The Dick Van Dyke Show: Queer Meanings
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The Dick Van Dyke Show
Queer Meanings

QUINN MILLER

Abstract: The television sitcom is typically considered a conservative form that reaffirms the status quo. In particular, network era sitcoms’ normative constructions of gender and sexuality are assumed to be antithetical to queer representation. In this examination of an episode of The Dick Van Dyke Show informed by historiography, gender studies, and transgender criticism, Quinn Miller shows how textual and intertextual details in the fabric of postwar sitcoms create a type of queer representation that differs from the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) characters TV producers commonly develop today.

Like many narrative forms, television deploys a hierarchy of characters. In addition to crafting main roles and a supporting cast, actors in minor appearances portray stock types. Comedy conventions allow secondary characters to deviate from norms in ways that main characters seldom do. With more minor parts, writers and actors have more freedom. As media scholar Patricia White has shown, such narrative conventions can produce queer meaning in popular texts. The term “queer” describes energies that protest norms and trouble conventional ways of thinking. A queer approach to television texts exposes the simplified understandings of gender and sexuality that make complex TV representations seem to fit conventional notions of what “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bi,” or “trans” identity and behavior entail. As a strategy for sparking radical change to social norms, which construct difference through dichotomies, queer criticism seeks to challenge conventional identity categories. Working with the minutia of television, this critical strategy reveals anti-normative perceptions, presentations, and desires within programming that is commonly understood as both “normal” and neutral.

This essay presents a queer critique of The Dick Van Dyke Show episode “I’m No Henry Walden” (March 13, 1963). The classic sitcom Dick Van Dyke (CBS,
1961–1966) depicted the life of Rob Petrie, who lives with his wife, Laura, and son, Ritchie, in suburban New York and pens scripts for *The Alan Brady Show*, a popular comedy variety series, at an office in the city. “Walden” debunked assumptions that cultural norms applied to everyone by representing variations across different characters’ perceptions of gender and sexuality. An analysis of “Walden” informed by transgender studies and queer historiography demonstrates how moments of self-reflexive television comedy complicate binary understandings of identity and culture. My discussion shows that queer meanings can interfere with deeply ingrained social constraints within the space of TV programs. Queer meanings in individual television episodes are an important part of both queer history and TV history. Comic moments and brief references to contextual material can bring queer culture to life in a manner often absent from more straightforward LGBT representations.

*Dick Van Dyke* regularly compared TV to other media in ways that reworked ideological views on gender and sexuality. “Walden” addresses cultural divisions between television and literature. When Rob is mysteriously invited to a glitzy fundraising event for a literary foundation hosted at a fancy Park Avenue apartment, he frets about “real” writers judging his profession. In showcasing Rob and Laura’s anxiety in the company of pontificating scholars, offbeat poets, and cosmopolitan novelists, the episode explores differences in class, status, and sense of humor. The episode opens in the Petries’ bedroom, as Rob and Laura prepare for the party. Rob grows nervous and worries that he was invited by accident, while Laura tries to calm and compliment him. The next sequence takes place at the event, where host Mrs. Huntington, a socialite with a big personality, repeatedly calls Rob “Bill Petroff,” introducing him as the author of *Weeps No More* (a presumably serious book with an unintentionally funny title). Huntington, who presumptuously acts as if she knows better than Rob how to pronounce his name, remains oblivious to his attempts to correct her mistake. Being addressed as a novelist when he is really a television writer confirms Rob’s expectation of feeling out of place, and the people they meet further alienate him and Laura with their disdain for TV. One particularly haughty guest calls Rob’s boss “Mr. Brody” (instead of Brady) and implies that a “television machine” is a worthless object alien to her refined sensibility. At the end of the episode’s first act, Huntington calls for donations to the Henry Walden Literary Fund, and Rob accidentally pledges a blank check to the charity effort.

