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## “I Love Lucy” Gender Analysis and its Influence on Popularity and Longevity

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**“I Love Lucy” Gender Analysis and its Influence on Popularity and Longevity**

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree in  
Bachelors of Arts in Communications and Media Studies  
School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the undergraduate program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Department of Communications and Media Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, an analytical approach was taken to examine the television show *I Love Lucy*. The contributing factors to the show's continued success were considered, including Lucille Ball's comedic style, domesticity and the role of housewives, marital relations, pregnancy on television, and the larger gender representations with a subtopic of social norms. Upon studying the above aspects of *I Love Lucy*, it is clear that each topic played an essential role in the success of the show. Ball's comedic style combined with her portrayal of a 1950s housewife, and the social norms that she and her co-stars broke through paved the way for the enduring *I Love Lucy* phenomenon.

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## **Television in the 1950s**

In America in the 1950s there was no communication medium more dominant than television. Television made its way into American culture in 1948, when Americans began to purchase this luxury item. When televisions emerged on the scene, they were very expensive and the homes that had one became the meeting place of the neighborhood. Sitting down to watch television was a family event, and television became known as a domestic medium (Anderson). Homes were configured in a way where the television was at the center and it became a group space where family and friends could eat and watch at the same time (Mock, 2011). Television transcended belief, and Americans spent more time watching it than reading newspapers, going to the movies, and listening to the radio. By the end of the 1950s, nearly 90 percent of all American households owned televisions (Baughman, 2007).

In order to appeal to the masses, television networks had to decide how to market this new medium. A combination of performing arts and recreating entertainment that Americans accepted on radio and in movies was how television was crafted. Many of the tactics used in radio and in front of live audiences were applied to television. Additionally, networks knew that postwar Americans armed with higher education and financial stability would be expecting a lot out of this new mode of communication. Television was a way to expose Americans to familiar ways of life.

An essential piece of the success of television was to present to consumers the same characters week after week that they would become familiar with. One idea was to transfer the types of shows on radio to television. New types of programs emerged in hopes of increasing viewership. One type of program that appeared was situation comedies. Situation comedies are series where a specific set of funny things happen to a specific set of characters (Spangler, 2003).

The situation part intertwined with comedy because of amplification of everyday life events (Landay, 2005). The two major television networks of the time, NBC and CBS, came to realize the importance of this type of show because it generated a new audience flow which in turn benefitted the network monetarily (Baughman, 2007). Of the various situation comedies, only one is known as the greatest hit of the 1950s: *I Love Lucy*.

### ***I Love Lucy* Introduction/Background**

On the evening of October 15<sup>th</sup> 1951, America was exposed to a television show that would come to be known as “The Mona Lisa of television”. In the nearly sixty-three years since its debut, *Lucy* has proven to become an American icon. Every detail that went into creating this show was vital to its success. The roots of the show are perhaps more complicated than most, but the stipulations that were met in order to cast and produce it infinitely paid off.

The concept for *I Love Lucy* stemmed from the radio series *My Favorite Husband*, which starred Lucille Ball and Richard Dunning. Columbia Broadcasting System offered Lucille Ball the role as zany housewife Liz Cugat in a new radio program where she would pull off schemes that would drive her husband crazy. The show was proposed to Lucille Ball as a way to segue her career into television if it were to succeed. The comedic genius of Lucille Ball was realized and feeding off of the show’s success from 1948-1950, so CBS began talks of transforming *My Favorite Husband* into a television series (McClay, 1995). In conjunction with the success of the radio show was CBS’s need to create a show that would bring their ratings up to match those of NBC (Baughman, 2007). To the surprise and delight of most, *I Love Lucy* surpassed all expectations and became the staple of situation comedies.



In order to launch the show, Lucille Ball made the request that her real life husband, Desi Arnaz, portray her husband on screen (Baughman, 2007). CBS was not convinced that he was the right choice, because they feared that an interracial marriage between a white woman and a Cuban man was unrealistic (Anderson). Ball's tenacity to put the show on air took over and she and Arnaz proceeded to take their act to vaudeville to test the waters and see if Americans would not only believe that they were married, but find their antics funny.

In 1950, Ball and Arnaz formed Desilu Productions and from 1950-1951 they performed their vaudeville act to audience and critical acclaim. They reworked the show to depict a Cuban bandleader whose wife tried desperately to get into the act. Despite the success of the act, CBS president William Paley was still reluctant to approve the show, until NBC showed interest in Ball and Arnaz, which provoked Paley to support the show (McClay, 1995).

From the beginning, Ball and Arnaz had immense involvement including the choice filming location, which they insisted was in Los Angeles instead of the standard New York (Baughman, 2007, p. 129). Additionally, Arnaz wanted the show to be filmed in front of a live audience in order to make the show feel like a play. This created monetary issues as the budget had not allotted for his plan to use a three-camera technique with the help of renowned cinematographer Karl Freund. In order to compensate for the costs, Ball and Arnaz took a \$1,000 pay cut each week for a year, and in return were given rights to 100 percent of the show (McClay, 1995).

Additionally, the characters of Fred and Ethel Mertz were added to the show. The idea for these characters came from a plot line on *My Favorite Husband*. The creator, Jess Oppenheimer, decided that Lucy needed a best friend to confide in and scheme with and Ricky needed a male counterpart as well (McClay, 1995). These two characters would provide a

contrast to Lucy and Ricky that was not too large, in order to make their friendships believable. Fortunately, Vivian Vance and William Frawley were talented enough as actors to set off Ball and work well enough with Arnaz to be able to play their counterparts without being overlooked.

When the terms of the show were met and ironed out, the title *I Love Lucy* was coined and has since become famous. The “I” of course refers to Desi Arnaz’s character of Ricky Ricardo, and the love not only refers to his love for his wife, but also America’s love for Lucy. From its debut season in 1951, to its sixth and final season in 1957, all 181 episodes of *I Love Lucy* captivated audiences and have continued to do so for six decades.

Describing the beginning of *I Love Lucy* creator, producer, and head writer Jess Oppenheimer stated, “We were an eager and innocent crew embarking on a trip in a medium of which we knew nothing. We all knew that Lucille Ball’s glowing talent was the one irreplaceable ingredient, which served as the base for the show. The rest must be credited to a group, not an individual....We were a happy group, with everyone’s opinion respected, and we had no inkling of the high-flying success that lay ahead”(McClay, 1995, p. 37).

