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Mary Tyler Moore & Her Role in the Feminist Movement

by Haley Steward

By the 1960s, little progression had been made in the fight for women's rights. While 38 percent of American women worked during the 1960s, 62% of women remained in the home, maintaining their role as a housewife (*The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement*). Clearly, a vast majority of society during this era still believed in the stereotypical American housewife: the idea that a woman's only job was to be a keeper to her husband, to look out for his well-being and to provide him with a family. However, as America was transitioning into a new decade, change was emerging among society. In an era when the Civil Rights movement was taking center stage, a new wave of feminists were beginning to fight for their equality as well. The emerging feminists of the 1960s and 1970s primarily focused on disassembling workplace inequality, exposing women's sexuality, and changing the way that women were perceived among society. While groups of women activists were leading the movement on the streets, another woman was pushing boundaries and spreading awareness through television.

First airing in 1970, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was viewed as "TV's first truly female dominated sitcom" (Reese). As society was being challenged to accept new values that promoted equality for women on both a personal and political level, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* had begun to positively portray the realities of the feminist movement. The women characters of the show, Mary, Rhoda, and Phyllis, brought forth many controversial issues that were occurring throughout America during the decade. As early as the pilot episode, Mary Richards, played by

Mary Tyler Moore, was everything that a woman of the early 1970s was expected not to be. Her character's liberation and focus on personal relationships, workplace equality, and women's sexuality, paved the way for viewers of the show to begin opening their minds to many societal issues that were prevalent among society during this time period. Through vague innuendo, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* pushed boundaries for television and inadvertently aided one of the most influential movements of its era.

Not only was the feminist movement of the 1970s making a positive impact on women, but it was further challenging the preceding belief that a household was centralized around a dominant male figure. The previous decades leading up to the 1970s was an era largely centralized around the stigma that men dominated the family. According to an article posted by *Tavaana*, as one woman of the era had voiced, "The female doesn't really expect a lot from life. She's here as someone's keeper—her husband or her children's." However, times were beginning to change in America and women were slowly removing themselves from the shadows of their husbands. In a time when divorce was hard to obtain, most marriages stayed intact even after they had long deteriorated. At the beginning of season four, episode eleven of *The Mary Tyler Show*, Mary brings forth the shocking fact that Mr. Grant's wife had left him. In "*Just Friends*" Mrs. Grant had obtained the strength to leave her husband, while Mr. Grant had been helplessly left behind. Interestingly enough, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was depicting that roles within marriages were being reversed among society. Throughout the episode viewers were able to witness how Mr. Grant was struggling to lead his newfound life as a single man, while Mrs. Grant was learning how to flourish. The episode is crucial at depicting the new realities that were occurring among marriages and relationships alike during the 1970s. Previous stereotypical ideas that women needed their husbands to survive were fading, and new ideas that women could

be independent individuals were emerging. Reflecting the feminist movement of the 1970s, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* allowed viewers to infer that women ultimately obtained the power within themselves to leave an unhappy relationship if they felt inclined to do so. In the new developing society of the 1970s, it was becoming more acceptable for women to remain by themselves without a husband and children. As more women were choosing to live a lifestyle of freedom, television characters such as Mary Richards, were beginning to challenge the preconceived belief that women needed a man in order to be successful.

From watching multiple episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, it can be concluded that Mary Tyler Moore's character, Mary Richards, was not looking to settle down with just one man. According to an article posted by *Tavaana* regarding women of the 1960s, "A woman was expected to follow one path: to marry in her early 20s, start a family quickly, and devote her life to homemaking" (*The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement*). Mary Richards on the other hand, completely contradicted every preconceived viewpoint that was held for women during this time period: she was 30, single, employed, and wasn't ashamed of going on dates with countless men. During season three, episode seven "*Just Around the Corner*", Mary is shown leaving her apartment for a date that she was attending that night. In the following scene Mary is shown having returned the next morning wearing the same exact dress, implying that she had stayed overnight with her date. Jennifer Armstrong makes remarks in her novel, *Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted* about how the writers of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* acted innocently by leaving out explicit information that prime-time television wasn't ready for. This allowed viewers to make their own implications and revert their minds to think about issues regarding women's sexuality that were occurring during this time period. Writers of the show admitted that less liberal minds weren't ready for the realistic and explicit aspects of everyday life that were

occurring during the 1970s (Armstrong 164). Therefore, they would have to settle with Mary's character remaining innocent while still subtly promoting women's sexuality.

Mary Tyler Moore's character, Mary Richards, was perceived as a good girl to viewers. In the novel, *Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted*, Jennifer Keishin Armstrong discusses how writers of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* were able to promote women's sexuality through Moore's character. One of the more influential episodes that subtly suggested Mary's sex life was episode eleven of season three, "*You've got a Friend*". In this episode Mary is determined to get her newly retired father, Walter, a friend. After a failed attempt to form a connection between Walter and her boss, Lou Grant, Mary resorts to having her father over for dinner at her apartment. After dropping her husband off to be with their daughter, Mary's mother proceeds to call out "Don't forget to take your pill!" (Armstrong 166). Both Mary and Walter simultaneously reply that they won't. A brief pause and a shocked look by both Mary and her father, coincides with birth control and its approval in 1960 by the Food and Drug Administration. According to Jennifer Armstrong, birth control has been credited for starting the sexual revolution. Oral contraceptives were essential in removing society's double standards that allowed and excepted premarital sex for men but not for women (*The 1960s-1970s American Feminist Movement*). In Armstrong's novel, female writer of the show Treva Silverman explains the significance of Mary taking the Pill by stating, "If Mary was taking the Pill, it gave the stamp of approval for sexuality." Had it been Rhoda who had taken the Pill, viewers would have been more hesitant to accept her actions due to her rebellious tendencies. Although, when Mary takes the Pill, viewers are more likely to be acceptant due to the fact that she is perceived as being a woman of innocence. Many believed that if a respected woman like Mary Richards took oral contraceptives

due to her actions, then women all around America should feel shameless for taking part in sexual activities.

