

Aldona Witkowska

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Introduction

Domestic comedies are “those which revolve around middle-class nuclear families living in suburbia and feature a professional father (doctor, accountant, etc.) and a full-time, stay-at-home mother. Humor is found in the interrelationships of the family members”¹.

The beginning of domestic sitcom domination fell on the mid-1950s and was connected with the rebirth of the Cult of Domesticity and traditional gender divisions. Domesticity was 18th and 19th century ideology, which assumed separation of market and family work. Adherence to its principles distinguished middle-class from lower classes². A clear division into “domestic” function of wife and “active” role of husband was based on the belief that the world of work is rough and only strong man can survive in it. As a result, the role of a husband was to work and support the family, while his fragile wife waited for him at home.

The television image of American family in the 1950s was a faithful reflection of domesticity assumptions. Family life was presented as a very pleasant journey to modernity, while remaining faithful to the traditional values. Parents and children were connected by love and respect. Children with joy fully repeated the path of their parents’ life: going to college, obtaining a good profession or being a good wife³.

The idealized vision of white middle-class family life was continued in the 1960s by sitcoms like: *The Donna Reed Show*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. As Ella Taylor wrote, they were “all vehicles for wholesome tales set in small rural towns or comfortable middle-class suburbs

¹ N.C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*, Austin 1995, p. 8.

² L. Johnson, J. Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*, Oxford 2004, p. 6.

³ E. Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1989, p. 27.

of Los Angeles or New York”⁴. In that televised, middle-class, dreamed life husbands mostly served “as the wise and knowledgeable authority in the household”⁵ and wives were their duplicates, silent partners who let them fulfill the role of the head of the family. In the majority of middle-class sitcoms men had the final word in important matters connected with the family. Women often played a supporting role of a housewife⁶. In the view of the author of the *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*, the woman characters

held a questionable position as the operative force in domestic life, wherein they were expected to perform the necessary domestic duties, but continually upheld their husbands as more important⁷.

Demographic study for the years 1950–1989 made in 1994, indicated that the connection between television families and the real ones were marginal. Lori Landay who brought up above studies, as the contrast put contemporary shows, defining them as those which “accurately portray the family life”⁸.

Undoubtedly, today’s series attach greater importance to portraying new phenomena and manifesting varieties of modern American family. However, still sitcoms concerning white middle-class family did not completely cut off from their predecessors. Contemporary situation comedies, *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *According to Jim*, are going back to the tradition of old, good domestic sitcoms, in the *Father Knows Best* kind, focusing attention on the character of husband.

Those two series also represent typical for domestic sitcom theme, meaning “slobbish guys with smart, sexy wives”⁹. There is no doubt that this trend gained more strength in recent years, considering the number of sitcoms based on the formula. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the tendency of matching clumsy, unattractive male characters with beautiful women is not new and has its roots in the 1950s. Enough to bring the examples of Ralph and Alice Kramden, or Robinson Peepers and Nancy Remington, a beautiful school nurse, who eventually became his wife¹⁰.

Everybody Loves Raymond and *According to Jim* continue this glorious tradition in all its manifestations. Wives from those two sitcoms, Debra

⁴ E. Taylor, op. cit., p. 29.

⁵ Ch. Blades, *From Housewife to Sex Goddess: Exploring the Changing Role of Women in Situation Comedies*, [online] <<http://televatcher.com/comedy/from-housewife-to-sex-goddess-exploring-the-changing-role-of-women-in-situation-comedies/>>, accessed: 20.05. 2011.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ J. Reed, *Beleaguered Husbands and Demanding Wives: The New Domestic Sitcom*, [online] <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/tv/domestic_sitcoms.htm>, accessed: 8.05. 2011.

⁸ L. Landay, *I Love Lucy*, Detroit 2010, p. 15–16.

⁹ T. Brooks, E. Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946–Present*, New York 2007, p. xx.

¹⁰ K. Bloom, F. Vlastnik, *Sitcoms: The 101 Greatest TV Comedies of All Time*, New York 2007, p. 94–95.

Barone and Cheryl, definitely belong to one of the sexiest in situation comedies history and their husbands are model examples of thick-headed, unattractive male characters.

Husband's superior: the character of Debra Barone from *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005)

Everybody Loves Raymond, one of the most popular TV shows which entertained the audience for nine years, was the result of cooperation between producer Phil Rosenthal and stand-up comedian Ray Romano. When they first met it turned out that they both were from Queens and had similar family experiences. Rosenthal recognized Ray's family as a perfect material for sitcom. He recalls:

He [Ray] tells me about his parents living close by in Queens, that they lived with his brother, who's a cop, who's older, who's divorced, who eats by touching every bite of food to his chin before he puts it in his mouth, and is jealous of Raymond and says, when he sees Raymond's Cable Ace Award for Comedy, "It never ends for Raymond. Everybody loves Raymond"¹¹.

