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*You Don't Need Education to Be a Wife*

"Twenty-three's old," comments famous singer Jessica Simpson about her upcoming birthday on the phone, "It's almost twenty-five which is almost mid 20s." Jessica and husband Nick Lachey are part of a new MTV reality show entitled *Newlyweds* in which the couple is followed around in their daily lives to see what it means to be a young couple taking on marriage. Put into context, this sentence does not make Jessica look like a very intelligent person. However, it is important to remember that sometimes we all say things without thinking about them first. In an MTV article by Corey Moss, Jessica's sister, Ashlee Simpson, is quoted as she reveals, "I love how people think her comments are so stupid, because she's such a bright girl. If you were to follow anybody around, everybody makes stupid comments." It seems as though MTV may be editing the show to block out the clever things Jessica says and simply spotlighting the silly comments to make her look foolish. Jessica Simpson is a classic example of how the media manipulates the roles of women in a society that ignores strong-headed wives by turning her into an object of ridicule and entertainment.

Jessica's birthday comment about her age is just one of the many remarks she makes that depict her as just another dumb-blonde. In result, the audience is led to not take Jessica as seriously as they would a wife who speaks her mind or is made domineering with her educated expressions. For example, when Nick and Jessica are out to dinner with Nick's brother and sister-in-law, the sister-in-law asks Jessica if she wants to eat some of the Buffalo wings they order. Jessica replies, "I don't eat buffalo." The



audience joins Jessica's dinner companions in laughter as they tell her that Buffalo wings are not really made of buffalo. Nick's brother joins in as he sarcastically asks Jessica, "Don't you find it weird that buffalo's don't have wings?" His sarcasm is another way of teasing and making fun of Jessica, who honestly did not know that they are in fact made of chicken and that the reason they are called Buffalo wings are because they originated in Buffalo, New York. Though it is hard to expect someone to know where Buffalo wings originated, the audience's laughter is incited by the brother-in-law's comment that inevitably causes Jessica to look dense. Another incidence of this is when Jessica and Nick are at home eating tuna for lunch. Jessica asks, "Is this chicken that I have of is this fish? I know it's tuna, but it says *Chicken by the Sea*." As she looks at her husband with his eyebrows raised (a body language expression that basically asks: *Are you serious?*), Jessica continues, "Is that stupid?" waiting for her husband to console her. As he laughs, she replies frustrated, "Don't make fun of me Nick," letting the audience know that her comment is completely sincere and not a joke. As Jessica's husband, Nick, continuously pokes fun at her thoughtless comments, Nick looks superior to his brainless wife. It is common example in which "[a woman's] humiliation is necessary to save [a man's]" (Douglas 262) dignity. Because Nick is the one to raise his eyebrows when Jessica makes a silly comment, it is Nick who looks more intelligent and wiser over his wife, whose humor is at her own expense—sort of like Lucille Ball's character in "I love Lucy," whose husband Ricky is always having to fix Lucy's goofy mistakes. It is hard to imagine a scene in which Nick would make a stupid remark and have Jessica correct him in jest. Perhaps this reflects our culture in which the man is the one who must be serious



to take care of the family and responsibilities, whereas the wife is simply under her husband's protective wing.

Another dilemma the modern-day woman faces is her struggle to balance business with "wifeliness." Since WWII, when women began working in factories as their husbands were sent away to war, women have discovered the benefits of independence in the workforce in which a woman no longer needs a man to determine her worth. Today, double income families have become the norm and women are faced with a new dilemma of making time for both work as well as wifely duties—categorized by the women of the fifties as laundry, dishes, cleaning, and cooking. Managing work has made women so self-sufficient that they have begun to separate themselves from their loved ones at the family's expense, as women are beginning to feel confident with the attitude that they can do any job a man can (Douglas 262). In *Newlyweds*, we again see this ongoing dilemma, as Jessica must balance these wifely duties with her emerging singing career, as tradition still expects wives to be able to manage the household. In the show, Nick constantly criticizes Jessica for not living up to her wifely duties by complaining to his brother how Jessica will take off her clothes and just leave them on the floor without putting them in the hamper, or how she will just leave her trash behind her. He comments, "She doesn't need a maid...she needs a full-time personal assistant to pick up after her." He blames Jessica's messiness as the result of being spoiled as she was growing up. As he tells Jessica that she is a spoiled brat, Jessica apologizes for not picking up after herself as well as the rest of the household, while admitting that it is hard to get anything done because she is always gone promoting her album for work—not only taking her away from the household but from spending time with her husband as well. Instead of the



