

In the Shadow of Sheldon: How *The Big Bang Theory* Used Misogyny and Neurodivergency as a Punchline

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In 2007 when *The Big Bang Theory* premiered I was nine years old, which isn't that old, but it's old enough to know when you're the black sheep of the family. As I grew up and grew to hate sport of any kind - a mix of not getting along with teammates and a lack of interest - I realized that my good ole Montana born-and-raised parents didn't really know what to do with a child who wanted to sit and read or play computer games instead of play softball. My parents didn't get into *The Big Bang Theory* immediately, but about two seasons into it - when I was around 11/12 - they get into it big time and I still to this day get referred to as Sheldon by my mother; each trip to New York Comic Con isn't without a joke about "One time on *The Big Bang Theory*..." and I find it extremely rude.

The Big Bang Theory was the average American's look into what a rich old New Yorker thinks geeky intelligent men are like. While a lot of the misogyny displayed by the cast is true to that culture, the way in which the show plays it for a joke whose root is in the characters neurodivergence isn't funny in the slightest and doesn't comment on but instead adds to the torrid history of geek culture's hatred of women.

Just the line "Created by Chuck Lorre" should tell one everything they need to know about the "comedy" in the show, but first let's talk about the premise. *The Big Bang Theory* follows four male friends - Leonard Hofstadter, Sheldon Cooper, Howard Wolowitz, and Rajesh Koothrappali - as they work together at CalTech and deal with Penny, the waitress and aspiring actress who moved in across the hall from Leonard and Sheldon.

First off, the concept of a bunch of geeky men trying to be around a hot girl and maybe have sex with her was outdated by 2007 when this show premiered. After 1984's *Revenge of the Nerds*, this type of plot was used heavily in both television and movies. By 2007, we had *Weird Science*, *American Pie*, *Not Another Teen Movie*, Steve Urkel and Screech had been on TV for a decade, and there was even a gender-swapped version of the trope in *She's All That*. To top it all off, *Superbad* came out about a month before *The Big Bang Theory* premiered.

There's nothing wrong with using a concept that has been used before, but doing so requires a writer to make this version special - what's the hook that gets us in, why do I care about these geeks? The thing is, *The Big Bang Theory* doesn't have that. The characters are all different versions of the same kind of man, and while something like that works in film, there needs to be a wider array of characters in a television show - this is why characters like Steve Urkel and Screech were a little lovable, they had Eddie and Slater there to even them out. Author and producer Kam Miller talks about how there needs to be a good story engine, something that continuously pushes the story forward as the cast goes through their lives, and while finding a

partner can be a good one, it's not a good one if it's the only drive the entire cast has. A 90-minute feature requires a small portion of character development while a 10 season sitcom requires a lot more, and without an array of characters it's harder for any development to take place, there's only an echo chamber.

The echo chamber created in *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the only things about geek culture that it gets right. Media likes to portray nerdy or geeky men as a softer, less abrasive counterpoint to the hyper-masculine womanizer, however as we've seen over the years misogyny in these geek circles is just as vicious and just as violent. Therefore, it's no surprise when the men of the show use women as their punchlines repeatedly.

In the pilot episode, the first "joke" that isn't about masturbating is about how dumb waitresses are. After giving sperm to a sperm bank - hoping to get good money due to their educational background - Sheldon and Leonard talk with the receptionist. Leonard remarks on the "egg-seeking geniuses" in their cups to which Sheldon responds, "Potential geniuses. I have a sister with the same basic DNA mix who hostesses at Fuddruckers." It's not the joke you are hoping for as a release to three pages of masturbation jokes, there's nothing funny about it in the slightest. However, it's the line that pushes us into furthering the story. Not only that, but this joke is just the beginning in many seasons of jokes about how people in the food service industry - specifically waitresses - aren't smart, because new neighbor Penny is a waitress.

Penny becomes the springboard for all of the misogyny in the show. Later in the pilot, after meeting Penny and offering her some lunch, Leonard and Sheldon are trying to get to know her better. When asked about herself, Penny gives the response of "I'm a Sagittarius which probably tells you more than you need to know," which then sends Sheldon into a spiel about how dumb believing in astrology is, a spiel that gets a laugh track inserted after it, with a shot of Sheldon looking proud - because we're supposed to agree with him, to see this stereotypically feminine interest as stupid. Things only get worse when Penny meets Howard and Rajesh. Immediately, Howard begins to uncomfortably flirt with her and by the end of the episode, he is using the technology he helped put on the Mars rover to see up Penny's skirt and take photos he then gives to Rajesh. Every single one of these things is played for laughs, we are supposed to find these antics endearing and funny because these men aren't the high-powered Jordan Belfordts of the world, they're uncool geeks.

However, it really isn't their geekiness that this show hides behind - because this show knows nothing about actual geek culture, often just having a character say something that sounds "geeky" and inserting a laugh track right after. Klingon Boggle, mentioned in the pilot, is a fairly normal game to be played amongst Star Trek fans, it isn't a punchline, and neither is just naming J.R.R. Tolkien characters (which happens a lot later in the show, seeing as Leonard is a big *Hobbit* fan). Instead, the show tries to hide behind its neurodivergent main characters, using their social struggles as a "Get Out of Jail Free" card for the horrid jokes Chuck Lorre and his writers put in.

If one was asked to name the main character of *The Big Bang Theory* they're probably going to tell you Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon is so synonymous with the show that four years after its finale it's rare to see an NYC bus without a "Bazinga, NYC!" wrap on the back. However,

Sheldon is also one of the worst behaving characters on the show, and the show blames all of this on his neurodivergency.