Thus, supported by Romano's family stories, Phil Rosenthal created smart and quirky sitcom about middle-class married couple, Ray and Debra Barone, who lives in Long Island with their three kids and, what is worse, with Ray's parents across the street. The proximity is the source of troubles as well as humor. The peace of married life is constantly interrupted by Ray's nosy parents and divorced brother. The plot is driven by complicated relations between members of Barone family: brothers, daughter and mother-in-law and of course husband and wife¹².

The Barone's family is filled with one-of-a-kind personalities. Ray is a sissy and has a difficulty in opposing his passive-aggressive tyrannical mother, Marie. His relationship with father is also not easy, since Frank is one of the most mean and disrespectful creatures in the world. Raymond's brother, Robert, on the other hand, is a true boor who blames everyone, especially Ray for his failures. All those characters create a specific climate of the sitcom but there is no doubt that *Everybody Loves Raymond* would not be the same without very expressive character of Debra, played by Patricia Heaton.

Heaton did not have much trouble with her role of housewife overwhelmed by domestic duties. At that time Patricia had a husband and two children herself. Her play was so suggestive that the character of Debra

¹¹ R. Romano, P. Rosenthal, *Everybody Loves Raymond: Our Family Album*, New York 2004, p. 14.

¹² J.W. Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs*, Westport 2005, p. 119.

appeared on the top-ten list of the most memorable television wives. The audience valued Debra Barone's steel for a backbone which distinguished her from the 1950s "pushovers"¹³. Phil Rosenthal confirmed that opinion in one of the interviews:

It's not just the wife, you don't want just to have the wife, the kind of "Hi dear, let me get your dinner", we wanted her to be three-dimensional character, we wanted her to have personality, we wanted her to be this character who is my wife and Ray's wife, who gives us trouble sometimes and we have to answer to¹⁴.

Undoubtedly *Everybody Loves Raymond* true-born married couple was influenced by Romano's and Rosenthal's marriage experiences. Although their wives were saying that Debra has not much in common with them, definitely there was something to it. They could not deny that several episodes were based on real events, like the IMS episode or *The Can Opener*¹⁵.

Despite the fact that most episodes were written by male writers, the woman's spirit is perceptible in Debra's character. Every single episode with her appearance expresses the great effort put in the creation of full-blooded wife. Debra Barone is so real that while watching her actions, not infrequently the female viewer is thinking: "She is just like me".

At first glance Debra is a typical full-time mother and wife, struggling with screaming kids and sink filled with dirty dishes, greeting her husband with a kiss and hot dinner. However, Phil Rosenthal kept his word and what we see on the screen is not a one-dimensional character which could be easily described and qualified. On the contrary, Debra is a walking bomb which in one moment kisses her husband and a minute later punches him. She can cook, take care of children and clean but she will always find time to show who is really wearing pants in that family.

Debra's feeling of superiority not only toward Ray but also all his family has its roots in her parentage. Debra's parents are upper-class, sophisticated people, who spend time on visiting museums, operas and traveling to exotic countries. They have not much in common with Italian decent Ray's family. Barone family is based on a traditional model, in which the husband earns money and the wife serves him to the grave and takes care of his children. Their entertainment is reduced to spending time in the kitchen eating and journeys across the street to their children's house. Marie Barone is completely devoted to her family and being the wife and mother is the only sense in her life.

Despite the fact that Ray's and Debra's marriage is also traditional, Debra, to put it mildly, does not identify with Marie's views on marriage and parenting. She accepts her role of a homemaker, fulfills home duties

¹³ M.L. Moore, *Top 10 Most Memorable Television Wives*, [online] <<http://www.examiner.com/tv-in-boston/top-10-most-memorable-television-wives>>, accessed: 12.05.2011.

¹⁴ *Casting of Debra (Patricia Heaton)*, [online] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM40GjXEyRM>>, accessed: 20.05.2011.

¹⁵ R. Romano, P. Rosenthal, op. cit., p. 34.

but not so perfectly as her mother in-law. What is more, she rather does not want to be perceived only as a housewife. She even feels offended when Ray calls her a good wife. Her answer to her husband's words is: "Don't you ever say that to me again"¹⁶. Debra's reaction is quite odd, however it is hard to firmly state what she really feels and thinks. She has many faces and that is why her behavior sometimes can be really surprising. Her character is best described by Ray, in his conversation with Robert:

There's two Debras. There's the Debra that you see, that does not have the problem with it, then when everybody leaves, there's the Debra that I see, "Darth Debra"¹⁷.

