useful to keep in mind;

- What sitcom **conventions** can be identified.
- How different social groups and cultural diversity are **represented**.
- What sort of **audience** the sitcom seems to be aimed at.
- What **institutional** issues are relevant.

TV Heaven Plus: Situation Comedy

DVD Chapters

1. *Hancock's Half Hour* (1959)
2. *Steptoe and Son* (1965)
3. *Till Death Us Do Part* (1968)
4. *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972)
5. *Are You Being Served?* (1973)
6. *The Fosters* (1976)
7. *Butterflies* (1978)
8. *Fawlty Towers* (1979)
9. *The Young Ones* (1982)
10. *Yes, Minister* (1984)
11. *Only Fools and Horses* (1989)
12. *Birds of a Feather* (1989)
13. *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989)
14. *One Foot in the Grave* (1990)
15. *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992)
16. *Men Behaving Badly* (1997)
17. *Dinnerladies* (1998)
18. *The Royle Family* (1998)
19. *The Vicar of Dibley* (1998)
20. *The Office* (2001)

Chapter 1. *Hancock's Half Hour* ('Spanish Interlude') (BBC, 1959)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes

Writer(s): Ray Galton & Alan Simpson

Producer: Duncan Wood

Cast: Tony Hancock (Anthony Aloysius Hancock), Sid James (Sidney Balmoral James)

Extract summary:

Hancock interrupts his friend and agent, Sid, while he's entertaining a young woman at their flat.



Programme context:

British sitcom first appeared on the radio during the 1930s and 1940s and played a particularly important part in building national morale during the Second World War. Following the long British tradition of music hall, seaside variety shows and pantomime, these radio programmes often adopted a 'variety show' format. In 1949, a variety style programme called *Ray's a Laugh*, fronted by real-life husband and wife Ted Ray and Kitty Bluett, gradually dropped its sketch show format and musical numbers to concentrate on the domestic comedy between Ted and Kitty, and its popularity led to a number of similarly themed situation comedies on the radio.

In the 1950s the relatively new medium of television was looking for programmes to 'inform, educate and entertain' the nation, and so the BBC looked to what was already popular on the radio. *Hancock's Half Hour* (1956-1960) was one of a number of early radio comedies transferred from radio to television and its popularity was invaluable in helping the BBC to maintain its ratings following the launch of ITV in 1955.

Scripted by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, *Hancock's Half Hour* starred comedian Tony Hancock and marked a decisive shift away from gag-based humour towards comedy centred on character and environment. Hancock's character transferred easily to television and his persona as the pompous loser out of his depth in an uncomprehending society still informs sitcom characters today, as demonstrated by the likes of Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) and David Brent in *The Office* (2001-2003).

The format of *Hancock's Half Hour* allowed the skill of the writing and acting to carry the comedy. With its reliance upon a few familiar locations and characters, its uneventful narratives and its staid visual style, the show provided an economical, but hugely successful piece of programming that would help to influence both the BBC's and the audience's conception of the British sitcom for the next 20 years.

While watching the extract:

- The humour here is very much dialogue-based, betraying its radio origins. Try closing your eyes during the extract to see if you can still follow the narrative and comedy.
- How does the title sequence make clear who the main character is going to be?
- This template of two male friends at the centre of the comedy can be seen in other sitcoms, including *The Likely Lads* (1964-1966) and *Men Behaving Badly* (1992-1999). Can you think of any other examples?

Chapter 2. *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1965)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes

Writer(s): Ray Galton & Alan Simpson

Producer: Duncan Wood

Cast: Harry H. Corbett (Harold Steptoe), Wilfrid Brambell (Albert Steptoe)



Extract summary:

Steptoe and Son (1962-1974) centres on the lives of two rag and bone men; a middle-aged son and his scruffy old dad. In this extract, Harold, a committed Conservative Party supporter, is outraged when his son comes home and announces that a Labour Party meeting is being held at their home that evening.

Programme context:

Hancock's Half Hour (1956-1960) writers Galton and Simpson were to make the sitcom a central part of British cultural life with their next series, *Steptoe and Son*. Combining great writing, inspired casting, virtuoso acting and creative direction, *Steptoe and Son* was so popular in the mid 1960s that half the UK population were regular viewers. Indeed, in 1966 Harold Wilson pressured the BBC to reschedule the show's transmission, fearing that it would interfere with the Labour Party election turnout.

The series established the template for the British sitcom, with each episode following the same narrative pattern: Harold and Albert are trapped together in their humble surroundings, a threat to their situation develops - usually Harold pursuing some kind of artistic pipe dream - before the threat is overcome and the characters return to the status quo established at the start of the episode. There are no other regular characters and the majority of the action takes place in the familiar surroundings of their dingy home and yard. *Steptoe and Son* also set the pattern for the multitude of sitcoms that followed that cast 'straight' actors rather than professional comedians (as *Hancock's Half Hour* did), and Corbett and Brambell's performances added real depth to the characters and set new standards in television acting.

Comedy in *Steptoe and Son* arises from some wonderful wordplay, the audience's knowledge and understanding of the characters, and from the irony that, despite his aspirations, Harold is in fact less intelligent than his father. There is also a good deal of political and social satire to be found, with many episodes commenting on national attitudes to sex, race and, especially, class. It is important to remember that in the 1960s, sitcoms like *Steptoe and Son* and *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975) were reflections of contemporary Britain at a time of enormous social change.

Viewed today the show may seem somewhat old-fashioned in its presentation, with its static sets and theatrical feel, but its narrative themes of failure, embarrassment and disappointment - and the comedy arising from these situations - mean that its relevance is undiminished.

While watching the extract:

- Note the references to real political figures of the 1960s, such as Ted Heath and Enoch Powell. *Steptoe and Son* attempted to place its narrative within the real social and political context of the time. By doing so, sitcoms can make their audiences think as well as laugh.
- Consider the representations of class and politics, the relationship between father and son, and how comedy is derived from the interaction of all these things.
- Why do you think *Steptoe and Son* was so popular with audiences in the 1960s?

Chapter 3. *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1968)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 10 seconds

Writer(s): Johnny Speight

Producer: Dennis Main Wilson

Cast: Warren Mitchell (Alf Garnett), Dandy Nichols (Else Garnett), Una Stubbs (Rita), Anthony Booth (Mike)

Extract summary:

Alf, his wife, daughter and son-in-law debate the virtues of donating blood.

Programme context:

Groundbreaking and controversial in equal measure, *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975) featured one of the most infamous sitcom characters in British television history; Alf Garnett. Played by Warren Mitchell, Garnett was an unapologetic racist, passionate super-patriot, aggressive anti-trade unionist and monarchist - the expression of the most appalling rightwing views that writer Johnny Speight could dream up.

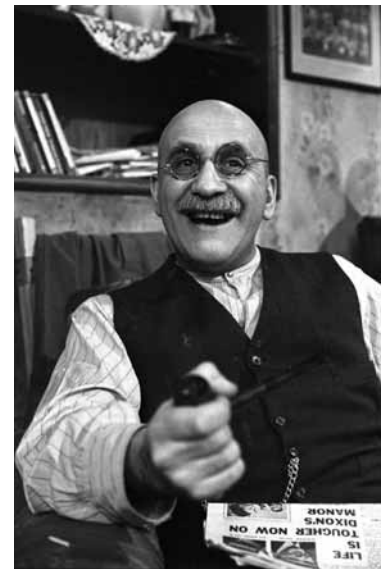
The programme started life as a one-off play in the BBC's *Comedy Playhouse* slot (1965), but was considered strong enough to be developed into a full series. *Till Death Us Do Part* employed a style previously unexplored in the sitcom genre; a cross between kitchen-sink drama and observational comedy. Its scripts were peppered with racist language and generated an avalanche of protests. Despite these objections, both Garnett and the show were huge hits, regularly leaving pubs almost empty on Monday evenings. Five weeks into the first series the show had already toppled its immediate competitor, *Coronation Street* (1960-), in the ratings war.

However, Speight's avowed intention of mocking right-wing prejudices and exposing them to ridicule backfired when many viewers began to identify and even sympathise with Garnett and his bigoted views. Rather than being a figure of fun as Speight had intended, the character was increasingly being seen as a voice of reason and so the satire was lost on the very part of the audience that *Till Death Us Do Part* aimed to challenge.

The comedy in *Till Death Us Do Part* often arises from the squabbles between Alf and his daughter and son-in-law Mike. Alf's lengthy rants go largely unchallenged by his wife, illustrating the typical role of female characters in early sitcoms. Women generally functioned as comic foils to set up punch lines for their central character husbands. Nevertheless, *Till Death Us Do Part* is a seminal sitcom – one crucial to the development of the genre - winning Speight the Screen Writers' Guild Award for Best Comedy three years running between 1966 and 1968.

While watching the extract:

- From this extract, do you think *Till Death Us Do Part* is simply racist, or can you see how the writer was trying to satirise Alf's views?
- What function do the characters of Rita and Mike have in this debate? Are they the voice of reason?
- How do you think audience reactions to the programme have changed since the 1960s?
- Do you think the divide in opinion between Rita and Mike, and Alf and Elsie is a generational one? If so, do you think this might have played a part in why audiences identified with Alf's views instead of scorning them (think about who watched the show)?



Chapter 4. *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames, 1972)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 40 seconds

Writer(s): Vince Powell and Harry Driver

Producer / Director: Stuart Allen

Cast: Jack Smethurst (Eddie), Rudolph Walker (Bill), Nina Baden-Semper (Barbie), Kate Williams (Joan)



Extract summary:

In this first episode of *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-1976), Eddie is horrified to discover that his new neighbours are black. This extract follows directly from Eddie's first meeting with Bill, and shows that the two men's objections to each other are in fact very similar.

Programme context:

In 1968, Conservative MP Enoch Powell made his infamous "Rivers Of Blood" speech in Birmingham, warning his audience of what he believed would be the consequences of continued unchecked immigration from the Commonwealth to Britain. He was sacked from Edward Heath's shadow cabinet the next day. Against this social background, one might have thought that television companies during the late 1960s and 1970s would have been particularly sensitive about what they broadcast, but many sitcoms from the era seem to be founded on highly questionable depictions of race relations.

