ABSTRACT

A FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE:  
WOMEN’S USE OF HUMOR FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

By Catherine Johnson

This project examines the way that women’s humor influences social change. It begins by examining the ways that women’s humor has evolved beginning with the work of Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball and exploring the ways these comedians strived to created alternate definitions of what it means to be a woman. Moving on, this project next examines the work of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers and investigates the way these two began to bring the discussion of women’s personal lives and personal perceptions into mainstream comedy. The project then examines the way that minority groups have used humor to create a unity within the group and then to alter the perceptions of the dominant group using sarcasm, parody, inversion and the ‘protest tale.’ In the final chapter, the project looks at the work of contemporary comedians Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho. Both women, with their different, but equally effective, audiences, are able to push for social change in areas where patriarchal attitudes toward women and comedy is beginning to give way.
Dedicated to

My family and friends. Special Thanks to Cecilia Johnson, Ray Johnson, Rebecca Howard, Anne-Marie Millim, Martine Nicolay and Erin Reschke.
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“A fish without a bicycle” was a popular slogan during the 1970s representing emerging humor in the women’s movement. The quote was originally “man needs god like a fish needs a bicycle” but was quickly adopted by feminists saying “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.” This quote created a lighthearted unity between feminists across the nation.

Years later when I was 14 years old when Ellen Morgan, the character played by Ellen DeGeneres on her prime-time sitcom, along with DeGeneres herself, came out to the public. I had recently read DeGeneres’ book, My Point, and I do have one… and was a huge fan. I thought she was one of the funniest people alive. I remember being shocked by the media hype and fury surrounding her coming out. To me, she was just a funny person who I wanted to emulate as closely as I could. It was my own shock at the media’s reaction to DeGeneres’ coming out that made me wonder how she could change so many people with this announcement. I realized there was more to her comedy than I had perhaps realized at the beginning.

This experience had little effect on me other than creating a personal open acceptance for gays and a realization of the impact people can have on our culture when revealing these types of ‘forbidden’ behaviors. As I progressed in my study of feminism, women’s issues and, social and cultural functions, I came to realize what a powerful venue comedy can be in reflecting, questioning and shaping these functions.

This project reflects upon how women’s voices in comedy have echoed social changes in the past and explores the abilities of women to create social change using comedy. I am not arguing that this is the only method of creating social change, or even the most effective. Rather, I am arguing that comedy is in the unique position of being an
indicator of social position for the joke teller and allows that teller the unique opportunity to alter that position through the use of humor.

It is with the progress of the women’s movement that women are now included among those with the ability to affect our society through their comedy. The work of Gracie Allen, Lucille Ball, Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, which I highlight in the first section of my project, represent women at different phases of the women’s movement. Their specific comedy speaks to the social issues of the time and their methods of comedy reflect general attitudes toward women, and women’s humor during these times.

As I discuss in section two, there are a number of methods of comedy that are typically employed by women and these methods can sometimes be catalysts for social change. Often these techniques will push for social change without trying; simply because it is women telling the jokes, they can subvert traditional norms and assumptions.

Finally, in the third section, I discuss the specific works of Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho. As contemporary female comics, their work is both evidence of and a catalyst for social change. The two use different methods and appeal to different audiences but both create social change with their comedy.

It is necessary for the study of humor to be taken seriously because, as Jerry Palmer states, “Comedy is an element of most human communication…humanity is one of the only species with a sense of humor, zoologists tell us, confirming Aristotle’s insight that laughter is a distinguishing feature of our species” (1). This is not a static humor that remains consistent among all people. It is changing within each culture and is dependent on social situations. Palmer goes on to say, “in cultural terms, there is every
point in taking humor seriously: what people laugh at, how and when they laugh is absolutely central to their culture” (2). What people find humorous is indicative of their culture.

The study of humor is also appropriately interdisciplinary. Although it is studied within the disciplines, to begin to fully understand humor, it is necessary to explore and unite the findings of multiple disciplines. The study of humor involves anthropology, sociology and psychology, historical studies, literary critics and in this case women’s studies, each of which provide a unique insight about the way humor is used, its functions and the implications surrounding those ideas.

Humor is useful in a study of social change because, as eloquently stated by Nancy Walker in her introduction to *What’s so Funny: Humor in American Culture*, “Humor, like all forms of communication, requires *context*: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding and values which are subject to evolution from one century or even one decade to the next” (4). Understanding this then, can lead to the recognition that humor is a powerful tool in the reflection of our culture. The ability to use humor to critique the existing culture can then eventually lead to a new standard and create social change for its listeners, and, with time, create that change within the whole culture. A change in comedy is evidence of a change in social understanding and social norms, and when that comedy tears down and questions those social ideas, it is creating, at least for the duration of the show, a new social reality.
Section 1: Women’s Comedy and the Evolution of the Women’s Movement.
In the following pages, I highlight women in comedy as a kind of social history. I focus on four comedians – Gracie Allen, Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, using their contributions to the world of women in comedy to understand general trends in the field through time. Many women have made significant contributions to the women’s movement and to the variety of acceptable women’s roles, but the women I have chosen to discuss here are included because they made their own significant individual contributions to comedy, and were typically working within more or less acceptable roles within mainstream popular culture during their time. These were four outstanding women who made contributions to comedy and were models of the changes that took place in women’s comedy through time.

In order to understand comedy and the effects of comedy now, it is necessary to understand where all this work has come from. The history of these four women is vital to the evolution of women’s role in comedy, their ability to succeed, and the restrictions that have been placed on women doing comedy simply because of their gender.

These four have made contributions not only to the field of comedy, but often to the women’s movement in general with the strides they have taken in their field. These women, especially Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball were dim-witted, foolish, zany women on the screen and on the stage, but astute businesswomen offstage as well, managing their own careers and often helping to manage the careers of the men around them. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz began their production company, Desilu, during their years in the spotlight. Upon their divorce, Lucy took control of the company. In addition, many female comedians have moved between genres and have performed as dancers, actors, singers, and many other kinds of performers. In this chapter, I will focus on the comedy
work these women have done. Though the other works these women have accomplished are both admirable and notable, they do not find their place in this work. There are countless women whom have made enormous contributions to the evolution of women in comedy but have been excluded from this section for reasons of length.

Although many women were active in comedy before her, I have decided to begin with Gracie Allen because she is one of the first women to make her comedy a household item and to gain prominence as a female in the field of comedy. Her name was nationally known and she was one of the first female comics to have a national following and national recognition. Comedy performed is recognized in most households now on CD, radio, and of course, television. But this was not always the case.

In the beginning of their book, *Women in Comedy*, Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave provide an outline of a history of women’s comedy from 1860 through 1919 that I found extremely helpful in understanding the early evolution of women’s role in performance and comedy. The following paragraphs summarize that introduction and highlight some of the more notable turns and landmarks during this time.

Women began appearing in vaudeville-type shows as early as the 1850s, but only as objects of men’s desire, performing as scantily dressed dancers doing the can-can (among other dances) to earn their wages. This gave women the ability to make money as performers and not only as waitresses selling themselves along with their drinks. Although women were beginning to perform as dancers at this point, they were not yet doing comedy in any medium. With the onset of minstrel shows in the late 1800’s, women began to work alongside men during performances. In these skits though, men would perform the comedy and the women would dance or sing to entertain and from
time to time they were only there to ‘look pretty.’ Women did not have the chance to perform in these arenas. These teams did not deal with domestic issues or the tension between the sexes, but only with issues concerning men, as it was only men who made up the audience.

As more women appeared on stage alongside these men, more women appeared in the audience, and as more women were appearing in the audience, there was a greater demand for women to appear on stage. With this, the content of these comedy routines shifted away from male centered comedy to comedy more focused on domestic humor and issues that concerned, or at least interested, women. With this shift, women began to have larger, more prominent roles in the skits. As women’s roles began to grow, the image of the Victorian woman began to shift to a new, more free, ‘liberated’ woman. It was in the wake of this growing feminist consciousness that women were finally able to begin (with very tiny steps) their own work in comedy. Women’s comedy really begins with Lotta Crabtree who, as early as 1860, was performing in the West in variety halls, singing and dancing and doing short physical bits. A few women around the country followed in her footsteps, doing comic songs, self-depreciative jokes, and other musical and vaudeville acts. These women include Elsie Janis, Nora Bayes, Eva Tanguay and Sophie Tucker, among others. As women grew unsatisfied with their assigned roles and feminist consciousness grew, a few women began establishing themselves as ‘comic talkers.’ Out of these routines grew the roots of women’s stand-up comedy. The only female stand-up comics to really emerge from this period were Beatrice Herford and Ruth Draper. They told jokes through stories that ended humorously and were often
‘gossipy’ in nature. These two also wrote all of their own material (Martin and Segrave, 26-35).

**Gracie Allen**

This comic tradition continued as women looked for new modes of expression on the vaudeville stage and eventually in motion pictures. Women were often forbidden from doing slapstick comedy lest they be considered vulgar. By 1920, women had made huge steps in comedy, beginning with Lotta Crabtree and moving throughout a period of consciousness raising and education, one of the survivors of this transition and continuing through the transition from vaudeville to radio and motion pictures was Gracie Allen. Although undoubtedly other women were able to stay afloat during these changes, “only Gracie Allen attained any kind of national stature and following. The others did not outlive their times and were consigned to obscurity” (Martin and Segrave, 31). This indicates there was something monumental about Allen that other women did not possess, something that aided her survival in popular culture that other women had not had. Allen was the leader of her comedy duo, Burns and Allen, and became one of the first women to be the lead in a male-female vaudeville comedy team.

Allen embodied a trend popular in the 1920s and 1930s of ‘dumbing down’ women and acting against the gains that had been made by women during the beginning of the century that would not be exceeded until the late 1960s. Fueled by the Depression, women tended to slide back into traditional roles often to make men feel more secure and more dominant in their position as the head of the family. Women found themselves back in constricting stereotypical roles like ‘man chaser’ and the ‘dumb’ beautiful.
woman. Gracie Allen was the quintessential dumb beautiful woman. Allen was performing in an era when, if a woman was doing comedy, she essentially had two choices: to do aggressive comedy and cover her good looks with costumes or outrageous faces or, more popular and far more acceptable, to be dumb and keep her looks, beautiful or not. This stereotypical, senseless woman became known generically as Dumb Dora.

In the beginning of their radio career, Burns and Allen used a “boy/girl” comedy routine based on malapropisms. This form of comedy was popular with acts of dull women, particularly in the work of Jane Ace. Burns and Allen would engage in ‘witty’ banter, Allen confusing word after word, until finally the two were on the same page or until Burns simply ‘gave up’ on trying to understand Gracie’s ideas or logic and let her go on and on about her mistaken ideas, never correcting her. In the early 1940s however, their ratings began to decline and the two made a change to domestic comedy. Martin and Segrave point out, “Gracie was the scatterbrained housewife constantly getting herself and George into problems. Burns was the long suffering and frustrated husband driven to the brink by his wife’s lunacy” (149). Gracie was famous for her misunderstandings, but also for her unique way of always seeming to understand what is going on. This ability to always seem to understand gave Gracie a sort of independent power that was rare for women in her time period, “Gracie rarely paid attention to [Burns], or to any authority figure. She unmade decorum, she unraveled patriarchal laws…” (Mellencamp 83).

The work of Burns and Allen was particularly powerful and popular because of their agreement to seem to represent their true personality during their radio show. This representation of their personality began the roots of the situation comedy.
The routines were full of conversations that either went in circles or Burns was frustrated with Allen shortly into the conversation. Patricia Mellencamp sums up the patterns of a Burns and Allen skit saying, “The scenario is often as follows: an ordinary event – shopping, going to the movies – would be “misinterpreted” and them complicated by Gracie, who would then connect a second, random event to the first” (83). In this skit the two discuss Christmas gifts they sent and we are treated to a stellar example of Gracie’s often mistaken logic and misinformed ideas:

GEORGE. Gracie, suppose you start explaining these Christmas bills. Who got this $25 hat?
GRACIE. I gave that hat to Clara Bagley. I’ve decided to break up our friendship.
GEORGE. Then why did you give her an expensive hat?
GRACIE. I have one exactly like it. When she sees me with it on, she’ll stop speaking to me.
GEORGE. There must be cheaper ways to lose a friend. Here’s a bill for a bushel of nuts delivered to San Francisco. Who’d you send those to?
GRACIE. My mother. That was your suggestion, dear. Every time I said, “What’ll we send mother?” you said, “Nuts to her.”
GEORGE. I should give your mother a bushel of nuts. What’d she ever give me?
GRACIE. She gave you me. I’m as good as nuts.
GEORGE. You can say that again.
GRACIE. I’d rather not. I didn’t like the way it sounded.