Debra's dark side can be revealed in many situations, especially during so called "hard days". In *Bad Moon Rising* episode Debra shows the fullness of her abilities. She cries, yells and furiously attacks Raymond. Yet, it does not mean that during other days Debra is the example of self-control and patience. Nothing more wrong. Even the simple can opener can make Debra become a "Darth Debra", not to mention her annoying in-laws and childish husband.

In the mentioned *The Can Opener* episode a very important feature of Debra appears, that is pride. She has a high sense of dignity and reacts impulsively when somebody, Ray or Marie, tries to undermine it. In this episode, Raymond reproaches her for buying a bad can opener. Debra takes her husband's comment as personal attack. When Ray says that the can opener is stupid, she responds with crying voice: "I am not stupid"¹⁸. Debra's reaction shows not only her sensitivity about herself but also expectation to be appreciated by her husband.

This statement is confirmed by another episode in which Ray again, shows a complete lack of tact. In *The Net Worth* he makes a comment about his superiority as a breadwinner. Debra quickly proves him that her work as a housewife is worth more. As evidence she gives him a bill for housework which exceeds his salary¹⁹. Debra's attitude, her awareness of the importance of a role that she fulfills, reflects the conviction that bringing money home, does not decide about man's dominance. Those episodes constitute an answer to contemptuous attitude toward a housewife profession and not perceiving domestic duties as a job.

However, there is another side of the coin. The show by underlining the importance of woman at home and keeping her away from the job market, promotes the stereotypical gender roles. Being a housewife is the only work that Debra can perform. When she receives a job as a copywriter, she gets fired after one day²⁰. Debra's failure means that she will stay at

¹⁶ *Marie's Meatballs* (1998), episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996–2005).

¹⁷ *The Young Girl* (2000).

¹⁸ *The Can Opener* (1999).

¹⁹ *The Net Worth* (2001).

²⁰ *Working Girl* (1999).

home. Of course, this situation is favorable for Ray who definitely does not intend to take over her home duties. That is why when Debra once again tries to “break out of the house” by running for the president of the school board, Ray does not vote for her²¹. The reason of his decision is obvious. Ray is afraid that Debra’s obligations which will not include cleaning and taking care of children, will disturb the traditional division of roles in his family.

He feels threatened not only by his wife’s activities outside home but also attractiveness. Debra is very confident, sexy woman who as Robert put it: “have a great body and not afraid to show it”²². Offended by Debra’s remark that he is filthy, Ray decides to make her feel bad about herself. He lies that other mothers from PTA think that she looks “trumpy”²³.

Ray’s perfidious behavior is a sign of desperation. His desperate desire to bring Debra to heel reflects man’s pride and irreconcilability with strong position of woman. Ray constantly has to deal not only with the fact that he has beautiful and smart wife, but also a wife who rarely counts with his opinion. Debra is the one who makes all decisions. When Raymond objects employing his friend Gianni to fix the broken stove, Debra says: “I don’t need you to say so”²⁴.

Very meaningful and confirming Debra’s position as the head of the family is a scene from the *Tissues* episode. When the kitchen catches fire, Debra is the one who can extinguish it. The viewer can see her holding a big fire extinguisher while in another room Ray stands with a garden hose, from which the water barely flows. It should be noted that the fire was caused by Raymond, in a day in which Debra finally agreed to give him some power and let him make decisions about groceries²⁵. Ray instead of proving his wife that he can handle things, only gives her another reason to be high-hat.

Raymond is totally hopeless without his resourceful wife, which is noticeable in many situations, like when Debra is sick and unable to take care of everything as usual. One day or even one minute with Ray in charge can lead to a catastrophe and Debra is aware of it. She does not even trust him enough to let him plan her surprise party. Ray receives specific directions, but ruins everything anyway and compromise himself in the eyes of friends and family²⁶.

“Ray makes a fool of himself” is a series most frequently presented topic. Debra does not have any illusions about Ray’s mental abilities. Not infrequently she gives voice to her not very flattering opinions. Raymond got used to the fact that he can rather expect yelling or mocking than words of

²¹ *A Vote for Debra* (2002).

²² *PT & A* (2004).

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *The Contractor* (2003).

²⁵ *Tissues* (2002).

²⁶ *The Surprise Party* (2003).

appropriate. When Debra is angry she does not mince words and calls him freak or idiot. Ray seems to be aware that life with immature “mamma’s boy” can be uphill. Disturbed by Debra’s outburst of cry, he asks her if it is because of his stupid behavior. Her answer is disarming as always: “I eat ice cream because you are stupid”²⁷.