After a post-party scene back in the Petries’ bedroom, the setting shifts to the *Alan Brady Show* office, where Rob receives a surprise visit from Walden, a character whose name references Henry David Thoreau, the nineteenth-century activist and author of *Walden* whose work, as Michael Warner argues, “repeatedly expressed a longing for self-transcendence through the love of another man.” In a comic and poetic reversal of expectations, Walden condemns the pretentious
beliefs of his cohort and asks Rob to collaborate with him on a broadcast special that will treat television comedy as an important national art form, an invitation that heals Rob's bruised ego. The invitation also represents an enlightened view of TV that combats elitist beliefs that the medium is rubbish and its popularity a sign of social ruin. The episode's coda brings Walden's appreciation of television to the fore at a second party in the same Park Avenue apartment by uniting the Alan Brady writers with the literati for a celebratory screening of “The History of American Humor.” In the end, the series suggests that Rob is a “Henry Walden,” despite the episode's title, because he is a respected artist in his medium. In making this argument, “I'm No Henry Walden” represents a culture of queerness within and beyond its fictional literary party.

Throughout, “Walden” represents social distinctions in ways that destabilize social conventions around gender expression and cultural value. Issues of class, prestige, and sexuality arise frequently, prefaced by Rob's flirtatious comment to Laura that even if they are out of place at the party, their presence will happily “prove . . . television writers marry the prettiest girls.” Voicing Rob's wariness of “serious” writers, this line implies that the Petries' marriage will remain strong during their encounter with the literary world. This is a conventional sentiment, yet it is expressed through associations that resist social norms. While suggesting that Rob enjoys one marker of success (i.e., Laura) that places him above people with bigger incomes and reputations, the line also implies—despite popular notions of middle-class prudishness and affluent decadence—that their physical pleasure exceeds that of bohemians and aristocrats.

In an example of queer meaning that arises from sitcom self-reflexivity and TV's hierarchy of characters, Carl Reiner and Frank Adamo, two people with ongoing roles behind the scenes on Dick Van Dyke, play minor characters who, along with a host of other supporting players, challenge the suburban family mindset Rob and Laura Petrie represent. Reiner, who scripted “Walden” and created Dick Van Dyke based on his own experience (and would have starred in the show had the network not deemed him “too Jewish”), plays Yale Sampson, a cultural critic who believes realism—the television industry's bread and butter—is dangerous. For the role of fey poet H. Fieldstone Torley, the show's producers cast Adamo, who was Dick Van Dyke's personal assistant and often stepped in for bit roles on the series—thus becoming a point of backstage trivia for fans (particularly following Nick at Nite's kitschy publicity of his appearances). The plotting of “Walden” generates narrative space for its writers, directors, editors, costumers, and actors to cultivate eccentric characters that comment on its own backstory.

As “Walden” depicts characters' perceptions of social markers through relatively intangible cultural cues, it fashions roles reminiscent of extratextual queer figures. The episode's cast of characters reflects a vision of avant-garde diversity
that contrasts with the image of white middle-class nuclear families associated with television programming. Two black guests, for example, who are prominent considering the white-centrism and overall lack of racial integration in fictional series during this period, recall Harlem Renaissance authors like Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Bruce Nugent, as well as James Baldwin, whose novel *Another Country*, which features multiple queer characters, came out the same year “Walden” aired. As the Petries venture into a social space outside their normal routine, the series explores conceptual terrain generally deemed beyond the realm of the era’s family comedies. While such intertextual references may be obscure to most viewers, the queer history implicit within them remains a part of programming in spite of this obscurity.

