

***Good Times*, The Evanses vs. The Robinsons, and Conflicts in Class Perspectives.**

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Introduction.

In the mid-1970s, *Good Times* (CBS, 8 February 1974-1 August 1979) challenged the image of the American white middle-class nuclear suburban family by introducing to television, only for the second time since the 1950s, the ethnic urban working-class family. *Good Times* explicitly depicted a Black working-class family while being implicitly in conversation with middle-class achievements, ascriptions, aspirations, and attainment both by virtue of its American social context and of the sitcom formula's focus on the middle-class lifestyle and values.

Although the Evans family represented a working-class family, it was through their interactions with Black middle-class families that their class consciousness was clearly revealed. A modification of executive producer Norman Lear's signature narrative technique "warring viewpoints" accomplished this task in "The Debutante Ball," the 18th episode broadcast from the second season of *Good Times* on February 4, 1975, (Taflinger 67, 69). Notably used in Lear's preceding successful comedies *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979) and *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978), two opposing viewpoints were presented. One viewpoint represented the Black working-class consciousness of the Evans family, and the other viewpoint represented the Black middle-class consciousness of the Robinson family. The families disagreed over both immaterial and material values.

"The Debutante Ball" episode of *Good Times* positioned the working-class Evans family as the model family-protagonist, in opposition to the middle-class Robinson family. This was

altogether a new narrative approach because white-cast sitcoms before *Good Times* positioned the white middle-class family as the model family-protagonist. In this paper, I perform a close reading of “The Debutante Ball,” exploring the conflicts between the Evans and Robinson families represented by and interpreting the working-class Evans family as a model family-protagonist.

The Working-Class Evans Family.

On February 8, 1974, *Good Times* was the first series to feature a recurring, intact Black nuclear family, the Evanses, on primetime television (Merritt and Stroman 493). The Evans family consisted of Florida Evans, the loving wife and mother, played by Esther Rolle, star of the series; James Evans, Sr., the hardworking husband and father, played by John Amos until 1976; James Jr., or J.J., the eldest son, played by standup comedian Jimmie Walker; Thelma, the middle child and daughter, played by acting newcomer Bern Nadette Stanis; and Michael, the militant youngest son, played by *Raisin in the Sun* star Ralph Carter.

The Evans family was depicted as a definitive ethnic urban working-class family via the family’s residential settlement and the father’s occupation and level of education. James Evans, with a sixth-grade education, was employed in primarily low paying, unskilled jobs (“Florida Goes to School”). With James’ level of education and occupational skills, he was caught in the economic bind of unstable employment. The working-class status of the Evans family was also evident in their home. They lived in a cramped two-bedroom urban high-rise apartment in a public housing project in Chicago, Illinois, paying \$104.50 in monthly rent (“Getting Up the Rent”). J.J. and Michael shared the pull-out sofa bed located in the living room. The parents shared a bedroom and Thelma had her own bedroom. There was one bathroom, a small kitchen,

and a small dining area. The community laundry room was in the basement of the building which was a 17-floor walk downstairs when the elevator was not working.

As a Black family embodying a working-class consciousness and life, the Evans family was depicted differently to white working-class families of the 1950s and 1960s. For white-cast working-class families, such as in *The Life of Riley* (NBC, 4 October 1949-28 March 1950; NBC, 2 January 1953-23 May 1958), *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1 October 1955-22 September 1956), and *The Flintstones* (ABC, 30 September 1960-1 April 1966), husbands and fathers were portrayed either as awkward, bumbling, clumsy, incompetent, and inept whereas white working-class wives were usually competent, serious, strong, and responsible (Cantor and Cantor 27-28; Heilbronn 214, 219). While Florida was competent, serious, strong, and responsible, James was never portrayed as bumbling, incompetent, or inept. This is due in part to Norman Lear's intention to promote a positive image of an African American husband and father on primetime television, which Esther Rolle who played Florida and John Amos who played James supported enthusiastically (Newcomb and Alley 186; "Esther Rolle Talks"; Kisner 60).

Although each family was decidedly in contrasting social classes, both James and Gene shared characteristics of traditional masculinity unspecific to each social class. Marc Lamont Hill reminisces that James Evans was the "personification of traditional masculinity" (69). Traditional masculinity was connected to a working-class consciousness because a man's "manliness" was connected to his work. This Black working-class masculinity was based on being a stable husband and father who was complemented by a wife, and whom he was expected to protect and treat well (Staples 8). Hill further completes a profile of a Black working-class masculinity embodied in James Evans: "He loved and provided for his family. He showed no vulnerability, no tears" (69). These Black working-class attributes apply equally to Gene

Robinson. Gene was not awkward, bumbling, clumsy, or incompetent as popular white TV dads of the genre. Being an economically stable husband and father was expected of Gene as a middle-class Black male.