The word “stupid” appears quite often in the show, especially in reference to Ray. Debra never forgets to underline her superiority over Ray. She will not let any opportunity remind him that he is lucky to have her. She cannot even stop herself from using it during recording love declaration:

Hi Ray, this is Debra. I’ve been doing some thinking and these are the reasons why we should break-up: you’re obsessive, insecure, selfish, you don’t always have the best judgment with your children, and yet I’m never going to leave you, ever, because you happened to be perfect for me and I love you very much, you stupid, stupid man²⁸.

The show and the words uttered by Debra do not leave any place for doubts. Just like Debra uses every occasion to show Ray who is the boss, *Everybody Loves Raymond* demonstrates how important role woman plays in family functioning. Through domineering Debra and childish Ray, it proves that being the breadwinner does not automatically means being the head of the family. Debra’s position is so strong that the title of the series could be easily replaced by *Everybody Loves Debra*. Despite some bad character traits, Debra is the most positive show’s figure. Her strong personality, intelligence and looks, makes that nobody is indifferent toward her. Raymond fears Debra, Robert is fascinated, and Frank considers Debra his only ally. He says in one of the episodes:

I always thought it was you and me against all of them in there. I’m mean like you and me, we are not like them, you know. Trust me we’re not like them, they’re loonies²⁹.

The uniqueness and popularity of Debra’s character led in 2009 to the creation of similar one, also played by Patricia Heaton. In the series *The Middle*, just like in *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Heaton plays overwhelmed by home duties mother of three. The biggest difference between both sitcoms is in the perspective from which the story is told. *Everybody Loves Raymond*, despite the strong competition in the form of smart and sexy wife, definitely belongs to the male character. In *The Middle* the figure of mother and wife extends to the front. “It is from the mother’s point of view”, said Heaton, explaining why she decided to play in the show³⁰.

²⁷ *Alone Time* (2000).

²⁸ *The Break-up Tape* (2002).

²⁹ *Snow Day* (2002).

³⁰ *Patricia Heaton: Back in The Middle*, [online] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fODqhW0fObk>>, accessed: 14.04. 2011.

It should be emphasized that sitcom title, referring to the Midwest, also suggests associations with the middle-class. Nothing further from the truth. *The Middle* presents everyday struggle of working-class family. Thus, Debra Barone has lived to see her *Everybody Loves Debra* but in “poorer version”.

Husband’s “supplement”: The character of Cheryl from *According to Jim* (2001–2009)

The title *According to Jim* in its overtone seems to call back the 1950s sitcom *Father Knows Best*. It suggests, just as its predecessor, that the character of a husband is central here and what the viewer is going to see on the screen will be male point of view. Of course, where is the husband, there is also the wife. Cheryl, Jim’s bride, is absolutely stunning. The reason for which such an attractive woman chose so unattractive man is not clear. What is certain here is that Jim did not win Cheryl’s heart by his charm and appearance. He is a common, devoid of any manners contractor worker, who runs a small construction firm with his brother-in-law. When he comes back home he is interested only in drinking beer and watching games. All the house work and three kids are on his wife’s head. Their family life is constantly interrupted by Cheryl’s neurotic sister Dana and brother Andy who not only works with Jim, but also is the member of his garage blues band.

This seems to be very similar to what is presented in *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The difference is that Jim is even more annoying than Raymond and Cheryl is more conciliatory than Debra. In most cases, she bears her husband scandalous behavior with stoic calm. Her reactions to Jim’s irrational or simply stupid actions are almost unbelievable. She is the model example of self-control and patience. Cheryl hardly ever raises her voice, her tone is calm and delicate. With the smile on a face and indulgent look, she patiently listens to what Jim has to say and, what is worth mentioning, it is rarely something bright.

Kimberly Williams, who plays the character of Dana, considers Cheryl’s acceptance and love for Jim praiseworthy: “From week to week she forgives him, she accepts him and loves him just the way he is”³¹. It is not hard to agree with Williams but, unfortunately, Cheryl’s enormous patience and understanding toward Jim eliminates, so important for viewers’ identification, element of realism. Beyond the feeling of sympathy she mostly breeds irritation and disbelief. Cheryl often behaves like an artificial creation in the kind of Stepford wife robot, deprived of her own will, created in order to better serve her husband. She greets Jim with words: “Hi honey, how

³¹ *According to Jim – Cast and Characters*, [online] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jcCwWS9D9Q>>, accessed: 20.04. 2011.

was your day?” and kisses him while stirring the soup. After that he sits at the table with the bottle of beer which in most cases is served by his wife.

