The Moral Imagination of ‘Leave It to Beaver’

Russell Kirk defined the moral imagination as “an enduring source of inspiration that elevates us to first principles as it guides us upwards towards virtue and wisdom and redemption.” It is a quality which informs the great works of art, not excluding the more popular art forms of film and television. Since its premiere sixty years ago, the beloved sitcom *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) has been such an “enduring source of inspiration” for many, unfolding the story of a young boy who learned “first principles” and was guided in “virtue and wisdom” in the midst of his family. Viewed today, *Leave It to Beaver* remains ever fresh, even as other pop-culture products have faded and dated. The main reason—apart from its top-notch production values—is that it avoided the topical and ephemeral and drew instead from the wellspring of the moral imagination, creating characters and situations which have become archetypes.

Yet it is surprisingly little known. To many, *Leave It to Beaver* is merely a phrase conjuring up a host of media-propagated clichés about society in the 1950s—bland, “white-bread,” conformist, and so on. The show is often misrepresented as a “sanitized,” “unrealistic,” or “cookie cutter” portrayal of a “perfect nuclear family”—phrases which reveal scorn for the very concepts of family and domesticity.

By contrast, Jerry Mathers, who played the title character and was a college philosophy major, has likened the series to a “medieval morality play” in which Theodore “Beaver” Cleaver repeatedly succumbed to temptation, suffered the consequences, and was guided back on the path of virtue. As we celebrate *Leave It to Beaver*‘s sixtieth anniversary, Mr. Mathers’ idea offers the perfect template for viewing this popular classic.

A Television Morality Play

Leave It to Beaver was an artistic expression of a particular time in history. After the tumult of World War II, Americans longed for tranquility and order. Media and popular culture during the Cold War reinforced the domestic ideal, particularly in light of Communism's disdain for the "bourgeois family." While divorce and broken homes were becoming more common—in 1949 one writer could already claim that "family life is becoming a thing to be remembered rather than to be lived"—TV domestic sitcoms attempted to shore up the old values, stressing the importance of family in forming character and virtue. To criticize *Beaver* for being "idealized" misses the point, for its purpose was not documentary but didactic.

Beaver had many trappings of a morality play. It was set in the fictional town of Mayfield—that is, a "field" in which the young (those in the springtime of life) are formed morally. The name of Beaver's elementary school teacher—Miss "Landers"—suggested a person who steers children to land amid the stormy seas of childhood. The Cleaver home was portrayed as a sanctuary, a garden of moral values in which love, mutual respect, and dignity reigned supreme.

But the evil lurking outside the sanctuary was given its due. Beaver's friends were a Dickensian bunch of delinquents, constantly luring him into trouble. Most memorable was Larry Mondello, whose function as tempter was emphasized by his ever-present apple; later in the series, this tempter role was filled by the aptly named Gilbert Bates ("baits"). Two of the most famous episodes of the series involved Beaver, at the instigation of his friends, attempting to smoke his father's meerschaum pipe and climbing into a giant "soup bowl" on a roadside billboard. The scripts excelled at pinpointing the decisive moment of moral choice and the chain of causation leading to evil.

The ultimate foil to the Cleavers was Eddie Haskell, the best friend of Beaver's older brother Wally. His name suggested an "eddy": a current at variance with the main current in a stream; and indeed, Eddie represented the antithesis of the Cleaver values. A smarmy sycophant to the adults and rascally schemer to his peers, Eddie was a menace to the social universe of Mayfield. His schemes were invariably shown to be morally bankrupt, and the episodes ended in the reinforcement of the correct moral norms.

Those who call *Beaver* "sanitized" overlook that many of the children on the show came from broken or dysfunctional homes. Larry Mondello's father was perpetually away on business trips; his mother was a nervous wreck, struggling to raise single-handedly her wayward son. Mrs. Mondello's advanced age carried the suggestion that Larry was a "surprise" child and unwanted. Others of Beaver's friends talked of their fathers' "hittin' moods." Eddie Haskell, too, behaved the way he did in part because of domestic discord. Divorce and alcoholism were addressed in various episodes.

