



F.R.I.E.N.D.S.

The one with all the problems

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May 27 marked the reunion of arguably the world's most famous group of friends. The cast of the wildly popular sitcom Friends came together for a special one-off episode 17 years after the final episode of the show aired. The last time a TV show sent such ripples through the pop culture world was probably right before the final season of Game of Thrones premiered (before they went ahead and aired it and ruined it). The growing anticipation and the palpable excitement surrounding the reunion goes to show how universally loved and adored the show is to this day.

But is Friends really the perfect show? Does it stand the test of time? The truth of the matter is the show hasn't aged all that well. A viewer in 2021 will have to confess that the entire run of 10 seasons was riddled with cringe-worthy moments, to say the least. We tend to overlook the problematic elements of the show because of its admittedly top-notch comedy. And there are instances where the show does a good job of appearing fairly progressive, whereas in reality such elements are introduced only to serve as the bland punchlines to jokes. Let's take a look at all the things in the show that a modern viewer should understandably have a hard time accepting.

Toxic masculinity

Friends perpetuates a lot of dated ideas about traditional gender roles and rallies behind the notion of 'Guys will be guys'. All the male characters make an absurd fuss about fitting into traditionally masculine roles. The slightest bit of effeminate behaviour sends the characters

into a frenzy about seeming 'girly'. While Ross and Joey taking intimate naps in each other's arms are surely funny, they can't even hug? Chandler straight-up 'accuses' Joey of turning into a woman when he seems to be enjoying Janine's decorations around the home. While minor gags are scattered throughout at the expense of the men being sensitive, Ross really takes the toxic masculinity trophy home. We first realise his insane drive of needing to be a 'man' in the episode where his son Ben takes a liking to get Ben to play with a more 'boyish' toy like G.I. Joe and eventually somewhat succeeds. One of the most troublesome episodes on the show was when Ross loses his mind over hiring a male nanny to take care of Emma. He finds it plain weird that a man can be sensitive and willing to take care of a child which, according to Ross, is clearly a woman's job.

Sexism and misogyny

There's a continuous expectation from the women on the show to conform to certain attributes which are perceived to be 'womanly'. And none of the men has been able to outgrow the sexual maturity of hormonal teenagers. Otherwise what sane adult would give up a much better apartment for a glimpse of two of their female friends kissing? When the friends are engaged in sports, Phoebe figures the only way to win is by distracting the boys by flashing them. Because of course, women can't be good at sports. Monica's much older boyfriend Richard appears to have a panic attack at the possibility of Monica having multiple past romances.

The misogyny goes unchecked with Joey. When he looks for a roommate, they have to be female, non-smoker and non-ugly. He can't seem to grasp the notion of a roommate where there's no possibility of getting into their pants. For Joey, women aren't deserving even of the most basic courtesy of an acknowledging phone call. While he keeps objectifying women in all manners, all his friends are constantly in awe of his ability to leave a trail of heartbroken girls behind.

Homophobia and transphobia

Homophobia and transphobia are rampant on Friends. There's no lack of tired, dull gay jokes from every one of the characters. Ross's ex-wife Carol appears to register with them less as a regular human being and more as a 'lesbian'. Homosexual people are referred to as a subset who only represent men even slightly in touch with their feminine sides. Ross can't conceal his surprise when a straight man is willing to work as a nanny. But in no other instance is the transphobia as explicit as the characters' treatment of Chandler's father. Not once during the show was Charles Bing mentioned without preparing the audience for a tasteless, repetitive joke at the cost of his sexual orientation. And it's not just that Chandler's (and everyone else's) attitude towards his father is outright cruel, the writers show little to no understanding of the difference between a transgender person and a gay drag queen. The relentless bashing of Chandler's dad's sexuality does little to establish the fact that she's a transgender woman and not a gay man. The actress who played the

character, Kathleen Turner, agrees that the character has not aged well.

Dismissal of the intelligent

One of the more subtle but impactful problems with Friends is its disdain of the intellectual. The show does it in two folds. Firstly by discarding all of Ross's attempts to have a meaningful, informative conversation. Any time he brings up his work, academia or science in general, all the characters act like they're being oppressed by a tyrant. Joey's laughable antics add the second layer to this trend. His sometimes silly, oftentimes nonsensical behaviour is served up with laugh tracks and presented as lovable and cute. Whereas in reality, no adult with Joey's capabilities of comprehension can function in the world. One can only hope the show didn't encourage multitudes of people watching to be decidedly dismissive of interesting conversation with substance.

At the risk of contradicting everything up to this point, I will admit that Friends is deserving of the iconic status it enjoys. But precisely because the show enjoys a skyrocketing popularity even today and is relevant to viewers of the modern time and possibly even to the viewers of the future, its problems are strongly apparent under the lens of modern standards of morality, tolerance and sensibility. So while one should have no objective reason to feel guilty about enjoying the comedy, being aware of and being ready to have a conversation about everything wrong behind the adorable exterior of the show is what's important.