This episode’s intertexts and wordplay denaturalize commonplace assumptions about social differences by stressing connections between gender and sexuality norms on the one hand, and cultural hierarchies around occupation and status on the other. “Walden” draws particular attention to Adamo’s portrayal of the poet “H.” *Dick Van Dyke*’s producers convey queer authorship through this character’s comportment and manner of speaking, as well as through his undone, slightly askew bowtie and the titles of his two books of poetry, *Lavender Lollipops* and *Point Me to the Moon*. These titles constitute queer content in their camp treatment of gay coding (lavender), sexual metaphor (lollipops), and social abjection in the era of the space race (*Point Me to the Moon*). The writer’s abbreviated name reinforces these associations with gender and sexual nonconformity, given its sense of anonymity and the resonance of “H.” with both canonical gay author W. H. Auden and the queer avant-garde writer and filmmaker H.D. With his stock “beatnik” characteristics, H. also serves as a doppelganger for Allen Ginsberg, the queer writer and activist whose publisher was charged with obscenity in 1957 for the “cock and endless balls” in *Howl and Other Poems*. *Dick Van Dyke* includes H. as the final author spotlighted in “Walden’s” party sequence and accents his presence by including multiple reaction shots from the protagonists.

Directly before Rob is caught up in the blank check debacle, he and Laura sit slightly apart from the rest of the group, looking relatively comfortable. The visual economy of the couple’s view of H. is integral to the only moment of the party when the couple would not rather be “canning plums” or “taking in a movie.” With its characterization, “Walden” suggests that H. is not any more bizarre than his peers, even if he appears further afield of gender norms. As an eyebrow raise from Laura indicates, H. is indeed unusual compared to the other people at the party. In being eccentric, however, he blends in with his unorthodox compatriots. In particular, apart from Rob and Laura, none of the attendees appears to be married. Despite broader cultural emphasis on presumed differences between wedded couples and unattached or ambiguously attached artists, the editing, acting,
and direction of the episode constructs H., along with Walden, as a marker of the comfort that Rob and Laura, who feel like outsiders at the party, might find in the context of an exceedingly urbane milieu. While Dick Van Dyke is generally assumed to represent a conventional world to which queer figures were antithetical, “Walden” demonstrates the way in which queer characters, while marginal, were nonetheless central to episodes dealing with the arts.

As part of the “high” culture scene, Rob and Laura participate in conversations that queer gender and cultivate unconventional erotics. As they talk to Thomas Evelyn, for example, a French modernist in a black dress and pearls, their bourgeois perspective shows. They register surprise at a woman named Tom, whereas the other characters fail to register anything unusual and remain oblivious to the couple’s uneasy reaction. In other words, the incongruity that Rob and Laura perceive goes unnoticed by the literati, thereby indicating the couple’s suburban sense of gender norms, which obviously differs from that of the more sophisticated crowd. This disparity is heightened by the “Petrie/Petroff” mix-up, which results in Laura being referred to, like Tom, with a name traditionally given to men. Rob repeatedly attempts to state his name after he is mistaken for Bill, but people think he is introducing his wife. Thus Laura is called Rob—or “Rob, darling,” in the parlance of the upper crust. This nonchalance around gender situations that might be perceived as confusing, contradictory, or transgressive creates a space within which queer forms of transgender and transsexual meaning are possible. As the Dick Van Dyke Show writers and performers normalize Tom through the reactions of the party attendees, their characters make room for gender transitions and genderqueer identities and embodiments.

In addition, as the error of the party attendees renders the Petries a couple with two “male” names, “Walden” maintains unconventional currents of
homoeroticism, creating what Gayle Salamon has called “homoerratic” interactions. In first responding to Tom and then attempting to convey Rob and Laura’s actual names, Van Dyke and Moore play gender anxieties for laughs, thereby drawing out butch-femme exchanges during which an erotics of difference situated beyond essentialized sex categories becomes evident between women as well as between the Petries. After the couple becomes known as “Bill and Rob,” for example, Rob, occupying the position of “Bill,” calls his wife by his own name in jest. This diegetic joke compounds the couple’s denaturalized “difference” erotics with a momentary erotics of sameness. In other words, the dialogue detaches the characters’ masculine-feminine rapport from their status as “male” and “female,” and this sexual dynamic queers the masculine-masculine and feminine-feminine vibes cultivated by Laura’s comic masculinization as “Tom” and Rob’s comic emasculation in connection to the “feminine” medium of television.