Not only did Mary Tyler Moore's character support the personal lives of women during the 1970s, but she also supported their political lives as well. Outside *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* Betty Friedan had recently published her newest novel, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1962. Friedan harshly contradicted previous beliefs on women's roles among society by calling on women to seek employment outside the home (*The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement*). As more women were beginning to emerge among the workforce, they were reluctantly being forced into low-paying positions. One of the many goals of the 1960s-70s feminist movement was to fight against salary inequality among men and women. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* took off at the start of season three by transforming Mary Richards from a passive feminine to an aggressive feminine (Armstrong). During episode one of season three, *The Good-Time News*, Mary tackles one of the many divisive issues of the 1970s: equal pay. At the start of the episode it was brought to Mary's attention that she was getting paid nearly fifty dollars less than the previous associate producer. When a very upset Mary confronted Mr. Grant on the issue he simply replied that the previous associate producer received an increased salary due to the fact that he was a man who had a family to financially take care of. After the airing of the episode, women's rights activists criticized Mary Tyler Moore's character for not being vocal enough on the issue, possibly reflecting Moore's own personal opinions on the many controversies of the feminist movement (Reese). However, even though Moore's character was less than assertive throughout the episode, by addressing the issue of equal pay, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was able to effectively bring awareness to viewers that such issues were occurring within the country.

While *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was making an impact on-screen, it was also creating an impact behind the scenes. What viewers had failed to see was that by 1973 out of the seventy-five writers of the show twenty-five of them were women, making *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* revolutionary for its time (Reese). No other sitcom airing during the 1970s had more female writers than *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Reese). Ed Asner, who played Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* shared his belief on the tremendous impact that women had made in creating such a successful and influential sitcom. According to an article posted by Alyssa Rosenberg within *The Washington Post*, Ed Asner noted, “And the fact that they brought in women writers as quickly and as often as they could meant a great deal to projecting to the world who Mary Tyler Moore was...They didn’t dominate, no. But they certainly were a presence...” Asner’s belief that women were making monumental efforts towards the success of the show, followed him into the real world where he joined the feminist campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment (Rosenberg). Although it would be a tedious task, Ed Asner proved that as time progressed and as men were beginning to become increasingly surrounded by women throughout the workplace, their beliefs on many of the feminist controversies were slowly changing. Women among society were finally being looked upon as possessing the capabilities of making vital contributions to the accomplishments of critically acclaimed productions, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Out of all the women who made contributions to the show, Ed Asner points out that one woman in particular “seemed to become the doyenne for the women writers” (Rosenberg).

One of the most influential female writers of the show was Treva Silverman. According to Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, Silverman was very grateful for the opportunities that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* gave her to be able to transform the images of women for such a large,

mainstream audience (Armstrong 170). Many people of the era believed that women could not be comical, however, Treva Silverman proved America wrong by continuously producing witty and entertaining story lines (Reese). It had been noted that Silverman was well known for sharing her own real-life experiences to mold characters on the show, making it more personal (Reese). In the article *The Real Feminist Impact of The Mary Tyler Moore Show was Behind the Scenes*, posted within *The Atlantic*, Hope Reese notes that in 1974 Silverman went on to earn an Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series and Writer of the Year, further solidifying that she was nothing short of an exceptional female writer. Not only was Mary Tyler Moore making a positive impact on the feminist movement through her character, but Treva Silverman was making an even greater impact by inspiring women to remove themselves from the household and use their voice to create something truly inspirational. Pat Nardo, Gloria Banta, Susan Silver, Gail Parent and many other women gathered around Treva Silverman to voice their own experiences in an effort to accurately and personally portray the realities of women in America (Reese). Revolutionary for the 1970s women were beginning to be viewed as ambitious individuals who had real, successful lives outside the household.

As *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was wrapping up its final season, the perception of feminists had been historically transformed through their fight to change a multitude of factors that had placed an immense amount of emphasis on the feminist movement (Farganis 233). According to Sandra Farganis, Mauric Merleau-Ponty wrote about the human body and its effect on how individuals perceive the world around them. He once noted, “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continuously committed to them” (Farganis 235). Mauric Merleau-Ponty’s statement reflects feminists of the 1970s and their fight

to constitute society into visioning women as an object of importance, while at the same time allowing women to view themselves as having the strength and integrity to come forth from the shadows of men. Women were slowly removing themselves from the household, and placing themselves among society. For one of the very first times in America, it had become possible for all women to set the dreams and aspirations that they had acquired for themselves into motion. The 1970s sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, played an essential role in bringing awareness to the feminist movement through television. Mary Tyler Moore, and the writers behind the scenes, set the stage for future generations of women among the acting industry to slowly break the sensors of television. Over time, as society was progressing from the feminist movement of the 1970s, television was further progressing towards a new millennium of artistic freedom.

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