Cheryl has much more in common with the 1950s star, Donna Reed, than with her contemporary Debra Barone. She represents everything what Phil Rosenthal wanted to avoid in creating the character of Debra. Cheryl is not a true born character like her predecessor. In Debra’s case it was easy to forget that the person on the screen is only a product of writers’ imagination. While watching Cheryl it is impossible to avoid the impression of involving strings.

The analysis of this character is not easy because one has the impression that its creators were not sure what features should characterize Cheryl. They could not decide whether she should be smart or naïve, serious or funny. What is known for sure is that they wanted her to be a perfect wife, loving and caring. However, in order not to exaggerate in one direction, sometimes let her to be angry or even wild.

Thus, Cheryl is primarily a homemaker whose life revolves around the house and children. Her activities outside home are limited to shopping, driving kids to school, PTA meetings and book club. It is important to note that Cheryl loves her life and enjoys being a housewife. Only sometimes she has moments of doubts and decides to prove herself and others that she is something more than just a boring suburban wife. In the *Blow-Up* episode Cheryl is looking for an original Valentine’s Day present for Jim. Dana suggests making a lingerie picture. When Cheryl expresses the disapprobation towards this idea, Dana baldly notes: “I know because you are not fun”³².

This is not the only case when she is presented as a boring housewife who talks only about groceries or colors of new curtains. In *Anec-Dont’s* episode Cheryl finds out that members of her family find her life not very interesting. It turns out that Jim only pretends that he listens to her and in most cases he does not have any idea what she is talking about. To make matters worse, Dana, who definitely does not lead the life of a housewife, meets Oprah at the coffee shop. Desperate Cheryl “steals” her story in order to get some attention³³.

She can sometimes pretend but the truth is that Cheryl lives other people’s lives. Her boring existence is diversified mainly by her husband’s pranks as well as Dana’s and Andy’s problems. Because her brother and sister are singles, Cheryl constantly supports them when they are trying to find love and confers when their relationships end. In point of fact, Cheryl does not have three kids but six, including her husband. She constitutes a safe harbor, provides advice and always knows how to react properly.

When Andy or Dana meet someone, Cheryl tries to make things right. She organizes family dinners and eases eventual conflicts. In the *Guess*

³² *The Blow-Up* episode (2002) of *According to Jim* (ABC, 2001–2009).

³³ *Anec-Dont’s* (2005).

Who's Cooking Your Dinner? episode, Dana devoid of any cooking skills, asks Cheryl to prepare a meal for her boyfriend Ryan, so he could think that she is a perfect candidate for a wife. Cheryl agrees right away and has no objections even when her sister demands very sophisticated and complicated menu³⁴.

Cheryl is accustomed to preparing meals for others. Since her husband has a tendency to cause conflicts she frequently has to say sorry for him and make "apology cookies". Unlike her husband, Cheryl enjoys the esteem and respect among neighbors and does not want to lose that. As Jim put it she is: "obsessed with being liked"³⁵. Indeed, Cheryl is very polite and well mannered and shows no reluctance even towards very annoying neighbors like Devlins. Eccentric Tim and Cindy Devlin disrupt peaceful life of Cheryl and Jim. Cheryl, as befits good neighbor, bears their strange behavior with calm. Thanks to Jim she is experienced in that matter. The duty of getting rid of "uninvited guests" as always falls on Jim³⁶. This distribution of roles has been best defined by Jim himself in one of the episodes, when he says: "We can't both be mad dogs, somebody has to be the chain and that's you Cheryl"³⁷.

There is no doubt that she is the one who keeps everything in order. Cheryl is a perfectionist, entirely devoted to everything she does. When it turns out that Jim has high blood pressure she becomes a psychologist, dietician and masseur in one, always prepared and ready for sacrifices³⁸.

Unfortunately, Cheryl's desire to be a perfect wife blinds her. Perfect example of that state is *All the Rage* episode in which Cheryl tries to find explanation for her husband's rude behavior. She convinces Jim and herself that he has an IMS, meaning Irritable Male Syndrome. Jim of course takes advantage of this situation. Thanks to his syndrome he can help even less around the house than before. When Jim finally admits that he lied about the IMS, Cheryl listens to his convoluted explanation with attention and understanding. As befits a good wife, she does not get angry, on the contrary, she softly says: "O honey", confirming his conviction that eventually she will believe in everything he says³⁹.

The IMS episode, beside presenting Cheryl as trustful and naïve person, confirms sitcom's focus on Jim's character. Instead of taking on the subject of commonly known women's Premenstrual Syndrome, it presents its less known male equivalent. This is a very clear signal that *According to Jim* creators project is to show every aspect of life from man's perspective.

Cheryl's task is to be her husband's beautiful "supplement" and support his strange ideas no matter what. When Jim decides to spend Thanks-

³⁴ *Guess Who's Cooking Your Dinner?* (2005).