There were fundamental differences between the onscreen Gracie and the off screen Gracie. “The onscreen Gracie was a sweet soul who on the surface embodied many of the feminine norms of the day—domesticity, reliance on her man, gentleness—even as she took symbolic pot shots at the gender order by subverting her husband’s logical, masculine world” (Weisblat). Things were different for Allen offstage though. She was talented and intelligent, not at all as dumb as her onstage persona. Burns was often only a complement to Allen’s comedy and was thus reliant on her work to make the
money for the couple. According to Weisblat from the The Museum Of Broadcast Communication makes the point that Burns and Allen made audiences aware through strategic publicity and from audience observation, “that only a talented and intelligent actress could manage to seem as dumb as Allen did onscreen. The program and Allen's character were always framed by audience knowledge about the "real" George Burns and Gracie Allen.” (Weisblat).

Evidence of the popularity and influence of the work of Allen comes when after she retired in 1958, Burns tried for a number of years to make it on his own without success for almost a decade. When he did succeed, the majority of his act featured jokes and stories about Allen (Weisblat).

Allen chose a path in life that was different from many of the females of her time. She dropped out of school at age fourteen to join her father and her three older sisters on stage. She began performing at this young age when women were typically confined to roles as mother and wife.

Clearly, Allen was truly talented along with her husband and comedy partner, George Burns, Allen was successful in vaudeville, radio, film, and television, but most popular in radio. (Martin and Segrave, 143). American’s seemed always pleased by the image of the scatterbrained woman. “She played on the belief that females were weaker and less intelligent than males. It was a belief held by women and not just men. Females loved Allen’s humor and much of her fan mail came from her own sex. Women could observe one of Allen’s silly schemes and say to their husband, ‘Now that dumb I’m not.’ That said more about feminine self-image than it did about Allen herself” (Martin and Segrave, 104). The idea of a woman gaining her success by showing her inferiority to
men remained popular long after the days of Burns and Allen. The only way for women to be popular as comics was to laugh at men’s humor—and often women were exactly what men wanted to laugh at. When Burns and Allen began as comics, Allen delivered the serious side of the jokes while Burns had the punch line and, as they performed more and more, it became apparent that this kind of joking was not working for the pair. It was then that Burns ‘gave’ the jokes to Allen. He began by collecting Dumb Dora jokes and adapting them for their use. “Apparently he took a lot of kidding from his vaudeville pals for giving Allen the jokes. Perhaps the only consolation was that Gracie was a “dumb comic”” (Martin and Segrave, 144). Even with the respect he held for his wife Gracie, Burns was able to find consolation and acceptance because he was obviously the ‘smarter’ of the two, at least on stage.

The work Allen was doing came at a monumental time in history. Allen dominated the comedy act with Burns while women were breaking ground in other arenas of social change. Suffragists began winning the battle as states began to ratify the 19th Amendment and women begin to move onto the next issues: passing an Equal Rights Amendment. In addition, Women formed the National Council of Catholic Women to improve conditions of women factory workers, Grace Abbott put the Sheppard-Towner Act into effect providing prenatal and child healthcare and the first federal prison for women opened in 1927 (Heinemann, 155).

In memory of Allen’s work at that time and the contributions she made to the role of women in television and radio, American Women in Radio and Television, Inc. has established The Gracie Allen Awards to “recognize and encourage positive and realistic portrayals of women in entertainment, commercials, news, features and other programs”
(Gracie Allen Awards). It is interesting that Gracie was chosen as the namesake of these awards as their goals seem far from the character she embodied on stage. The award’s website states,

For more than a quarter of a century, the Foundation of American Women in Radio and Television, Inc., has been a leader in electronic media by honoring programming that is by women, for women or about women, as well as individuals who have made exemplary contributions to the industry. The Gracie Allen Awards strive to encourage the positive and realistic portrayal of women in entertainment, commercials, news, features and other programs (Gracie Allen Awards).

Although her portrayal of women was unrealistic and often insulting, she did pave a path for women to be immensely popular as comics and she is worthy of this award herself. The work she has done, as evidenced by these awards, has led to the recognition and discussion of women’s work and women’s role in the media.

**Lucille Ball**

In 1933, as Lucille Ball interviewed for a role in *Roman Scandal*, directed by Busby Berkeley, she was asked along with a host of other showgirls if she was willing to take a pie in the face. When she was the only to volunteer, Berkeley stated that she would be the one to make it in show business (Martin and Segrave, 264). Still at this time and progressing into the 1940s and 1950s women were told they could ‘make it’ if they were willing to insult themselves and willing to do anything they were told for a laugh. As television became much more popular, Lucy found herself reliant on physical comedy to get her laughs. “Lucy was praised for her physical comedy and excellent sense of timing, which was compared to that of Jack Benny. The props and outrageous gags on the show were reminiscent of old-time vaudeville” (Martin and Segrave, 270). The physical comedy Ball did differed from the bits of physical comedy done by other
women. Martha Raye had been doing physical comedy for ‘army boys’ that led her to do “crazy, suggestive” things, and Joan Davis was doing physical comedy but often had her legs spread and was accused of being “too masculine” in her comedy (Horowitz, 35).

Ball starred in the show *I Love Lucy* with her physical comedy complemented by her then husband and co-star, Desi Arnaz along with Vivian Vance. At this time the comedy of women became less dependant on language, as it was when the radio was the main entertainment medium in the home, and moved into the realm of physical comedy and thus more dependent on the visual imagery of the woman herself. According to Martin and Segrave,

> “Lucy’s exaggerated facial expressions gave a visual focus to her comedy and made her less dependent on jokes. She appeared in an enormous variety of guises, including everything from a Martian to a matador. Lucy’s wild stunts on roller skates or stilts provided much of the comedy (270).

Lucy’s show was immensely popular. *“I Love Lucy, the first comedy filmed before a live audience, was an instant hit. When it aired, department stores closed early, telephone usage dropped, water demand diminished”* (Harmon, 88).

Lucille Ball had opened a door for women to do physical comedy but women were still held to strict physical standards. The vision of the Dumb Dora was still in effect and though Ball played an often dull-witted character, she was still beautiful, as the stereotype would prescribe. She knew the power her good looks played in the seduction of her audience. “Her outfits, attitude, and coiffeur combine domestic propriety, comic exaggeration, and respectable sexiness. She wears conventional shirtwaists, suits and capri pants – all cut to reveal her statuesque figure – while she mugs or tosses a head full of improbably orange curls” (Horowitz, 31). This way, her working-class audience could
relate to her on a personal level because they saw her wearing the same type of clothes as they wore. On the other hand, they knew there was something unique and special about Lucy that kept her attractive to her audience. She found a unique balance between the roles women were ‘supposed’ to fall into and had her own independence that created a draw from many audiences.

There are a number of episodes still revered by fans and the show still airs its reruns on television. There are innumerable fan websites to the *I Love Lucy* show and, of course, the fans to go with them. According to numerous fan sites, there seem to be three top episodes of the show. The first is when Lucy is featured in a commercial for Vitameatavegamin, a health tonic that contains, much to Lucy’s surprise, 23% alcohol. As the commercial progresses and Lucy continues to drink the tonic, she grows increasingly tipsy and leads herself into a number of humorous (and embarrassing) situations. In the second, Lucy and Ethel (her constant sidekick) switch roles with Ricky and Fred and end up working in a chocolate factory. The two stuff their clothes and mouths with chocolates as the conveyor belt becomes too fast for their abilities. The third episode features Lucy visiting Italy and starring in a film. In order to get a feel for the atmosphere, Lucy heads to a vineyard where she stomps grapes with her feet until her whole body is stained blue and she can no longer be in the film. All of these episodes feature Lucy in some compromising situation because of her own foolishness.

In the Vitameatavegamin commercial, we see that Lucy’s desire to be on television and to become a star is so overwhelming that she drinks this ‘health tonic’ until she is so drunk that she interrupts Ricky’s television variety show and makes a fool of herself. Lucy yearns to be on television, but after this experience realizes she is just
not cut out for that work. In the second episode, Lucy and Ethel decided they could handle raising money for the family while Ricky and Fred stayed home. When they are offered a job at the chocolate factory and fail, the two realize they belong at home where they can be left up to their usual scheming tricks. In the third episode, Lucy has again let things go to her head and has gone way overboard with her fantasies. Luckily, as the show teaches us, she has Ricky home to patch things up when she makes mistakes, which in this case is her fight with an Italian woman in the vat of grapes, turning herself blue. Ricky warns her not to go exploring in Italy to see a vineyard because he doesn’t want her to cause trouble across the ocean as she does at home.

These favorite episodes, among many others, displayed a kind of double message to women. On one hand, Lucy is a mobile, competent homemaker, wife, and mother who never puts her family in danger. On the other hand, Lucy rebels against the position in which she is put. In one episode, Lucy says to Ricky, “Here I am with all this talent bottled up inside me, and you’re sitting on the cork…I’m going to get into that show or my name’s not Lucy Ricardo!” (Horowitz 36). This method of spreading her message was both rebellious and compliant. She worked within an arena that would accept her zany schemes because, and possibly only because, she stayed within the 1950s pre-feminist ideas of keeping the perfect house.

This show was popular during a time when women were being urged to move to suburbia leaving the workforce and their own income to raise children and serve their overworked husbands. Women were being urged to support the new image of happiness in a suburban home with a yard and smiling faces. (Mellencamp, 81).
As women moved into television in the 1940s and 1950s, World War II was having drastic effects on women and the women’s movement. Of course, this had a concurrent impact on the roles of women presented through comedy. These roles again became rigid and stereotypical. “This period continued a reversal of women’s rights, which had been dealt a blow by the Depression of the 1930s. The images projected by women comics coincided with this reactionary era” (Martin and Segrave 204). Ball represented a housewife while other comics were often forced into roles as dumb, ugly, or man chasing. One aspect of Ball’s performance as a housewife that was revolutionary was her ability to call into question some previous norms. “While it’s true that she played the scatterbrained housewife, her program’s themes, like her red hair, were a transition between the sexy dumb blonde and the witty independent brunette” (Martin and Segrave, 271).

In displaying the ‘typical’ home in the 1950s, *I Love Lucy* provided a vehicle for social critique of the day. The interactions of Lucy and Ricky manifested many of the frustrations women of the time were dealing with in their own lives. In *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers and the New Generation of Funny Women*, Horowitz notes,

The domestic malaise of the 1950s, which Betty Friedan charted in the *Feminine Mystique*, surfaces in a disguised, comedic form in *I Love Lucy*, as Lucy revolts against the tedium of being Mrs. Ricardo. Her vaudeville turns and comic inventiveness made the repression and boredom of domesticity bearable and helped her viewers sidestep the real issues with laughter (37).

Many of the disputes between Lucy and Desi displayed on the *I Love Lucy* show were over the things he wanted her to do that she either chose not to do, or was simply unable. Martin and Segrave point out, “Lucy Ricardo was not content to stay at home. She
wanted to be in show business. Ricky preferred her to be a housewife. Lucy Ricardo did not take orders from her husband. She wanted her own way” (Martin and Segrave, 271). Here women were being presented with a stereotypical woman’s role, but also with a woman who began to move slightly toward the boundaries of those roles through comedy. She raises questions about what the stereotypes were and how they were presented to the public, and how women reacted to those assigned roles. “Lucy Ricardo displayed a subtle hostility towards her role as housewife which verged on the rebellious” (Martin and Segrave, 271).

In addition to the representation of a rebellious housewife, the show featured a woman with whom people could understand and relate on a personal level. The show displayed a middle-class family that did not live a lavish life, but faced the economic problems of everyday housewives. According to Horowitz,

“Since Lucy’s schemes often tended toward the absurd and implausible, anchoring them in mundane domestic life provided the show with audience identification. Instead of playing a Hollywood actress like herself, Ball played an ordinary housewife whose dream of getting into show business is every housewife’s dream of a more glamorous, adventurous life” (28).

In a way Lucille was also the living embodiment of this dream. As a woman in the 1950’s with her own television show and her own starring role, Lucille Ball had achieved that dream and gave women a role-model to follow.