While these fleeting moments may seem inconsequential, their significance becomes clearer in the context of additional queer referents for “Walden’s” ensemble. For example, in the context of Tom’s last name, which is Evelyn, her “male” first name points to the feminized connotations, at least in the U.S. context, of British author Evelyn Waugh’s typically “female” moniker. Beyond this literary connection, the fictional title of Tom’s book, *I Love to Love to Love to Love*, calls up the modernist prose of Gertrude Stein, who was legendary in the 1960s for writing “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” and notable for her queer gender presentation and negotiation of heterosexism. While *Dick Van Dyke* does not present a fictionalized version of either Stein or Waugh—or of Ginsberg, Auden, or H.D.—the Tom and H. characters do clearly reflect the producers’ (and perhaps some viewers’) understandings of a literary world that included queer figures.

“Walden’s” queer meanings are additionally produced through traits in its supporting characters that are not directly related to gender or sexual non-conformity. This is most evident with Reiner’s Yale Sampson. Extratextual reference points for Sampson riff on the era’s cultural stereotype of the incoherent “egghead,” a derogatory caricature of academics. Reiner’s comic delivery of Yale’s intellectual monologue, which is intermittently unintelligible, conjures public intellectuals as diverse as Clement Greenberg and Marshall McLuhan. Yale’s rant includes words like “penetrability” and “ostentation,” as well as several neologisms. Later, Rob imitates Sampson’s arrogance and manner of speaking, listing traits he associates with the literati they encountered including “vulnerability” and “flamboyance.” As with H.’s *Lavender Lollipops*, these adjectives encode the queer element of the episode’s minor characters’ collective cultural difference. Rob’s irritability at their “flamboyance”—after being dismissed as an artist and taken for a donation he and Laura cannot afford—and Sampson’s emphasis on the word “penetrability” signal queerness through their intertextual citation of popular discourses constructing
homosexuality. At the same time, when Rob rants in parody and frustration, he represents the partygoers as unapologetic about their behavior, a stance that undercuts these same homophobic discourses.

In the context of the episode’s ensemble, issues of artistic reputation and income surface in connection with queerness, such as when the Petries discuss their finances following Rob’s accidental donation. Building on the themes of cultural identity and socio-economic differences running through “Walden,” Rob confesses that he bought the tuxedo he is wearing, telling Laura, “They won’t let you on Park Avenue in a rented tux!” Worrying that if his check bounces he will “lose his reputation,” Rob recalls the charity’s goal of raising $250,000 (well over a million dollars today) and tells his wife that Huntington could fill his check out “for two thousand bucks,” using slang terms that exaggerate his class identity. Laura reminds him that most of the donors pledged royalties rather than concrete amounts, quipping that H.’s royalties for *Lavender Lollipops* “couldn’t amount to more than a dollar and twenty cents.” While acknowledging bias against queer-coded cultural production in the marketplace, Laura’s comment troubles received notions of economic value in “high” art along with popular discourses constructing queers as a threat.

Unsettled themes of class, talent, and reputation again collide during Walden’s visit to Rob’s office and in the episode’s brief coda. These scenes further destabilize divisions between apparently normal and abnormal people, high and low class demeanor, and respectable and repellant media. With his first lines of the episode, Walden reveals himself to be an oddly plain-talking poet laureate with an appreciation for popular culture and a sense of humor that the other “serious” writers lack. Showcasing characteristics that blur seemingly intractable social distinctions, he uses colorful language (“hoodwinked, bamboozled, hornswogged”) to describe Huntington’s method of procuring Rob’s pledge and shows surprising respect for the illustrious vaudeville and early TV careers of Rob’s writing partners, Buddy and Sally, by reciting a string of accolades that praise the show-biz credentials of Morey Amsterdam and Rose Marie, the actors who play these characters. Walden cracks no less than ten jokes in five minutes, including a risqué one about Huntington that, in reversing stereotypes based on classed expectations for sexual expression, serves as a bookend to the Petries’ own display of affection at the episode’s outset. Just as Walden’s vernacular aligns with Rob’s Midwest-inflected speech (evident in Rob’s reference to a novel he “ain’t never gonna finish no how”), this element of sexuality establishes connections across perceived cultural divides.

