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Perspectives on Education: Teachers and TV

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Watching prime time television can be an uncomfortable experience for teachers these days. While other professionals are often portrayed as dignified, knowledgeable men and women doing serious and important work, teachers are usually figures of fun. New York Times television critic John J. O'Connor recently expressed concern that "the incessant and accelerating ridicule of the [teaching] profession on television entertainment is reaching truly troubling proportions."

TV sitcoms involving school are based on the pleasure principle - the premise that life's primary goal is the pursuit of fun. Fun, by definition, requires no intellectual effort, merely affability and the willingness to look for a good time. Hence, solemnity is the cardinal sin in sitcom land. There are three major categories of television teachers: Nerds, who are oblivious to their students' pursuit of fun ("out of it"); Villain-buffoons, who are actively hostile to fun; and Good Guys, who frequently show the students new ways of having fun.

1) The Nerd: A familiar stock figure, the nerd is drab, ordinary, and usually a male. He inevitably wears glasses: those of Mr. Peepers (Wally Cox), a nerd from television's early days, had wire rims, while contemporary nerds usually select the thick, black-rimmed variety. Speaking in a lugubrious monotone, this teacher doggedly "covers the material" while students glance longingly at the clock, pass notes, and engage in other antics. (The most imaginative of these was depicted in Fellini's movie Amarcord: a student seated in back of the classroom urinates into a long tube which extends beneath the row of desks, depositing a telltale puddle between the feet of the unsuspecting lad in the front row). The Wonder Years' science teacher, with his humorless rapid-fire delivery and slide show-lectures on natural disasters (spiders devouring prey, catastrophic earthquakes - definitely not fun subjects) is a classic nerd. Conscientious and ineffectual, these teachers do not, however, interfere with their students' endless quest for fun (although they temporarily delay the quest by holding classes), but they don't have any fun themselves. Knowledge gives them no pleasure; no sane person could prefer reading to partying. The nerd's sin is being serious, hence out of touch with the important issues of life.

2) The Villain-buffoon: Another stock character, the villain-buffoon is physically unattractive — fat, balding — rather than, like the nerd, merely ordinary looking. The buffoon is also distinguishable from the nerd in that he is not concerned with learning. For example, Mr. Rooney, the principal in Ferris Bueller, is obsessed with the school football team and with trying to defeat Ferris, although it's never entirely clear why. Like Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost, Rooney appears to possess a "motiveless malignity" and an insatiable petty vindictiveness. Rooney's weapons are threats of detention and expulsion, but he is always outwitted, defeated and humiliated — week after week reduced to red-faced fury by the wily, winsome (and naturally fun-loving) Ferris.

3) The Good Guys: A few television teachers are not only good looking, but are also fine human beings who listen thoughtfully and sensitively to their students' problems. An amiable and handsome Hillman College professor in A Different World (the only show in this survey set in college rather than high school), is sympathetic to a student who wishes to find a home for an orphaned eight-year-old boy, and solves her problem by agreeing to adopt the child himself. (Whether or not he has consulted his wife is not clear). More often the good guys are iconoclasts, working more or less openly against the system. The model here is the Robin Williams character in Dead Poets' Society, who instructs his repressed students to tear off offending pages out of their textbooks and exhorts them to take charge of their own lives ("Seize the Day"). The good guy-iconoclast liberates his students by breaking the rules. Inevitably, he is fired by dreary and rigid administrators who can't appreciate a "great teacher." Billy Connolly, the teacher in Head of the Class, is a good guy in this tradition. Like Williams, he is likable, witty, and sensitive to the students' needs and concerns. His blue jeans and longish hair reveal that he is something of a rebel, and, like Williams', his classroom performance is largely a one-man show, a lively entertainment which holds his audience's attention, but calls forth no intellectual response on their part. And although Billy is an entertaining speaker, his message is that the classroom is a dull place.