A debate exists that no one can or is willing to answer definitively about whether or not Lucy represents as a feminist ideal. Some argue that she is wholly a feminist icon for all who watch. Others who saw how Lucy was treated by Ricky and were dismayed. One critic argues that the things Lucy did on her show were often an
accurate portrayal of the role of postwar, pre-feminist women. They were required to stay home, clean, raise the perfect children and look perfect themselves. Stamberg argues, “They had little power beyond what came out of their bottles of kitchen cleanser. And so playing games, making up stories, fooling husbands was almost the stay-at-home's job description. You could tiptoe around the truth if you had to, to carry off something you coveted. Why right there on television, one of the day's biggest stars was doing it too. Lucy had her little lies. So did we. And everybody laughed and had a terrific time!” (18).

In defense of the Lucy show during an interview, Madelyn Pugh Davis, one of the writers of the I Love Lucy show was asked her feelings on this issue. She states, “I cringe at some of the early episodes, but this was a different time. [Once, when a reporter criticized Lucy's unliberated ways] I almost wrote her a letter saying, "Wait a minute. It was the '50s, kiddo. You can't rewrite history." And remember, Lucy always got what she wanted. Others want to make her a feminist. Lucy Ricardo didn't know what that meant” (Kelly, 13).

A feminist step Ball did take during her career was her display of her pregnancy on television. “Writers for the show decided to incorporate the pregnancy into the series. So radical was this idea at the time, that a priest, minister and rabbi were invited to all rehearsals to ensure nothing offensive was included” (Martin and Segrave, 273). This was the first time a woman had become pregnant on television. In fact it was so revolutionary in fact, that she was not allowed even to use the word pregnant on television and apparently the reaction from the public was positive: “When Lucy gave birth to her TV child in 1953, 40 million Americans or 71.7 percent of people with television sets were tuned into the show” (Martin and Segrave, 273). Lucy had also scheduled the birth of her real child, Desi Arnez Jr. for the same day as the birth of her television child (Harmon, 88). Lucy and Desi were at this time the highest paid actors on
television. Receiving eight million dollars per year (Martin and Segrave, 273); the popularity of the show was indisputable.

**Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers**

As the nation moved into the 1960s, feminism was beginning to become more popular and women were beginning to have more flexibility in the roles they played. As movies became more mainstream, it was challenging for female comics to enter that genre, television was the same way, and radio was virtually obsolete. It was only about one in a hundred comedians that were female (Martin and Segrave, 308). During this time, Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers became popular. Because of the extreme popularity and recognizability of their name, I feel it necessary to include both of them in this piece. These were two of the only females during this time to be performing stand-up. For their names to remain as considerable as they are signifies the sizeable contributions to the field of female comedy they have made.

In order to remain acceptable in popular culture these women were, as had been necessary in the past, performing self-deprecatory comedy. Both Diller and Rivers used the tradition of self-deprecation during the 1960s and continued the tradition through time, “But their razor sharp wits carried them far beyond the dizzy dunderhead and ever the man chaser” (Martin and Segrave 309).

Much of Phyllis Diller’s work involved questioning ideas about female roles. Many of her jokes were “extremely hostile towards husbands, children, families, the rigid role of housewives and female suppression in general” (Martin and Segrave 309). Diller
began her work in 1955 at the age of 37, filling in a two-week vacancy at a comedy club in San Francisco called the Purple Onion. “She used the two weeks to try out new material, satirizing ridiculous ads from *Vogue* and *Bazaar*, making funny faces and using various props, from comic glasses to tatty furs” (Martin and Segrave, 338). She was so well received that the comedy club quickly adopted her act and she remained there for 89 weeks. After she left the Purple Onion, she traveled, with her husband as manager, to clubs all over the country, writing all her own material about what she knew best, family interactions and housework (Martin and Segrave, 338). Diller reached new heights for women in comedy, and was profiled in *Time* magazine for her work.

Phyllis Diller had a crop of ‘stock characters’ she often relied on during her shows to make fun of husbands, mothers and housewifery in general. The most famous of those is her fictitious husband, Fang. “Diller enjoyed the Fang jokes because she said it was a chance to get back at male comics who have put down wives for years. Diller was never sentimental about family life” (Martin and Segrave, 341-2). Although Fang can be seen as a way of making fun of men with every Fang joke, Diller was making fun of the women who marry these men. She used Fang as a vehicle for making fun of her own inadequacies to get a man who is smarter or more handsome than Fang.

Diller did face hardships from males in the audience as she began and was first popular only among homosexual men. Eventually women began to hear and appreciate her comedy, most likely because she was saying things they wanted to say themselves, and finally those women brought their husbands and men into her audience (Martin and Segrave, 343). These women were fans because of the truth her comedy told. Although her characters were made up, women could see truth in the stories she told and in the
interactions between Diller and her characters. “Diller said she stuck close to the truth for her material using the day-to-day problems that housewives had with husbands, children, relatives, food and housework” (Martin and Segrave, 342).

Like Lucille Ball, Diller took her comedy only so far. She made fun of herself, her appearance, and her fictitious husband Fang and his fictitious family. Her comedy had limits. She never crossed into the realm of being hostile about motherhood. Her comedy never spoke about annoying or problematic children or bitterness about being a mother. These topics seemed untouchable. Although both Diller and Rivers remark repeatedly about their failures at the female role, neither represents herself as an inadequate mother (Horowitz, 50). So, although these women found themselves at a point in our society where they could push the boundaries of female sex-roles, they found themselves without the ability to question all ideas associated with women. Perhaps though, the questioning of these ideas had not yet entered their mind. Perhaps they were not willing to question ideas and assumptions about motherhood, but felt, because of the time and the progression of ideas about women there were not questions that needed asking. It is also possible that they were confined by the limits of the medium in which they perform. They are limited to material that will not alienate their audience by pushing their ideas too far.

Diller was well known for her outrageous outfits and looks in general:

“She deliberately masked her good figure and pleasant face by wearing gaudy clothing, fright wigs, shaved eyebrows, false eyelashes, and high-heeled ankle boots. She had a collection of blue, green, pink, yellow and turquoise contact lenses for the stage. She delivered her gags standing with her legs wide apart and her shoulders slightly hunched” (Martin and Segrave, 341).
Sex roles and representation of those roles played a major part in Diller’s act. She was finally becoming popular in the 1950s when shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* were immensely popular and portrayed exaggerated sex-roles. “The ideal woman was irresistibly seductive and/or chastely domestic. But Diller and Rivers comedically counter pointed the image of woman as harlot/housewife by wisecracking about their sexual and domestic defects” (Horowitz, 50). Diller challenged the ideas of this rigid sex-role assigned to women using her comedy.

In an interview with Susan Horowitz, Diller discusses her views on her own self-deprecatory humor and her act in general:

> I find it charming. It’s not necessary, but it’s a lot harder to do without self-deprecation. It endears you to the audience. It makes you seem—look, I’m not such hot stuff, I’m just one of you guys. I’m not perfect…if some of the girls did it, they would get further faster. It’s a great way to say hello. The only way to learn comedy is in front of the audience—which is humiliating. When I started out, I didn’t know how to say hello to an audience. And to this day, my hello relates to something I am wearing (Horowitz 49).

Diller is willing to admit that she used her self-depreciating humor as a tool to become popular with audiences. She considers it a choice among many methods she could use to achieve this goal. She was able, using this kind of humor, to made herself inadequate and not appear in any way superior to her audience (especially the males), which often made her humor more accessible and less threatening to males.

The comedy Diller employed typically made fun of one of four things: her husband – here she used a fictitious husband ‘Fang’ to represent men (or perhaps just husbands) in general; her inabilities to fulfill the duties typically associated with housewifery (cooking, cleaning etc); women who enjoy these duties or are good at them;
and finally about Fang’s family. She was willing to point out her own inadequacies from the get go. Take for example these lines from her Phyllis Diller, Live from San Francisco album released in 2001:

Course you can see my main problem, I never should have married, for heaven’s sakes, there’s nothing domestic about me – I don’t like to clean, I don’t know how to clean, I don’t know how to cook, I don’t know all that stuff, ugh! We have a ring around the tub you can set a drink on… There ain’t a person in our family who’s got the guts to eat raisin toast.

Although lines like this might not seem self-deprecatory, Diller follows them shortly in her routine with: “My high school class voted me most likely to marry outside of the species…I was the ugliest thing you ever saw in your life – my own Ouija board told me to go to hell…A peeping tom threw up on my windowsill.” These are lines that are clearly self-deprecatory, to say the least, and the audience laughs as she puts herself down more and more.

The work that Diller did in stand-up was dictated by power. She used her rejection of her ‘femaleness’ to gain power in a male dominated profession. “Her persona, who lacks traditional female power (sex appeal and domestic competence), becomes her vehicle for taking power in a traditionally male profession—stand-up comedy” (Horowitz, 62). This achievement of power by a woman in a male dominated space can be seen in two ways. In one way, Diller made great strides for women. She pushed her way though walls that would not allow women to enter the field of stand-up comedy and created a space where women were now welcome and popular. Susan Horowitz argues that Diller’s method of comedy, self-deprecation, was her way of making fun of the stereotypes of the 1950s housewife. Horowitz states, “the fact that she has established and maintained her success for over forty years indicates her comedic
creativity, the underlying attractiveness of her personality, and a high degree of perseverance and purpose” (62). The achievements of Diller can be seen in another way as well. Her comedy, self-deprecatory as it is, indicates unwillingness in the social climate to allow women to perform their comedy. Diller had to adopt a male role in order to be accepted as a comedian. She had to forgo her femininity in order to speak her mind and remain less threatening to her audience and to the social ideas people held so dear.

Joan Rivers, who was also popular at this time, applied many of the same methods as Diller to her comedy, which led her to her popularity. Rivers was a “victim who struck back. Men preferred women who remained mute victims. Mixed in with her brand of assault humor was a large dose of self-deprecation…It was this very aspect of her act which has allowed her to attain the heights of popularity that she has reached” (Martin and Segrave, 344-5). This method of attacking the ideas of society along with herself was a sort of apology for the first attacks. She allowed herself leeway by making fun of herself along with the ideas she made fun of. This methodology made the threats to women’s roles less harmful and more accommodating to a large audience.

One difference between the work that is being done now, as compared to the work that women were doing prior to this, is that Rivers and the female comics of this era were able to write their own work, discuss whatever topics they want to and perform in a way that felt right for them. Much of the work Rivers did evolved out of her own anger and thoughts about her life. “The raw material for the act is Joan’s own life—the fear, anger and grief transformed into absurd humor, the memories exaggerated and ridiculed until the pressurized balloon of pain is pricked by a punch line and bursts into laughter” (Horowitz, 90). Rivers did indeed have a lot of anger present in her life, some of which
stemmed out of her striving to be a female comedian. According to Weisman, “Until she was 32, River experienced every imaginable form of rejection from an entertainment industry that had no use for females who were not either ingénues or mother-types. Dirt-poor and without familial support, Rivers spent nights in city Y’s and periodically lived out of her beat-up 1950 Buick” (18). Because of this rooting in anger, it is assumed that the audience Rivers’ found was often empathetic to her statements and to her humor. In order to be successful as a comic it is necessary to relate to the thoughts of the audience. This is a tactic Joan employed in her stand-up routines. “Rivers knows her audience. She knows that, like herself, they both admire and resent attractive, successful celebrities and enjoy seeing the rich and famous as the butt of jokes” (Horowitz 99). The audience can understand what she is saying with her comedy. They can then relate to her as a person because she is joking about things that they too think and feel.

One reoccurring bit in Rivers’ routines was the discussion and dichotomy between the “bitch” and “tramp.” She makes the point that “a ‘tramp’ is gorgeous, sexually promiscuous and stupid- except when it comes to attracting men” (Horowitz, 100). In the same way that Phyllis Diller has her stock character “Fang,” Rivers has Heidi Abromowitz, a fictitious “tramp” who attended Rivers’ high school. Heidi was often the butt of jokes insulting sexually promiscuous women. The opposite of the ‘tramp’ then, was the ‘bitch,’ “a tough clever woman who is out for what she can get” (Horowitz, 101). These are loaded words that Rivers’ chose to use, typically associated with linguistic sexism, insulting women both by men and women. These words have meaning that is only directed toward women, and derogatorily so. Rivers never revealed in her act why she chose these words but we could conclude she was either trying to point
out the impacts and effects of these words, she was calling for a blending of these categories, or she simply wanted to use strong language that everyone can identify with and is probably in some way emotionally attached to in order to strengthen her act.