show simply targeting that Jessica indeed may be a messy person and that it is her responsibility as an adult to pick up after herself, it includes Jessica apologizing to her husband for not holding a clean house, making a political statement that it is the wife's duty to clean. Part of Jessica's lack of wifely duties is often blamed on her busy career demands. In one episode, Jessica plans to cook a meal for Nick after he grumbles about how much money they spend eating out all of the time because Jessica does not keep groceries in the house. Jessica claims she "took on cooking to become a woman" before she married Nick because he wanted her to grow up a little before he proposed to her. Jessica plans to cook a nice meal for him the next day, and returns home at nine p.m. with bags and bags of groceries. The couple, who had planned on going to a movie that night, decides to eat out instead, as it would be another two hours before dinner was ready if cooked. Jessica claims she was unaware of how late it got, as her yoga lessons and manicure took longer than she expected—a major priority for a career in entertainment. Nick is disappointed and Jessica again apologizes, promising to cook the next night. Although much of Jessica's lack in "wifeliness" may be due to her busy life of fame, the show presents an idea that work often interferes with being a wife and that often it is the husband who suffers because of it.

Just as Jessica is cast into the role of the silly wife, Nick is made to look like a dominant man and yet at the same time like a giant teddy bear. Women desire both the man who protects and shelters as well as the caring loving husband who will cry with them at sappy "chick flicks." As presented on the show, Nick has both the qualities of a strong man and a thoughtful husband. After eating the romantic dinner that Jessica cooks, Nick promises that he will make dinner the next night, casting him as a sensitive,



caring husband to whom a female audience adores. Jessica responds with a laugh asking if it will be something grilled, hinting that a man's place is not in the kitchen but rather by the barbeque. This is a true reflection of our society. Often, the woman prepares the meal in the kitchen and is rarely seen outside grilling on the barbeque, an appliance— with a large heavy lid and bulky utensils—clearly not designed for the delicate female build. As a result, Nick portrays the stereotype that it is a man's job to handle the barbeque, while at the same time he is admired for his sincere offer to cook dinner for his wife. The audience sees the egotistical "manly" side of Nick as he attends parties at the Playboy mansion, gives points as a judge for stripper competitions at clubs, and interviews Cats dancers—clad in scandalous attire for his upcoming music video—while Jessica is away promoting her album. Jessica knows of his behaviors, expresses her disapproval and jealousy, and yet fails to see an apology for making his wife feel uncomfortable. It is merely excused by the fact that he is, after all, a man and that his behavior is nothing abnormal. In the evenings, we see Nick carrying Jessica over his shoulders up to the bedroom, sort of like a caveman carrying his meat. On the contrary, the audience also sees a sweet side of Nick that creates feelings of warmth and affection towards him. For example, Nick plans a giant Mad-Hatter birthday bash for Jessica's birthday, completely spoiling and pampering her for her big day. Jessica spends three hours getting ready for the event and is whisked away in a limousine with her husband and friends. To start the night, Nick makes a toast to Jessica "who get more and more beautiful with each year." The comment appears genuine, transforming Nick into a sort of romantic Casanova. In another episode, Nick plans a surprise getaway for the two of them to San Diego to fly in a hot air balloon, a dream that Jessica has told Nick she has



wanted to do for a long time. Though Nick's plans do not completely happen as expected, we see Jessica in bliss as they return home to a hotel room filled with candles and rose petals, set for a romantic dinner for two. Though it is adorable to see Nick going to such great extremes to please Jessica, one wonders how much Nick thought of the plan himself or if the producers of the show, possibly women themselves, could have had any influence in the occasion. Come what may, Jessica is clearly pleased by her charming husband, whose masculinity mixed with a romantic heart is the perfect combination for a desirable husband, as is reflected on many television shows according to Susan Douglas in her essay titled "Signs of Intelligent Life on TV"(261).

In the end we see a wife who is fun yet brainless, and a husband who is naughty yet charming. The show casts Jessica as a modern day Lucile Ball, suggesting that it is more fun to have a wife with half a brain than to have a wife who is smarter than her husband. The show reveals a common conflict in society in which more and more women are filling the jobs once fit for only men, as education is becoming available to both the sexes, and thus projects a conservative view as the edit Jessica to be the damsel in distress, turning her a form of amusement for better ratings.



*Works Cited*

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