Love Thy Neighbour deals with the tensions that arise when a Tory-voting West Indian couple, Bill and Barbara, move next door to white working-class socialist Eddie and his wife Joan. The basic idea behind the programme was to explore how a white family might react if a black family moved in next door. In *Love Thy Neighbor* the comedy springs from stereotyping and the language used is often racist. Modern audiences are shocked by this, as society's values have changed and people are much more aware of the negative impact that the use of racist terms on television can have.

Described as a "trivial and uninformed treatment of race issues" by the Community Relations Council shortly after its first broadcast, *Love Thy Neighbour* was in fact intended by its writers to be a balanced view of race-relations, containing both anti-white and anti-black sentiment and exploring the issue of ethnic harmony. Launching the series in 1972, the *TV Times* proudly announced, "It is about racial prejudice - with a difference. It should make us laugh a lot... and think a lot, too." Black actors Rudolph Walker and Nina Baden-Semper claimed to be happy with the material, and Walker defended his role in the series by arguing that Bill was just as much a fool as Eddie, giving as good as he got. In short, the actors, like the writers, hoped that *Love Thy Neighbour* would break down barriers, not reinforce them.

But some critics argue that, whereas the BBC's *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975) had a strong comic script and characterisation to save it from sinking wholly into racist diatribe, the characters and scripts of *Love Thy Neighbour* were flat, superficial and offensive, rarely rising above undisciplined name-calling and crude stereotyping. And yet the show was hugely popular at the time, regularly attracting audiences of over twenty million people, and running for eight series.

While watching the extract:

- How do you think *Love Thy Neighbour's* depiction of race relations compares to *Till Death Us Do Part*? Does it make a difference having black characters involved?
- Is it significant that the two women do not seem to share their husbands' views? What purpose might this serve for the narrative and comedy? Can you see similarities between them and Mike and Rita in *Till Death Us Do Part*?
- Do you think sitcoms can raise difficult issues more easily than a drama or documentary? Are people more open to ideas if they can laugh at the same time?

Chapter 5. *Are You Being Served?* (BBC, 1973)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 40 seconds

Writer(s): David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd

Director: Bernard Thompson

Producer: David Croft



Cast: John Inman (Mr Humphries), Wendy Richard (Miss Brahms), Mollie Sugden (Mrs. Slocombe), Frank Thornton (Captain Peacock), Trevor Bannister (Mr. Lucas), Arthur Brough (Mr Grainger), Joanna Lumley ('His' and 'Hers' sales girl), Larry Martyn (Mr Nash)

Extract summary:

When a young and attractive representative from the 'His and Hers' perfume company sets up a sales stand in Grace Brother's department store the existing staff are concerned that their own sales may suffer.

Programme context:

During the 1970s *Are You Being Served?* (1973-1985) was enormously popular and was even exported to America and Australia. Although this was a fairly common practice for television companies who wanted to generate as much revenue as possible from popular programmes, it was less common with the sitcom genre at that time.

Comedy in *Are You Being Served?* is mainly derived from sexual innuendo and double meanings, which is partly indicative of the increased sexual liberation that had taken hold of Britain and British television by the 1970s. It also reflects the long tradition of bawdy comedy in British music hall and variety shows, seaside postcards and the *Carry On* Films (1958-1978). Rather than focusing on the domestic situation of its characters, as most British sitcoms had done, *Are You Being Served?* satirises working life. For example, the theme of humiliating authority figures runs throughout the show, offering ample opportunity to laugh at inept middle manager Rumbold and pompous figure-of-fun Captain Peacock. For this type of character-based comedy to work well audiences need to be familiar with the characters and their foibles, and so their characteristics are exaggerated and unchanging to ensure continued identification and flow of humour throughout the series. Although some people criticised *Are You Being Served?* for being too coarse and predictable, catering for 'the lowest common denominator', writers Croft and Perry returned to the format for their spin-off series, *Grace and Favor* (1992-1993).

When *Are You Being Served?* was first broadcast, its portrayal of Mr. Humphries, the extremely camp menswear assistant, was very controversial. Although his sexuality was never explicitly stated (both Inman and writer David Croft insisted that he was just 'a mummy's boy') Mr. Humphries was one of the few screen representations of a gay man at that time. It is a stereotypical depiction, however, it could be argued that it is not an offensive one, partly because Mr. Humphries emerges as the only character with any dignity and self-respect.

While watching the extract:

- Remember the conventional narrative pattern of sitcoms. The appearance of the sales girl in Grace Brother's is the catalyst that drives the narrative forward; the staff's usual way of working has been disrupted by her presence and so the problem must be overcome and the status quo re-established by the end of the episode.
- Is the representation of gender in this extract stereotypical?
- Do you think the show's representation of Mr Humphries would be as controversial today as it was in the 1970s?

Chapter 6. *The Fosters* (LWT, 1976)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 30 seconds

Writer(s): Roland Wolpert (original script), Jon Watkins (script adaptor)

Producer: Stuart Allen

Cast: Norman Beaton (Samuel Foster), Lenny Henry (Sonny Foster), Isabelle Lucas (Pearl Foster), Carmen Munroe (Vilma), Lawrie Mark (Benjamin Foster), Sharon Rosita (Shirley Foster), Val Pringle (Rev. Steve), Archie Pool (chauffer)



Extract summary:

Sam's old friend, Reverend 'Smiling' Steve, offers him a job collecting donations during his sermons, but Pearl knows that Steve is getting rich from his congregation. After returning from one of Steve's sermons (in which a dubious 'cripple' is healed), Sam has to decide whether he will take the job for the financial benefit of his family, or turn it down on moral grounds.

Programme context:

The first British series to feature an all black cast, *The Fosters* (1976-1977) was originally billed as a 'sparkling new comedy series' about life in a typical south London black family. However, to many critics, *The Fosters* was anything but typical, new or original. In a convoluted and somewhat ironic way, the show actually came to British screens via *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975). Johnny Speight's series was sold to America under the new title *All in the Family* (1971-1979). This show then spawned a spin-off series called *Maude* (1972-1978), which in turn produced a series called *Good Times* (1974-1979) and that was the basis of *The Fosters*. In fact, when America sold the format to the UK it was on the condition that the British scriptwriters would use the original *Good Times* scripts and only change those elements necessary to make it relevant for its new British audience.

While not overtly political, *The Fosters* did make statements on the condition of Black families in 1970s Britain. Earlier in this particular episode, Reverend 'Smiling' Steve claims that "the Good Lord gives us everything", to which Benjamin snappily retorts, "So why does he give white people more, then?" Interestingly, the show takes as many sideswipes at the Fosters' local Black community. For example, 'Smiling' Steve is just one of a series of Reverends that appear in the series, many of whom are portrayed as being more interested in the size of their collection boxes than in the spiritual wellbeing of their flock. However, audiences expecting a cutting edge comedy were sadly disappointed, and not only did the sitcom fail to impress the black audience that it was undoubtedly aimed at, it also courted controversy from many critics who claimed that it reinforced some racial stereotypes.

In 1988 Norman Beaton and Carmen Munro played husband and wife again in Channel 4's award-winning sitcom, *Desmond's* (1988-1994). In this sitcom Beaton's character did not play a humble car wash attendant as he had in *The Fosters*, but the proprietor of his own barbershop business. Perhaps this was a sign of some social progression - at least in the eyes of commissioning editors - of black communities in Britain by the 1980s.

While watching the extract:

- From what you have seen in this extract, do you think criticisms that *The Fosters* reinforced racial stereotypes are fair?
- Can you identify the climax in the narrative? And the resolution?
- Notice how the action is confined to the family's living room, highlighting the domestic focus of the sitcom.

Chapter 7. *Butterflies* (BBC, 1978)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 40 seconds

Writer(s): Carla Lane

Producer: Gareth Gwenlan

Cast: Wendy Craig (Ria), Geoffrey Palmer (Ben), Nicholas Lyndhurst (Adam), Andrew Hall (Russell)



Extract summary:

Worn down by the demands of marriage and family, Ria finds some respite in furtive meetings with businessman Leonard. But, having arranged to meet Leonard at a local café, she is held up by an unexpected lunch-time run-in with her family.

Programme context:

It was while working on the sitcom *And Mother Makes Five* (1974-1976) that Carla Lane met Wendy Craig, the actress that would become the star of her first solo authored work, *Butterflies* (1978-1983). In spite of her known track record as a comedy writer, it took Lane three years to convince the BBC that the theme of marital boredom and potential adultery would work as the foundation for a comedy.

Butterflies signaled a change of direction for Lane towards more serious themes; she wrote it for women like her who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s who were, as she put it, "galloping towards forty with, so much to do, so little time to do it." Wendy Craig brought believability and vulnerability to the part of Ria Parkinson, an attractive middle-class woman approaching middle-age and worrying that she has not made the most of her life. On the surface, Ria seemed an extension of other Wendy Craig sitcom characters from *Not In Front Of The Children* (1967-1970) and *And Mother Makes Five*, but whereas they wondered aloud at their lot, Ria became obsessed with it in her every waking moment. The hidden malaise at the heart of the middle-class suburban family has been a recurrent theme in sitcoms ever since, notably in *2 Point 4 Children* (1991-1999), while *My Family* (2000-) borrows many of *Butterflies'* key elements, including the dentist father and the mother whose cooking skills leave much to be desired.

Butterflies' bitter-sweet nature and sometimes downbeat atmosphere set it apart from other sitcoms, and its dramatic undertones allowed it to deal with subjects - such as teenage pregnancy, suicidal feelings and the temptation of adultery - that many others series would have avoided. Lane's finely judged scripts, however, maintained just enough traditional sitcom elements (such as the family's reaction to Ria's attempts at cooking and the adolescent bickering of the boys) to keep the mood light before exploring the darker areas of Ria's frustration.

In 1979 the *Butterflies* format was sold to America, but Lane was hugely disappointed with the pilot episode - lamenting the loss of subtlety in particular - and it failed to become a full series. The last British series (number four) was aired 1983. Though neither attracting the huge audiences of *Bread* (1986-1991), nor defining an era like *The Liver Birds* (1969-1996), *Butterflies* is arguably the most successful of Carla Lane's sitcoms in terms of its style, revolutionary theme and the affection in which it is still held.

While watching the extract:

- Consider how the mix of comedy, pathos and drama work together in this extract.
- Think back on the previous extracts. Is Ria a more realistic female character than those we have seen so far?