One difference in Rivers’ and Diller’s work is Joan’s appearance. Unlike Diller, Rivers did nothing to mask her attractiveness. Instead of looking grotesque to the audience, she only made reference to when she was obese as a child or about her sexual inadequacies. Some of her favorite material though, was the inadequacies of other (often women) celebrities. To be an attractive and biting comic as a woman was a whole new step. Rivers encountered resistance as a comic because she is a woman. Horowitz states, “Self-deprecation eased that resistance—the logic being that if you’re doing something women aren’t supposed to do, you might be accepted if you show that you don’t think much of yourself as a woman…Joan looks attractive but her words reveal her appearance to be phoney, a metaphorical drag act for someone who doesn’t really fit what a woman is supposed to be” (103).

She perpetuated the idea that women should be beautiful and sexy but she is, at the same time questioned ideas about women’s roles by being a female comic.

Although from time to time Rivers tried out new jokes and new subjects, making fun of herself, alongside other women in popular culture, proved to be the most lucrative. In the 1970s Rivers had prepared a six-minute routine on women’s liberation and had others on pollution and youth culture but decided to get rid of them when she discovered that these topics were not funny to America’s women. She found her typical self-deprecatory routine of making fun of female roles to be much more successful (Martin and Segrave 351). Apparently at this time, the women of America were not yet ready to laugh about feminism or to joke about the serious issues happening around them, but were ready and willing to laugh about the roles they were assigned to and the
responsibilities associated with being women. The laughter that women held had an enormous power to dictate social change and to establish a social climate of women’s discussion of their roles.

A difference from Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball that both Diller and Rivers face is that they were working in the arena of stand-up whereas much of the work of Allen and Ball was done in clearly scripted sketch acts. This presented new problems to the comedy of the stand-ups. Audiences tend to relate the statements made by a stand-up comedian more closely with their real lives and real personalities than is often done with sketch comedians. Stand-up comedy also tends to give the performer more power over the audience as they can see and hear the audience reaction and react accordingly. They can form their material to suit the wants of the audience. As was discussed earlier, people often were understanding and knowledgeable about the differences in the onstage and offstage personas of Gracie Allen. Having one’s work connected so intensely personally to ones personal life can allow for power in words, but also ridicule of not only one’s act, but implicitly of one’s life as well. “The confusion is almost inevitable—for one thing, the performer and the on-stage character have the same name” (Horowitz, 50). This topic relates back to the issue of what is included in a comedy act. Even when doing self-deprecatory comedy, there are lines that performers do not want to cross. “Stand-up comics walk a thinner line between autobiography and fiction. Perhaps an abusive mother – even in jest – is just not funny” (Horowitz, 50).

The roles of Diller and Rivers were monumental. Moving out of the excessively rigid roles of people like Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball, the two were finally able to make social commentary through their comedy. Finally, in the 1960s and 70s
women were able to gain some ground, although only under the pretense that they remain self-depreciatory and do not come across as too aggressive or independent, and to discuss the roles they were in and the limits they faced. “While many find Rivers’ performance personal objectionable and the content of her humor vulgar, they nonetheless appreciate her having broken down the doors barring women’s entrance into comedy” (Weisman, 18). Many of the things both Rivers and Diller said were objectionable, to feminists and traditionalists alike, but it is undeniable that they were taking progressive steps in the roles that women are able to play in comedy. “Rivers and Diller, by creating a bridge, made it easier for a future group of female comics to rely less and less on that brand of humor and to choose from a wider variety of styles and material as men have always done” (Martin and Segrave, 347). They began to open a field to women that would eventually allow women the freedom of exploring all kinds of comedy without insulting themselves. These were opening an arena where finally, women’s voices can be heard. These women may have said things that contradicted the women’s movement or made some feminists cringe, but “we come to believe in the power of women’s voices – regardless of what we think of their words” (Weisman, 18).

All of the women in this chapter, and the majority of female comics during this time, were popular only because of their ability to laugh at the same things that men were laughing at. Slowly, from Gracie Allen to Phyllis Diller, we began to move toward a culture that accepts women’s comedy. Joan Rivers provided a new side of humor when she most often made fun of celebrities in a ‘gossipy’ way, part of an evolution that led to the eventual comedy of women like Roseanne, Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho. This new generation of comics has somehow broken many of the traditional ties placed on
female comics and is beginning to map a landscape where women have their own tradition of humor, whatever that might be, and have options in the kinds of comedy they are performing.

This social history of women’s role in comedy provides a perfect background to explore further the roles women play today. As we move toward more contemporary in the next chapters toward more contemporary work it is necessary to be able to place that work within the context of this history. Without this background knowledge it is impossible to fully understand and appreciate the impacts women in comedy have today.
Section 2: The Use of Comedy for Social Change.
Minority groups have been using humor for decades as a method of social change in reaction to humor used against them. Comedy is a method of social change and social control that allows these groups to maintain some kind of solidarity and control over their own situation. These groups use many methods that I will discuss in the following pages such as the use of the ‘protest tale,’ sarcasm, parody and reversal in order to counteract the effects of the humor of oppression and the oppression they have suffered in general. Minority groups are mocked as members of society through humor and through everyday interactions. This humor, which is typically a humor used within communities, allows these groups to maintain a sense of dignity and power.

Humor itself is determined by social position. When people hold power in a society, such as white men hold in our society, they are able to make fun of groups below them. Evidence of this is that seen in the way that minority groups, including women have been the subjects of humor for decades. They have been mocked because they are seen as less important than those considered dominant. Because of their lower social position, these minority groups have reacted to that humor and that general disrespect in a number of ways. They have used academia to educate people, they have used their often-unheard voice to write letters to the editor of newspapers, they have staged protests and they have fought for their rights and importantly, they have responded to humor with humor.

The process of undermining a more powerful social force is a difficult one that requires powerful morale. One way these groups are able to maintain this morale is through their own humor. Groups often use insider humor to maintain a realistic understanding of their oppression, acknowledging the atrocity of the situation and
remaining optimistic that the situation can be improved. This humor serves at once as a way to foster group unity and morale, and to undermine powerful and oppressive social forces.

The way that these groups are able to do that is through the use of different types of humor such as sarcasm, parody, inversion, and “protest humor.” These are all popular methods of humor by oppressed people. Through these techniques of humor then, because the way humor is used is an indicator of social position, these minority groups question and slowly begin to change social norms in their favor. Using humor to make fun of dominant, oppressing groups can bring unity to an oppressed group through a feeling of mutual understanding and sympathy. These groups generally share opinions about the dominant group and through this humor can gain a sense of strength to stick together and fight against their oppression. When these groups are making fun of dominant ideology it is working to undermine the power these dominant groups hold over them. The different methods of comedy used by marginalized groups are used in different ways to assert some kind of social change.

Because people find a similar positionality among people of similar social group, the use of these techniques of humor that work to undermine dominant humor seem to be stronger and more convincing when used in groups of like people. As early as 1900 Freud began to do work on humor. He asserted that in every joke told, there are three parties involved: the teller, the audience and the target. Freud also made it clear that in order for a joke to be funny, there must be an agreement between the teller and the audience about the implications it directs toward the target. These parties must share attitudes and beliefs that support the joke’s theme in order for the joke to work
successfully (Lampert, 232). This argument shows how women are able to use these common understandings to create a general consciousness. According to an article on feminist humor, “a group of like-thinking people is required because a sense of shared norms or values are necessary to perceive something as humorous” (Merrill, 273). The attitudes and beliefs Freud argues are necessary in order to perceive a situation as humorous is, in this case, the general understanding of oppression from another group and a feeling of resistance to that group. When this group of like-minded thinkers is gathered together, their humor can often be powerful and forward thinking because there is not the pressure of the social hierarchy weighing on and evaluating their jokes. A group like that is freed from the feeling of powerlessness and able to express their own humor. Whether these groups are unified or not, marginalized people often employ techniques of humor, as mentioned before, that avoid direct confrontation of the oppressor in favor of working to subtly undermine the power used against them.

The first method often employed by marginalized groups that I will discuss here is the use of sarcasm. Sarcasm is not the strongest form of social critique but it still offers a means of making a strong point without open confrontation. According to an article about women’s use of humor, Suzanne Bunkers notes, “social criticism is the cornerstone of sarcastic humor, which provides an outlet for anger that have been repressed for too long” (163). Because sarcasm is often used in a situation that avoids direct conflict, it supports the assumption of inequality. Using sarcasm allows the speaker to make jokes and make fun of people superior to them while being non-threatening. We can see this technique demonstrated fully in the work of Lucille Ball and
Gracie Allen. They had to use non-threatening, subtle techniques because they were not allowed the freedom of the excessive sarcasm we see in comedians like Diller and Rivers. Although sarcasm is usually offered as a critique of a given behavior of another groups, it can also begin good-natured relations between two groups because of its non-threatening ways. On the other hand, it can be very derogatory and vengeful, leaving both groups feeling even more distanced from one another. Sarcasm is often ambiguous and because of this indirectness offers the speaker a layer of safety to say the things he or she wants to be known. The effects of sarcasm are softened by the underlying message typically associated with sarcasm of “I don’t really mean this” and, although that may not be true in this particular case, it works to the advantage of the speaker of a marginalized group.

The second method, parody, is a humorous imitation of another group or another situation. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines parody as, “a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule.” In the case of minority groups, parody will most often be used to ridicule the majority. Through the humorous imitation of something held close by the majority, the minority is able to communicate to the majority in a way that begins to deal directly with things close to the majority group. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the function of parody in a social context. Bakhtin’s work is discussed in the writing of Micah Berger: “the function of a parody is to open a channel of communication between the standard social norms and the minority views of that same community” (22). This is essentially stating that parody functions as a method of communication between minority groups and their oppressors. This works because the
minority group is using the language of the oppressor in order to convey their own ideas. In parody, the speaker is able to use the language of the majority and bend it to the will of their own intentions in order to force the majority to understand, or ‘reframe,’ these ideas in a new social context. Parody is critical of dominant ideas, that it either mocks those ideas or offers new ones. Parody is often thought of as “counter-hegemonic texts” that question and alter conventions, thereby destabilizes the power of hegemonic texts.

Finally, an effective technique used by oppressed groups to create humor for social change is the “protest tale.” The protest tale was first noted by Richard Dorson and later by Donald Simmons. It is a method of humor of a distinctly protest nature. There are seven general techniques within protest humor that are outlined in Josepeh Boskin’s *Humor and Social Change in Twentieth Century America*. Those techniques are: first, the belief that freedom can be found within the group and an adoption of widespread cultural norms will lead to a great personal loss. Second, in protest humor, a member of a marginalized group will counter specific insults from the oppressor in retaliation. A third technique is using parody against a given cultural image. Fourth is thinking and speaking like the majority but in the end, creating an escape for the minority. The fifth works to knock the status of the majority group by mocking their high status, ridiculing an individual with that status or revealing how that group truly feels about the minority. Sixth, a strong relationship between a majority and minority member may be imitated. And finally, entire scenes may be inverted to place the minority group on top. This “protest tale” employs multiple techniques of humor that allow a group to maintain its dignity in spite of all the slander and oppression with which they are faced (Boskin, 46-7).
Minority groups have been using these methods of humor as social change for decades. Many people forget, though, that women have also always been a marginalized group and thus in need of employing some of these same techniques in order to ensure group cohesion and unity. This has not been as easy for women, though, because of the widespread understanding that women have a lower social status than men throughout every group, including other minority and marginalized groups. This has also been problematic for women because it was (and often still is) believed that women are somehow incapable of humor of any kind.