As a clear example of an ethnic urban working-class family, episodes depicted the family's struggles to make financial ends meet their most basic needs—Florida's cost-conscious caretaking of her family and James's efforts towards better paid employment and improved job skills development. Nevertheless, the Evans family also had middle-class aspirations. James and Florida wanted to send their children to college, and they valued success, achievement, and upward mobility. These middle-class aspirations were revealed in their interactions with the Black middle-class Robinson family.

The Middle-Class Robinson Family.

Gene and Betty Robinson, the parents of Clarissa Robinson, J.J.'s current girlfriend, were introduced in "The Debutante Ball." Regarding class, the episode never explicitly named Gene and Betty as members of the Black middle class, but many tightly bound rhetorical expressions, descriptions, and symbolic images within the episode did. The Robinsons' upper middle-class social status was signified through the father's occupation and several conspicuous symbols—their residential settlement, participation in elitist rituals, dress, and transportation. For one, Gene was a "big time businessman," which strongly suggests that he had a white-collar occupation or was an entrepreneur. They lived in the Southshore suburban neighborhood of Chicago, "where all the rich Black folks live" ("The Debutante Ball"). They participated in elitist rituals such as the Southshore Ball, a "big social event of the year for Black society" and one that was reported on in the Chicago *Defender* newspaper, historically Chicago's most prominent Black paper. The family's clothing pointed to their comfortable lifestyle. Clarissa wore a mink fur jacket, her

father a luxurious overcoat with a three-piece suit and tie underneath, and her mother wore a full-length mink fur coat with matching hat. The Robinson family's affluence was further evidenced by their home, with eight rooms and two and a half bathrooms, and Clarissa's mode of transportation. She drove a "hog," which was African American slang for a Cadillac, a storied American luxury vehicle.

Conflicting Values.

As with all situation comedies, "The Debutante Ball" began simply enough with J.J. accepting his new girlfriend Clarissa Robinson's invitation to take her to the 10th Annual Southshore Ball. The complication occurred when Clarissa arrived at the Evans household to inform J.J. that he could not take her to the ball. The reason: Her parents felt that J.J. was not the "right type" of person to escort Clarissa to the ball. The conflict in class perspectives between the Evans family and the Robinson family boils down to conflicting values over the importance of "cash and credentials," or material possessions, and human worth, individual talent, and a sense of obligation to less fortunate African Americans, or immaterial values (Reeves, Guyot, and Krause; Durant and Loudon 259-60). J.J. was not the "right type" because as James summed it up, J.J. (and his family) lived in the "wrong zip code."

Gene felt that J.J. was a "nice boy" but he also thought that J.J. had a "million-to-one shot" of "getting out" of the projects. J.J.'s living conditions and social status was problematic for Gene and Betty because they wanted better opportunities for their daughter which would mean that Clarissa's marriage partner would be at the very least in the same socioeconomic standing as Clarissa. Florida pointed out that J.J.'s artistic talent was what J.J. was going to use to improve those "million-to-one shot" against him.

An interesting aspect of the conflicting values between the families was the role of

gender as it intersected with class. Each husband's gender role is elevated above their wives. That is, the articulation of the Evanses and Robinsons' perspectives and experiences were gendered—the perspectives and experiences of the families were revealed from the viewpoints of the husbands, James and Gene, with little direct articulation from their wives, Florida and Betty.

Both wives and husbands participated in expressing their warring viewpoints but there was a subtle hierarchy: The men articulated and initiated their respective viewpoints while the women augmented and supported their husbands' viewpoints. Yet there was more of an egalitarian approach between James and Florida as compared to the interaction between Gene and Betty. For example, Gene voiced his pessimism about J.J.'s "million to one shot" of getting out of the "ghetto." Florida articulated her own viewpoint by showing Gene one of J.J.'s paintings and declared that his talent was the way J.J. was going to get out of the ghetto. Betty only made secondary remarks that augmented she and her husband's beliefs and values. Betty never articulated a countering argument on her own. For example, Gene commanded Clarissa to "get her things," to which Clarissa replied that she was not going. After the Robinsons' short interchange with Florida and James, Betty repeated Gene's command telling Clarissa to "please get her things."

This gendered distinction suggests that wives' (or women's) subordinated authority occurred across representations of class boundaries in seventies primetime television. The "warring viewpoints" in "The Debutante Ball" set up the audience to consider the polarized differences in immaterial and material values aligned with class but not with gender.

The Evans Family: Model Family-Protagonist?