While its content questions cultural hierarchies, “Walden’s” overall reflexivity emphasizes the “high” elements of “low” media and the “low” elements of “high” culture. Walden’s quips are penned—and Sampson is performed—by Reiner,
who, as a TV writer, is the type of writer that his fictional intellectuals are expected to be above. H. is acted by Adamo, who, as the assistant to the show's star, occupies a position relative to his marginalized character, but would appear to have less artistic clout. When Walden lands a punch line, and when Yale and the others congratulate Rob after viewing the co-authored television special, it is not only television (and the people who write it and support its production) that appear newly praiseworthy, but also those viewers who will risk social stigma by exhibiting a sophisticated appreciation for the medium. In scripting characters like Tom, H., and Yale and then highlighting their differences from Rob and Laura, “Walden” spotlights both the respect Rob and Laura feel toward celebrated writers and the outrage they experience when snobs lacking in quick wit dismiss TV writing. In effect, the queer meanings attached to its minor characters allow Dick Van Dyke to cultivate tensions between popular culture and respected mediums of self-expression while also pointing out the absurdity of the distinctions on which these tensions are based.

The series’ comparison of Rob and Yale (whom Rob accidentally calls “Harvard,” in a passing swipe at Ivy League pedigree), for example, operates through dichotomies that it ultimately redefines. Rob’s belief that Sampson has nothing of real value to say yet receives kudos for being obscure distinguishes Rob’s work from Yale’s. In the context of Sampson’s dismissal of mass culture and realist conventions, and his fan Venetia Fellows’ way of turning her nose up at TV, “Walden” intensifies Rob and Yale’s character differences, implying that educated people with discerning tastes often miss the artistry of television writing when it takes the form of light entertainment. Walden, however, rejects this norm, arguing that Rob, as a “first-class television writer,” has more talent than the “third-rate novelist” Petrof. This belief is confirmed in the final scene by applause from Yale, H., and the others at a screening of “The History of American Humor” that features Sally and Buddy as representatives of comedy’s “low” art.

Through indirect renderings of queer artists, Dick Van Dyke contributed to a television discourse that goes beyond “high” and “low.” With the awkwardness (from a conventional perspective) and unremarkableness (from the sophisticates’ perspective) of H’s Lavender Lollipops and women with “men’s” names, “Walden” ventured into a self-reflexive space around authorship, cultural norms, and non-conformity. The associations “Walden” invokes between art and queerness support Dick Van Dyke’s self-presentation as a high form of low culture, but its abstract and satirical representations undermine the high/low distinction itself. Looking at popular art that complicates markers of social distinction shows non-normative worldviews embedded in TV from the network era. It also shows that divisions between “high” and “low” class, taste, and talent make the overall matrix of gender and sexual differentiation seem far more straightforward than
Figure 12.2.
In “Walden’s” final scene, key players watch a TV set suggestively placed in front of a book. From right to left, they include: Laura, Buddy, Sally, Rob, Tom, Dr. Torrance Hayward, Walden, Yale, Mrs. Huntington, Venetia, H., and an unnamed butler.

it actually is. When artists break down assumed distinctions between high and low culture, they often throw the norms that stabilize gender and sexuality into question as well. The same is true of queer television criticism that addresses the instability of common beliefs and binary logics of identity and difference. Illuminating unexpected challenges to straight conventions and spaces of non-conformity within norms, queer analysis of TV changes the way we see conventional representations in past eras and cultural history as a whole.

Notes

Further Reading