### **Lucille Ball Career Pre-*I Love Lucy***

Contrary to popular belief, Lucille Ball was not always known as Hollywood’s most famous redhead. Although she came to be known simply as Lucy, she did not always have the privilege of being recognized solely by her first name.

Ball had an inkling for show business from a young age. She would attend vaudeville shows with her grandfather from which she became interested in acting (McClay, 1995). In high school she would act in plays but in order to be at the caliber of those on Broadway, she decided to enroll in the Robert Milton-John Murray Anderson School of Drama. She encountered

troubles at the school and it was determined that she had a lack of talent and should return home (Kanfer, 2004).

After returning home for a few years, she made her way back to New York City where she constantly auditioned for any role she could get, which was mostly modeling. In 1928 she had her break and landed the role as a model at Hattie Carnegie's. She modeled for a year and then decided to return home, only to stay for a little over a year and then return to New York as a model for Hattie Carnegie's once again (Kanfer, 2004). This job led her to become a "Chesterfield Girl" who modeled for the brand of cigarettes. During this time, she met Sylvia Halo, an agent looking for one more girl for a group she was sending to California to work for Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Ball accepted and in 1933 starred in the movie *Roman Scandals* and was then signed by Columbia Pictures the following year (McClay, 1995).

The contract with Columbia fell through but her role in the movie *Roberta* led to a new contract with Radio-Keith-Orpheum. Working there, she appeared in nearly forty movies but was never able to make her mark on Hollywood. She even dubbed herself the "Queen of the B-pluses," referring to the fact that the movies she was in never made it big, or flopped altogether (Kanfer, 2004). Her contract with RKO ended in 1942 and she was then signed by MGM. With MGM, she continued to make movies including *Du Barry Was a Lady* and *Best Foot Forward*, among others, when in 1943 she decided to expand her career to radio, which would later be the start of *I Love Lucy* (McClay, 1995).

In the mid to late 1940s, Ball's career faded and when her contract with MGM ended she was a free agent, until she was picked up by Columbia Pictures. In 1948, CBS offered Ball a role in a new radio program called *My Favorite Husband* (McClay, 1995). The show aired from 1948 to March of 1951. Like many stars, radio propelled Ball to stardom and from *My Favorite*

*Husband* came *I Love Lucy*. For the first time, Ball was able to hone her comedy skills and use them to her advantage. Her brand of comedy is now what she is known for and what has made her the queen of comedy.

### **Lucille Ball Comedic Style/Comediennes**

Comedy is uniquely gender biased. While television has advanced in part because of contemporary gender relations, the roots of comedy are gender prejudicial. Questions are still raised about whether women are funny because traditionally the term comedian only referred to males. Comedy is associated with male physicality because before television, stand-up was the primary medium for comedy and stand-up was described as aggressive and inappropriate for women (White, 2010). With the emergence of television came situation comedies, which as previously mentioned were domestically centered. This medium allowed women to break into the comedic scene, and was ultimately where Lucille Ball made her mark on the genre.

Ball was able to combine the talents she learned from her twenty years in show business to create one iconic character. She wanted to portray the conventional sitcom character with hints of vaudeville. This allowed Ball to explore different aspects of comedy previously reserved for men. She branded her style of comedy as a mix of femininity and slapstick (Doty, 1990). The standard gimmicks that Ball integrated into her character include the cry, spider voice, drats, dodge dance, open mouth, and the language-mangling comeback (McClay, 1995).

The cry is perhaps the most well known and most imitated. When Ricky became angry with Lucy she would fall back on her crying tactic, which was a high-pitched noise similar to an ambulance. The sound alone is enough to be recognized without even seeing her face. The cry is Lucille Ball's comedic staple. The spider voice was given this name by the writers behind *I Love*

*Lucy*. Its origins came from a radio commercial where Ball portrayed Little Miss Muffet. In *I Love Lucy* Ball used this voice when she was confronted about a scheme that did not go as planned. Ball would make a pinched face and let out a sort of “yeeooo” noise. The “drats,” as “*I Love Lucy*” writers called it, was when Ball would sharply put her arms at her sides with clenched fists. She would do this when she got caught in a scheme or when something went wrong (McClay, 1995).

The dodge dance was when Ball would put her arms out and shuffle her feet in a frantic motion. She would do this to avoid advances from an angry counterpart, most often her husband Ricky. The open-mouth is another one of Ball’s comedic gestures it was a silent action to express disbelief (McClay, 1995). This gimmick was one of the ways Ball incorporated vaudeville with comedy, as she did not need to speak a word to get her point across and make the audience laugh. Lastly, Ball’s comedic style was unique in that she used her husband’s trouble with the English language to her benefit. Whenever Ricky would mispronounce a word or phrase, Lucy would mock him and repeat it back the same way he said it. The way Ball teased Arnaz’s language barrier, along with the crying stint, are the most well known gags on *I Love Lucy* that Ball brought to the show.

Also contributing to her comedic style was her fiery red hair. Her hair was a source of jokes including her ability to keep her hair that color and her reactions to Ricky criticizing her hair color. Soon, her hair became a link to her screwball logic and she even became known as the “crazy redhead”(Doty, 1990, p. 6). In contrast, her natural beauty posed a problem to her potential comedic abilities. In order to be perceived as funny, she need to make herself ugly and luckily she was not afraid of that (White, 2010). Ball wanted to distinguish the character Lucy Ricardo from her previous roles because she did not want to play a glamorous, wealthy woman

but rather the average housewife. She was able to play an exaggerated form of a housewife who intertwined comedy with femininity.

Although Ball would often dress gender-opposite in her role, she had the unique ability to still appear feminine. A lot of her antics surrounded her desire to get into the show as either a chorus girl or dancer, which emphasized female sexuality, all the while making fun of it. In order to stray attention away from her natural beauty or any hints of female sexuality in her performances, Ball would dress gender inappropriate or gender opposite (Doty, 1990). The need for Ball to act this way was because in the 1950s, femininity was not synonymous with comedy. Femininity at this time meant intelligence and confidence. Female comediennes then had both a feminine and masculine identity, in essence becoming transgender figures in order to be perceived as funny (White, 2010). This created an inverted idea of female sexuality represented in the way Ball acted and dressed on screen.