The American televisual family-protagonist before 1974 was white, patriarchal, nuclear, middle-class, suburban, and occupationally defined. This televisual family-protagonist was the type,

shadow, form, and norm for the supposed “American family,” representing the default standard family configuration to which every other family was compared. Nina C. Leibman argues that family feuds in family melodrama served to underscore the moral superiority of this one dominant group over others (145). Similarly, the warring viewpoints narrative technique articulated class differences and underscored the Evanses moral superiority as well as brought into question *which* socioeconomic class was the model of *an* or *the* “American family” (Leibman 148).

The family-protagonists of the white middle-class families in sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s such as the Nelsons in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), the Andersons in *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), the Cleavers in *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), and the Stones in *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) were a model family-protagonist because they often demonstrated how a positive white middle-class family could influence and impact a negative dysfunctional or broken one, served as the model for improvement, the catalyst for change, and the initiator of solutions welcoming the “intrusion of society’s more troublesome situations in order to resolve them and restore the patriarchal conservative order,” and represented as both ideological goal and active mediator (Leibman 148-50).

Although the Robinsons were upper-middle-class, were a nuclear family, and lived in a suburban area in Chicago, they did not represent a model family-protagonist because they believed that rather than an individual’s humanity or talent, an individual’s residential settlement, education, and economic wellbeing were the most important indicators of an individual’s worth. By the mid-1970s? such exclusionary beliefs and values were not seen as morally upright. The middle-class Robinson family should have automatically been shown as the morally superior family and should not have been rendered dysfunctional and oppressive but yet they were, as compared to the Evanses (Leibman 149). Since the Evans family was neither white nor middle-

class, their model positioning and moral superiority should have been suspect and open to challenge. However, due to the sitcom formula's focus on the middle-class lifestyle and values (in fact *because of* the formulaic nature of television situation comedies), the Evans family was required to stand out as the model family-protagonist. Although they were the least "illustrative of the American bourgeois nuclear unit," ethically and morally the Evans family were on par with white middle-class families—and even more so as compared to the Robinsons—regarding their values of togetherness, love, and respect.

However, the ideological conflicts and differences between the Evanses and the Robinsons remained unresolved. The Evans family were neither a model for improvement nor a catalyst for change for the Robinson family. Unlike the white middle-class families in sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, in *Good Times* disagreement, aggression, hostility, and negativity between families was expressed. Mimicking the state of racial relations in the United States in the mid-seventies, the conflicts engendered between the two class perspectives in "The Debutante Ball" episode of *Good Times* would not go away. Gene and Betty Robinson were unchanged by their encounter with James and Florida Evans and James and Florida Evans were unchanged by their encounter with Gene and Betty Robinson. The Robinsons' "way of thinking" would remain unchanged. While the Evans family was the more ethical and inclusive family, they failed to incorporate the Robinson family into their "way of thinking." As in many of the cases when the "warring viewpoints" narrative technique was used in Norman Lear's comedies, the episodes rarely affirmed that a particular "way of thinking" was better and instead only affirmed that different ways of thinking existed, and that these different ways of thinking should be expressed. For example, this pattern was typical of the interactions between Archie Bunker and his son-in-law Michael Stivic in *All in the Family*. In addition, as with most of Lear's comedies, the

narrative did not force the Evanses' point of view upon the ideologically dysfunctional and oppressive middle class Robinson family. There is no narrative closure, and the Robinson family would continue to hold to their familial oppressive actions, beliefs, and values. On the upside, the younger generation did not comply fully with the status quo. Clarissa did not go to the ball. She told her parents that she would only go if she could go with J. J. Since Clarissa's parents would not approve that plan instead, J. J. and Clarissa went out to have "Big Macs."

Conclusion.

In conclusion, the seventies in American culture witnessed the "comeback," or the rise, of a post-Civil Rights Black middle class who were at the same time, moving away from the Black working class in terms of their residential base, education levels, and occupation towards the concerns and lifestyles of the white middle class (Durant and Loudon 261-262). On the other hand, the Black working class were beginning to show signs of decline towards a Black underclass due to an increase of female headed families, out of wedlock births, drug addiction, and welfare dependency (Wilson 88-90). Within this context, the Evans family as a Black working-class family were a brand-new televisual family-protagonist and one after which the American family-protagonist landscape diversified. "The Debutante Ball" episode of *Good Times* positioned the working-class Evans family as the model family-protagonist in opposition to the middle-class Robinson family, demonstrating that immaterial values of human worth, artistic talent, and empathy for the less fortunate were inclusive, noble, and commendable. This episode and series pointed to the conflicting beliefs and values of the Black middle class in the 1970s and foreshadowed the important role this group would have in future television sitcoms featuring Black nuclear middle-class families such as the Huxtables in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), the Petersons in *The Parent Hood* (1995-1999), and the Johnsons in *black*ish* (2014-2022).

Thank you for our time, interest, and attention!

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