Chapter 8. *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1979)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes

Writer(s): John Cleese and Connie Booth

Director: Bob Spiers

Producer: Douglas Argent

Cast: John Cleese (Basil Fawlty), Prunella Scales (Sybil Fawlty), Andrew Sachs (Manuel), Connie Booth (Polly), Ken Campbell (Roger), Una Stubbs (Alice), Brian Hall (Terry)



Extract summary:

Sybil, under the impression that Basil has forgotten their wedding anniversary, walks out on him just as the guests for her surprise party begin to arrive.

Programme context:

Co-written by and starring John Cleese and his then wife Connie Booth, *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) was inspired by a visit to a Torquay hotel by the *Monty Python* team in 1971. The proprietor, Donald Sinclair, was described by Cleese as "the most wonderfully rude man I had ever met" and he became the basis for Basil Fawlty, the neurotic, eccentric and bad-tempered manager of Fawlty Towers. Henpecked, rude, accident-prone and an appalling snob, Basil Fawlty is part of a great tradition of British sitcom losers, which includes the likes of Tony Hancock, Harold Steptoe and David Brent.

Bill Cotton (the BBC's Head of Light Entertainment in the mid-1970s), said after the production of the first series that *Fawlty Towers* was a prime example of the BBC's relaxed attitude to trying out new entertainment formats and encouraging new ideas. Cotton claimed that when he read the first *Fawlty Towers* scripts he could see nothing funny in them, but trusting that Cleese knew what he was doing he gave the series his blessing. He said that the commercial channels, with their emphasis on audience ratings, would never have let the show get to the production stage on the basis of the scripts alone.

Cleese's characteristically deranged physical performance was an instant hit, while Prunella Scales and Connie Booth were the perfect comedy foils. Andrew Sachs played Spanish waiter Manuel, whose basic English and constant humiliation at the hands of Basil produced many of the series' funniest moments. Basil was an inspired creation, but *Fawlty Towers* was not especially innovative or original, closely following the traditional British sitcom conventions. The show was, however, brilliantly funny and its legendary status among sitcoms was guaranteed when Cleese decided to axe the show at the height of its popularity, after just twelve episodes.

Fawlty Towers' continued popularity and critical acclaim was confirmed in 2000 when the British Film Institute's poll of television industry professionals and critics judged it the greatest British television show of the 20th Century, followed in 2004 by a fifth place ranking in the BBC's *Britain's Best Sitcom* poll.

While watching the extract:

- How many different comic techniques can you identify in this one clip e.g. humour arising from the characters' relationships, witty dialogue, physical comedy, misunderstandings and farce, wordplay?

Chapter 9. *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 30 seconds

Writer(s): Ben Elton, Rik Mayall and Lise Mayer

Producer: Paul Jackson

Cast: Ade Edmondson (Vyvyan), Rik Mayall (Rick), Nigel Planer (Neil), Christopher Ryan (Mike)



Extract summary:

Rick (an arrogant and pretentious sociology student), Vyvyan (a punk medical student), Neil (a suicidal, lentil-obsessed hippy), and Mike (a dapper but dodgy ladies' man) are students sharing a North London house. When their home is in danger of being demolished by the council they rally together, in their own unique way, to save it.

Programme context:

The creation of Channel 4 in 1982 was led by a remit to provide new and challenging programming to a diverse range of audiences not catered for by the BBC or ITV. As such it provided the opportunity for a new generation of comedy performers to gain television exposure. The Comic Strip was a group of actors and stand-up comedians who had caught the attention of commissioning editors while working the London stand-up comedy scene. Their Channel 4 series, *The Comic Strip Presents...* (1982-2000) was not a sitcom but a series of self contained short films which showcased the team's skill at integrating challenging comedy and political awareness. Subsequently, several members of The Comic Strip team were invited, along with writer and comedian Ben Elton, to produce an 'alternative sitcom' for BBC2.

The Young Ones (1982-1984) deliberately undercut many of the conventions of sitcom through constant digressions, brief stand-up routines, musical numbers, and very loose, disjointed narratives. It also sought to shock through its rejection of the conservative, middle class ideas and values which characterised the majority of sitcoms at that time. However, the basic sitcom structure remained in place and despite its nod towards anarchy *The Young Ones* remained indebted to the formal devices of the genre. For example, the sitcom family 'types' are still present (albeit very loosely); Neil plays the role of the put-upon housewife, Rick and Vyvyan are the wayward, bickering teenagers, Mike acts as the wheeler-dealer father figure, and as a dysfunctional family group they manage to see off the troubles that arrive on their doorstep. So it was the style rather than the structure of *The Young Ones* that made it so different to other sitcoms.

The show built up a cult audience on BBC2, but had little immediate effect upon mainstream sitcoms already broadcasting on BBC1 and ITV. Ben Elton would later go on to write for the *Blackadder* series (1983-1989) and the comedy acting duo of Ade Edmondson and Rik Mayall can be seen again in the BBC sitcom *Bottom* (1991-1995).

While watching the extract:

- What sitcom conventions can you recognise in this extract?
- Which elements are different from the sitcoms you have seen so far?
- How does this extract differ from those we have seen so far in terms of its narrative 'resolution'? Do the efforts of the lead characters actually have any effect on events?

Chapter 10. *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1984)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 15 seconds

Writer(s): Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn

Producer / Director: Peter Whitmore

Cast: Nigel Hawthorn (Sir Humphrey Appleby), Derek Fowlds (Bernard Woolley), John Nettleton (Sir Arnold Robinson)



Extract summary:

After the Prime Minister announces that he is going to resign, Sir Humphrey and Sir Arnold muse about the two likely candidates to replace him, before realizing that Minister Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) would be a far more 'suitable' candidate for their own particular needs.

Programme context:

Yes, Minister (1980-1984) is generally believed to be one of the most sharply satirical sitcoms ever broadcast on British television. Like all good sitcoms, it is based on a very simple observation: that for all its claims towards democracy, the British political system is largely run by unelected civil servants who run rings around their supposedly superior masters. Each episode revolves around the inner working of central government and, as such, most of the action takes place in private offices. This is because, writer Jonathan Lynn explains, "government does not take place in the House of Commons [...] As in all public performances, the real work is done in rehearsal, behind closed doors. Then the public, and the House, are shown what the government wishes them to see". This remark reveals both the cutting satire in the writing of *Yes, Minister*, but also the programme's uncannily accurate depiction of government work. Ironically, *Yes, Minister* counted Margaret Thatcher among its fans, despite the fact that it was Thatcher's government that the sitcom was satirising when it was first broadcast.

Much of the show's humour derives from the friction between Cabinet ministers who believe they are in charge, and the members of the British Civil Service who actually run Britain. The characters' personal characteristics allow the quality of the show's scriptwriting and dialogue to take centre stage; Sir Humphrey has a flair for complicated sentences, dry wit and catchphrases (including that of the show's title); Hacker's attributes include the use of unusual mixed metaphors and making ridiculous speeches. The acting and comic timing in *Yes, Minister* is impressive, and necessary to help the audience penetrate of some of the more complicated political narratives.

Structurally, *Yes, Minister* exhibits the usual narrative convention of status quo - disharmony - resolution. A typical episode centers on Hacker's suggestion of a reform and Sir Humphrey's subtle attempts to foil his plans. Usually, Sir Humphrey prevents Hacker from achieving his goal and so the status quo is resumed.

A huge critical and popular success, *Yes, Minister* received a number of awards, including several BAFTAs, and it was voted sixth in the BBC's *Britain's Best Sitcom* poll in 2004. The political climate in Britain has really changed very little since *Yes, Minister* was first broadcast, and so it has remained an enduringly popular and socially relevant sitcom.

While watching the extract:

- How does the dialogue in this extract compare with that in previous extracts? What does it reveal about *Yes, Minister's* setting, satirical aims and intended audience?
- Do you think that the political attitudes expressed in this extract are still relevant today? If they were not, would audiences still find *Yes, Minister* funny?

Chapter 11. *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 1989)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 35 seconds

Writer(s): John Sullivan

Director: Tony Dow

Producer: Gareth Gwenlan



Cast: David Jason (Del Boy), Nicholas Lyndhurst (Rodney), Buster Merryfield (Uncle Albert)

Extract summary:

Del attempts to convince Rodney of the importance of image in the modern business world.

Programme context:

The traditional sitcom format continued throughout the 1980s, the decade that saw the beginning of arguably the most popular sitcom of all time, *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-1996). Written by John Sullivan and first aired in 1981, the series charts the fortunes of the Trotter brothers as they attempt to escape from their dreary council block existence via a string of ill-fated get-rich-quick scams. A born opportunist with aspirations beyond his working-class roots, Del Boy was not only an inspired comic creation but also an enduring icon of the Thatcher era; he is an eternal optimist, who, lacking the entrepreneurial sense to succeed through conventional means, deludes himself into believing there is a fast-track to prosperity. Del's opinion in this extract about the importance of image is a perfect example of this attitude.

The fact that Rodney is invariably roped into Del's latest scam illustrates the importance of that pivotal sitcom institution - the family. A slightly different take on the 'normal' sitcom family, this one comprises of three men; the two brothers and Uncle Albert (or, in earlier series, Granddad). In later series the Trotter family extended to include Raquel (Tessa Peak-Jones) and Cassandra (Gwyneth Strong), wives of Del Boy and Rodney, and their children. These additional characters allowed Sullivan the opportunity to mix comedy with drama as the Trotters' efforts to save their rocky personal relationships became an increasingly familiar theme. Also, whereas many early episodes were largely self-contained, with few plot-lines mentioned again, the show developed a story arc and an ongoing episodic structure thanks to these relationships.

Humour in *Only Fools and Horses* comes from several sources. The interaction between Del and Rodney allows each to be a comic foil for the other through their contrasting personalities, appearance and opinions. Much is made of individual character traits, such as Del's lack of cultural refinement (despite his pretensions) and Rodney's slightly gormless nature, which leads Del to call him a 'plonker' or 'dipstick' on a regular basis. There are also several running gags, such as Uncle Albert's endless "during the war..." stories that allow regular audiences to feel a degree of familiarity and closeness with the characters. There is also, of course, the satirical element of Del's ongoing efforts to succeed in Thatcher's Britain. Good sitcom actors tend to resurface in different series e.g. a younger Nicholas Lyndhurst appeared in *Butterflies* and David Jason has appeared in many other classic sitcoms including *Porridge* (1974-1977), *Open All Hours* (1973-1985) and *A Bit of a Do* (1989).