Ball realized the restrictions that comedy had on female sexuality and used them to her advantage. She often dressed in outrageous costumes or put herself in situations where she would fall in the mud or cover her face in chocolate. Put concisely, “Ball frequently tried to deemphasize the sexual aspects of her slapstick performances as Lucy by having Lucy make herself up as an ugly hag, usually with a fright wig and a few blackened-out teeth to distract from the otherwise fetishized hair and mouth” (Doty, 1990, p. 11).

A prime example of Ball dressing in what Doty describes as drag is in the episode entitled “The Operetta” (13 October 1952). The premise of this episode was that Ball’s character Lucy Ricardo falls short on funds for her women’s club and decides to put on a play to get the funds back. She writes an operetta where she plays the maiden, but since Ethel sings better, she ends up playing the Queen of the Gypsies. During the play she emerges from a well, dressed in a

long layered skirt and baggy shirt with tons of necklaces and a beaded headpiece. Her hair is down and disheveled and over half her teeth are colored in black. While she dresses like a woman, it is not normal dress. “Lucy disrupts white, middle-class heteronormative forms of feminine behaviour” (White, 2010, p. 356). Additionally, having her teeth blacked out and messy hair only refers back to the idea that women had to make themselves appear ugly to be considered humorous.

Another episode where Ball dresses in drag is “The Million Dollar Idea” (11 January 1954). In this episode Lucy and Ethel come up with an idea to sell Lucy’s salad dressing. They decide that promoting it on television is a good idea and proceed to do so. Unfortunately, this leads them to receive more orders than they can fill. To fix the problem, they go on television again and instead of promoting the salad dressing, they make it seem like it is the worst dressing in the world. In the promotion, Ethel plays herself and Lucy dresses up as a hillbilly and tries the dressing and states how horrible it is, effectively ending the rapid increase in demands. In her hillbilly costume, Ball dresses with a large floppy hat, checkered pantsuit that is too large and an oversized coat. She also blacks out some of her teeth. This is yet another of the plethora of times Ball de-emphasizes her femininity in order to come off as funny.

In contrast to Ball’s need to dress gender opposite are present day comediennees. Unlike female comediennees in the 1950s, present day comediennees dress gender appropriately and even emphasize their sexuality. In contemporary times, dressing to accentuate female sexuality actually adds to comedy. This is because it presents a contrast between beautiful women and shocking or male behavior (White, 2010). Looks are now very important in comedy and women that are attractive can now be funny because the things that they do and say are not what would be expected from such beautiful women. An example given by White is Katherine Heigl, who

does not have to dress up or color her teeth in to come off as funny. The appearance of a comedienne, however, is not the only thing that has changed since *I Love Lucy*; the larger representation of women have as well.

### **The Role of Housewife**

The ways in which men and women are characterized on-screen are indicative of the time period in which the show takes place, and the social constructions of the time. *I Love Lucy* aired right after WWII, when America was in a postwar stage. Men were coming back to work and women who were employed during the war were forced to revert to housewifery. The overarching theme of *I Love Lucy* was that women get tired of unemployment and want to break into the workforce. Lori Landay labels this idea as postwar domestic ideology. Post-WWII the mindset was on a return to domesticity. The unforeseen trouble was finding a balance between life inside and outside the home. The idealized representation of marriage, family, and home was a way to show the traditional separation of genders. Contributing to this separation was the increase in marriage rates, the baby boom, suburban housing, and reinforced gender roles around the home (Landay, 2005, p. 90). The appeal of Lucy Ricardo was that while she represented a housewife, she put her own spin on it by trying to break out of the confines of domestic life.

The thing that set Ball's character apart was that she always rebelled against her sex-typed role. Lucy Ricardo did not desire to simply be labeled as a housewife. She continually fought to do more than tend to the house and care for her husband. She represented what women wanted to do, but were too afraid to pursue. In this she presented juxtaposition between domestic ideology and social norms.



Ball personified one of the most well known cultural figures, a trickster (Landay, 1999). A trickster uses deception to attain their goals, all the while entering into situations that cross social boundaries. The trickster takes on different personas, dressing up, crossing gender and class lines. While most times the trickster's schemes do not pan out, the hilarity of the attempt is what draws audiences in. The identification as a trickster allowed Ball to display her unique talent of physical comedy. "Lucy is specifically a female trickster because her attempts to circumvent the limitations of postwar domesticity oscillate between masculine and feminine social roles, spaces, practices, and metaphors" (Landay, 2005). Her rebellious acts included trying to attain a job, performing at Ricky's club, and tricking Ricky in order to pull off a scheme (Anderson). Lucy Ricardo's aspirations to find an opening to a world outside the home is an early reference to female ambition (Spangler, 2003).

The flipside of Lucy Ricardo's character was that while she always pursued show business and a multitude of other jobs, she never succeeded. While she had the courage to attempt to break out of her confined home life she was never able to make a career for herself. Her failure reminded postwar America that women should not and cannot succeed in the workplace (Landay, 2005). While much of *I Love Lucy* was based on real life, Lucy Ricardo's ambitions depicted a fantasized version of domestic reality. The zany tactics that she used to break out of her confines were representative of the idea that being a housewife got boring (Tueth, 2004). Author Gerard Jones sums up the character of Lucy Ricardo in a concise way, stating, "She is the self-embodiment of female energy with no valid outlet. She is the mid-century American woman with no job, no power, no reinforcement for her aspirations. She is a comic demon called forth from the boredom and frustration of an entire generation of housewives"(McClay, 1995).

An iconic example of Lucy attempting to get a job is in the episode entitled “Job Switching” (15 September 1952). In this episode Lucy and Ethel challenge Ricky and Fred to switch conventional gender roles for one week. The women therefore have to go out and find jobs while the men stay home and cook and clean the house. In the beginning Ricky impresses Lucy with his cooking skills until she finds out he ordered the food instead of cooked it. Lucy and Ethel on the other hand surprisingly did not play games and go to Acme Employment Agency and get jobs at a candy-making company.