³⁵ *Thanksgiving Confidential* (2002).

³⁶ *Deal with the Devlins* (2003).

³⁷ *The Lemonade Stand* (2003).

³⁸ *Under Pressure* (2002).

³⁹ *All the Rage* (2007).

giving on bowling she delicately suggests that this is their son's first holiday. Because her argumentation does not make any impression on him, Cheryl gives up and returns to preparing dinner. She does not show anger, even when Jim's friends show up, claiming that he invited them for Thanksgiving. However, later events best demonstrate Cheryl's devotion to Jim. When the bowling gets out of power she brings candles and puts them along the track, so he could finish the game⁴⁰.

This is not the only case of Cheryl's full support for Jim. When their neighbor speaks contemptuously about Jim, Cheryl jumps at her like a wild animal. She is ready to get into cat fight only to defend his honor⁴¹. In *Lean on Me* episode Cheryl pours a drink on Jim's old friend because she sees her a threat to her marriage⁴². Cheryl's anger attacks in those particular situation are evidences of her great concern for family.

Nonetheless, something else in the *Lean on Me* episode deserves special attention. The sitcom assumption was to show the unmatched couple' sexy blonde and slobbish guy. Still, Cheryl is the one who has to fight for her man, not the other way round. Even more surprising is that when Jim is jealous, he only pretends to be, in order to make his wife feel better about herself. What is more, when he finds out that one of his clients is charmed by Cheryl, he uses her to mark his superiority over him. All indications are that stunning Cheryl should be grateful that so unattractive and boorish man took her to be his wife. Yet, in *According to Jim's* world everything is possible and in favor to the male character.

Those episodes also have another goal, that is to show Cheryl's human side and do a little scratch on her perfect image. In order to make her character more believable, even Jim has to feel Cheryl's anger at his own skin. From time to time she becomes a rebel. It is important to underline that Cheryl's opposition toward Jim often results from her sister's actions. Dana does not like Jim because he made her sister his servant. Thus, when Jim demands more space and requires Cheryl to remove some of her cloths from their closet, Dana does not want to let that happen. Cheryl is ready to accede to Jim's request because in her conviction marriage is a compromise. She quickly changes opinion when Dana makes a speech about women taking control and makes her aware that she is a suppressed housewife who has to fight for her rights. In order to visualize Cheryl's extremely low position she adds: "even the hamster has a wheel to run around on"⁴³. The conversation between Dana and Cheryl can be viewed as clash between feminism and post-feminism. Conciliatory Cheryl, recognizing the principle of compromise is the embodiment of post-feminism and

⁴⁰ *The Turkey Bowl* (2001).

⁴¹ *The Lemonade Stand* (2003).

⁴² *Lean on Me* (2005).

⁴³ *The Closet* (2002).

Dana who with satisfaction exclaims: "You go girl"⁴⁴, when she finally convinces Cheryl to oppose Jim, is the reflection of feminism.

The character of Dana deserves special attention. She is a complete opposite of her sister. The last thing that she would like to do is to be a housewife. Dana works in advertising industry and tries to find handsome, wealthy man who will do whatever she wants, meaning will be a henpecked husband. What is interesting here is that the show presents Dana in a bad light. In most cases she is manipulative and mean, while Cheryl is "a walking ideal". Her interventions in Cheryl's marriage do not come from concern, but the desire to make Jim's life harder.

However, Dana's actions are not directed toward Jim himself, but the attitude he presents. Jim's misogynistic views make that Dana finds punishing him really satisfying and pleasant. Since Jim is the least considerate person in the whole world she has many opportunities to do so. The list of Jim's sins is long and full of unbelievably stupid and disrespectful actions. It starts with throwing Cheryl's dead cat to their freezer, showing her lingerie picture to his band members, ending with giving his brother-in-law sperm instead of his for fertility study, in order to gain better results.

In spite of the fact that Jim's actions exceed all bounds of decency and despite Dana's great efforts, he gets away with it. Cheryl eventually forgives him. What is more, she is interested in his way of thinking and at the end expresses full understanding for it. It is quite surprising, if we consider the formula of domestic sitcom. According to it, Jim as a buffoon, at the end of each episode should learn a lesson from his more mature and sensible wife. However, this is not what happens here. *According to Jim* creators clearly wanted to break this pattern and reverse the situation, in order to maintain superior position of male character. Cheryl not only accepts Jim's ways, she eventually comes to conclusion that her husband is in the right. In one of the episodes, Jim says that while Cheryl is trying to change him, she is the one who changes and becomes more like him. Cheryl only seemingly dominates over Jim. All her features: looks, being excellent mother, great cook, serve the interests of Jim. She is supposed to make his life more beautiful and easier.

