Leah Tams: Proposal

*M*A*S*H* is one of the most popular and enduring television shows in American history—it successfully ran on CBS from 1972 to 1983. It is about a group of doctors working during and surviving the Korean War, operating in close proximity to the front. *M*A*S*H* enjoyed great popularity throughout its eleven-season run, due to its lovable characters and excellent writing and humor. The final episode of *M*A*S*H* remains the most-watched television episode in American history, even though over forty years have passed since its original air date. *M*A*S*H* still runs in syndication on several networks in the United States, which is a testament to its endurance and importance. The proposed research paper will study the first six seasons of *M*A*S*H* in an effort to understand why the show made such an impression upon millions of Americans.

Although *M*A*S*H* is set during the Korean War and is meant to reflect its events, critics at the time and later have pointed to its distinct undertones and attitudes associated with the Vietnam War. Many go so far as to say that *M*A*S*H* is not really about Korea—it is solely about the Vietnam War. Critics and viewers made (and still make) the claim that *M*A*S*H* is really about Vietnam because the show emerged in 1972 in the midst of American involvement in Vietnam. By 1972 the war was unpopular, and its televised nature made it a central topic of debate. Many Americans were upset at the course of Vietnam—after nearly a decade it was not effectively combatting communism—and the actions of the U.S. government, like the 1970 bombing of Cambodia. The 1971 leaking of the Pentagon Papers only added fuel to the rapidly growing antiwar fire. Such an environment would undoubtedly have influenced cultural products like books and sitcoms, and *M*A*S*H* is a quintessential example of a cultural product influenced by the war. *M*A*S*H* contains a significant amount of antiwar commentary and
provides an ideal way to do so: it is set at an army hospital, and the main characters are doctors and nurses. They are not in Korea to fight, and they heal soldiers who are just sent back to the front—a critical irony that underlines the futility of war. The show makes direct commentary on war and the military through the dialogue and attitudes of its central characters and through its negative portrayal of military officials. Additionally, M*A*S*H’s treatment of Koreans, whether military or civilian, North or South, adds another layer of commentary to its critiques. Oftentimes the show treats Koreans as normal people, rather than enemies, or it portrays them as comically aggressive and almost harmless. These characterizations demonstrate the ridiculous nature of the war and criticize its dehumanizing aspects.

M*A*S*H also makes subtler commentary on war and militarism through its use and subversion of gender stereotypes—evidence of the influence of 1970s events aside from Vietnam. The women’s rights and Gay Liberation movements brought the issues of gender and sexual relations to the forefront of American thought and culture, so M*A*S*H’s inclusion of these issues points to its social relevance. In studying the attitudes of M*A*S*H with respect to war and the military, Koreans, and gender and sex, the proposed paper will elucidate the culture from which M*A*S*H emerged and how it reflects elements of that culture, thus speculating as to why it spoke so strongly to American audiences.

Scholars and critics alike generally acknowledge that the first few seasons of M*A*S*H are its most provocative, though a general consensus has not yet emerged on where in its run M*A*S*H ceases to be groundbreaking and becomes “normal.” For the purposes of this study, the proposed paper will analyze the first six seasons of the show—a bit more than half of its total run. This selection will ensure analysis of the most provocative seasons of the show, while also encompassing some important transitions, such as when the endearing but incompetent
Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake is replaced by the fatherly Colonel Sherman Potter, a career soldier. In addition to the episodes of *M*A*S*H*, interviews with and memoirs of the cast and crew offer direct insight into the influences and attitudes that shaped the show. Books like John Robert Greene’s *America in the Sixties* (2010) and Beth Bailey and Dan Farber’s *America in the Seventies* (2004) will aid the proposed paper’s careful study of 1960s and 1970s America. The interviews, memoir, and the show itself, coupled with secondary literature, provide ample source material for a thorough cultural analysis of *M*A*S*H* and its significance.

Most of the existing secondary literature on *M*A*S*H* either falls under the category of a guide to the show or within studies of film and television. One book that does not fall into either of these categories is James Wittebol’s *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (1998), in which he discusses particular episodes of *M*A*S*H* within the context of contemporary American events and attitudes. It frequently references the earlier 1985 work of Suzy Kalter, *The Complete Book of M*A*S*H*, which is an authoritative guide to the series. Several journal articles also discuss particular elements of *M*A*S*H*. Though the amount of secondary literature on the show dropped significantly after the 1990s, works are still being published today, and websites run by fans of the show remain active—an evidence of *M*A*S*H*’s popularity and continued relevance. These sources, often written by people intimately familiar with the show, will facilitate the proposed paper in developing a thorough understanding and analysis of *M*A*S*H* and its legacy.
Bibliography

Books


Journal Articles


Other


———. *There Is No End: The Korean Enemy from Steel Helmet and M*A*S*H to the Axis of Evil*. Unpublished manuscript. Last modified October 27, 2013. PDF.


Electronic and Audiovisual