Lucy starts out in the dipping department where she miserably fails to dip candy in chocolate by covering herself and a coworker in chocolate sauce. Meanwhile, Ricky and Fred try to cook dinner and also fail. Eventually, Lucy and Ethel are demoted to the candy-wrapping department where they try their best to succeed but inevitably get fired. In the end, the men and women decide that they are best off with their roles as housewives and working men. This episode is different in that it shows Lucy trying to get a job that does not involve show business. Once again, she fails at her attempt to insert herself in the working world. This episode reinforced social norms to viewers. At the end of the episode, the Mertzes and Ricardos returned to their traditional gender roles. . Essentially these four characters are saying in this instance that women belong at home because they cannot hold jobs anywhere else.

A stark contrast can be made between Lucy Ricardo and Lucille Ball. While Lucille Ball liked to refer to herself as the average housewife, she was much different. Unlike her character, she was successfully able to make a career in show business and in the corporate world. Specifically in *I Love Lucy* Ball ingeniously made Lucy Ricardo’s lack of skills work to her advantage and turned them into a variety of comedic stunts (Doty, 1990). Interestingly, the lack of talent for her on-screen character only propelled Ball’s actual talent for comedy. Ball’s career

was different than most women because she was the first female to break into the world of situation comedy for television. As previously mentioned, comedy (and more specifically physical comedy) was a male dominated field and Ball's work on *I Love Lucy* proved to be groundbreaking for comediennes (Landay, 2005).

Ball had an aptitude for spontaneity and was easily able to achieve what Landay calls *Sprezzatura*: "The Italian term for 'the art that conceals art, the supremely artificial that strikes us as supremely natural'" (Landay, 2010, p. 45). While for the most part, she followed the script; in certain moments she would add or change one movement that instantaneously made it more humorous. An example is in the episode "L.A at Last" (7 February 1955) when she spills food on William Holden and then has to disguise herself when Ricky brings him over. She decides to wear a fake nose and it catches on fire when she lights a cigarette, which leads her to pick up her coffee cup and put her nose in it. This was not planned as it was written that she would just put out the fire. The smallest of details that Ball integrated into the show proved to be the funniest.

Her knack for picking up skills was also beneficial for the show because it allowed the writers to put her in any situation. She easily picked up on instruments she was asked to play or dances she was taught, to the point where her skills made it less humorous and she had to "pretend" that she had no skills. Her astounding talent was what anchored the show, and the producers knew it (McClay, 1995). If they were to lose Ball the entire show would go down the drain. Without her impeccable timing, vaudevillian facial and body movements, and willingness to play any role as Lucy Ricardo, there would be no *I Love Lucy*.

Ball's skills were not only in performing. Her knack for picking things up quickly, transferred over to the corporate side of *I Love Lucy* and the creation of Desilu Productions. As a result of taking their act to vaudeville, Ball and Arnaz formed Desilu Productions in 1950. They

decided that they wanted to create a company where they would be equal partners. When CBS picked up the show, Desilu financed the pilot and subsequently gained the rights to the *I Love Lucy* (Harmon, 2003). While Arnaz handled most of the off-screen business, Ball was the head honcho on stage. She was the boss and took her role as an owner very seriously, always striving for perfection. By 1957, Desilu Productions was the most successful production company in America, owning more sound stages than MGM, and owning RKO (Johnson, 1996).

The tumultuous marriage of Ball and Arnaz took a toll on Desilu Studios and by the mid-1960s their finances began to decline. This led Ball to buy out Arnaz for full ownership in 1962 (Johnson, 1996). She was the first woman to head a major television production company. This again reinforced the idea that she was not just the zany housewife she portrayed for so many years on screen. When she acquired Desilu Studios they were in economic turmoil and her decision to hire Oskar Katz as executive vice president served her well (“Entrepreneur”). With his help, Ball was able to produce shows such as “Star Trek” and “Mission Impossible” which made Desilu Studios financially successful once again. In 1967 she ended up selling the company to Gulf + Western, but she remained on screen and continued her career.

### **Marital Relations**

An aspect of *I Love Lucy* that relates back to the central theme of domesticity is the representation of marriage, specifically between Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. Many of the episodes were steeped in the context of a battle of the sexes, “To Lucy life is a series of contests between her and her husband, and she is determined to win” (McClay, 1995, p. 40). Most often the storylines would revolve around Lucy first asking Ricky if she could be part of the show and he either denying her or forbidding her to try out all together (Spangler, 2003). He assumed that she

had no reputable talents that could be used outside the home (Doty, 1990). Additionally, his desire was for her to remain domesticated because he wanted her to provide him with all of the comforts of home (Landay, 2005). If given the chance, Ricky would ask Lucy to sing or come to his club to perform a dance that he knew she would inevitably fail.

Many of the conflicts in the show arise from Lucy withdrawing too much money from her monthly allowance, and Ricky would let his temperamental side take over and get angry with her, pointing her finger and backing her into a wall. In addition, there are instances where Ricky spanked Lucy like a child. In this sense he acted as an almost patriarchal figure. It is reinforced however, that there is not a lack of love between these characters and although they quarrel there is always the presence of love (McClay, 1995). However, the tactics that Ricky portrayed when dealing with Lucy were somewhat exaggerations of the 1950s male dominated culture (Mock, 2011).

Putting Ricky in the category of a patriarch makes Lucy out to be the child. Alexander Doty calls this “infantilization”. The premise of the show again is Lucy’s urge to cloud the line between domesticity and the workplace. The idea of a woman acting like a child comes from her failed attempts at pushing social norms of what a woman should be. The situations that she put herself into displayed childlike hindrances. For example, her failure to sing in tune, play an instrument, follow a dance, and overall clumsiness plays to the fact that she does not have the capabilities of an adult. While Lucy was demeaned to a child, that was the norm of the 1950s housewife (Doty, 1990). A paradox is created between who Lucy wanted to be and how she is portrayed. While she desires independence and a change to societies expectations of gender, she is never able to attain them.

Although the character of Lucy Ricardo was seemingly bound by the restrictions of her husband, she would almost always disobey him. As a result of her disobedience, Ricky would express his frustration with his wife by yelling at her because she is working against social norms (Mock, 2011). On the off chance that Lucy would succeed in her ploy to break social boundaries and land an audition, she always used her maiden name of Lucy McGillicuddy (Doty, 1990). It can be inferred that this was used in part because she did not want to be associated with Ricky Ricardo because she often auditioned in spite of his restrictions. Another facet is that she wanted to show that she had a life before Ricky, alluding to the bigger picture that she can be an independent woman, who thinks and acts out of her own free will.