There are three central ideas that speak to the idea of women’s humorlessness. The first is the idea that women were forbidden to be funny because all that was funny was aggressive and for a women to be aggressive is impolite. According to Anne Beatts as quoted in *Humor and Social Change* by Joseph Boskin, for women, “having a sense of humor meant laughing when someone poured salt over your head” (38). Typically, men exhibited this kind of aggressive humor that was openly critical of groups they believed to be inferior. According to a series of anthropological studies on humor inequality between the sexes, Mahadev Apte states, “The use of humor to compete with or to belittle others, thereby enhancing a person’s own status, or to humiliate others either psychologically or physically, seems generally absent” (70). Lakoff and Regina Barreca note that humor, particularly the types of humor that denigrate either groups or individuals, is not considered "polite," and women are brought up to avoid any air of impoliteness. Also, as mentioned earlier, so much of humor is overtly aggressive, and women are discouraged and maybe even forbidden from expressing aggression in any form (56).
It is this type of aggressive humor that women have been left out of according to Jerry Palmer. He goes on to say that it is these types of aggressive humor (slapstick, horseplay, verbal duels and ritual insults) that are characterized by being very masculine (71). It is the masculinity imbedded within these jokes that make them so powerful. It is not as though women are incapable of this aggressive humor but rather that the social control exerted upon them makes it unlikely for women to tell these types of jokes (Palmer, 71). Mary Kay Blakely writes humorously about this politeness in the introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*. Blakely writes of women,

“We are expected somehow not to offend anyone on our way to liberation. There’s an absurd expectation that the women’s movement must be the first revolution in history to accomplish its goals without hurting anyone’s feelings. We are to be the Boston Tea Party that serves crumpets with its resolutions. We are to curtsey through our crusades. We ought to smile politely as we outline our injustices. By all means, we are to be kind. (Pardon me sir, but could you kindly move over? You’re stepping on my body, my paycheck, my choices. It’s hurting me, sir. Would it be too much trouble to please move over?)” (10)

Blakely is making fun of the way that women are forbidden, and often afraid to act too aggressively with their humor because of their conditioned politeness. Nancy Walker writes of this phenomenon, “the degree to which aggression and hostility are overt in a particular woman’s humorous expression depends on the degree of gender equality permitted in her society” (172). What Walker suggests with this statement is that women are not inherently less aggressive in their humor: it is only a result of the social status and social expectations of women. Walker argues later that it is because of these sexual taboos and social constraints that “women’s humor has been described as more gentle and genteel than men’s, more concerned with wit than derision, more interested in
sympathy than ridicule, more focused on private than on public issues” (173). Whether it is true that women are inherently less aggressive in their humor or if it solely because of social situation is not the real issue. It is important to understand that because of that less aggressive humor, women have often been less recognized for their humor than men.

Next, it has been argued that it is false that women are not humorous but rather that women’s humor has been unrecognized and often misunderstood because it is so restricted. In women’s comedy writing for instance, it has been argued that although women have attempted comedy writing, it has been largely unsuccessful. In reality though, as discussed earlier, the type of humor women use is different than men’s and has thus been unrecognized as humor. According to Barreca in her introduction to Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy, “although women authors have of course written comedies, some of the most important aspects of these comedies have been virtually ignored by critics who do not perceive the wide range of emotions raised by the texts” (5). This is because the comedy that women are using in these texts, and in general, is not the same as men’s comedy and thus underappreciated by dominant groups. Kate Sanborn makes an effort to combat this misinterpretation of women’s humor in her collection of female humorists. She states in her introduction that her central motivation for creating the collection is to combat the notion that women are humorless.

Women’s humor often uses techniques not typically seen in men’s humor. One example of this is using incongruity. Although not to say men do not use this type of humor, it is more popular among women. According to Walker, the use of incongruity can dispel myths of patriarchy. She argues this works because “By exposing the discrepancies between the realities of women’s lives and the images of women promoted
by the culture, between the inequalities to which women have been subjected and the egalitarian ideals upon which the nation was founded, American women humorists have targeted the patriarchal social system” (174). This type of humor, because it differs from men’s humor and is thus deviant from the norm, is not as often recognized as such a valid form of humor as some of the techniques men choose are validated.

Finally, the third reason it may be assumed that men are somehow more capable of humor than women is because men and women typically express different types of humor. As discussed earlier, men are typically aggressive in their humor preferring quick one-line often crude jokes. I quickly conducted a web search for men’s humor and the result was a number of websites featuring quick jokes often about women. The jokes include:

QUESTION. What do women and a toilet seat have in common?

ANSWER. They are both warm when you get there, but you're always wondering who was there before you. (Humor)

but it is often found that women are less aggressive and enjoy a more thoughtful, less hierarchical type of humor. In studies conducted by Mahadev Apte, an anthropologist, we find that men’s humor is often aggressive whereas women prefer puns, wordplay and anecdotes (70). Women have created a body of humorous work in all mediums that often deals with the unique experience of being a woman. There can be situations when men cannot understand this humor or relate to it as well as women and thus, may not find it humorous. According to Walker, American humor writers have been actively employing these types of humor and have created a unique body of work. Walker notes that the
distinctive position of women has created a body of work that discusses issues that relate directly to women’s lives stating that women’s humor is, “Reflecting, by necessity, their roles and positions as women in the culture, female writers have focused largely on the domestic sphere of wife and mother and on the social sphere that, differently in different eras, has been defined as women’s work and activities” (172). There are a number of collections of women’s humor and almost every text includes primarily anecdotal humor. A quick flip through a book like *Pulling our own Strings: Feminist humor and satire* or *Titters: The first collection of humor by women* will reveal primarily humorous stories, anecdotes and poetry. There is of course the aggressive, one line, insulting, slapstick humor that Apte argues is more characteristic of men (70-1), but it is nevertheless infrequently present in these collections.

Palmer also points us to the suggestion by some sociolinguists that women often feel more restricted and less able to speak as freely as men do and so women do not develop the social skills necessary to tell good jokes. The theory goes on to suggest that women are further inhibited to tell jokes, especially in mixed company, by constant expectations of politeness (Palmer, 71). Because of these social controls placed on women, they often feel inferior to men and for that reason, according to McGhee, “women would be expected both to initiate humor less frequently and to be less victimizing of others when they do initiate it” (186). And although women have been thought of as incapable of having a sense of humor, they are often prey to humor.

Besides the humor of comedians like Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller where women made fun of themselves, men have been making fun of women for years. Men have stereotyped women in the same ways that women have done to themselves. Men make
fun of women for being silly, stupid, nagging, too talkative, not beautiful enough, dependent and just funny beings in general. According to sociologist Paul McGhee, power has a close association with humor and “the initiation of humor has in our culture become associated with males rather than with females because males hold the power” (183). Suzanne Bunkers notes of McGhee’s work that, “Those who hold the power in a culture develop a preference for humor that victimizes the powerless, while the powerless develop a preference for self-victimizing humor” (162). According to Jerry Palmer in Taking Humor Seriously, in a review of studies comparing men’s and women’s preferences for different types of humor, a number of studies are consistent in showing that both men and women prefer for a joke to be about a female no matter what the theme of joke may be. Men tell jokes about women that everyone is supposed to find funny. If a woman doesn’t laugh, she is often criticized because she ‘doesn’t know how to take a joke.’ The jokes men tell, similar to this joke, often reinforce the stereotypical roles of women.

QUESTION. What happened when you come home and find a woman in the living room? 
ANSWER. Her chain was too long.

QUESTION. Why does a woman wear white on her wedding day? 
ANSWER. Because the dishwasher should match the stove and refrigerator.

This joke implies a ‘hey buddy, wasn’t that funny?’ mentality between men with women as the target. What is funny about this joke to the audience is the idea of a woman being chained to the kitchen (or oven or sink etc.). Although this is clearly an absurd idea, there is still something that elicits laughter. That something is the understanding of the
stereotypes of women. With this joke, the teller is stigmatizing and stereotyping women and thereby exerting control over them. The joke isolates women and their roles as a way of gaining control over a certain group (in this case, women). A similar joke reinforces the same ideas:

QUESTION. How many brain cells does a woman have?
ANSWER. Four – One for each burner.

This joke, like the last enforces the idea of a woman as a servant but introduces a new idea of women’s stupidity. Because men are socialized to see themselves as superior to women, and because women historically have been represented as humorless, the lack of wit and intellect associated with the stereotype of women makes way for the dumb woman jokes. Here is another:

QUESTION. What do you learn when a woman is leaning against a wall and the wall falls down?
ANSWER. The smarter one gives in.

As women gain more social control, become more socially powerful and find they are no longer required to laugh at jokes like this to be considered humorous, the threat to men and these jokes becomes greater. As men are forced to relinquish their social control, jokes with women as the target become more violent.

QUESTION. What do you tell a woman with two black eyes?
ANSWER. Nothing she hasn’t heard already.

Humor indicates a level of control one has over a situation and as men lose their control over women, as a last attempt to gain control they make use this violent humor. It is
unlikely, though, that women would use this same kind of derogatory, stereotyping humor against men because of their lower social position. In a discussion of the inequality found in the humor of men and women Jerry Palmer includes in his book *Taking Humor Seriously* that “women’s humor reflects the existing inequality between the sexes not so much in its substance as in the constraints imposed on its occurrence, on the techniques used, on the social settings in which it occurs and on the kind of audience that appreciates it” (71) although he does go on to note that there are factors that can affect these inequalities such as advanced age, marriage and participation in women’s groups.

This is not to say that women, or other minority groups, have not make these same kinds of aggressive jokes about men or about dominant groups. These jokes do exist. Women have a stock of jokes they make about men often playing on the same stereotypes men play with. Some examples of this humor include:

QUESTION. How does a man help with housework?
ANSWER. Lifts his legs so you can vacuum.

QUESTION. Why is psychoanalysis a lot quicker for men than women?
ANSWER. When it's time to go back to his childhood he's already there.

Just like the jokes men make about women, this joke plays on stereotypes. The difference is though, that these jokes are told from a different power position. When women tell jokes like this it is a reversal of the roles of men and women and instead of men stereotyping the roles women are forced into, women ridicule men in order to try to place themselves on top for a short time. Earlier I mentioned the way that men’s jokes
about women serve to stigmatize and stereotype women, thus labeling and objectifying them in order to gain control. In this case through, these jokes work in the exact same way, stigmatizing and stereotyping, but in an effort to resist control rather than maintain control over another group.

There are jokes like this throughout many minority groups that serve the same functions. These jokes ridicule the dominant group in an effort to place themselves on top, if only for a moment. On a number of websites featuring Jewish jokes, there is a joke about the humor of gentiles. Beginning with the preface that Jews might be tired of so many “Jewish jokes,” they offer relief with some “gentile humor.” The jokes include:

A Gentile couple goes to a nice restaurant:
The man says: "I'll have the steak and a baked potato, and my wife will have the Julienne salad with house dressing. We’ll both have coffee."
The waiter says: "How would you like your steak and salad prepared?"
The man says "I'd like the steak medium, the salad is fine as is." The waiter says: "Thank you."

A Gentile man calls his elderly mother.
He asks, "Mom, how are you feeling? Do you need anything?"
She says, "I feel fine, and I don't need anything. Thanks for calling."
(Gentile Jokes)

These jokes are housed within collections of jokes intended for a Jewish audience often pointing out the nuances of Judaism. These ‘gentile jokes’ in particular are meant to play on the stereotype that gentiles (non-Jews) lack a sense of humor or at least one that can compete with Jewish humor.

These jokes all revolve around the similar theme of an inversion of power structures. Bakhtin discusses this reversal of power through this specific type of reversal
humor in his work. In his work he specifically uses the concept of the carnival as a method of beginning to challenge social norms. Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, established in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1968), embraces the idea that in carnival there is an inversion of power where, to some extent at least, people did whatever they want, power positions shifted and those who had power lost it and those who normally didn’t, finally did. “Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions… it was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin, 10). Carnival created a release from power structures that rigidly defined roles, just as these jokes provide a release for the teller. The teller is able to break free from the “established order” and find temporary liberation by reversing the power positions.

Another central idea of Bakhin’s carnival is that it is all-encompassing. It does not exclude either the actor or the spectator but rather involves everyone in its meaning and action. “Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (Bakhtin, 7). Like carnival then, these jokes do not allow the spectators or audience (or in Freud’s terms, the target) to passively observe but rather demands that all groups are involved in the understanding that there is a shift in power happening. This could happen when a woman directly tells a man a joke that questions his power position and their assumed roles. He is then directly confronted with the fact that she is, even if only for the brief moment of that joke, exerting power over him.

In the same way that carnival refuses to distinguish actors and spectators in its actions, it also refuses in its laughter. According to Bakhtin,
Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. It is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity…it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world (11-12).

The arrangement of carnival forces people to include themselves in what is going on. They are not allowed to step back and laugh at the carnival; they are instead forced to laugh with it and with the participants as if they were also participants. This forces the participants to accept the temporary reversal of power structures. Applying this concept to jokes then would force the target to laugh along with the joke in a kind of acknowledgement of the shift in power.