Following in the long line of “prodigy children” and “eccentric genius” characters, Sheldon has been hit with the constant think pieces on whether or not the character is somewhere on the Autism spectrum, has OCD, or a mix of both. However, the creators of the show have come out and said that he doesn’t have any of these things, that he’s just “quirky.”

This is something that I find so hard to believe after reading the pilot episode, because not only does Sheldon share a lot of traits with neurodivergent people that are then used as the catalyst for jokes, but the first episode also very openly makes fun of a neurodivergent side character. After volunteering to get Penny’s old clothes and things from her ex-boyfriend’s apartment, Leonard and Sheldon aren’t buzzed in by Penny’s ex, and instead they take advantage of a delivery person to help them get in. From the script:

LEONARD CONSIDERS THE SITUATION AS A DEVELOPMENTALLY
CHALLENGED DELIVERY PERSON, BOBBY, APPROACHES WITH A
STACK OF MENUS.

BOBBY

Hiya.

LEONARD

Hi.

BOBBY

I have a job and make my own money. I put one menu at every door.
I'm Bobby.

LEONARD/SHELDON

That's great. / Good for you.

BOBBY PRESSES ALL THE BUZZER BUTTONS.

Entire episodes of television have been written on the premise of “Oh shoot, we’re locked out,” that using a neurodivergent person as the way in which Leonard and Sheldon get in is not only lazy writing, but it puts all of the writers’ cards on the table. This is why it’s no surprise when we are supposed to view all of Sheldon’s misogynistic quips and racist musings as him not being “aware of anything in the social code” that goes against these things, they’re trying to hide their prejudice behind a very common and very stressful aspect of having Autism Spectrum Disorder. That does no good for anyone, and only in turn helps push a negative narrative about people who are neurodivergent.

Sheldon’s neurosis are not the only ones the show uses for humor, in fact, Rajesh’s biggest storyline for the first couple seasons is that he cannot speak to women unless under the influence of alcohol or drugs. We see through this and his stress over microwaves which leads him to putting aluminum foil in his hat and pants (which doesn’t make it into the pilot’s final cut) that Rajesh obviously has a serious anxiety disorder. As someone who also has a pretty serious anxiety disorder, these things aren’t the punchline of a joke, they’re actual issues that people deal

with, that make their lives harder - it's not funny that Rajesh has to get drunk to speak to women, substance abuse is actually a very real issue that people with anxiety disorders face. While we do see Rajesh get over this hurdle during the show, it's worth noting that he is both the only person of color in the main cast and he is also the only person in the main cast that ends the series single. Neither of these things make the show look that good either.

Rajesh's ability to talk to women is the only solid piece of character development we actually end up seeing throughout the show, and I think it's because this show wants the viewers to be on the side of its main cast - even though the main cast is a bunch of men who would make fun of you for watching a mainstream sitcom in the first place. The real way for character development to happen in this show would be if it was written the same way *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is written.

In her dissection of an episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, Kam Miller notes that the show works so well because it's actually structured as a tragedy. She says that the climax of an episode of the show isn't the gang winning, it's instead the gang failing, and eventually settling back in with the status quo. I think that this way of framing the show, of writing it with the beats of a tragedy instead of a "winner takes it all" comedy of errors. While I understand the writer's original goal of wanting to uplift a subculture of people to a point they aren't normally seen in media, I think when you make your characters as misogynistic and rude as any other male chauvinist and lack a real understanding of the culture, it doesn't work. When you show our "heroes" overtly sexually harassing the only main female cast member (until the guys get girlfriends, of course!) time after time, her anger obvious but also played for a laugh, you get tired. In trying to tell us that "geeky guys are better," *The Big Bang Theory* continues on in the age-old geek tradition of harassing women.

All of the characters in *It's Always Sunny* are reprehensible, but they are at least punished for being that way - with them failing in the end, and the pub failing along with them. In *The Big Bang Theory*, these men are rewarded for their heinous behavior with academic accolades and wives, and aren't being held to work on their issues. While one can say that this does mirror the world of geek men that they are trying to explore - the reminder here is that all of these things are being played for laughs. These things are being so played for laughs that *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the last sitcoms that I can remember to use a live audience laugh track during its run.

The use of the laugh track in *The Big Bang Theory* does nothing to add to the show, instead it is just used to underline all of the things the writers think are jokes. Not only does the laugh track make a writer's prejudices glaringly obvious but it also helps show the audience who they're supposed to be rooting for, whose side they should be on during the scene. Usually, the laugh track in this show places us on the side of whoever is making fun of Penny at the moment, and to find any quirk that may also be a trait of some form of neurodivergency hilarious. It's become a meme to see episodes of this show without the laugh track, showcasing just how flat all of the "jokes" fall when you aren't being told to find them funny.

There's a certain bitterness with which I look at *The Big Bang Theory*, an annoyance for seeing my parents laugh at someone who has the same mental health issues as their child, for being told by my mother that the things I watch are just "dumb low brow comedy" when *Bob's*

Burgers has been heralded for years for the way it portrays a loving and supportive community. While here it would be expected for me to say, “However...” and give some praise to the show, I can’t bring myself to do it. There are no good parts to this show, there is no important or different or interesting conversation brought to the social consciousness because of *The Big Bang Theory*. Instead, the show carried on its reign as one of the most popular shows on television while Gamergate made headlines and women in the video game industry feared for their safety. I can’t help but see a little bit of Penny in those women.

With the finale of *Young Sheldon* - the prequel spin-off that retcons a lot of things established in the original show - coming in 2024, I hope 2025 becomes the first year in nearly two decades where there are no new episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*. The world will be better for it.