Lucy's decisions to follow her own path and question social order are a precursor to what feminist Andrea Press calls the second wave of feminism in the 1960s (Spangler, 2003). Lucy's resistance against her limitations was a source of inspiration for women in the 1950s. The show pushed viewers to see that the domestic ideal did not have to equate women with home life, which provided a foundation for the coming feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Landay, 2005). This also ties back with Lucille Ball's real life endeavors and how she also pushed the boundaries for women in the workforce at this time.

### **Real Life Marriage**

The drive that Ball exhibited on screen was also present off screen, just in different ways. The onscreen marriage of Lucy and Ricky represented the typical 1950s husband and wife getting into atypical situations. On the other hand, their real life marriage was much more tumultuous than that of their characters. From the beginning, Ball and Arnaz had marital troubles because their work schedules took them to different sides of the country. This led to hardships

between the couple, with rumors of cheating following Arnaz. The solution came when CBS decided to make *My Favorite Husband* into a television show. Ball saw this as a perfect opportunity to keep her marriage together by working collaboratively on one project (Doty, 1990). In order to do this she had to convince CBS president William Paley to cast Arnaz to play her on-screen husband. The fear, as previously mentioned, was that viewers would not believe an All-American girl was married to a Cuban bandleader.

The original thought was to re-write the part of the husband to fit Arnaz's personality and background. Ball would play a movie star and Arnaz a bandleader, and they would perform together. When sponsors did not pick it up, it was suggested that they rework the show and make the characters an average, middle-class couple that viewers could relate to (Doty, 1990). From this came the idea to base the characters off of Arnaz and Ball's real life marriage. Storylines would center in the home with the couple getting ready in the morning or at night for bed, as they would normally do in real life (Landay, 2005). Additionally, the quarreling that was such a prominent part of Ball and Arnaz's marriage would be emulated on screen. The premise of the episodes would be them getting into a squabble and then working it out at the end like they always did off screen. The theme song even states in the lyrics, "Sometimes we quarrel but then, how we love making up again", referring back to both the Ricardos and the Arnazs.

This idea of creating a couple that viewers could identify with was in part due to the fact that in the 1950s America was still largely racist, and in order to have Arnaz on the show he needed to play a version of himself because he would not be believable as the typical Caucasian husband as written in *My Favorite Husband*. He needed to portray a macho yet suave Cuban instead of a stereotypical American husband (McClay, 1995). The role was re-written to fit his ethnic origin and his job became a bandleader at a nightclub called the Tropicana. He would use

his natural talent as a musical performer singing and playing the bongos to once again remind that audience of his Cuban culture. His Latin temper was also emphasized by his reactions to Lucy's antics. In order for him not to seem too domineering the audience needed to feel empathy towards his character. To do this, his language barrier, distinctive physical humor and clumsiness were highlighted (Doty, 1990, p. 8). In essence, the character of Ricky Ricardo had to constantly remind the viewers that he was a Cuban man living in American culture.

Furthermore, the simple fact that the Ricardos represented an interracial marriage was pushing social norms. They were the first interracial couple ever on television. This could have caused problems with viewership, but because of their success with taking the act to vaudeville there was less concern that viewers would be affected by it. This proved to be true and the marriage was deemed believable. The relatable storylines paired with the audience's knowledge that Ball and Arnaz were a married couple in real life was a big part of the show's continued success.

### **Pregnancy on Television**

The central theme of American life in the 1950s was creating the nuclear family essentially a happily married couple and their children. At the time *I Love Lucy* aired the baby boom was in full swing. In the first season of the show, the Ricardos were childless and there was no desire or hint at the fact that they may have a child. This changed when at the end of filming that season, Ball learned she was pregnant with her second child in real life. Ball and Arnaz were fearful that the show would have to be cancelled as a result (McClay, 1995). This is because in 1950s America, it was considered distasteful to publicly show a woman as pregnant or even say the word pregnant on television. This created a gap between people's actual



experiences and cultural representations of real life (Landay, 2010). A large part of the reason for not showing pregnancy was that it alluded to female sexuality and as present in *I Love Lucy* there are no mentions of sexuality at all.

With the knowledge that pregnancy was not socially acceptable for television, Ball and Arnaz approached Jess Oppenheimer with the preconceived notion that the show would have to be cancelled. To their surprise, Oppenheimer was pleased with the news and wanted to write her real-life pregnancy into the show. There was also the issue of whether the show's sponsors would agree to this, and Arnaz met with them to make sure they would (McClay, 1995). This agreement would eventually lead to the first representation of pregnancy in television history, making Lucille Ball the first woman to ever be acknowledged as pregnant on television. To appease the sponsors and make sure not to offend the audience, each script that involved the pregnancy was examined and then approved by a priest, rabbi, and minister. Additionally, the instead of using the word pregnant, they used the French word for expecting, "enceinte" (Landay, 2010).

The storylines surrounding the pregnancy included Lucy finding out she is pregnant and telling Ricky, preparing for the baby, mood swings, picking out baby names, and eventually the arrival of Little Ricky (Landay, 2010). The representation of what a real life couple would go through in preparations for a child was a first for television. *I Love Lucy* now created, "a new arena for comedy, one in line with the focus on domesticity and family in the wider culture and television's focus on the home and everyday life in particular"(Landay, 2010, p. 69). Similar to the first representation of an interracial couple, *I Love Lucy* was once again pushing social norms.

The audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive as was the coverage in the press. The fact that the storyline was something that the viewers could relate too, or was happening in their own lives, proved beneficial because it was easier to accept. Lucy and Ricky were essentially creating the American dream of the 1950s (Davies & Smith, 1998). Lucy's pregnancy was not making a joke of motherhood and pregnancy, but rather providing television with a basis for portraying pregnancy on television as a whole. The tasteful way that her pregnancy was handled on-screen was something of a model to be revered. (Davies & Smith).

Two specific episodes in the pregnancy storyline stand out and have become well known pieces of television history. The first is entitled "Lucy is Enceinte" (8 December 1952), where she finds out that she is pregnant and tells Ricky. The episode begins with Lucy thinking she is sick, only later to find out that she is pregnant. She spends most of the episode trying to tell Ricky the good news but keeps getting interrupted. She finally prevails when she goes to his nightclub, the Tropicana, and writes a note asking him to sing a song for a couple who is expecting.