Bakhtin provides a valuable theory that can be applied to the functions of women and humor. But in reading his work, it is easily seen that the majority of his theories apply to class issues of class rather than gender. More specifically to this work though, in her book *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), Natalie Zemon Davis applies the ideas of carnival to issues of gender. She discusses the ‘unruly’ women who invert their world and end up on top and what that does for them and the society they are in. This theory works essentially the same as the carnival. Women are able to place themselves in a dominant position by inverting the hierarchy and achieving a position of power. This inversion gave people who typically experience powerlessness, like the marginalized groups discussed in this chapter, a way to express themselves and their feelings. According to Davis, “sexual inversion also gave a more positive license to the unruly woman: her right as subject and as mother to rise up and tell the truth” (Davis, 147). Using humor along with what Davis describes as sexual inversion allows women to subvert ideas they are typically forced to acknowledge and accept. Davis states, “a
comic treatment of the woman out of her place allows her a temporary period of domination, which is ended only after she has said or done something to undermine authority or denounce its abuse” (135). This inversion provides women a place where they can speak truths they feel and understand, and begins to undermine those ideologies where they are otherwise characteristically unable to do such things.

Davis’ theory is conditional though. It will not work in all circumstances and Davis is aware of that. Although Davis was writing about early modern France, the conditions necessary for this inversion to be in place today. As Davis states it the following conditions must be in place:

The woman-on-top was a resource for private and public life in the fashions we have described only so long as two things were the case: first, so long as sexual symbolism had a close connection with questions of order and subordination, with the lower female sex conceived as the disorderly lustful one; second, so long as the stimulus to inversion play was a double one – traditional hierarchical structures and disputed changes in the distribution of power in family and political life (150).

Davis qualifies her theory by observing that sex is closely bound with power, as it is in this society as the pages before this demonstrated through the types of humor granted through power that women are kept away from. Secondly, she argues that these structures must not only be present on the macro level, but on the micro level as well. If the inversion of these hierarchies will affect the general, public sphere as well as just the personal situation, it will remain effective. Because patriarchy so dominantly controls our environment, this inversion theory is appropriate to apply in our society. Now that this theory can be applied it is necessary to ask how it can be useful to women, especially in the realm of comedy in order to achieve social change.
The theory suggests an inversion of power as a way to begin to alter and question the present norms. Inversion represents, though, a world that has been flipped over. Because of this, both anthropologists and literary critics have argued that it is an action that can only be turned back over and does not make way for actual change, but just correction. As Davis puts it, “students of festive and literary forms have ordinarily come to the same conclusion as anthropologists regarding the limits of symbolic inversion: a world-turned-upside-down can only be righted, not changed” (131).

Davis, however, disagrees with these theorists. She contends that it has been an effective method of social change. She argues that this inversion of hierarchies gives voice to women who previously did not have it and options to women who previously did not have them. Davis suggests that women perform this inversion were allowed to function in new ways thus allowing for the possibility that if women can act this way in an inversion of power, perhaps it is always possible. Perhaps that inversion can become permanent and women can remain on top. Secondly, this is an effective method of social change because women are allowed a place to voice their opinions in a society that traditionally is not tolerant of hearing those voices. As Davis puts it:

The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and, second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest (131)

This inversion does not only serve the immediate needs of women to have a voice and a choice; it also engages a larger social discourse that asks questions about large social
issues. “Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within a society. The woman-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behavior” (Davis, 131). Through the power of inversion women are able to make changes in the hierarchical system. The inversion of humor – women telling jokes about men that are directly insulting – is one effective method of achieving this inversion.

As this humor has been more and more effective, women have found themselves able to expand into a humor that is less about a struggle to have a voice and moves into a push to be heard and struggle for equality. There is an explanation for the change in this newly-popularized humor of women. As Suzanne Bunkers explains, if humor is founded on an individual’s perception of what is happening around her, then clearly women’s sense of powerlessness in the past explained the self-deprecatory comedy that was so characteristic, but now that there is a growing consciousness of women’s rights and the women’s movement, there is a general lack of acceptance for that powerlessness that leads to women’s newfound sense of humor and the potential to find power through that humor (169).

Recently, women’s humor has undergone a transformation that allows women to discuss the experiences of women in their humor. This humor has moved into a more ‘feminist humor’ as described by Gloria Kaufman. Kaufman argues that feminist humor is “based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. It is also based on the conviction that such oppression is undesirable
and unnecessary. It is a humor based on visions of change” (13). The last part of this statement is particularly important because it acknowledges the transformation of women coming into their own sense of humor rather than being judged and pressured into conforming to men’s humor. This new women’s humor, although not always directly, typically demands social change. Kaufman goes on to explain the functions of this humor, “we are ridiculing a social system that can be, that must be changed. Female humor may ridicule a person or a system from an accepting point of view (“that’s life”), while the nonacceptance of oppression characterizes feminist humor and satire” (13). This notion of a new women’s humor more blatantly geared for social change is shared by a number of scholars on the subject of women’s humor. Barreca agrees stating a number of characteristics distinct to women’s humor, “they write comedies which destroy a social order, perhaps but not necessarily to establish a new and different order; that their comedies may contain very little joyous celebration; that they use comedy not as a safety valve but as an inflammatory device, seeking ultimately, not to purge desire and frustration but to transform it into action” (8). Women’s humor is moving into a sphere where it is no longer forced to be polite or careful but can now make demands and hold standards to society.

The recent but hesitant acceptance of women’s humor is making that common, self-deprecatory humor of women less humorous than it has been in the past. According to Lisa Merrill, “when women no longer identify with the ways in which we traditionally have been defined, humor which ridicules our departure from those expectations no longer amuses us” (273). Women no longer find it amusing to laugh at themselves. With a greater sense of self-worth and value, those jokes are simply not funny. Women are
becoming aware of their own power and no longer listening to those who once held power over them. Barreca acknowledges this when she writes, “In exploring laughter, women are exploring their own powers; they are refusing to accept social and cultural boundaries that mark the need for desire for closure as a ‘universal.’ Comedy is dangerous; humor is a weapon. Laughter is refusal and triumph” (14). Women are beginning to embrace that power within comedy and within themselves to make a strong unified move toward social change that no longer allows for the victimization of women either in comedy or anywhere else.

In our ideal comedy, women, and all marginalized groups for that matter, are able to mock traditional roles and stereotypes and enter into a position where they are able to ridicule oppression openly and everyone will embrace this humor because of the inherent ridiculousness. Since according to conclusions drawn by McGhee, “if one perceives oneself to be generally low in status, self-victimizing humor is as likely to be appreciated as humor victimizing others” (186). Since women are gaining a higher social status and a higher sense of self-worth, their humor is changing as well and is no longer tolerant of that self-victimizing, self-depreciating comedy.

Examples of this type of humor can be found in collections and anthologies of women’s humor such as Crème de la Femme: The best of contemporary women’s humor, Titters: The first collection of humor by women, Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist humor and satire and In Stitches: A patchwork of feminist humor and satire to name a few. This humor is not just in print though. It can be seen in the work of stand-up comedians, women’s everyday speech and on television.
Lisa Merrill in “Feminist Humor” writes about an experience she had at a comedy club that moved her so much that she began working on the subject of women’s humor specifically. During a stand-up performance by Elayne Boosler in New York, Merrill noticed a new kind of humor from a woman. Boosler joked about the everyday experiences of women like avoiding men in the subway, weight gain and hassles with the phone company. Merrill also noted that although everyone in the club was amused, the women laughed much harder. She suggests this laughter was a “recognition of our shared socialization and shared concerns” (275). She also noted the comic’s ability to contradict stereotypes. Boosler “demonstrated by her parrying with the audience as well as through her routine, that women could be aggressive, brash and funny; survivors rather than victims” (Merrill, 275). This is a display of the humor women are fully capable of when they finally embrace the power they are slowly gaining.

As we have seen, humor is determined by social position and can be used to undermine social forces and ideologies. Minority groups cause use various forms of humor to combat these powerful forces in order to reach a higher social rank. Women specifically have been using this type of humor to alter their social position. Women, along with other minority groups, have ridiculed social ideologies, which has then placed them on top of the social hierarchy. Finally, as we move into a now feminist humor, we see a change in the social position of women as they refuse to be oppressed or oppress themselves with their humor. Female comics are becoming stronger and are less influenced by social forces trying to push them down.
Section 3: Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho:

Contemporary Women's Comedy.
This section features the comedy of two women, Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho. Both of these women are popular female stand-up comedians today and are evidence of the social change discussed in the last chapter. As I argue here, though, these women are also creating further social change through their work. The two work in different venues: DeGeneres in a mainstream context allowing her access to a wide variety of audiences, and Cho in a more focused, specialized context that allows her more freedom in her expression but also access to fewer people. Both women, in their own way, have contributed to the advancement of women in comedy and to the social forces moving women away from oppression and toward equality.

Ellen DeGeneres is a 46 year old lesbian who, through many efforts to make herself a respected, mainstream performer, hosts a top-rated daytime talk show, has written two successful books, and released DVDs of her standup routine. She moved from the mainstream during the mid-nineties into being a marginalized gay woman after she came out both on her television show and in her real life. Then she moved back into the mainstream, where she is now a widely respected comic. She has her comedy and her method of comedy to thank for that.

Ellen came out on her sitcom and in her life (at least to those who did not know already) in 1997. It is at this point that Ellen really forced the public to deal with her homosexuality. Before this point, it is assumed that the majority of her fans and the gay community was aware of her homosexuality but it was easy for people to deny it or to remain unaware because she had not come out publicly.

Ellen has been interviewed countless times as to why she chose to come out when and in the way she did. Each time she argues that she was not trying to be political but
that she simply refused to continue to live her life in secret. She no longer wanted to have to hide who she is in order to feel accepted. She admitted to Oprah on her show that in the past she was afraid while doing Oprah’s show once before that if Oprah knew that Ellen was gay, Oprah may not continue to see her with the same respect and admiration. This was a realistic fear of Ellen’s that she refused to put up with any longer.

Since then, Ellen has done revolutionary work with her comedy. Before then, Ellen was a remarkable comic. She was witty and was able to comment on day to day situations that created widespread laughter. She rarely did comedy dedicated exclusively to women, but has always focused on a more universal truth. When she openly announced she was gay though, her comedy turned political and progressive whether or not that was her intention. She stands firm claiming that she does not want to be political. She insists during her 20/20 interview with Diane Sawyer and her interview on Oprah that she is not trying to be political but that she only really came out so publicly for herself. She wanted to stop living a lie and having to hide herself like there was something wrong. “Ellen DeGeneres never set out to be anybody’s advocate for social tolerance, nor the standard-bearer for gays on television. She certainly never intended to be the poster child for the lesbian community. Mostly, she just wanted to be funny, make people laugh, and be liked” (Tracy, vii). But she did end up that way in many respects. The work she has done and the frenzy she created when she and her character, Ellen Morgan, came out of the closet shows just how seriously the statement “the personal is political” must be taken.

Whether Ellen liked it or not, her comedy became intensely political. She had a new identity to live with.
After Ellen had openly admitted her sexuality she was forced to deal with the public response to it. It is exactly this act, even more so than the coming out itself, that is political. Ellen is still forced to address her sexuality in all of her skits because people simply want to hear it from her. In 2003 Ellen released her newest book *The Funny Thing is…*, a book that contains new material and a lot of material transcribed from her stand-up tours that eventually found their way to HBO specials on DVD, *The Beginning* (2000) and *Here and Now* (2003). Ellen uses her new even more ‘free’ status to discuss messages she wants to convey to her audience. Because Ellen remained in the closet for so many years while she became intensely popular, she was rarely ostracized because of her sexuality by any audience and thus developed a wide fan base.

In her book *The Funny Thing is…* as well as on her DVD *The Beginning*, Ellen offers the following monologue:

> I don’t know. I don’t understand a lot of the stuff people are into but I do believe that everyone has the right to do whatever they want with their bodies. If it makes you feel good, do it. It's your life and your body. As long as you are two consenting adults – or three or five sometimes, I guess. (167).

She demands her audience be open minded and respectful of all people and their desires. With her performance she is setting up an atmosphere in which people must agree to (at least temporarily) share her views about sexuality and freedom in order to participate in the reality she is setting up. She goes on to state her opinions about same-sex marriage and assumes her audience feels the same way she does in order to find her humorous. She is setting up a social climate that will last at least until the show is over which demands acceptance of these issues:
Sex should bring people together but sometimes it really separates them. We have this huge debate going on right now about same-sex marriage. There are people who are against it. There are people who are for it. And the people who are against it say marriage is a union between a man and a woman and it has always been that way and it should remain that way. If we change the law to include two people of the same sex, they say, then what will be next? Someone could marry an animal. That is where they go right away. These people scare me. They think we’re weird. (168).