Only Fools and Horses officially ended in 1991, but regular repeat showings and a string of one-off Christmas specials has ensured its popularity has continued. Polls regularly name it as the favourite British comedy series of all time and it currently holds the record for the highest ever rating for a sitcom episode, for the 1996 finale, 'Time on Our Hands', which attracted over 24 million viewers.

While watching the extract:

- Despite the absence of women, can you see examples of traditional family roles in this extract?
- What do the costumes and setting reveal about the characters?

Chapter 12. *Birds of a Feather* (BBC, 1989)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 40 seconds

Writer(s): Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran

Director: Tony Dow

Producer: Esta Charkham

Cast: Pauline Quirke (Sharon Theodopolopoudos), Linda Robson (Tracey Stubbs), Lesley Joseph (Dorian Green)



Extract summary:

Sharon takes a break from her loser husband and council flat to visit her wealthy sister, Tracy, in her new home in Chigwell. But Tracey's next-door neighbour calls round unexpectedly.

Programme context:

British sitcoms have often dealt with social change and there are few cultural forms that have offered a better analysis of the changing British class system. *Birds of a Feather* (1989-1998) is an excellent example of the humour and pathos that can be found in such an examination. As with *Only Fools and Horses*, it offers a slightly different take on the domestic, family-orientated sitcom, centring on two sisters, Sharon and Tracey, whose lives have taken very different financial paths, but who are reunited when their husbands are imprisoned for armed robbery. Completing the trio is next-door neighbour, Dorian, a flirtatious shopping addict.

The comedy in *Birds of a Feather* is largely derived from the culture clash between the three women, with Sharon at one extreme, Dorian at the other, and Tracey somewhere in the middle - having the same background as Sharon, but with new-found wealth and aspirations. Down to earth banter between the lead characters is delivered with excellent timing and chemistry by Quirke and Robson in particular, who became close friends in real life after appearing together in another Marks and Gran series, *Shine on Harvey Moon* (1982-1995). But for many viewers, the star of the sitcom was the larger-than-life Dorian, who brings an added dimension to the sister's life together and introduces many comic situations to feed the narrative.

Birds of a Feather is a rare example of a 1980s sitcom that concentrates on female lead characters, and by literally removing the men from the narrative (by putting them in prison) the writers ensured that the audience fully identified with the sisters and their efforts to live together in harmony. By the show's finish in 1998, Sharon and Tracey had evolved from being the downtrodden wives of two jailbirds to independent and confident women, running their own successful business - something that the Trotter brothers never really managed to achieve in *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-1996). This character development is perhaps indicative of the increased attention paid to female independence during the late 1980s and 1990s. A massive hit from its first broadcast in 1989, *Birds of a Feather* ran for nine series between 1989 and 1998. While early series kept close to the plotline of the husbands' imprisonment, the scripts became increasingly ambitious, including a 1993 Christmas special set in Hollywood.

While watching the extract:

- Think about the previous extract from *Only Fools and Horses*. How does this scene compare to that between Del, Rodney and Uncle Albert? Can you see any similarities?
- What can you tell about the three women and their backgrounds and attitudes from their dialogue, acting and costumes?

Chapter 13. *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC, 1989)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 10 seconds

Writer(s): Richard Curtis and Ben Elton

Director: Richard Boden

Producer: John Lloyd

Cast: Rowan Atkinson (Blackadder), Hugh Laurie (George), Tony Robinson (Baldrick), Stephen Fry (General Melchett), Tim McInnerny (Captain Darling)



Extract summary:

In the Western Front trenches of the First World War, Captain Blackadder and his men are visited by General Melchett before setting out on yet another mission 'over the top'.

Programme context:

The sitcom format is incredibly enduring. The flexibility of the basic sitcom structure allows the genre to deal with a seemingly endless variation of social groupings or cultural conflicts, but also to merge with other television genres, including the medical drama e.g. *Only When I Laugh* (1979-1982), *Green Wing* (2004-), science fiction e.g. *Red Dwarf* (1988-1999) and even, as in the case of *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989), the war drama. The *Blackadder* series (1983-1989) are particularly interesting in that each one is set in a different historical era (medieval, the Elizabethan and Regency periods, and the First World War) and so the overarching historical setting of each new series allowed its writers to refresh the narratives and comic material. The first series, *The Black Adder* (1983), had enjoyed a considerable budget for a sitcom, and had mainly been shot on location. At first the BBC refused to make a second series, but when Michael Grade took over as the controller of BBC One in 1984, he agreed on the condition that the production costs were dramatically cut. *Blackadder II* (1986) was therefore a studio-only production. Ben Elton joined the writing team from the second series onwards and suggested a major change in character emphasis; Baldrick would become the stupid sidekick, while Edmund Blackadder evolved into a cunning sycophant, someone who was happy to give up his dignity and self-respect to stay in favour with whoever was in power at the time. This led to the now familiar set-up that was maintained over all the following series.

Comedy in *Blackadder Goes Forth* relies in part on quite subtle comic performances from each of the actors. Facial expressions, clipped delivery (particularly Atkinson's trademark bullet-like intonation) and excellent comic timing all play their part in turning the rich script into something even greater. Repeated gags include Blackadder's playing on Captain Darling's surname ("Hello, Darling!"), General Melchett's booming and incomprehensible public-school language, and Baldrick's appalling attempts at cookery and "cunning plans". *Blackadder Goes Forth* has a far more satirical tone than previous *Blackadder* series, commenting on the nature of war and the effect it has on those that have to fight it. Indeed, the final episode, 'Goodbyeee...', features one of the most poignant scenes in television history, when Blackadder and his men finally have to 'go over the top' to their deaths. This episode illustrates how sitcoms can deliver moments of great drama as well as making us laugh. When an audience laughs with a character they forge a bond with them, and so sympathize with them when they suffer. As a result the last series of *Blackadder* is remembered, not only as a great sitcom, but as a damning testament to the pointlessness of war.

While watching the extract:

- What can you tell about the background of each of the characters in this scene? Do their class differences contribute to the show's satirical commentary about war?
- How does this scene follow the sitcom conventions of being set in a confined location and characters being emotionally or physically trapped?

Chapter 14. *One Foot in the Grave* (BBC, 1990)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 10 seconds

Writer(s): David Renwick

Producer / Director: Susan Belbin

Cast: Richard Wilson (Victor Meldrew), Annette Crosbie (Margaret Meldrew), Doreen Mantle (Mrs. Warboys)



Extract summary:

When Victor returns from holiday, Mrs Warboys informs him that his house has burnt down.

Programme context:

The 1990s saw an increase in US sitcom imports on British television, particularly on Channel 4, which had great success with shows like *Cheers* (1982-1993) and *Friends* (1994-2004). The UK also began to adopt the American scheduling technique of bundling similar types of programming together, and so comedy nights appeared on Channel 4 and BBC2. But there was still an appetite for British sitcoms and the genre was reinvigorated in the 1990s with a variety of programmes on offer. *One Foot in the Grave* (1990-2000) became a big part of British popular culture, just as *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) and *Steptoe & Son* (1962-1974) had been twenty years earlier.

Although the situation may seem deceptively simple, *One Foot in the Grave* is actually quite a complex sitcom. With its studio laughter, suburban setting, and comic pratfalls, it could be seen as one of the last great 'traditional' British sitcoms and some critics were unimpressed at its apparently 'old-fashioned' suburban domestic setting when it was first broadcast. However, the show challenged the traditional boundaries of cosy suburban sitcom, dealing with subjects like death and old age with pathos and a strong overtone of black comedy, paving the way for many of the 'dark' sitcoms that followed, such as *The Office* (2001-2003) and *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002). *One Foot in the Grave* also experimented with settings, sometimes abandoning the traditional one-room sitcom in favour of entire episodes set in a car, a bed or during a power cut.

Victor's endless ranting and raving led the media to coin the term "Victor Meldrew" as a cultural reference for any grumpy old man, but for all his anger, Victor remains a sympathetic character. The audience might laugh at the situations he finds himself in, but can identify with his infuriated reaction - "I don't believe it!" - because everyone has been irritated by the stupidities of modern life at one time or another. Victor Meldrew continued the long sitcom tradition of the downtrodden comedy hero, a list which includes Alf Garnett, Basil Fawlty and Edmund Blackadder.

Ratings for *One Foot in the Grave* were initially low, but by the third series it was regularly attracting audiences of 16 million people. The Christmas 1993 episode topped 20 million viewers and the Boxing Day special was only beaten in the ratings by the record-breaking finale of *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-1996), which attracted over 24 million viewers. *One Foot in the Grave's* enormous success proved yet again that the sitcom form could ask difficult questions of a mass audience while still providing entertainment. The show was brought back for a final series in 2000, culminating in Victor's death in a hit and run accident, which, for a sitcom where comedy and tragedy are so intertwined, was an appropriate end for the character and the series.

While watching the extract:

- Do you think *One Foot in the Grave* is written with a certain audience in mind, and who do you think they are?
- Do you sympathise with Victor in this scene, find him funny, or both?

Chapter 15. *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 30 seconds

Writer(s): Jennifer Saunders

Director: Bob Spiers

Producer: Jon Plowman

Cast: Jennifer Saunders (Edina Monsoon), Julia Sawalha (Saffron Monsoon), Joanna Lumley (Patsy Stone)

Extract summary:

Saffy is not impressed when her mother returns home late at night, activating the burglar alarm. They go down to the kitchen to have a 'chat' about what Eddy has been up to.



Programme context:

Written by and starring Jennifer Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-2003) follows the exploits of self-obsessed PR executive Edina Monsoon and her vice-laden best friend Patsy Stone. The premise for the sitcom originated in a *French & Saunders* (1987-) sketch called 'Modern Mother and Daughter', which played on the idea of mother/daughter role reversal and starred Jennifer Saunders as the mother and Dawn French as the daughter. While French was taking a break from television after adopting a baby, Saunders developed the idea into a series centered on the relationship between the smoking, drinking, partying, foul-mouthed Edina and her sternly studious, clean-living daughter Saffron.