As he begins singing, he sees Lucy in the front row and realizes that it is he and Lucy that are expecting. After this realization, he attempts to finish the song, mixing up the lyrics, eyes filled with tears. Lucy then begins to cry as well, in a pure state of happiness. Although this moment was written in the script, the emotions were real. Ball and Arnaz had not planned to cry tears of happiness, but it naturally happened at their joy of having a second child (Landay, 2010). In this moment, the real lives of Ball and Arnaz intertwined with their fictional characters onstage for the world to see. This scene broke down the barrier of private and public life and gave viewers a glimpse of who Ball and Arnaz really were.

The other significant episode is “Lucy Goes to the Hospital”(19 January 1953). This episode begins with Lucy, Ricky, Fred, and Ethel rehearsing their plan for when Lucy says she is ready to go to the hospital. As time progresses, she reveals that it is time to go to the hospital for the delivery of her baby. Coincidentally, Ball’s doctor had her caesarean section scheduled for January 19<sup>th</sup>, the same day this episode aired. On that Monday evening, 44 million Americans tuned in to see the birth of Little Ricky, a groundbreaking number of viewers (Brooks, 2005). This episode also achieved an all-time high Trendex rating of 71.1 (Davies & Smith). More people tuned in to this episode than to President Eisenhower’s inauguration the following day. The scope of *I Love Lucy* had increased exponentially.

### **Lucille Ball’s Real Life Pregnancy**

From the time Oppenheimer decided to incorporate Ball’s real life pregnancy into the show, the production of the second season of *I Love Lucy* revolved around Lucille Ball. Filming began during what would be the hiatus to accommodate for Ball’s four-month maternity leave. Many episodes had to be filmed in advance so they could be aired while Ball was on leave (Davies & Smith, 1998). During this time, Ball’s schedule was very rigorous to accommodate the pregnancy, but she prevailed. She worked tirelessly to get her job done and the production crew pitched in to make matters easier for her. Ball represented what many women wanted to be, a working mother. She was successfully able to have a career and a family life (Landay, 2010). Her ability to balance these parts of her life, led both the audience and the press to accept the pregnancy with little backlash. Another factor of the acceptance was the heavy marketing of the pregnancy by Desilu, CBS, Phillip Morris, and the press (McClay, 1995).

In the time leading up to the birth, media coverage speculated on the sex of the child, describing the relationship between Ball and Arnaz and how another child would fit in with their successful careers. CBS, Desilu, and Phillip Morris also released hundreds of announcements and blurbs about the pregnancy. Once Ball gave birth and it was revealed that she had a baby boy, the media went into frenzy. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1953 headlines were filled with news of the birth, “Never before had the birth of a baby generated such worldwide interest”(McClay, 1995, p. 72). Baby Desidero Alberto Arnaz IV was even deemed “The Million-Dollar Baby” because including letters, telegrams, phone calls, baby booties, cards, and other gifts, one million people sent some form of good wishes to the Arnaz’s (McClay, 1995). In April of that year, Desidero Arnaz IV would also be featured on the cover of the first edition of *T.V. Guide* (Davies & Smith).

### ***I Love Lucy* Popularity Overview/Background**

The longevity and popularity of *I Love Lucy* is somewhat of a phenomenon. The statistics alone provide an immense amount of insight into how popular *I Love Lucy* was when it first aired. On average, 40 million viewers tuned in to watch *I Love Lucy* every Monday night at 9pm (Gould, 2002). Additionally, the episode titled “The Marriage License” (7 April, 1952) was the first television program to ever reach ten million homes at one time, when there were only 15 million televisions in American homes at the time (Landay, 2010). This dedicated viewership led *I Love Lucy* to be the number one show in the Nielsen ratings for four out of its six seasons. Furthermore, adding to the number of viewers when the episodes actually aired was the introduction of rebroadcasting. *I Love Lucy* began showing re-reruns as early as 1955, in its fourth season. The rebroadcasting has made it possible for *I Love Lucy* to stay on air since its

debut (Tueth, 2004). The statistics, coupled with the attractive storylines, talented actors, and innovative filming techniques, have led to the sustainability of the show for 63 years.

### **Popularity and Relatability**

A large part of the success of *I Love Lucy* at the time it aired was the familiarity aspect. Viewers were easily able to identify with the characters and the storylines because they depicted the average American. The Ricardos were not a Hollywood couple, but rather a typical middle class couple living in postwar America. This represented a majority of America, and therefore viewers. Both Ball and Arnaz wanted their characters to reflect middle-America and the sponsors agreed that was the best route because their products mostly appealed to middle-class Americans (Gould, 2002). Ball is quoted as saying, “We had a great identification with millions of people. People identified with the Ricardos because we had the same problems they had”(Landay, 2005, p. 93). She highlights that it is normal for married couples to go through the trials and tribulations of life together. The premises of each episode are believable in that normal people could get into the same situations. Creator Jess Oppenheimer described that they were not intentionally trying to create funny situations, but rather instances where Lucy and Ricky’s problems were the same things the audience went through. The creators behind the show called this “holding up the mirror” (Spangler, 2003). At the center of each episode is the family unit and tensions that were at the middle of American everyday life (Mock, 2011). The storylines coincided with real life, just in an exaggerated form.

The Ricardos had to deal with issues of everyday life including paying the rent, affording new clothes, allowances, moving, raising a child, career moves and much more. Additionally, the friendship between the Ricardos and the Mertzs were representative of any regular friendship

couples have. Ethel served as Lucy's confidant and partner in crime. She could go to her to complain about Ricky and come up with her schemes that Ethel would inevitably be pulled into. The female friendship was a core relationship in the show and the off-screen camaraderie between Ball and Vance showed on screen (Landay, 2010). Similarly, the male friendship between Ricky and Fred served a similar purpose. Fred was an outlet for Ricky to discuss Lucy's latest antics and the same went for Fred speaking about Ethel. Ethel's more sensible attitudes served to ground Lucy, while Fred's quips about money and Ethel kept Ricky more grounded with Lucy at times. These relationships also allowed for the male and female characters to go out or involve themselves in activities that did not include their spouses. These dynamics were yet another representation of real life in America in the 1950s. There was an air of familiarity with these friendships, as if they could be the viewers themselves.

