A MYTHIC CRITICISM
OF THAT 70'S SHOW

By Stephanie Taber
4350 Tonawanda Creek
East Amherst, NY 14051

For Com 321 Final
December 14, 1998

This material may be protected by
Copyright Law (Title 17 U.S. Code)
 Approximately 99.4 million American households contain televisions (Nielsen Media Research). With such a large audience, television programs have become one of the most influential forms of modern rhetoric. *That 70's Show*, a popular television sitcom, attempts to bridge the generation gap between today’s teens and their parents (children of the 70s). At the same time, this show works to disband the myth that life was better in the old days by drawing comparisons between the 70s and today. It both depicts that teens today aren’t any different than teens in the 70s and that some situations are universal and transcend the boundaries of time.

I will be using Mythic Criticism to demonstrate that through the myths of Family Values, the Value of Challenge and Possibility of Success, the sitcom achieves the union of two traditionally opposing groups, teens and their parents, and at the same time dispels the myth of the Eternal Return. The following paper will include a description of the artifact, the *That 70's Show* episode, to be followed by a description of the unit of analysis, Mythic Criticism. The rhetorical analysis of the artifact using the theoretical perspective of Mythic Criticism will ensue, with the conclusion to close the paper.

**Description of the Artifact**

*That 70’s Show* airs on Fox stations, Sunday nights at 8:30 p.m. It draws on average 1.6 million viewers (Nielsen Media Research). The series depicts a suburban
town in 70’s Wisconsin, focusing around 16-year-old Eric Foreman, his family and his friends Kelso, Steven, Donna, Fez and Jackie. The ensemble are stock characters: Eric is the shy and doting son who’s afraid to tell his best friend and girl-next-door Donna that he’s in love with her; Kelso is the pretty face who lacks in intelligence and whose spoiled-little-rich-girl girlfriend Jackie has him wrapped around her finger; Steven is the political anarchist and resident philosopher, and the foreigner Fez is new to American ways. There’s a lot of scary fashion and multiple marijuana references, all of which sets the perfect stage for the stereotypical 70s.

In the episode that will be analyzed, Eric’s family takes Grandma to Church, which also includes a daylong visit with her. The very disagreeable Grandma finds fault with everything, from the mass to the Foreman’s car to Mrs. Foreman’s cooking. Everyone repeatedly bites their tongues at Grandma’s complaints and attempts to escape her company at various times. No one challenges Grandma’s outrageous statements for fear that they will disrupt the status quo and false “harmony.” At one point, Eric even offers to rub Grandma’s feet in an effort to divert an oncoming argument between his mother and Grandma. Just as he is about to change his mind about the offer, Fez shows up and actually wants to rub her feet (it is an honor in his home country to do so). Eric then escapes to the garage where he finds his father hiding out from Grandma as well.

At the end of Grandma’s visit she suddenly changes her tone and reflects on what a pleasant day it had been. Mr. and Mrs. Foreman agree with her and say their goodbye filled with niceties and hopes to see each other soon. Eric stands by awestruck at this complete reversal of attitudes and almost begins to protest, but is quickly silenced by his father.
The subplot to the episode is Eric’s 1,000-word essay on the three branches of government. Eric has waited until the day before to write it, for which Jackie scolds him. She then goes on to proclaim that her own habits of finishing homework on Saturday are the reason for her far superior grades. The rest of the group finds studying on Saturday lame and encourages Kelso to break up with Jackie. When he attempts to, Jackie suddenly remembers a paper that she had done on the three branches of government for which she received an A. Donna begs Kelso to wait until Jackie finds this paper and then he can break up with her. It turns out that Jackie didn’t do a paper on that topic at all, but Kelso decides to stay together with Jackie anyway. This forces Eric to stay up until 1 a.m. working on the essay himself, which ends up short of the 1,000-word requirement.

Besides the easily identifiable 70s fashion and furniture, 70’s model cars also set the physical setting for That 70’s Show. In addition, a still frame of ice skater Dorothy Hamil, computer-generated so that she screams, pops up in between scenes to remind the audience of the era in which this show takes place (Hamil won a medal for the United States at the 1976 Olympic Games in figure skating).

**Description of the Unit of Analysis**

I will be using the theoretical perspective of Mythic Criticism to analyze my artifact. Mythic Criticism focuses on the correlation between myths and call to social action. Myths are beliefs that draw upon memory and imagination to create a concrete form of a generalization. They simplify a situation and, once accepted, become representative of a larger issue. Because myths are so general, they can withstand
changes over time and can be easily adapted. Myths are passed down and become so well known that most often the whole story doesn’t need to be explained; people can complete it without the details.

The speaker’s job is to offer the myth to the audience, which intensifies emotions that are already present because the audience is already ingrained with it. Myths appeal to emotions more than to logic. Because of this, the validity of a myth is less important than the audience’s belief that it is valid.

A myth needs to provide a specific behavior in its content and therefore becomes selective and idealized. By doing so, a myth provides the framework in which the audience can perform a social action in response to a larger issue.

Charles Larson mentions eight common cultural myths as follows:

1. **Wisdom of the Rustic** – Society believes in humble beginnings and that difficulty teaches even the most uneducated of us to be wise in a worldly way

2. **Possibility of Success** – Success will come to those who are honest and work hard

3. **Coming of a Messiah** – Assumes that when the culture is in chaos and great uncertainty that one single great leader will rescue us from despair

4. **Presence of a conspiracy** – The belief that big problems don’t have simple causes

5. **Value of Challenge** – The belief that wisdom is gained only through great challenge and testing