She follows this bit with a description of what it would be like to marry a goat, what it would be like to live together and how you would introduce the goat to your parents. She ends this segment saying:

I guess what I’m trying to say is, there are a lot of self-righteous people out there. And if you try to adjust your life to please them—by the way you dress, your sexuality, or the ass faces you make—you’re just going to go crazy and risk being as unhappy as these self-righteous kooks are. So enjoy your life. God gave us our bodies as a gift (Granted, to some of us it’s kind of a gag gift, but that’s okay too.) Wear what you want, love who you want and have fun. (169).

In this anecdote, Ellen makes a serious social critique about acceptance and diversity, but at the same time she is able to laugh at herself and keep her social commentary rooted in comedy. When she makes the remark about bodies being gag gifts, she is demonstrating her ability to laugh at herself while still taking herself and her message seriously. Ellen exhibits a new kind of comedy that Francis Gray argues emerged in the seventies out of the combination of traditional British comedy and traditional American comedy. This comedy is intensely personal and the comedian is no longer a joke machine, but a person telling a humorous personal story (142).

Ellen is reordering power structures through her work by demanding that, as an accepted, mainstream comedian, people accept her sexuality as well. She has reordered
these power structures, not on her own of course, but through the help of our culture’s growing acceptance of both women and homosexuality.

Ellen both created that social change by coming out and demanding that acceptance (which she didn’t get for a long time) and paved the way for other women and lesbians and other marginalized groups to do the same. During her coming out episode, Oprah appeared as a therapist for Ellen. Having Oprah play this part allowed Ellen to feature a black woman and a gay woman having this conversation. With the use of comedy, Ellen was complaining to Oprah that if she comes out as gay, she will face discrimination from others and people will dislike her based simply on what she is, without knowing her. She explains to the therapist that the therapist simply could not understand Ellen’s point. With this, she is urging the audience to realize that while many people quickly degrade gays, the exact same thing has been done to blacks and women.

Ellen is aware of the context in which she was able to be a comedian. She comments in an interview with *Ladies’ Home Journal*, “Historically, women could be funny if they were on stage with a man… But now, it’s okay for women to be strong. And the more women we see who aren’t tough in a bad way – just strong, and there *is* a difference—the better it is. I’m strong” (Ginsberg, 113). Ellen’s humor is closely bound with her being as a woman and as a homosexual. The laughter she evokes then, is also closely tied to her identity. She says, again in her *Ladies’ Home Journal* interview, “I’ve never gone for insulting humor. And I don’t talk about sex, or curse, which I think is lazy. I like pointing out what’s different about all of us – and what’s the same. I’ve learned that if I feel something, even if I think it’s weird, somebody else has felt it too” (Ginsberg, 115).
Ellen’s comedy is routinely observational. She notes things that happen in the world that are not controversial and allow her whole audience to relate to her anecdotes. According to Allison Fraiberg in an article discussing the connection of feminist studies and women’s standup comedy, “the content of [Ellen’s] work relies on acknowledging common experiences: that is, audience members are positioned to identify with her narratives. For the most part, she talks about situations to which audience members can relate” (312). Fraiberg goes on to discuss the fact that Ellen rarely discusses sexual relationships or gender-specific situations but prefers instead to stick to general cultural observations. Ellen’s humor often deals with general subjects and issues everyone faces. In her most recent HBO special, Ellen performs a bit about the packaging of everyday items. After she laments the packaging of scissors arguing that the only way to open scissors is with another pair of scissors, she wonders what one would do upon purchasing their first pair of scissors. Ellen goes on to discuss other types of packaging: "Batteries, they're packaged like never before. Thick, laminated plastic, with thick, thick cardboard. I mean, what could happen to batteries? Then you go to buy light bulbs, thin, thin, cardboard. Open on both ends. What are they thinking? [sarcastically] Oh, they'll be fine!" (Here and Now). With this type of comedy, Ellen “steers clear of what has been ripe terrain for both men and women in comedy: cultural observations based on gender and (hetero)sexuality (Fraiberg, 321). This type of humor makes her work more easily accepted by mainstream audiences.

The way she performs this comedy, though, is almost always as a first-person narrative. This forces the audience, who is connecting with the anecdote, to connect to Ellen herself. This personal connection allows Ellen to gain closeness with her audience
through truly personal interaction rather than just speaking in purely hypothetical terms. This closeness then allows for a point of connection and understanding that is crucial in comedy in order to produce social change. Although this is not the only method of having that type of control over an audience, it is a strong one and works well, especially in Ellen’s case.

By using comedy as her venue in her sitcoms, her talk show and in her stand-up comedy, Ellen is allowed a freedom to discuss things that are not typically acceptable in mainstream society. Comedy is often a way to discuss issues that are otherwise seen as taboo. “Much of the comedy of both stand-up comedians and in sitcoms owes its existence to saying the unsayable and doing the undoable of hegemonic culture” (Andrews, 51). Using comedy allows Ellen to discuss openly her sexuality without facing the ridicule and exclusion she would face in a more public environment. This venue allows her to question the ideas that are typically so radical and make those ideas commonplace and force her listeners to understand why those issues are problematic in mainstream society. Ellen pushes little by little the edge of what she is able to reach with her comedy. She begins discussing sexuality in her most recent comedy release, *Here and Now*. With this discussion she is working to maintain her appeal from her mainstream crowd while slowly edging toward acceptance of things that were previously on the fringe of acceptability. According to Andrews:

Jokes tend to cluster around points of friction or rupture within the social structure, around places where a dominant social discourse is already starting to give way to an emergent counter-discourse; jokes allow the comic expression of ideas that in other contexts may be regarded as threatening.
It is important to note here that comedy is often most effective in creating social change when there is already social discourse surrounding the idea. When an idea is in circulation within a society it is possible to use comedy to push these ideas over the edge and make them acceptable.

Judy Little argues in *Comedy and the Woman Writer* that when ‘outsiders’ of our culture (an outsider being someone who is not a white, heterosexual male) used comedy to make fun of ideologies that are in the process of changing, they are able to push society in a new way in order to gain acceptance during a time of wavering and possible change: “we can also expect, especially in a time of social change, that the work of writers who perceive themselves as ‘outsiders,’ as persons assigned to the threshold of a world that is not theirs, will manifest the distinctive features of inversion, mocked hierarchies, communal festivity, and redefinition of sex identity” (6). As this goes then, if the specific work being done is comedic, then it is that comedy that is mocking the dominant ideology and creates a temporary new order. The comic, in this case Ellen DeGeneres, is able to make an effort at persuading her audience into the acceptance of homosexuality.

Ellen uses comedy as a powerful device to push for an alteration of social ideologies. This is not the only method of change and, of course, this alone will not provide social change, but it is a tool that can be used in aiding this process. Andrews raises the point of how destabilizing women’s humor can be to social ideals simply because of who is joking and how they are joking. She states, “Rather than neutralizing the radicalism of women’s laughter, comedy, particularly in women’s cultural spaces, is always potentially threatening to dominant social orders, processes and power
relationships” (51). Ellen performs a ‘bit’ about her homosexuality in the beginning of one of her recent stand-up routines:

What’s great about this ya know, you think about it, you have a room full of people – everybody is so different and were all here for different reasons…but that’s alright because we’re all here and with all of our differences, we all have one thing in common – we’re all gay. Now there are people out there going ‘do they think we’re gay because we’re here? Do we look gay? I told you this would happen – we’re not going to understand a word of this. No, that’s my one obligatory gay reference otherwise people might leave here going ‘she didn’t do anything gay, she’s not our leader, what happened to our leader?’ Seriously though, if you’re here, you’re probably gay – I mean… you have tendencies, you’ve thought about it. Now there are people going ‘I have thought about it – does that mean I’m gay? I’m not gay – is that how they get us?’ (Here and Now)

With this piece, Ellen is making reference to her homosexuality and forcing her audience to be comfortable with it. This monologue is also a sign of the social change Ellen has produced. In 2003 in preparation for her HBO special, Ellen performed this piece at many comedy clubs across the country before performing to a full house in New York City. The fact that she can make these references, be openly gay and perform repeatedly to sold-out crowds across the country is evidence of the change in social climate and attitudes toward homosexuality.

During this performance piece, Ellen alters her perspective from herself to a heterosexual audience member. She does this by working to even more closely identify with her heterosexual audience when she says, “Do we look gay? I told you this would happen – we’re not going to understand a word of this.” This shift in perspective eases the impact of her comedy, but is still just as effective. By understanding and expressing the perspective of the audience, Ellen is locating herself in a position that is sympathetic and understanding to their ideas, but shifts back to her own perspective to promote
change in the audience. According to Allison Fraiberg, “The destabilized perspective is transposed onto an attempt to undercut narrative assumptions” (322). By understanding what the heterosexuals in her audience might assume about homosexuals, Ellen begins to stabilize their world, but it is only a short time before she undermines these ideas by making fun of them. Fraiberg goes on to say, “Every time a contest begins to stabilize, DeGeneres cuts the frame out from under it, thereby undermining the stability of her central trope” (323). Ellen is able to create new perspectives by imitating and questioning those that already exist.

Like Ellen DeGeneres, Margaret Cho deals with issues of sexuality in her stand-up routines. Margaret Cho reaches far beyond the social deviance Ellen approaches. Cho has an audience that is typically more radical than Ellen’s and she is thus better able to deal with issues in her routine that Ellen could not touch. Cho directly addresses issues of sexuality, race and social difference. Her work has afforded her honors from many national organizations like GLAAD (The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), American Women in Radio and Television, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the National Organization for Women. She is honored by these organizations because her comedy has worked extensively to promote equal rights for all people, regardless of race, gender or sexual identity.

One of the clear major issues Cho focuses on in her comedy is racism. Being Asian-American, she has experienced racism herself and discusses it in her book and DVD, *I am the One that I Want*. She discusses with the audience the failure of her sitcom, *All-American Girl* emphasizing the personal, emotional and physical trauma that
ensued when they tried to create a sitcom with an accurate portrayal of an Asian-American family. She was instructed by the networks to lose weight and she was told that she was not Asian enough. Cho discusses her interaction with casting agents during her time in the acting industry saying:

They had a real problem with me because I look this way but I talk this way [i.e., with “no accent”]. So it’s like a problem. And they’re trying to be sensitive about it and they’re like, “Margaret, we don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but could you, I don’t know, a little more Chinese” Well, actually I’m Korean. “Whatever” (Ladies of Laughter).

Cho’s encounters with racism have formed her humor and helped make her humor more of a reaction to racism. Because she was rejected from the acting industry and was able to make it in stand-up comedy, she has a special brand of humor stemming from her experiences. Cho works with a number of oppressions to form her humor such as racism, sexism, oppression of sexualities to name a few. This makes her humor unique. Her personal experiences are so intensely bound with her humor that along with the comedy comes a real display of pain and challenge, which only makes her comedy stronger and more persuasive to her audience.

According to Eileen Gillooly in Women and Humor, “Much like minority humor, female humor represents a tactic of personal survival, a political and psychological strategy for managing the anger and frustration arising from the experience of the oppression” (475).

Cho goes beyond that need for personal survival and pressures others to challenge their own notions of reality and comfort. She works to alter assumptions and thereby loosen stereotypes, creating openings for new ideas. The use of the stereotype is often mistakenly understood as acceptance. When stand-up comedians use stereotypes they
often do so in a way that demonstrates an acceptance of that stereotype and they are using that stereotype to make fun of a group of people (typically minorities) or of an ideology. In Cho’s case though, these stereotypes are used to make fun of the stereotypes themselves in an effort to dispel the myths they represent.

During her performances, though, Cho often employs a number of stereotypes when imitating her mother, a popular bit in her shows. She squints her eyes, crunches up her face and brings out a thick Korean accent. During one of her shows that was released on DVD, the *Notorious C.H.O.*, Cho imitates her mother by saying with her typical ‘mother’ face: “My mom used to give me messages like this: “Ummm…Scott called…Is he the gay?!’ ‘Well, God, mom, I don’t know if he’s the gay, that’s a lot of pressure on just one guy. He has to do the parade all by himself! ‘I’m here! I’m queer…I guess I’m the only one’” (*Notorious C.H.O.*).