Relating back to the Ricardo's marriage is the idea that it played off of the real-life marriage of Ball and Arnaz. The fact that the audience knew that the fictional marriage was representing a real one was a way for viewers to connect with the characters on a deeper level (Kanfer, 2003). The viewers could essentially see their marriages in the Ricardos, especially when hints of the Arnaz marriage were seen on-screen. For example, the love between Lucy and Ricky was not in any way fake; it was the on-screen portrayal of actual love between man and wife. Landay puts this concisely when stating, "One of the attractions of *I Love Lucy* was its blend of reality and fiction, or 'real life' and 'reel life' "(Landay, 1999, p.28).

### **Commodities and *I Love Lucy***

A large part of the monetary success of *I Love Lucy* can be attributed to the manufacture and widespread purchasing of commodities based on the show. The inherent goal was to make

the show a success and continue to gain viewership, but the larger objective was to make it a commodity in itself. This happened through commodification, “a process of transforming experience, ideas, and senses of self into the quantifiable products of consumer culture, and placing those products in a social context in which people define things in terms of themselves...” (Landay, 2010, p. 61). Essentially, the things that people buy serve to identify who they are as people and fulfill their abstract social goals.

The desire to purchase goods related to *I Love Lucy* was twofold. The first aspect that appealed to many was the familiarity of the characters and the representation of the good life. The good life was characterized by a middle class married couple living in domestic postwar America. The context of the show therefore provided juxtaposition between the idealistic good life and women’s dissatisfaction in the home often fueled by commodification. The premise of many episodes revolves around Lucy spending too much money or wanting more money to buy a product. The conflicts revolve around consumption and how that plays into married domestic life (Landay, 1999). Lucy’s dissatisfactions are often rooted in things that she cannot have, whether it be a household item, new furniture, or an item of clothing such as a mink coat. Her antics then revolve around her trying to attain these commodities for her own satisfaction.

One episode that embodies Lucy’s desire for a commercial good is “The Freezer” (28 April 1952). In this episode Ethel buys a walk-in freezer from her uncle, which she and Lucy proceed to fill. A walk-in freezer was a luxury and one that both Lucy and Ethel wanted, much like other housewives of the time. They end up ordering two sides of beef, which is way more than they had intended. The cost of the meat is nearly \$500 and they ponder how to hide it from their husbands because of their impending anger from over-spending. Lucy decides to hide the meat in the furnace but ends up getting locked in the freezer. Once again, her antics revolved

around trying to buy the latest household item ends with her getting in trouble and “failing”. This episode reflects real life in an artificial way and ties back to the idea that people purchased goods seen and based on *I Love Lucy* because of the relatability of the characters and products.

Another way that *I Love Lucy* appealed to consumers was that it showed viewers how television could be used as a vehicle for consumerism and advertising. In the episode “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” (5 May 1952), Ball presents a self-reflexive version of herself by becoming a sales girl for a commercial (acting in a commercial) while simultaneously acting in a television show. This episode gives the audience an inside look at advertising, by exposing what really happens behind the scenes. The premise of the episode is Lucy wanting to be in the sponsor commercial for Ricky’s television show. She tries to convince him at home by constructing a fake television and inserting herself in it. When he does not buy in to her schemes, she pretends she is the actress intended for the part and takes over the commercial.

During the filming of the commercial, Lucy has to drink spoonfuls of a vitamin drink called vitameatavegamin. She soon realizes that the substance has an awful taste, with a 23 percent alcohol content, but has to portray that it tastes great in order to sell the product. This draws a distinct line between reality and artifice. Essentially, Ball is giving the audience a glimpse at the real tactics behind advertising and what lengths companies go to in order to sell a product. In the end, she drunkenly disrupts Ricky’s show and fails at getting into show business and having a job, circling back to the central theme of *I Love Lucy*, women and domesticity.

The familiarity of domestic life led to the mass production of goods shown in *I Love Lucy*. These included pajamas that looked like Lucy and Ricky’s, dresses that Lucy wore, Lucy dolls, a Ricardo bedroom and living room set, costume jewelry, coloring books, comic books, records, sheet music, and much more. With the birth of Little Ricky came a whole new market of



baby clothes, diaper bags, and furniture that is said to have exceeded \$50 million in sales. Additionally, by October 1952 there were around 3,000 outlet stores that carried Lucy and Ricky clothing items. Lastly, in the first month of selling, bedroom furniture identical to the ones in the Ricardo's fictional apartment grossed over \$500,000 in sales in two days (Landay, 1999).

The advertising for *I Love Lucy* also played into the show's monetary success. Phillip Morris was the sponsor and one of the goals of *I Love Lucy* was to sell Phillip Morris cigarettes. The show did this by portraying both Lucy and Ricky smoking cigarettes that were always Phillip Morris. This representation showed cigarettes as a fundamental commodity; because the Ricardos have them, viewers wanted them. The advertisements from Phillip Morris served to justify people purchasing products to be like the Ricardos. Additionally, print ads for Phillip Morris featured Ball and Arnaz cigarettes in hand, which served to promote both the show and the brand.

Moreover, the original opening sequence of *I Love Lucy* features an animated version of a Phillip Morris pack of cigarettes that an animated Ball walks towards and turns around to reveal Arnaz in an elevator. They then proceed to ride the elevator inside the cigarette pack to the top of their apartment building and written at the top is "Phillip Morris presents, *I Love Lucy*" (Landay, 1999). The framing of Phillip Morris cigarettes as something both the fictional Ricardos and the real life Arnazs consumed further developed the link between real life and reel life.

The illustrious appeal of *I Love Lucy* has not waned in the years since its debut. The commodities available for purchase when the show first aired are now collectables. A large part of the show's success in current times is the sense of nostalgia it brings. The depiction of an almost perfect 1950s family presents to viewers an idealized version of the times. Particularly, Lucy's antics serve as reminders to women of how far they have come since the 1950s. Lucy's

desire to hold a job and be seen as an equal to her male counterparts serves to remind women of the triumphs of women in the past 50 years (Landay, 1999). This insight into life in postwar America continues to appeal to new generations because it provides a snapshot of what their lives might have been like had they lived when *I Love Lucy* first aired.