Everyone, including her sister treats her like a servant. While Cheryl prepares dinner, cleans and takes care of children, Jim, Andy and Dana are busy with watching the game and drinking beer. Moments in which Cheryl in her own anniversary washes the dishes with broken hand or digs grave for her beloved cat, while Jim stands next to her, say a lot about her position within marriage. She does not see anything wrong in the fact that her husband goes to the game, when she mourns her cat's death. With no signs of discontent, she prepares a meal for Jim and his companions.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

Cheryl also feels obliged to convince Jim not to feel guilty about it. That is why she kisses him and says: “I want you to go and have fun”⁴⁵.

How is this possible? Clearly, Cheryl lives in conviction that her husband has more right to have fun because he works hard to earn a living. Staying home and doing all the housework by herself is obvious for Cheryl because she chose a life of a homemaker. The impeccable performing of her duties and happy family are Cheryl’s sources of pride and satisfaction.

It seems that *According to Jim* creators’ goal was to create a wife of their dreams and simultaneously express opposition toward modern women increasing demands. They decided to prove that a woman can be happy even when she stays home and does not get any help from her husband. Unfortunately, they let their imagination run wild. From what viewers see on the screen it follows, that in their opinion a modern wife should be a perfect cook, excellent mother, beautiful, sexy lover and undemanding servant. She should be satisfied with the fact that her husband earns money and from time to time wins a romantic gesture. The problem is that that kind of woman can exist only in the world of television. However, if by some miracle she really existed, it is unlikely that she would have chosen irritating, slobbish and unattractive misogynist who says: “Woman, be quiet”⁴⁶ to be her husband.

According to Jim and Cheryl’s character, despite many similarities makes an interesting opposition to what *Everybody Loves Raymond* presents. Debra represents attitude to which *According to Jim* creators wanted to oppose. Patricia Heaton confirmed that assumption in one of the interviews by making a following interpretation of Debra’s character and her relationship with Raymond:

I think is very much like most women who, you know it’s kind of not enough that their husbands go out and earn a living, they also have to be sensitive and helping with the kids, and change diapers, and do grocery shopping, and remember your anniversary, and all kinds of stuff, and you know I guess it’s too much to ask, and that causes a lot of conflict. They were kind of Lucy and Ricky, it’s kind of modern Lucy and Ricky, and maybe just flipped, you know, Ray was the new Lucy⁴⁷.

Heaton took notice of a very important phenomenon occurring in the world of American sitcoms, that is duplication of existing schemes. Undoubtedly, contemporary situation comedies’ references to the previous ones are very strong, starting from the characters draft to the plots of single episodes. The connection between *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *According to Jim* are also noticeable. Enough to bring examples of motives

⁴⁵ *The Cat Came Back* (2001).

⁴⁶ *The Pizza Boy* (2002).

⁴⁷ *Archive of American Television: Patricia Heaton Talks about Her Everybody Loves Raymond Family*, [online] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFUs885ablw&feature=fvwrrel>>, accessed: 15.04. 2011.

which appeared in both sitcoms: the anniversary, namely husband's problems with remembering about them, wives' attempts to improve their marriages by common activities. Yet, what links them most is the formula based on marital life interrupted by family members.

Those two sitcoms are also linked by directing the attention toward male characters and storytelling from their point of view. Of course the character of wife here is also similar. Both Debra and Cheryl are homemakers, have more than two kids to take care of and what follows, lot of stuff on their heads. However, differences between them are much more significant. Debra's character just as other from *Everybody Loves Raymond* has its source in its creator's real life. As it was said earlier, Ray Romano and Phil Rosenthal drew abundantly from their own life experience. *According to Jim* and its wife character constitute a completely different case. Creators of that sitcom based on the world of television, they chose a safe option and benefited from best practices. *According to Jim* writers gathered several features from different sitcoms wives, threw them into one bag, mixed and created not a real person but a television creature. Thus, Cheryl is a combination of domestic goddess Donna Reed, funny Lucy Ricardo with small admixture of her contemporary Debra Barone. While Debra strongly separates from the 1950s "pushovers", Cheryl despite significant advantages over Jim, visibly gets closer to them. Her figure proves that sitcom repeats itself.

Conclusion

We can venture to say that thanks to *According to Jim* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* history of television comes full circle, comes back to its origins. Undoubtedly, both situation comedies show that television trends return just as trends in fashion, modified but still with the note of nostalgia for the old times. They are not like *I Love Lucy* or *The Donna Reed Show* but are deludingly similar. *According to Jim* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* account for modern version of domestic comedies⁴⁸. Just as in mid-1970s and 1980s, there was a throwback to traditional vision of family, of course with some differences.