Besides the mother/daughter role reversal, much of the show's comedy derives from seeing Eddy and Patsy indulging in unashamed decadence, hedonism and outrageous, unladylike behaviour. Physical comedy also plays a part, with Eddie falling head first down stairs, and out of windows or cars on a regular basis. The mutual hatred between Patsy and Saffy provides a great deal of comic dialogue, as do the increasingly dotty comments of Edina's slightly senile mother (played by June Whitfield).

Absolutely Fabulous is one of a handful of sitcoms that appeared in the 1980s and 90s that focused on female lead characters - as we have already seen in *Birds of a Feather* (1989-1998), and will see again in *dinnerladies* (1998-2000) and *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007). However, Edina and Patsy are hardly female role models, instead their behavior satirises the work-hard, play-hard attitude of the 1990s, when women were encouraged to do and act as men did.

Launched in 1992 to critical and popular acclaim, the show, quickly dubbed *Ab Fab*, became a huge international success, even prompting a lacklustre attempt by American comedienne Roseanne Barr to adapt the show to a US format. The later series, however, were less well-received, with some critics describing them as stale and repetitive. Despite efforts to update the pop cultural references, the show's very 1990s premise meant it felt somewhat stranded in the 21st Century. Nevertheless, *Absolutely Fabulous* had a huge influence in raising the profile of women in British comedy and in serving a female audience.

While watching the extract:

- How do the 'mother' and 'daughter' roles in *Absolutely Fabulous* compare to those we have seen so far?
- Who do you think is the intended audience of *Absolutely Fabulous* and why?

Chapter 16. *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC, 1997)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 50 seconds

Writer(s): Simon Nye

Director: Martin Dennis

Producer: Beryl Vertue

Cast: Martin Clunes (Gary), Caroline Quentin (Dorothy), Neil Morrissey (Tony)



Extract summary:

In the first of these two extracts, Gary proposes to Dorothy after she discovers he has been unfaithful to her. The episode goes on to follow the pair on their Hen and Stag nights, where each of them sleeps with someone else and they break up. By the end of the episode Gary and Dorothy are engaged again and, in the second extract, we see Gary and Tony reflecting on the situation in their own unique way... in a birthing pool.

Programme context:

The 1990s saw a strong tendency to link sitcoms to young adult audiences. *Men Behaving Badly* (1982-1999), with its frank - and sometimes controversial - depictions of relationships, sex, drinking and laddish behaviour is an example of a sitcom aimed at this audience, which itself became identified with the 'lad' culture phenomenon of the mid 1990s. Gary and Tony are two stereotypes of 1990s men in their thirties, taking a keen interest in booze, women and football. Gary and his girlfriend Dorothy are occasionally unfaithful and frequently split up, but Gary desperately clings to Dorothy as the only woman he can form a relationship with.

Created and written by Simon Nye and based on his book of the same name, *Men Behaving Badly* was first broadcast in 1992 on the ITV network, with comedian Harry Enfield in the role of Dermot, Gary's best friend and flatmate. Nye claimed that ITV picked up the series partly because Enfield agreed to star in it. However the sitcom was cancelled after two series, due to poor audience figures. It has been argued that this was partly because ITV gave it a poor slot in the schedules, forcing the "bad behaviour" at the core of the sitcom to be toned down. The BBC, allowing a racier theme and acknowledging that 1990s political correctness was ripe to be satirised, picked up the show and aired it in a later timeslot, transforming it into one of the biggest situation comedies of the 1990s.

Despite its massive popularity, *Men Behaving Badly* was not without controversy, with some critics claiming that young men were copying Gary and Tony's "bad behaviour." The comedy in *Men Behaving Badly* is often crude and suggestive, reflecting the subject matter of the series. The various relationships between the two male and two female leads provides many opportunities for farcical and physical comedy (particularly between the men) as well as satire about the nature of modern relationships in the 1990s.

While watching the extract:

- Compare these two short extracts and think about how the representations of gender roles and relationships differ, and how comedy is delivered in each.
- Read the extract summary at the top of the page and think about the narrative arc of this particular episode. These two clips are the first and last scenes in this episode; they represent the 'status quo' that is disrupted, but which is regained by the end.
- Do you think young male audiences could have been influenced to copy Gary and Tony's behaviour when the show was first broadcast, and could they still be today?
- How does Tony and Gary's behaviour compare to that of Edina and Patsy in the previous clip?

Chapter 17. *dinnerladies* (BBC, 1998)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 40 seconds

Writer(s): Victoria Wood

Director: Geoff Posner

Producer: Victoria Wood and Geoff Posner

Cast: Victoria Wood (Bren), Thelma Barlow (Dolly), Andrew Dunn (Tony), Shobna Gulati (Anita), Celia Imrie (Philippa), Maxine Peake (Twinkle), Duncan Preston (Stan), Anne Reid (Jean)



Extract summary: Another day in the canteen, and as the staff arrive for work they get on with the business of discussing life outside the factory walls.

Programme context:

Previous extracts have demonstrated how sitcoms evolved in the 1990s, offering a different take on the traditional sitcom conventions and narratives. However, the popularity of programmes such as Victoria Wood's *dinnerladies* (1998-2000) showed there was still an appetite for the 'classic British sitcom'.

Dinnerladies is a world away from the more self-consciously innovative sitcoms of the late 1990s and 2000s. Keeping the audience 'laugh track' that is a trademark of most early sitcoms, but which had been abandoned by the likes *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002), *The Office* (2001-2003) and *The Royle Family* (1998-2000), *dinnerladies* relies wholly on the quality of its writing, performances and characters to deliver laughs. It is also an extreme example of how sitcoms thrive on confined locations; the camera never leaves the canteen set, and so off-screen spaces (such as the fire escape where Tony has his cigarette breaks) develop a mysterious and exotic attraction.

At the centre of the series are dependable, big-hearted Bren, canteen manager Tony, doing his best to retain his dignity among the female staff, dippy, over-sensitive Anita, stropky teenager Twinkle, chalk-and-cheese best friends Dolly and Jean, and father-fixated handyman Stan. The wide variation in the characters' ages, backgrounds and attitudes allows for a great deal of comic interaction and much of the humour derives from the sparky dialogue between them - after all, the narrative is very confined by its static location and so it is through conversations that the audience knows what is happening in the world outside the canteen. These conversations are often obscure and muddled, not helped by some of the characters' inability to keep up. In this extract, Bren's discussion about a Dirk Bogarde film and Dolly's story about the woman "who got pregnant with a turkey baster" get the better of Anita's limited grasp on the situation.

Unlike many sitcoms that are set in the workplace, *dinnerladies* is not a negative or cynical portrayal of working life, but rather an affectionate celebration of everyday interactions that happen during the course of it. Wood's scenarios carry real emotional depth, and there are some dramatic and poignant moments during the series, including Bren and Tony's tentative romance, Jean's broken marriage and Anita's abandoned baby. There is a wider political and social agenda too, as Wood champions ordinary workers at the mercy of aloof, indifferent managers, or dares to suggest that the over-fifties might still enjoy sex. But *dinnerladies* never appears overtly critical or political, simply because of its phenomenal joke-rate, sparky dialogue and obvious affection for its characters.

While watching the extract:

- In what ways does *dinnerladies* conform to the conventions of the sitcom genre?
- Do you think that having a female writer makes a difference to *dinnerladies'* representation of its female characters?

Chapter 18. *The Royle Family* (BBC, 1998)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 20 seconds

Writer(s): Caroline Aherne, Craig Cash, Henry Normal

Director: Mark Mylod

Producer: Glenn Wilhide

Cast: Caroline Aherne (Denise), Sue Johnston (Barbara), Ricky Tomlinson (Jim), Ralf Little (Anthony)



Extract summary:

The Royles discuss *Family Fortunes* and Denise's future domestic plans at the dinner table.

Programme context:

Although *dinnerladies* (1998-2000) showed there was still an appetite for the traditional British sitcom, the undoubted successes of the 1990s and 2000s were the sitcoms that dispensed with old formal conventions like the studio audience, traditional studio or high-key lighting, and theatrical performances, and embraced how technology and audiences tastes had changed. More recent examples of this phenomenon include *Peep Show* (2003-) and *The Mighty Boosh* (2004-), but *The Royle Family* (1998-2000) was an influential forerunner. Like many sitcoms, *The Royle Family* focuses on a family group, but creators Craig Cash and Caroline Aherne rejected the heavily scripted feel of many sitcoms to let humour emerge 'naturally' through character instead of through contrived jokes and plot. The vital sitcom components of great writing, inspired casting, virtuoso acting and creative direction were still present.

Realism was very important in *The Royle Family*. Very little actually happens in the show beyond the everyday rhythms of life and viewers simply drop into the family's conversations, watching them channel-hop and discuss everyday subjects. The audience is made to feel as though they are looking directly into a family's home and catching them unawares. As a result, the relationship between the audience and the characters is very intimate and voyeuristic.

Humour in *The Royle Family* lies in the audience's recognition of the show's uncomfortably accurate portrayal of family interaction. Viewers will no doubt have had similar conversations in their own homes and so they understand the truths being told about family life. As in all the best sitcoms, there is also a dark side to the comedy in *The Royle Family*. An undercurrent of bullying, neglect and disappointment runs through the Royles, but, as Aherne points out, there is a lot of love too. The series has great respect for ordinary people and their lives and a belief that they are both interesting and funny.

The success of *The Royle Family* was instrumental in establishing new expectations for comedy audiences, allowing other British sitcoms to lose the studio audience and play for quieter, darker, more uncomfortable laughs. A simple idea, brilliantly observed characters and a mixture of humour and pathos made the *The Royle Family* immensely popular, and it moved from BBC2 to a prime time BBC1 slot after its first series. Craig Cash went on to script and star in the BBC2 sitcom *Early Doors* (2003-) which was very similar to *The Royle Family* in terms of its naturalistic style and focus on character interaction rather than conventional narrative.

While watching the extract:

- How does the style of *The Royle Family* differ to the sitcoms we have seen so far? What sitcom conventions does it display or seem to have rejected?
- Have you had similar conversations to this with your own family?