The continued airing of *I Love Lucy* on networks such as Nickelodeon and TV Land also serves to maintain viewers and gain new ones in modern times. This has increased viewers' desire to own commodities from the *I Love Lucy* age. With the advancement of technology and websites such as eBay and Amazon, it has become somewhat of a hobby to track down and purchase *I Love Lucy* memorabilia. TV Guide covers, photographs, clothing, and more from the time the show first aired have increased in price substantially over the years. Additionally, websites and organizations such as the Lucy-Desi Museum in Jamestown, New York have begun to produce commodities based on the show. There are clothing items, greeting cards, dishes, bookends, posters, calendars, purses and accessories and much more. Furthermore, there are websites dedicated to both Ball and Arnaz, and an *I Love Lucy fan* club with a website, which began in 1995 (Landay, 1999). The continued marketing and re-runs makes certain that *I Love Lucy* is never forgotten and that the appeal of the show continues to bring in new viewers each year, leading to the purchase of more commodities.

### **The *I Love Lucy* Phenomenon**

The one feature of *I Love Lucy* that set it apart from all other situation comedies was the comedic talent of Ball. She was the anchor that held the show together and the finest comedienne not only of the time, but even to this day. While her antics were sometimes outrageous, she brought a sense of authenticity to her role. She presented herself as a real person who

exaggerated the desires of housewives in the 1950s. The reason she was able to do so was because of the writing behind the show, by Madelyn Pugh, Jess Oppenheimer, Bob Carroll, and Bob Schiller. The material that they provided for Ball was so good that she rarely improvised, and simply said what they wrote and added her own physicality to it.

The Lucy phenomenon was also fueled by the innovative techniques that went into filming the show, and the addition of vaudeville and musical acts to the plots. By filming the show in front of a live audience, a sense of immediacy was created that is present in theatre. This created a thin line between reality and fiction (Landay, 1999). The audience was torn between what was real and what was artifice because having Ball and Arnaz performing right in front of them made it seem like real life, while the presence of three cameras reminded them that it was a television show. Furthermore, the use of three cameras with 35mm film allowed for the show to be shot at three different angles and for it to be saved and re-used for rebroadcasting. This has allowed *I Love Lucy* to continue to be aired even 63 years after its debut.

The continued airing of the show along with the various aspects that contribute to the Lucy phenomenon has allowed *I Love Lucy* to sustain its popularity over the years. Today, *I Love Lucy* is considered one of the most beloved television shows of all time. In a 2013 article in TV Guide Magazine ranking the 60 best television shows of all time, *I Love Lucy* was named number three. Looking at the list as a whole, *I Love Lucy* is the oldest show in the top ten and the third oldest show present on the list. This illustrates how highly regarded *I Love Lucy* is, not only as a situation comedy, but as a television show as a whole.

Also affirming this is an exhibit that was dedicated to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *I Love Lucy* in 2011 at The Library of Congress. The exhibit featured a history of the show including characters, sets, theme song, and cast and crew. There were memorabilia from the show on

display as well as pages from Ball and Arnaz's family scrapbook. Additionally, there was an opening concert titled BABALU to introduce the exhibit. Moreover, since 2000 there has been a stage performance titled *I Love Lucy On Stage*. This stage show was adapted from the television show and tours nationwide. This stage performance along with the exhibit and ranking are tributes to the timelessness that is *I Love Lucy*.

There is also a museum in Jamestown, NY called the Lucy Desi Center for Comedy. There are recreations of the *I Love Lucy* set as well as timelines of both Ball and Arnaz's lives. The museum has also put on an annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival since 1991. This festival pays tribute to not only *I Love Lucy*, but largely Ball and her craft. The continued attendance and popularity of the festival and museum further confirm how popular *I Love Lucy* is even in contemporary times. Even 63 years after its debut, people are still watching and loving the show.

## **Conclusion**

It is abundantly clear that there is no television show, past or present, that has held such high admiration or viewership over six decades, than *I Love Lucy*. From the emergence of television in America in the late 1940s, to the first airing of the show in 1951, *I Love Lucy* has become a staple of American culture. A clear connection can be made between *I Love Lucy* and the success of television and situation comedies. *I Love Lucy* broke various popularity records and brought formerly controversial topics into the lives of millions of Americans. *I Love Lucy* is and was a phenomenon.

The success of *I Love Lucy* can be accredited to the combination of many individual parts, pieced together in an ideal way. The comedic stylings of Lucille Ball that combined slapstick and femininity proved that women could be funny. Ball paved the way for comedienne

and showed Americans that a woman who is willing to do anything, dress any way and act gender opposite, had the potential to be funny. Additionally, her representation of a 1950s housewife with a twist was unique in that it showed what women wanted to do, but were too afraid to do. Ball represented the everywoman as someone who was tired of the confines of domestic life and yearned for a career outside the home. This appealed to female viewers because they could essentially live vicariously through her character. However, her failure to success in the workplace and her zany tactics appealed to male viewers because it reinforced the idea that women belong at home, in a domestic setting.

The distinctive ability of *I Love Lucy* to appeal to both genders was also greatly influenced by the on-screen marriage of Lucy and Ricky and how it paralleled the real life marriage of Ball and Arnaz, or real life versus reel life. The fact that the audience knew that Ball and Arnaz were a real couple made the show that much more believable. Viewers could see themselves getting into the same arguments and going through the same trials and tribulations as the Ricardos. The relatability of the characters coupled with storylines that never get old created the timelessness of the show.

Related to the on-screen marriage is that it was an interracial marriage, the first to be shown on television. The marriage was accepted though, because of the genuine love present between the actors that translated on screen. This representation was one of the many ways *I Love Lucy* pushed social norms. The most prevalent however, was Ball's real life pregnancy and how it was written into the show. This was a very controversial issue at the time and deciding to bring it into American homes was a big risk that paid off. The delicate handling of the topic along with Ball's comedic talents and antics she played out on screen created a culture where pregnancy was not taboo and lead to the most watched episode of the series.

The sheer amount of viewers each week, capping 40 million was not only groundbreaking in the 1950s, but also in modern times. The love for Lucy has not diminished over the years, but has continued to bring in new viewers generation after generation. The influence that *I Love Lucy* had over America and television as a medium are astonishing, and have created an enduring show loved by millions.

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