Until Ellen’s coming-out episode, the sitcom lacked a focus and point of view. Ellen DeGeneres felt the show needed a spark and that she needed to come out to audiences, both herself and as her character on the show. The episode was followed by two more that focused on coming out to her family and friends. In the final season of the show, Ellen was gay-themed. This change of focus was blamed for the cancellation of the show as well as the loss of advertising revenue.

Significance

Ellen broke new ground with an episode featuring the main character’s coming out. As the first main character to be openly gay, Ellen Morgan, played by Ellen DeGeneres, was not necessarily comfortable with her sexuality. Growing more comfortable with herself would be part of the next season’s plot. For Ellen DeGeneres herself, the decision to come out was personal, even though several groups tried to make it political.

The episode, titled “The Puppy Episode,” aired in April 1997 near the end of the season, but not as the final episode. There had been a running joke that Ellen’s problems would be solved if she got a puppy. There were more serious issues at stake, however. The writers allowed time for the story to develop over the next two episodes before ending the season. DeGeneres, who did not necessarily want to return to the show after that season, only had one more season. ABC replaced the show midseason.

DeGeneres received praise and hate for her coming-out episode. Significantly, teens wrote to her, thanking her for portraying an openly gay character on national television. The letters signaled support and the importance of dealing with the issue in an honest, if comic, manner.

ABC, owned by Disney, was supportive but not overly so of DeGeneres’s move. In the final season, a parental warning was added to the show, labeling the show as having adult content. DeGeneres felt the warnings were unfair, and this turned out to be the breaking point between the network and the star.

Although her show did not survive, DeGeneres paved the way for other openly gay and lesbian characters on television. By 1999 there were as many as thirty gay or lesbian characters on prime time television. In the early twenty-first century these were no longer small parts for actors and actresses, but often major roles. Like Ellen, however, the characters were still often the only gay or lesbian characters or were not in serious relationships. Shows like Will & Grace dealt openly with gay issues in prime time. The comfort level and acceptance of the viewing public seemed to have gone up in just a few seasons.

Primary Source

“Roll Over, Ward Cleaver” [excerpt]

SYNOPSIS: Sitcoms in the early twenty-first century had risky subject matter and topics that Ward Cleaver, the father in Leave it to Beaver, never could have imagined. In the 1990s, comedies like Ellen and Seinfeld took on issues that were not necessarily popular with the country and the networks.

Different media have different thresholds for scandal. Controversy in the movies might mean making a film that glorifies one of the nation’s most repugnant pornographers. Controversy in literature might mean writing a memoir about the affair you had with your father when you were in your 20s. In television, which functions not just as a business and debased art form but also as an increasingly fractured nation’s de facto mirror of itself, the threshold is much lower. Controversy could mean starring in a sitcom as a gently scatterbrained former bookstore owner who, after years of adult floundering, reluctantly comes to a realization about her homosexuality and begins to take a few hesitant baby steps out of the closet and toward getting a life.

“I hate that term ‘in the closet,’” says Ellen DeGeneres, the aforementioned sitcom star whose all-pants wardrobe and sometimes awkward chemistry with male ingénues was provoking curiosity from fans and reporters long before her sexuality became a minor national obsession. “Until recently I hated the word lesbian too,” she continues. “I’ve said it enough now that it doesn’t bother me. But lesbian sounded like somebody with some kind of disease. I didn’t like that, so I used the word gay more often.”

What she hasn’t been able to bring herself to do, until now, is use the word gay along with “I am” in public. Indeed, for a lot of men and women whose livelihood depends on the goodwill of millions, those may be the three scariest words in the English language. “I always thought I could keep my personal life separate from my professional life,” says DeGeneres while sitting in a patio at her home in Beverly Hills. “In every interview I ever did”—she’s squinting, too polite to interrupt this one even though the sun is clearly in her eyes—“everyone tried to trap me into saying I was gay. And I learned every way to dodge that. Or if they just bluntly asked me, I would say I don’t talk about my personal life. I mean, I really tried to figure out every way to avoid answering that question for as long as I could.”
That became a lot harder last September when the news leaked, unintentionally by all accounts, that DeGeneres wanted to have the character she plays on *Ellen*, her three-year-old ABC sitcom, discover that she—the character, that is—is a lesbian. For DeGeneres, 39, the decision was the culmination of a long process of struggling with feelings about her own sexuality, her fears about being rejected for it, her wish to lead a more honest and open life in public, her weariness at the effort it took her not to. For the public, the news was a sensation: a gay lead on TV—that would be a first, and to those who attach importance to these sorts of things, either a long time coming or another way station on the road to moral abandon.

Or maybe it was just something to gossip about. In a series of TV interviews last fall, previously scheduled to promote a new CD but suddenly subjected to intense scrutiny because of the coming-out rumors, DeGeneres joked awkwardly that she was Lebanese, or that the real news was that a character named Les Bian would be joining *Ellen*'s cast. She even kidded her own teasing reticence on an episode of *The Larry Sanders Show* that had her hopping into bed for man-woman sex with the fictional male talk-show host.

Finally, after things dragged on all winter, ABC announced last month that the character of Ellen Morgan would indeed be coming out in a special one-hour episode on the last day of April, just in time for sweeps. That resolved, DeGeneres, who had felt constrained from speaking frankly about the issue while her sitcom's fate was still in the balance, is coming out too. "For me," she says, "this has been the most freeing experience because people can't hurt me anymore. I don't have to worry about somebody saying something about me, or a reporter trying to find out information. Literally, as soon as I made this decision, I lost weight. My skin has cleared up. I don't have anything to be scared of, which I think outweighs whatever else happens in my career."

In a sense, the burden lifted from DeGeneres' shoulders has landed on those of her bosses at ABC and Touchstone Television, which co-produces *Ellen* (both, of course, are part of the Walt Disney Co.). Dealing with controversy isn't usually a TV executive's strongest suit. It's not that there aren't already gay characters on television. There are—so many, in fact (22 as of February, according to the Advocate, a national gay-and-lesbian magazine, from the lovelorn Smithers on *The Simpsons* to the lovelorn Matt on *Melrose Place*), that one of *Ellen*'s producers offers the half-joking observation that homosexuals "have become the new stock character, like the African-American pal at the workplace."

But all those characters are either peripheral or part of an ensemble. Like Mary Richards before her, Ellen Morgan functions as her show's center, around whom the rest of the cast revolves—structurally, Ellen Morgan is Mary Richards, except she likes girls. She provides the window into the show's comedic world; she is the character we are asked to identify with, the person to whom we are asked to give tacit approval. That's why, in a country that still has a lot of conflicts about homosexuality, this formerly innocuous, intermittently funny series is now pushing buttons in a way that other shows with gay characters haven't. It's also why, after a telephone threat, the soundstage on the neat and tidy Disney lot in Burbank where Ellen is filmed had to be cleared before the final segment of the coming-out episode was shot and bomb-sniffing dogs brought in.

All this comes at a time when television is subject to greater scrutiny than ever before—dating