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Dismissing the French textbook as useless ("You can’t learn about France from this"), he abandons the teaching of irregular verbs, and instead regales the class with tales of his own amorous adventures in France. It’s not necessary to know much French to meet girls, he assures them; besides, the only way to learn French is to visit France, where everyone has remarkable adventures. (Inspired, one of his students impulsively flies to France and does indeed have a thrilling time, unimpeded by his lack of familiarity with the language.) As a seemingly logical consequence of this line of reasoning, Billy takes his students to the movies. Thus, even a likable and entertaining teacher fosters the pervasive idea that true enjoyment can be had only by experience school this way: the real “action” is outside the classroom, in the halls, the cafeteria, the locker rooms. But I have also known students who speak nostalgically of high school and college classrooms, who remember intellectual excitement and imaginative, challenging teachers. Of this there is no clue on television. The excitement is physical, sexual, emotional — but never intellectual. In no television classroom I saw (admittedly my experience is limited) did a lively interchange of ideas or arguments occur. Television writers are no doubt afraid that any conversation on a serious subject lasting more than two minutes would bore viewers - and they may be right. The result, though, is that the public never sees for itself what can go on in a good classroom, which may explain why, although there is a great deal of discussion about improving the quality of education, budgets continue to be cut. The viewing public never sees the possibility that there might be stimulation - yes, even fun - in the exercise of the mind.

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suburban America’s TV and music over the rural customs. Mason’s characters are dislocated in their very homes; their categories no longer separate and distinct. “Jenny kissed him in front of Opal and told him he was gorgeous. She said the placemats were gorgeous too.” This is Mason’s way, and more than with Beattie and Smiley, one has to listen to the voices, to reread, to let the stories resonate. In “Wish” an elderly sister tells her eighty-four year old brother how their father had ruined her life by forbidding marriage to the man she loved. “You know she says, ‘how you hear on the television nowadays about little children getting beat up or treated nasty and it makes such a mark on them? Nowadays they know about that, but they didn’t back then. They never knew how something when you’re young can hurt you so long.’” Her brother, “hard and plain” she calls him, eight years widowed from a domineering woman who forced him to move out of the family home to her dream house, recalls after his sister leaves, meeting the girl he loved in the woods behind the family home, the girl he didn’t marry. Suddenly we realize the painful influence of father on son. The hurt forces us to reread “Wish” and understand that unfulfilled wishes engender painful knowledge. The hurt and the knowledge of it passes from generation to generation.

“Memphis” shows us that indeed men continue to dominate their ex-wives outside of marriage. Joe tells his ex-wife, Beverly, that he is relocating to Columbia, South Carolina. “I’ll want to have the kids on vacations—and all summer,’’ he tells her. “Well tough!’ she responds; ‘you expect me to send them on an airplane all that way?’” “You’ll have to make some adjustments,’ he said calmly. . . .’’ Beverly can’t accept the adjustments and can’t understand why. “It seemed no one knew why [divorce] was happening,” she thinks. “Everybody blamed it on statistics; half of all marriages nowadays ended in divorce. It was a fact, like traffic jams—just one of those things you had to put up with in modern life.” Her friends and ex-husband accuse her of being too judgmental and of never knowing what she wants. “It ought to be so easy to work out what she really wanted,” she thinks. “Beverly’s parents had stayed married like two dogs locked together in passion, except it wasn’t passion. But she and Joe didn’t have to do that. Times had changed. Joe could move to South Carolina. Beverly and Jolene could hop down to Memphis just for a fun weekend. Who knew what might happen or what anybody would decide to do on any given weekend or at any stage of life?”

Who among us knows? Sociologists may document through interviews and statistics the messes we’ve made of our lives; story writers reveal that what’s been documented is emptiness. “Marriage,” says one of Smiley’s characters, “is a small container...barely large enough to hold some children. Two inner lives, two lifelong meditations of whatever complexity, burst out of it and out of it, cracking it, deforming it.” The container is inadequate to its task, perhaps because we do not know any longer what its proper task should be. For too many of the characters in these stories the future holds only more cracking and more deformity. There are no happy families any more.