The writers of *Leave It to Beaver* seemed to be telling us that everything outside the sanctuary of the Cleaver home is illusory and unreliable, and that family is a refuge from the corruption of the world.

Ward and June Cleaver provided the moral armor to fight these evils. Here again, the names had symbolic resonance. A "cleaver" is an instrument which cuts and separates, just as Ward Cleaver helped his children discern good from evil (one is reminded of the biblical phrase likening the word of God to a "two-edged sword"). The archaic verb "to ward" means "to protect or guard," and the Cleaver patriarch also had the function of "warding off" bad influences. June Cleaver's name suggested Juno, the Roman goddess of fertility and the hearth. June was indeed the heart of the Cleaver home, its source of grace and stability.

As a father, Ward exercised justice tempered with understanding, frequently recalling what it was like to be a child. He was always ready to sit down with his sons and discuss their dilemmas—often in his book-encrusted den, the inner sanctum of the Cleaver home. A den scene in the episode "Beaver's Library Book"—in which Beaver loses a book checked out on Ward's library card—even evokes a sacramental confession, with Beaver as the penitent sinner and Ward the benevolent priest. (Jerry Mathers, a Catholic, would presumably have been familiar with the dynamics of the confessional.) In this way, *Leave It to Beaver* suggested that parental authority images divine authority.

Yet far from pushing a rigidly authoritarian viewpoint, *Beaver* put adult foibles on display. In this respect, the show could be compared to the moralistic paintings of Pieter Bruegel or Jan Steen in which children and adults are shown participating in the same vices. Ward's co-worker and best friend Fred Rutherford was a parody of a pretentious, jargon-spouting corporate drone; his underachieving son "Lumpy" took after him. Many adults on *Beaver* were shown to be corrupt, deceitful, or susceptible to peer pressure. But above all, the show emphasized that both children and adults face the same moral choices and have something to teach each other.

Ward and June, for example, frequently made mistakes and admitted them. *Beaver* reflects a new era in which parents were increasingly concerned about parenting techniques and instilling the right values in their children. Caught between the traditional way they were raised and the new "pop psychology" of the Dr. Spock era, Ward and June strove for the right balance. Ward often mentioned that his own father disciplined him with corporal punishment, a method which he vowed not to use with his own children. The clash between nature and an over-complicated modern society was treated in a number of episodes, with the farming out of childhood to technical "experts" coming in for particular scorn. Far from

blindly reflecting the social mores of the day, *Beaver* critiqued and satirized them.

The Cleaver family was founded in the loving marriage of Ward and June, a marriage characterized by companionship and mutual respect. Ward frequently assisted his wife in household chores and always listened to what she had to say. *Beaver* also stressed the complementarity of the sexes, their differing sensibilities. While Ward was authoritative, June was nurturing and often swayed her husband in the direction of a more merciful stance toward their children. In one episode, Ward used the novel *Ivanhoe* to teach Beaver the ideal of chivalry, and throughout the series we saw Beaver grow into a more mature role *vis à vis* the opposite sex. The idea of complementarity was reflected visually in the famous paintings of a little boy and girl—*Blue Boy* and *Pinkie*—which adorned the Cleavers' living room.

If Ward and June represented authority, then Wally and Beaver represented solidarity and community. Wally was the mediator between Beaver and the adult world, his caustic quips and advice helping his brother navigate his environment. Beaver was the perpetual innocent, exuding wonder as the complexities of life were explained to him.

Humor and Artistry

Leave It to Beaver was just as strong on the "imaginative" side as on the "moral." Writers Joe Connolly and Bob Mosher perfected a unique style of droll humor which poked fun at human nature, much of it mined from their experience with their own children. The whimsical observations about life "from the mouths of babes" sometimes turned into sharp satire:

> "Hey Wally, what's this? I found it in the bushes."
>
> "It's whiskey."
>
> "Smells awful."

> “All whiskey smells awful.”
>
> “Then why do people drink it?”
>
> “Well, it’s like when grownups have a party. They drink it to have a good time.”
>
> “Gee, if it’s a party, don’t they have a good time anyway?”
>
> “Well, grownups have a harder time having a good time than kids do.”