Chapter 19. *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC, 1998)

Extract Duration: 3 minutes 10 seconds

Writer(s): Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer

Director: Dewi Humphreys

Producer: Sue Vertue and Jon Plowman

Cast: Dawn French (Rev. Geraldine Granger), Gary Waldhorn (David Horton), James Fleet (Hugo Horton), Emma Chambers (Alice Horton), John Bluthal (Frank Pickle), Trevor Peacock (Jim Trott), Roger Lloyd-Pack (Owen Newitt), Clive Mantle (Simon Horton), Simon McBurney (Choirmaster), Geraldine McNulty (bigamy lady)



Extract summary:

Alice and Hugo finally get married, even though events during the ceremony conspire against them.

Programme context:

For many years women in sitcoms were sidelined in sensible, long-suffering, supporting roles, but modern sitcoms have successfully feminised a once masculine form. Perhaps the most important example of this trend is *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007), a sitcom which not only focuses on a female lead character, but a female character in a traditionally male role – that of a parish vicar. *The Vicar of Dibley* centers on the efforts of modern-minded female priest, Geraldine Granger, to lead her somewhat eccentric flock. The character, created by *Blackadder* (1983-1989) writer, Richard Curtis, was written as someone who is the polar opposite of Edmund Blackadder, and whose problems are generally the result of good intentions. Geraldine is joined by a host of eccentric supporting characters and it is these characters and their interactions that provide a great deal of the comedy in *The Vicar of Dibley*.

The show did attract some controversy due to its somewhat stereotypical depiction of rural communities as unintelligent and peculiar. However, *The Vicar of Dibley's* gentle writing style seems to suggest a true affection for the Dibley community and so such representations never seem satirical or cruel. The comedy ranges from physical pratfalling (many will remember Geraldine being totally submerged in a massive puddle) to subtle word play and irony. It is sometimes crude (for example Owen's frequent descriptions of the ailments of his cattle), but is rarely cynical or brash as other sitcoms can be.

Geraldine's character was based on Joy Carroll, one of the first female vicars to be ordained following the 1994 rule changes within the Church of England, and *The Vicar of Dibley* has been both commended and criticised for raising the issue of woman priests. Dawn French acknowledged that the show was 'extremely political' when it first aired, but she was still 'astounded' to receive abusive mail, much of it from clergymen, over her role in the show. Initially, some viewers found Geraldine's light-hearted approach to her vocation to be bordering on blasphemous, but, while bawdy, her theology is really quite orthodox, and tends to highlight the more positive aspects of religion - just as *The Vicar of Dibley* itself highlights the gentler aspects of rural life and of British sitcoms.

While watching the extract:

- How does this extract represent Geraldine and the members of the Dibley community?
- In what other types of programme might we expect to see a wedding being interrupted in this dramatic way and does this extract play on our expectations for comic value?

Chapter 20. *The Office* (BBC, 2001)

Extract Duration: 2 minutes 50 seconds

Writer(s): Ricky Gervais and Steven Merchant

Directors: Ricky Gervais and Steven Merchant

Producer: Ash Atalla

Cast: Ricky Gervais (David Brent), Martin Freeman (Tim), Mackenzie Crook (Gareth), Lucy Davis (Dawn), Vincent Franklin (Rowan), Ewen Macintosh (Keith)



Extract summary:

The staff at Wernham Hogg paper merchants attend a staff training day.

Programme context:

Like *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975) and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (1973-1974) *The Office* (2001-2003) proved itself an important sitcom, capturing the zeitgeist - the spirit of the age - of early 2000s Britain. Satirising the insecurities of British society under New Labour, the show's central character, David Brent, is self-serving and dull with a desperate need to prove to people that he is caring, sophisticated and witty.

Although some of the series' features, like the foolish central character and the workplace setting, are familiar to sitcom audiences, much about *The Office* feels different. Its visual style mimics the reality shows and 'docu-soaps' that filled the television schedules during the late 1990s and early 2000s, with cameras following events around the office and recording direct interviews with the staff. These types of reality programmes and their use of ordinary people are a ripe source of comedy because characters' attempts to analyse themselves on camera make their lack of self-awareness very obvious to viewers.

The humour in *The Office* also comes from its satirical and frighteningly accurate depiction of the world of work, with its petty bickering, ridiculous management speak, and, as in this episode, painfully uncomfortable staff training sessions. The setting - a paper merchant in Slough - is deliberately mundane and dull, allowing all viewers to identify with some aspect of the situation. This is emphasised by its 'reality TV' style and made *The Office* too real for comfort for some viewers. British sitcoms traditionally deal in failure, disappointment and misunderstanding and *The Office* is no exception. However rather than being utterly cynical, what makes *The Office* stand out is its complexity and its compassion for its characters, which we can see in the show's sensitive treatment of Tim and Dawn's hesitant romance. The series is an example of narrative comedy at its best, with a script that understands the hilarity and the tragedy of everyday (office) life.

While watching the extract:

- What sitcom conventions can you identify in this extract?
- What makes *The Office* look and feel like a documentary?
- How do you feel watching this extract? Are you just amused, or do you feel slightly uncomfortable too? Why do you think this is?
- What audience do you think *The Office* is particularly aimed at?

Other Resources

Other Sitcoms available to view in TV Heaven

Allo Allo

An episode from the long running sitcom featuring the French Resistance during the Second World War. It was basically a spoof of the earlier BBC drama series *Secret Army*.

BBC 1984 30 mins

And Mother Makes Five (3 episodes)

The light sitcom sequel to *And Mother Makes Three*, Wendy Craig is typically cast as a dizzy mother.

Thames 1974 25 mins

The Army Game (The Mad Bull)

ITV's first big comedy hit. Set in a transit and ordnance depot at Nether Hopping it ran for five years and 153 episodes.

Granada 1957 30 mins

The Blackadder (Episode 6)

Considered one of the best television comedies of the 80s, this is the final episode of the first series, which was set in the Middle Ages. Rowan Atkinson plays Edmund Blackadder with Tony Robinson as his sidekick Baldrick.

BBC 1983 35 mins

Bless this House (Episode 1- The Generation Gap)

Classic seventies sitcom with Sid James and Diana Coupland coping with their teenage children.

Thames 1971 25 mins

Bootsie and Snudge

Typical 1960s-style personality based sitcom. A spin off from *The Army Game* with Bootsie (Alfie Bass) and Snudge (Bill Fraser) now in civvy street, working in a gentlemen's club.

Granada 1961 25 mins

Bottom (Smells)

Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson wrote and starred in this squalid sitcom about two repulsive bachelors, continuing their particular brand of violent schoolboy humour as featured in *The Young Ones*.

BBC 1991 30 mins

Bread

Liverpudlian sitcom which reflected the high levels of unemployment in the 1980s. The argumentative Boswell family were forced to rely on state handouts but managed to exploit all the loopholes. The series was written by Carla Lane and starred Jean Boht as the matriarch of the family.

BBC 1989 30 mins

Curry and Chips (Episode 1)

A comedy show in which Indian-born Spike Milligan blacked up to play a Pakistani working in a British factory. Eric Sykes played the foreman and Kenny Lynch a cockney black man. The show only ran for one season because of complaints about racism, but its writer Johnny Speight maintained that he was making fun of racists.

LWT 1969 25 mins

Dad's Army (Episode 55 - The Deadly Attachment)

Popular comedy series which ran between 1968 and 1977, about the incompetence of a Home Guard troop defending a small English seaside town against the Nazis. This episode contains one of the most quoted moments when Ian Lavender's Pike and Arthur Lowe's Captain Mainwaring confront a U-Boat commander played by Philip Madoc.

BBC 1973 30 mins

Duty Free (Episode 1)

Top of the ratings farce about two couples on the longest ever holiday in Spain, but actually filmed in Leeds.

YTV 1984 25 mins

The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin (Episode 3)

Leonard Rossiter stars as the dissatisfied business man longing to escape his humdrum life. Comedy by David Nobbs featuring Geoffrey Palmer, Sue Nichols, Pauline Yates and John Barron among the supporting cast.

BBC 1976 30 mins

Father Ted (A Song For Europe)

The remote Irish west coast was the setting for this cult comedy series, involving three dysfunctional Catholic priests and their weird housekeeper. This episode from the third series concerns the pathetic efforts of Father Ted and Father Dougal to compose an entry for the Eurovision Song Contest.

Channel Four (Hat Trick) 1996 25 mins

For the Love of Ada (Episode 1)

Wilfred Pickles and Irene Handl as two love-torn pensioners in the popular geriatric sitcom.

Thames 1970 30 mins

The Good Life (I Talk to the Trees)

Popular sitcom about a middle-class couple who drop out to farm self-sufficiently in suburbia. Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal star as Tom and Barbara Good with Penelope Keith and Paul Eddington as Margot and Jerry, their less than understanding neighbors.

BBC 1976 30 mins

Hancock (The Blood Donor)

One of Tony Hancock's most celebrated shows. It was his seventh BBC series, when he was no longer being partnered with Sid James but the show was still being scripted by Galton and Simpson. His co-stars include Hugh Lloyd, June Whitfield, Patrick Cargill and Frank Thornton.

BBC 1961 25 mins

Keeping Up Appearances

Roy Clarke's popular sitcom about the bossy snobbish Hyacinth Bucket (which she liked to pronounce "Bouquet") and her long-suffering husband Richard. Patricia Routledge was excellent as Hyacinth, a were the supporting cast - Clive Swift as Richard, Judy Cornwell and Geoffrey Hughes as her uncouth in-laws Daisy and Onslow, and Josephine Tewson as the intimidated neighbour Elizabeth.

BBC 1990 30 mins

Last of the Summer Wine

An episode from the long running comedy series featuring Blamire, Clegg and Compo, wandering around Holmfirth trying to fill empty lives. The humour of these early shows is gentle and melancholy.

BBC 1973 30 mins

Man About the House (Episode 1 - Three's a Crowd)

Popular flat-sharing sitcom that was followed by two spin off sequels, *George and Mildred* and *Robins Nest*.

Thames 1973 25 mins

Mind Your Language (The Examination)

Sitcom starring Barry Evans as the teacher of a class of adult students learning English as a foreign language.

LWT 1978 25 mins

My Family

An episode from the third series of the popular sitcom, reminiscent of family-based sitcoms of former years such as *Bless this House* and *Butterflies*.