Along with deconstructing traditional stereotypes of Asians, this monologue highlights the generational gap between Cho and her mother. She often uses her mother as an example of an earlier generation to emphasize the changed attitudes and understandings of sexuality today.

Outside of this context, this would be an upsetting, controversial and overtly stereotypical portrayal of her mother, but because of the situation, Cho is able to use this stereotypical representation to challenge those ideas. Cho is Asian herself and mocking the idea that she herself is not Asian-looking enough to even represent her own mother. She must enhance those features in case the audience has somehow forgotten that she is Asian. When she is doing this she is offering the idea that perhaps she must do more to make herself look more Asian and is then, in a humorous way, acknowledging the idea
that she does not ‘look the part.’ She is deconstructing what it means to ‘look’ Asian by representing it in a variety of ways.

Cho has used her personal experience as one outside of the mainstream of our culture to create much of her comedy. She uses her experiences to send across a message that it is time for a revolution of minority groups. According to an article in *Lesbian News*, Cho’s “bottom line message” explains, “the idea that for anyone outside the mainstream to love themselves is nothing less than an act of revolution...accepting themselves [the minority] in the face of a culture that spends billions of dollars to tell them they’re not OK could unleash amazing power” (Wilkinson 30). She reinforces this message in her performances by using personal experience.

According to Gloria Kaufman in a discussion of feminist humor, “The persistent attitude that underlies feminist humor is the attitude of social revolution” (13). She goes on to argue that this type of humor is a humor “based on visions of change” (13). This humor is from a feminist perspective and demands a change in the status quo and that change and that revolution, in this case, begins with the comedian. In her work, Cho is constantly bringing attention to the damaging effects of the status quo to women and demanding a change. She highlights the ridiculousness of the present situation for marginalized people in order to bring about a change in that situation.

In her performance of *The Notorious C.H.O.*, Cho, in a bit about the portrayal and advice given to women in women’s magazines says: “I can’t even look at those women’s magazines anyway. I love fashion but I look at the pictures of the skinny models, and they’re wearing clothes I can’t even fit on my fingers. And I look at that and I think, if that is what woman is supposed to look like, than I must not be one.” This allows her
audience to begin to question the confinements of the representation of women in mainstream society.

Later in the same show, Cho discusses the damage that these ideas can cause to women, again using personal experience. She shares deeply personal history in order to identify with and protect her audience and promote the idea that the standards women are held to are ridiculous. Cho says:

So from the age of 10, I became anorexic, and then bulimic, and then stayed that way for about twenty years, until one day I just said, “Hey, what if this is it? What if this is just what I look like, and nothing I do changes that?” So how much time would I save if I stopped taking that extra second every time I look in the mirror to call myself a big fat fuck? How much time would I save if I just let myself walk by a plate-glass window without sucking in my gut and throwing back my shoulders? How much time would I save? And it turns out I save about 92 minutes a week. I could take a pottery class. (Notorious C.H.O)

Cho uses more than reference to her own life in her comedy – she is also intensely political. She uses her comedy to share her social messages and argues that using comedy makes her audience more receptive to her message. Cho makes the point in her biography that she knows that she is dealing with issues in her comedy that people are often unprepared, or sometimes unwilling to face but she argues that because she is using comedy, her audience is less likely to be guarded and more likely to be receptive to her message (margaretcho.com).

Cho uses her humor not just in her own stand-up performances, but has also performed for organizations representing beliefs and opinions that she shares. Recently, Cho participated in the campaign by moveon.org, an organization working to bring everyday people back into politics and to give those people a voice (moveon.org), by performing at one of their benefits. Cho used political humor in order to convey her
message, such as, “George Bush needs a new set of the 10 commandments. Like thou shall not steal… votes. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s… country. Thou shall not kill… for oil” (margaretcho.com).

Apparently Cho’s approach to humor and political issues has been working for her. According to an article in Women Who Rock, Margaret Cho “has become a spokesperson and role model for gays, lesbians, women, minorities and pretty much anyone who has ever felt like an outsider… She has taken the art of stand-up comedy to a new level with her brilliant, biting social commentary” (Shattuk, 62). Cho has truly become a role model for people in these outsider groups because of her method of challenging norms in our society. She encourages her fans to follow her and to voice their differences as well as offering a method of creating even more social change. She is quoted in her biography on her website as saying, “I didn't mean to be a role model. I just speak my truth. I guess speaking from your heart really creates a huge impact, and if I can encourage people to do that, then I would love to be a role model. If I could encourage people to use their voices loudly, then that's my reward” (margaretcho.com).

The majority of Cho’s work, though, has appealed to a more select audience. Because she is so direct, blunt, and coarse in her humor, she does not reach the mainstream audience that other performers (like Ellen DeGeneres) do during their routines. This is not a problem for Cho. She states in her biography, “I don't care about winning an academy award; I don't care about mainstream acceptance, because it's never going to be what I want it to be. I just want to do my work and love it.” (margaretcho.com). She is aware that she is working outside of the mainstream, but it is evident that she would not be able to influence the same level of social change from
within a mainstream context.

One fact that keeps some audiences at bay is Cho’s willingness to discuss any subject, of this she states in her book *I’m the One that I Want*:

“I don’t think it’s possible to get too personal. We all have pain. We all have doubt and sadness and horrible things that have happened that shouldn’t have, and when we cover them up and try to pretend that everything is OK, then our stories are forgotten, and our truths become lies. I tell the truth because I am not afraid to. I tell the ugliness to show you the beauty. But there is so much ugliness still left”

During her performances, one of Cho’s strategies revolves around questioning identities and assumptions. According to an analysis of Cho’s work by Allison Fraiberg, Cho isolates a moment with a great potential for identification, and then, “She takes that moment of connection and fragments it based on cultural expectations. And the process continues with each fragment reshaped into a new moment of identification, then shattered once again” (325). This method of comedy leaves limited potential for identification from the audience. By the time Cho is done shattering cultural identifications, there are only a few members of the audience who can find themselves in similar situations. Because of this method of dis-identification and specific cultural references, Cho often attracts a more specific audience than some other more traditional comics.

This is not to say, though, that this somehow makes Cho’s work less effective. Cho has retained a freedom in her speech and in her material that is lost when entering a mainstream platform. Because issues of racism, sexism, and sexual identity are often resisted by the mainstream, Cho simply chooses not to associate herself with that type of audience.
Although their audiences differ to some extent, the work of Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho provokes social change. The two question norms in our society in order to bring about gradual change. Both Cho and DeGeneres “invoke dominant cultural scene in order to disturb the familiarity and assumed mass appeal associated with them” (Fraiberg, 326). This is a traditionally female method of humor because, as Gillooly points out, “Female humor works inconspicuously to unsay what its sober expression says, to undermine cultural myths and authoritarian figures overtly endorsed by the text rather than to appropriate their power in support of other causes, as male humor tends to do” (475). DeGeneres and Cho offer social commentary, each using their own unique blend of humor. The humor they offer ties together their audience and their opinions. Clearly both express opinions outside of mainstream acceptance and through this identification in their comedy, the two are able to convince their audience to subscribe to their own ideas. They discuss shared experiences, contradict stereotypes, and embrace the power they are capable of. These features allow them be to be persuasive to their audience, thereby coercing their audience to subscribe to their ideas for social change. Their humor is the humor of change and of revolution and will provoke its listeners to, at the very least, think about the possibility of change.
Conclusion
Social positionality plays a great role in a people’s lives. It affects what they are allowed within social structures, how they are allowed to lead their lives and with whom they are allowed to connect. These are some fundamental aspects to people’s lives. The ability to alter and control that social position is essential to the survival and propagation of groups. These groups are most often arranged in a hierarchy with others, leaving only a few select groups on the top.

Humor is one method people can use to alter their social position when given the advantage of a preexisting beginning to a change in social ideology. By using the example of comedy in this project, is to show that it acts a commentary on parts of women’s lives that can lead to change and theoretically many other venues can do this as well. This project reflects upon how women’s voices in comedy have echoed social changes in the past and explores the abilities of women to create social change using comedy. Within comedy the work of women has typically been very progressive and even political. Within their respective time period, women’s comedy has historically reflected context specific social ideologies regarding women; and the vast changes in comedy between time periods have demonstrated the changing social attitude toward women and other marginalized groups.

We saw this evidenced in the work of the women in section one. Gracie Allen, a smart businesswoman and partner with her husband, George Burns, portrayed herself as thoughtless and irrational. Women in comedy during this time were often portrayed as either dim-witted (like Gracie) or if they were portrayed as intelligent women, they used their intelligence in a manipulative, controlling way. This was happening as the first
wave of the women’s movement was beginning to gain clout and women finally won the right to vote.

Decades later we turn to another image of women, represented by Lucille Ball. Her show, *I Love Lucy*, first aired on October 15, 1951, a time when women found themselves ‘trapped’ in suburban homes and restrictive traditional roles. Lucy demonstrated to the public her desire for more and her quest to find fulfillment outside the home. She couldn’t stay complacent in her role as an ordinary housewife and her desire for more led her into humorous situations. Only a few years after *I Love Lucy* went off the air in 1957, Betty Friedan released her book, *The Feminine Mystique*. This book gave voice to the women who, like Lucy, were trapped in traditional female roles and yearned for more, a problem Friedan identified as “the problem with no name.” Lucy helped to create a social climate that was understanding of the idea that some women were dissatisfied with traditional roles and opened up a discussion that eventually allowed for more freedom in women’s roles.

Shortly thereafter, Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers presented a new brand of comedy to women in which they were harsh and self-deprecatory. These two women forced comedy into a new direction where women were finally able to talk about themselves and about their own issues, but their comedy remained unthreatening to males. Their work reinforced the social hierarchy by maintaining the same derogatory attitude toward women that men traditionally had in the past. What is important to remember about these women though is they opened up an avenue of women’s comedy where women were finally able to talk about their own issues. Previously, women had
always spoken of themselves in the context of their homes or their husbands but Diller and Rivers gave women a way to laugh about these roles.

In section two, we find an explanation of the comedy of women. Historically, women had been thought of as incapable of having the capacity for humor. For women in the past, a sense of humor has been defined as a woman willing to be made fun of. Humor for women was having the ability to laugh along with men and with the ideas men thought were funny, even if it meant making fun of oneself. With the recent focus on women’s voice and independence in a number of fields, it is becoming clearer that women do have something of their own to say and they are beginning to say those things through comedy.

This section highlights techniques that marginalized groups use to create social change such as parody, sarcasm, inversion and the “protest tale” and the way that groups of people can use comedy to form a cohesive group and maintain solidarity. It is important to realize that often as a catalyst for social change, minority groups will employ these techniques in order to create unity within the group before using these same techniques on a more broad scale to create social change. Minority groups can use these techniques to force a new understanding of ideas.

Women’s alternate kinds of humor have functioned to provide women with a forum to discuss freely issues that are typically on the ‘fringe’ of society. Here we find the unique distinction between female and feminist humor. Female humor criticizes the existing, oppressive social system while feminist humor refuses to accept that oppression. The two can both be effective in creating social change, but work in different ways.
Finally, in section three, we find examples of women who are displaying feminist humor in a way that can begin to provoke social change. Rather than adopt the male humor that is aggressive and degrading to less powerful groups, the feminist humor of these women has adopted a new strategy. According to Gloria Kaufman, there is a widespread misconception that feminist humor has “assimilated the misogyny of male humor, and with some guilt they expect that feminist humor will return their treatment in kind” (Kaufman, 14). Cho and DeGeneres do not employ this type of humor but rather work to undermine those social hierarchies by exposing and then questioning them. Both comedians work to push for change in areas where change is beginning to occur but to different degrees. DeGeneres works within a mainstream framework that makes her humor accessible but restricts her freedom whereas Cho’s humor is more radical and appeals to a smaller audience. Both women though, are able to provoke social change and to promote the idea of a new social reality through their humor.

Humor is an important tool for change that is often overlooked. It is necessary that we examine the ways that humor can function to create change and how we can see change through that humor. Laughter can create a new reality and that is what women have done with their comedy through time. Comedy has always been determined by social position, which has often left women restricted in the comedy they can use, but they have often managed to use what they could to push the limits of the definition of woman and to expand the rigidity of the roles of women. On that note, humor is also capable of changing social position. When women engage in new types of humor, they are in the process of pushing those definitions and expanding the roles women can hold.
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