The camera work highlighted the interaction between the adults and the youngsters, with the adults often shot from the child’s perspective. In fact, *Beaver*—whose initial working title was *It’s a Small World*—was one of the first family shows to be written from the point of view of the children instead of the parents. It dealt compassionately with experiences which while trivial to an adult are veritable battlefields for a child. This too reflects a new postwar emphasis on the well-being of children. But the focus was less on making the new generation better-off materially than on making them better morally. Art as moral instruction, a longstanding American tradition, was exploited brilliantly by *Leave it to Beaver*, appealing on a dual level to children and adults.

Routinely described as “simple,” the plots were in fact highly inventive, finding moral ambiguities in the theater of everyday life. The best of them were like gracefully choreographed comic ballets. Frequently, Beaver or Wally traveled a journey from innocence to wisdom by way of a disillusioning experience—like finding out that their favorite, big-talking uncle was a phony or being disappointed in a teenaged love affair. As the boys matured, the plots matured along with them, finding scope for romantic and financial dilemmas.

The series was filmed in movie style, using actual exterior locations and well-made interior sets—most notably, the cozy Cleaver home. Crisp black-and-white cinematography created the feeling of Mayfield as pastoral paradise, a Garden of Eden in perpetual May. *Beaver*‘s realism was in no small part a result of the uncommon chemistry among the four principal actors—Jerry Mathers as Beaver, Tony Dow as Wally, Barbara Billingsley as June, and Hugh Beaumont (incidentally, a Methodist lay preacher) as Ward—and the tenderness with which their interactions were filmed.

The emphasis on decorum and good manners in the Cleaver family conveyed a vision of the good, true, and beautiful as they are first instilled in the home. This brings us to that other oft-repeated criticism of the show: the supposed unreality of Ward and June’s sitting around their home in formal attire (Ward in suit and tie, June in high heels and pearls). To this, we can only pose the philosopher Jacques Barzun’s definition of decorum—a “facade which presents things at their best”—and Russell Kirk’s statement that the moral imagination is meant to “elevate” us to a higher plane of living.

A Living Legacy

Connolly and Mosher created a unique work of art in *Leave It to Beaver*: a coming-of-age saga, told in real time over six years. Although enjoyed today as a nostalgic reminder of a

supposedly “simpler” time, the show was very likely deliberately tapping into a tradition of Americana and depictions of a child’s world, from the stories of Mark Twain to the paintings of Winslow Homer. What one commentator has written about the art of Homer seems particularly applicable to *Beaver*:

> *The horrific experience of the Civil War inspired a generation of Americans to seek solace and escape in fantasies of an ever-happy childhood. More deeply than any other artist, Winslow Homer understood this need for sweet nostalgia in postwar society. His paintings… conjure an almost mythical American childhood: sailing boats in a stiff breeze, reading stories in the cool grass, and playing games outside a one-room schoolhouse. Homer’s world seems forever summer.*

On a personal note, *Leave It to Beaver* is an essential part of my life, a touchstone to which I return regularly in re-runs and on the gorgeously restored DVDs. I would be poorer without it. That the show’s stars—Jerry Mathers, Tony Dow, Ken Osmond and the others—have remained in the public eye and upheld the show’s positive spirit has surrounded *Beaver* with a radiant aura that remains undimmed. In many ways, the saga of the Cleavers continues.

For sixty years, *Leave It to Beaver* has taught us to look at life with irony and whimsy. This is the sublime gift of comedy: to instill in us the capacity to take ourselves lightly. But the *type* of comedy is crucial. Instead of low slapstick, *Beaver* offered us a high comedy of manners, comedy in the classical sense of a story that ends in the restoration of order and happiness. One might also add, in the case *Leave It to Beaver*, the acquisition of wisdom.

Note: I am indebted to Michael Leggs for his discussion of name symbolism in his online essay All the Symbolism You Never

Knew Existed in “Leave It to Beaver.”

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