Fathers are not anymore omniscient, on the contrary, they are totally hopeless without their smart wives⁴⁹. So far, that kind of situation might have occurred only in working-class sitcoms. Why? Apparently only a badly-paid, blue-collar worker could be instructed by a woman. In the case of a man with high status, well paid job which provides a comfortable life to his wife, it was unthinkable.

⁴⁸ J. Reed, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

Thus, the biggest change constitutes here an element of opposition in the form of wife, who undermines the authority of the husband. The fact that women have demands toward men and voice which they have to respect, seems to be the result of feminist movement. The couples ability to compromise and negotiation, on the other hand, seems to be the move toward post-feminism⁵⁰.

Everybody Loves Raymond and *According to Jim* include also another element of post-feminist rhetoric. In accordance with the post-feminism slogan: "Patriarchy is gone and has been replaced by choice"⁵¹, contemporary domestic comedies underline the fact that the women made independent choices, they decided to be the housewives. Debra and Cheryl chose the life of a homemaker and despite many disadvantages, this life gives them satisfaction.

However, the above statement, used by Bonnie Dow, has a completely different overtones. What she suggests is that the word "choice" sounds really nice and promising, but in reality it does not change much. The women's biology supported by social expectations, still act against and strongly limit women's choice. Women, despite the access to work market, as caregivers cannot fully profit from that access. "They are cut off from social roles that offer responsibility and authority"⁵², wrote the authors of a book under the title *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*.

The middle-class family sitcom strengthens the illusion, that post-feminist ideology works perfectly, both for men and women. Indeed, on the surface it may seem that it is. Wives dominate over their husbands, with looks and intellect. They keep everything in order, their husbands take their opinion into account and even sometimes fear them. Yet, they are still prisoners of their houses, what is suggested by Dana, when she compares Cheryl to the hamster living in the cage. Even dominative Debra is forced to remain just a housewife. When she tries to go back to work, she gets fired, when she wants to be the president of the school board, she loses with her male opponent. Cheryl, on the other hand, does not even try. She agrees with her role as a housewife and Jim's as the breadwinner. Simultaneously, secretly puts some money, because her cheap husband shares it with her unwillingly. In the light of all presented facts, claiming that Debra and Cheryl, mothers of three kids and wives of inconsiderate husbands, have a choice, is far-fetched. This situation brings to mind the words uttered by Polish writer, Hanna Bakula: "It will take some time before woman will stop being perceived as the victim of man's love and become the partner"⁵³.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ B.J. Dowe, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*, Philadelphia 1996, p. 95.

⁵² L. Johnson, J. Lloyd, op. cit., p. 6.

⁵³ The words uttered by Hanna Bakula during *Dzień Dobry TVN* program [no other data].

Streszczenie

„Wielki powrót do domu” – innymi słowy, historia i sitcom rodzinny lubią się powtarzać

Artykuł porusza tematykę wizerunku żony i rodziny w „krzywym zwierciadle” sitcomów. Obrazy te są często ironiczne, satyryczne, krytyczne, wskazujące na miejsca pęknięć w strukturze społecznej i tkance obyczajowej. Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza współczesnego amerykańskiego sitcomu rodzinnego oraz funkcjonującego w nim obrazu żony pochodzącej z klasy średniej, pod kątem jego związków z tradycyjnym sitcomem z lat pięćdziesiątych. Jednym z istotnych elementów analizy jest próba ukazania, że pod płaszczykiem drobnych modyfikacji po półwieczu komedia sytuacyjna z obrazem żony zakreśliła pełne koło. Autorka próbuje wykazać, że retoryka postfeminizmu przebrzmiewająca w serialach *Jim wie lepiej* oraz *Wszyscy kochają Raymonda* stanowi współczesną wersję panującego w latach pięćdziesiątych kultu domatorstwa.

Summary

The Great Homecoming – in other words, history and the domestic sitcom repeat themselves

This article discusses the subject of the image of wives and family life through the “distorting mirror” of sitcoms. Those representations are frequently ironical, satirical or critical, indicating the location of cracks in the social structure and moral fabric. The main objective of this paper is to analyse the contemporary American domestic sitcom and the image of a middle-class wife, in terms of its relationship with the traditional sitcom of the 1950s. One of the most significant elements of the analysis constitutes an attempt to prove that, under the cover of minor modifications after half a century, the situation comedy and its wife figure have come full circle. The author tries to demonstrate, based on *According to Jim* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, how post-feminist rhetoric has actually produced a modern version of the 1950s Cult of Domesticity.