BBC (DLT Entertainment) 2002 30 mins

Nearest and Dearest (Getting to Know You)

Popular comedy series which ran from 1968 to 1972, starring Jimmy Jewel and Hylda Baker as warring brother and sister Eli and Nellie Pledge, who have inherited a pickle factory somewhere near Colne in Lancashire.

Granada 1969 25 mins

On the Buses (Episode 8 - Radio Control)

Perhaps LWT's most successful sitcom, with a team of solid characters and actors. It centres on the escapades of bus driver Stan Butler and his conductor Jack. Comic support comes from Stan's mum, brother-in-law Arthur, his sister Olive, and the dim-witted Inspector Blakey.

LWT 1970 30 mins

Phoenix Nights

Peter Kay's award-winning comedy show about a Bolton social club, which suffers one disaster after another. He plays not only Brian Potter, the bad-tempered wheelchair bound licensee, but also a number of other parts such as the incompetent doorman Max.

Channel Four (Goodnight Vienna Productions) 2001 25 mins

Please Sir (Episode 1)

Sitcom about a secondary modern school and in particular 5c - a class of no-hopers and teenage delinquents. John Alderton played their newly qualified teacher.

LWT 1968 35 mins

Porridge (A Storm in a Tea Cup)

Hugely successful sitcom set in a prison. A great script from Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais resulted in one of British television's best loved comedies.

BBC 1977 30 mins

Rab C Nesbitt

A sitcom about the seamier side of life in a Glasgow tenement, with Gregor Fisher as the grubby string-vested protagonist, battling with his wife Mary, two obnoxious children and a tendency to alcoholism. Written by Ian Pattison, and often unintelligible south of the border.

BBC 1997 30 mins

Red Dwarf (Me2)

Science fiction sitcom set in a spacecraft. This is the final episode of the first series, which emphasises the tension between Craig Charles' Lister and Chris Barrie's Rimmer.

BBC 1988 30 mins

Rising Damp (Episode 1)

Sitcom featuring Leonard Rossiter as Rigsby, self-styled aristocrat of bed sitter land and his unfortunate tenants, Philip (Don Warrington), Alan (Richard Beckinsale) and the dotty spinster Miss Jones (Frances De La Tour).

YTV 1974 30 mins

A Sharp Intake of Breath (The Seven Year Hitch)

David Jason and Jacqueline Clarke star in this sitcom. Actors featuring briefly in this episode who are now much better known include Richard Wilson, Bella Emberg and Alun Armstrong.

ATV 1978 25 mins

Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em (Series 3, Episode 2)

Raymond Allen wrote this sitcom about an accident-prone halfwit with Norman Wisdom's clumsy little man character in mind. However, Michael Crawford made the lead role of Frank Spencer very much his own and by this final series Crawford even had an input to storylines. This episode pits Frank against a stray dog, a Wendy house, some super glue and Richard Wilson (Victor Meldrew from *One Foot in the Grave*) as an exasperated insurance man.

BBC 1978 35 mins

Surgical Spirit (Joyce's Ulcer)

Nichola McAuliffe leads as an acid-tongued surgeon in one of the few medical sitcoms where women are not just sexy nurses and dragon matrons.

Granada 1989 30 mins

DVD

Most of the situation comedies referred to in this pack and in the *AQA GCSE Media Studies (3571) Guidance for Teachers* notes are available to buy on DVD.

Written Resources

Media Studies for GCSE by Peter Wall published by Collins Educational. ISBN 000713391X, 2002, plus on-line Controlled Test resources
<http://www.collinseducation.com>

GCSE Media Studies for AQA by Mandy Esseen, Ann Riley and Martin Phillips
Published by Heinemann. ISBN 0435109693

GCSE Media Studies by John Price published by Nelson Thornes. ISBN 0748767037

Looking at Media Studies for GCSE by Julian Bowker published by Hodder Arnold.
ISBN 0340848553

Investigating Media Studies by Mike Edwards et al, published by Hodder Arnold. ISBN 0340758384

Websites

TV Heaven programme database:

<http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/Television/TvHeaven.asp>

BBC Guide to Comedy: www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/clips.shtml

Classic Sitcoms: www.classicsitcoms.com

Sitcoms online: www.sitcomsonline.com

The British Sitcom Guide: www.sitcom.co.uk

The BFI's online guide to sitcoms: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/445368/index.html>

Humour Glossary

The following are brief explanations of some of the comic terms used in the TV Heaven Plus: Sitcom pack.

Farce depends upon ridiculous situations, exaggerated character types, coarse humour, and physical humour for its comic effects. Farce is often generated through misunderstandings between characters in absurd situations, and these misunderstandings are usually discovered and explained away at the end of the narrative.

Irony is, very simply, the denial of a statement that everyone knows or believes to be fact and it is the denial itself that is funny. Irony is a very subtle form of humour and is most easily identified by the way in which it is delivered (i.e. spoken); irony can often be seen in sarcastic comments and biting, one-line retorts. Therefore, it is often (although not always) a verbal form of comedy.

Parody is created by mimicking something or someone purely for comic effect. Because parody is based on imitating recognisable features, how successful it is depends on how familiar its audience already is with the original person, thing or situation that is being parodied.

Pathos is a form of story-telling that appeals to audience emotions. It makes the audience care about and sympathise with a character and their situation. It is not itself a form of comedy, but by mixing pathos with comedy a sitcom can have a deeper meaning than just to make the audience laugh – it can make them care about a character as well.

Puns are a form of wordplay. A pun is a phrase that deliberately exploits confusion between similar-sounding words, or words with multiple meanings, for comic effect.

Satire or **satirical comedy** mocks serious people or situations with the intention of wounding them and sometimes correcting their behaviour. It often ridicules political, social or moral problems. Successful satire - like parody - depends on its audience already being familiar with the original person, thing or situation that is being satirised. As a result satire can lose its power over the years as people become less familiar with the subject that is being ridiculed.

Slapstick is the most visual of comedy forms, and consists entirely of physical comedy: people falling over (pratfalls), walking into things, and otherwise causing themselves (apparent) injury. Because it is very physical and does not rely on language, slapstick is a simple and universal form of comedy, appealing to all nationalities. Slapstick requires excellent timing and well-honed performance skills to be successful.

Wordplay is a technique in which the nature of words themselves are used for comic effect. In the case of sitcoms, wordplay can be seen most often in spoken dialogue. Puns are one example of wordplay.

TV Heaven Plus: Situation Comedy Extract Worksheets

Chapter 1. *Hancock's Half Hour* ('Spanish Interlude') (BBC, 1959)

Extract summary:

Hancock interrupts his friend and agent, Sid, while he's entertaining a young woman at their flat.

While watching the extract:

- The humour here is very much dialogue-based, betraying its radio origins. Try closing your eyes during the extract to see if you can still follow the narrative and comedy.
- How does the title sequence make clear who the main character is going to be?
- This template of two male friends at the centre of the comedy can be seen in other sitcoms, including *The Likely Lads* (1964-1966) and *Men Behaving Badly* (1992-1999). Can you think of any other examples?

Chapter 2. *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1965)

Extract summary:

Steptoe and Son (1962-1974) centres on the lives of two rag and bone men; a middle-aged son and his scruffy old dad. In this extract, Harold, a committed Conservative Party supporter, is outraged when his son comes home and announces that a Labour Party meeting is being held at their home that evening.

While watching the extract:

- Note the references to real political figures of the 1960s, such as Ted Heath and Enoch Powell. *Steptoe and Son* attempted to place its narrative within the real social and political context of the time. By doing so, sitcoms can make their audiences think as well as laugh.
- Consider the representations of class and politics, the relationship between father and son, and how comedy is derived from the interaction of all these things.
- Why do you think *Steptoe and Son* was so popular with audiences in the 1960s?



Chapter 3. *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1968)

Extract summary:

Alf, his wife, daughter and son-in-law debate the virtues of donating blood.

While watching the extract:

- From this extract, do you think *Till Death Us Do Part* is simply racist, or can you see how the writer was trying to satirise Alf's views?
- What function do the characters of Rita and Mike have in this debate? Are they the voice of reason?
- How do you think audience reactions to the programme have changed since the 1960s?
- Do you think the divide in opinion between Rita and Mike, and Alf and Elise is a generational one? If so, do you think this might have played a part in why audiences identified with Alf's views instead of scorning them (think about who watched the show)?

Chapter 4. *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames, 1972)

Extract summary:

In this first episode of *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-1976), Eddie is horrified to discover that his new neighbours are black. This extract follows directly from Eddie's first meeting with Bill, and shows that the two men's objections to each other are in fact very similar.

While watching the extract:

- How do you think *Love Thy Neighbour's* depiction of race relations compares to *Till Death Us Do Part*? Does it make a difference having black characters involved?
- Is it significant that the two women do not seem to share their husbands' views? What purpose might this serve for the narrative and comedy? Can you see similarities between them and Mike and Rita in *Till Death Us Do Part*?
- Do you think sitcoms can raise difficult issues more easily than a drama or documentary? Are people more open to ideas if they can laugh at the same time?

Chapter 5. *Are You Being Served?* (BBC, 1973)

Extract summary:

When a young and attractive representative from the 'His and Hers' perfume company sets up a sales stand in Grace Brother's department store the existing staff are concerned that their own sales may suffer.

While watching the extract:

- Remember the conventional narrative pattern of sitcoms. The appearance of the sales girl in Grace Brother's is the catalyst that drives the narrative forward; the staff's usual way of working has been disrupted by her presence and so the problem must be overcome and the status quo re-established by the end of the episode.
- Is the representation of gender in this extract stereotypical?
- Do you think the show's representation of Mr Humphries would be as controversial today as it was in the 1970s?

Chapter 6. *The Fosters* (LWT, 1976)

Extract summary:

Sam's old friend, Reverend 'Smiling' Steve, offers him a job collecting donations during his sermons, but Pearl knows that Steve is getting rich from his congregation. After returning from one of Steve's sermons (in which a dubious 'cripple' is healed), Sam has to decide whether he will take the job for the financial benefit of his family, or turn it down on moral grounds.

While watching the extract:

- From what you have seen in this extract, do you think criticisms that *The Fosters* reinforced racial stereotypes are fair?
- Can you identify the climax in the narrative? And the resolution?
- Notice how the action is confined to the family's living room, highlighting the domestic focus of the sitcom.

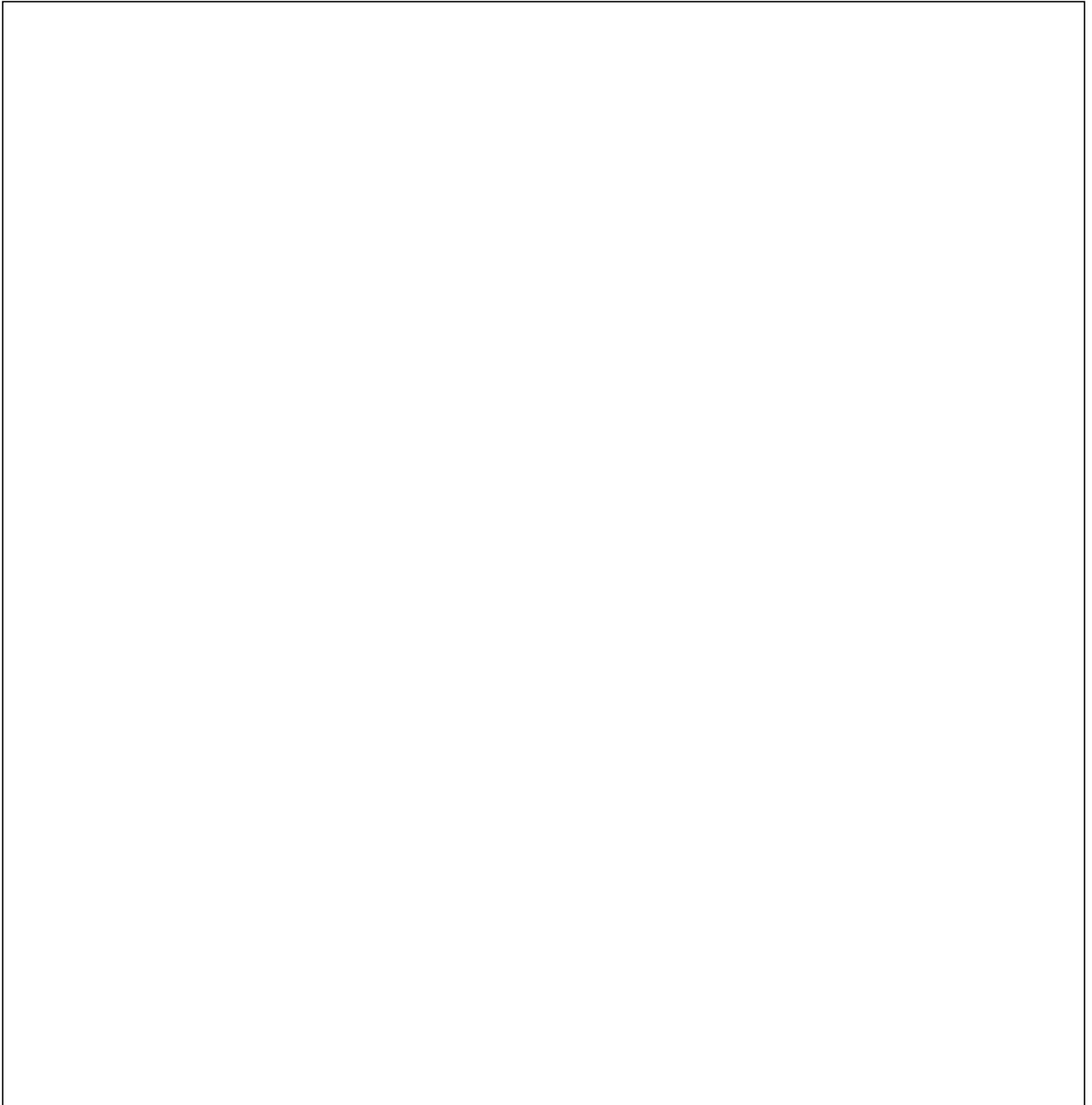
Chapter 7. *Butterflies* (BBC, 1978)

Extract summary:

Worn down by the demands of marriage and family, Ria finds some respite in furtive meetings with businessman Leonard. But, having arranged to meet Leonard at a local café, she is held up by an unexpected lunch-time run-in with her family.

While watching the extract:

- Consider how the mix of comedy, pathos and drama work together in this extract.
- Think back on the previous extracts. Is Ria a more realistic female character than those we have seen so far?



Chapter 8. *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1979)

Extract summary:

Sybil, under the impression that Basil has forgotten their wedding anniversary, walks out on him just as the guests for her surprise party begin to arrive.

While watching the extract:

- How many different comic techniques can you identify in this one clip e.g. humour arising from the characters' relationships, witty dialogue, physical comedy, misunderstandings and farce, wordplay?

Chapter 9. *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982)

Extract summary:

Rick (an arrogant and pretentious sociology student), Vyvyan (a punk medical student), Neil (a suicidal, lentil-obsessed hippy), and Mike (a dapper but dodgy ladies' man) are students sharing a North London house. When their home is in danger of being demolished by the council they rally together, in their own unique way, to save it.

While watching the extract:

- What sitcom conventions can you recognise in this extract?
- Which elements are different from the sitcoms you have seen so far?
- How does this extract differ from those we have seen so far in terms of its narrative 'resolution'? Do the efforts of the lead characters actually have any effect on events?

Chapter 10. *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1984)

Extract summary:

After the Prime Minister announces that he is going to resign, Sir Humphrey and Sir Arnold muse about the two likely candidates to replace him, before realizing that Minister Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) would be a far more 'suitable' candidate for their own particular needs.

While watching the extract:

- How does the dialogue in this extract compare with that in previous extracts? What does it reveal about *Yes, Minister's* setting, satirical aims and intended audience?
- Do you think that the political attitudes expressed in this extract are still relevant today? If they were not, would audiences still find *Yes, Minister* funny?

Chapter 11. *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 1989)

Extract summary:

Del attempts to convince Rodney of the importance of image in the modern business world.

While watching the extract:

- Despite the absence of women, can you see examples of traditional family roles in this extract?
- What do the costumes and setting reveal about the characters?

Chapter 12. *Birds of a Feather* (BBC, 1989)

Extract summary:

Sharon takes a break from her loser husband and council flat to visit her wealthy sister, Tracy, in her new home in Chigwell. But Tracey's next-door neighbour calls round unexpectedly.

While watching the extract:

- Think about the previous extract from *Only Fools and Horses*. How does this scene compare to that between Del, Rodney and Uncle Albert? Can you see any similarities?
- What can you tell about the three women and their backgrounds and attitudes from their dialogue, acting and costumes?

Chapter 13. *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC, 1989)

Extract summary:

In the Western Front trenches of the First World War, Captain Blackadder and his men are visited by General Melchett before setting out on yet another mission 'over the top'.

While watching the extract:

- What can you tell about the background of each of the characters in this scene? Do their class differences contribute to the show's satirical commentary about war?
- How does this scene follow the sitcom conventions of being set in a confined location and characters being emotionally or physically trapped?

Chapter 14. *One Foot in the Grave* (BBC, 1990)

Extract summary:

When Victor returns from holiday, Mrs Warboys informs him that his house has burnt down.

While watching the extract:

- Do you think *One Foot in the Grave* is written with a certain audience in mind, and who do you think they are?
- Do you sympathise with Victor in this scene, find him funny, or both?

Chapter 15. *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992)

Extract summary:

Saffy is not impressed when her mother returns home late at night, activating the burglar alarm. They go down to the kitchen to have a 'chat' about what Eddy has been up to.

While watching the extract:

- How do the 'mother' and 'daughter' roles in *Absolutely Fabulous* compare to those we have seen so far?
- Who do you think is the intended audience of *Absolutely Fabulous* and why?

Chapter 16. *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC, 1997)

Extract summary:

In the first of these two extracts, Gary proposes to Dorothy after she discovers he has been unfaithful to her. The episode goes on to follow the pair on their Hen and Stag nights, where each of them sleeps with someone else and they break up. By the end of the episode Gary and Dorothy are engaged again and, in the second extract, we see Gary and Tony reflecting on the situation in their own unique way... in a birthing pool.

While watching the extract:

- Compare these two short extracts and think about how the representations of gender roles and relationships differ, and how comedy is delivered in each.
- Read the extract summary at the top of the page and think about the narrative arc of this particular episode. These two clips are the first and last scenes in this episode; they represent the 'status quo' that is disrupted, but which is regained by the end.
- Do you think young male audiences could have been influenced to copy Gary and Tony's behaviour when the show was first broadcast, and could they still be today?
- How does Tony and Gary's behaviour compare to that of Edina and Patsy in the previous clip?

Chapter 17. *dinnerladies (sic)* (BBC, 1998)

Extract summary: Another day in the canteen, and as the staff arrive for work they get on with the business of discussing life outside the factory walls.

While watching the extract:

- In what ways does *dinnerladies* conform to the conventions of the sitcom genre?
- Do you think that having a female writer makes a difference to *dinnerladies'* representation of its female characters?

Chapter 18. *The Royle Family* (BBC, 1998)

Extract summary:

The Royles discuss *Family Fortunes* and Denise's future domestic plans at the dinner table.

While watching the extract:

- How does the style of *The Royle Family* differ to the sitcoms we have seen so far? What sitcom conventions does it display or seem to have rejected?
- Have you had similar conversations to this with your own family?

Chapter 19. *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC, 1998)

Extract summary:

Alice and Hugo finally get married, even though events during the ceremony conspire against them.

While watching the extract:

- How does this extract represent Geraldine and the members of the Dibley community?
- In what other types of programme might we expect to see a wedding being interrupted in this dramatic way and does this extract play on our expectations for comic value?

Chapter 20. *The Office* (BBC, 2001)

Extract summary:

The staff at Wernham Hogg paper merchants attend a staff training day.

While watching the extract:

- What sitcom conventions can you identify in this extract?
- What makes *The Office* look and feel like a documentary?
- How do you feel watching this extract? Are you just amused, or do you feel slightly uncomfortable too? Why do you think this is?
- What audience do you think *The Office* is particularly aimed at?

TV Heaven Plus: Situation Comedy Evaluation Form

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Any further comments: