

In what ways does *The Simpsons* portray American family and social values?

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to discuss the extent to which *The Simpsons* is representative of American family and social values. I will discuss how each member of the Simpsons family behaves, as well as highlighting what may be socially expected of them. Secondly, I will examine how the Simpsons family interacts with the surrounding community, concentrating particularly on the images that they portray. In order to do this, I will examine the regular codes and conventions of the series to show how the characters work together in the whole scheme of things

Introduction

Set in the north-western Illinois town of Springfield, *The Simpsons* is an animated sit-com about the day-to-day tribulations of a disfunctional lower-middle-class family. The main family itself consists of the father, Homer, his wife Marge, son Bart, and daughters Lisa and Maggie. Other family members include Homer's father, Abraham Simpson, as well as Marge's sisters, Patty and Selma. Occasionally, Marge's mother, Mrs Bouvier, makes an appearance, and on one occasion, Homer discovered that he had an adopted older brother, Nigel. Since its official launch in 1989, *The Simpsons* has become one of the world's most popular animated series, and has been enjoyed the world over by children and adult's alike. Originally, the show occupied a space on the Tracey Ullman Show between 1987 and 1989, and was then called *The Bart Simpson Show*. Its immense popularity proved so great that Twentieth Century Fox decided it would be worthwhile to launch *The Simpsons* as a show in itself. In this format, the first episode was broadcast in 1989, and in this season there were thirteen episodes. In fact, the show was so immediately popular that a huge wave of cross-media production and merchandising took place, and this culminated in the release of a single, "Do The Bartman", in early 1991. Other examples include toys, comics, and computer games

But what is it about *The Simpsons* that continues to make it so popular? Is it Homer? Is it Bart? Or is it just the culmination of the shows different elements? These are some of the ideas I hope to cover in the course of this study.

To this day, *The Simpsons* is still largely rated as the greatest of all the animated sit-coms. Since its release there has been a whole trail of subsequent cartoon impersonations, such as *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, *Daria*, and *Beavis and Butthead*. Unlike most cartoons, the

comedy in *The Simpsons* is not based solely on situational comedy and site gags. The characters themselves make the comedy, with their personalities, their uniqueness, and their own personal points of view. Having such strong characters means that the writing can practically do itself, and that is one reason that *The Simpsons* has been able to endure for so many years. Innovative comedy, including the lack of a laugh track, makes *The Simpsons* one of the funniest shows on television.

As well as this, a continual supply of hilariously stupid jokes also helps to keep the comedy running smoothly. For example, when Bart asked why he thought he was receiving money for nothing, Grandpa Simpson replied, "I just figured the democrats were back in office". Also, when the zoo director is asked if he's going to save Ned Flanders from baboons, he replies, "Ooh, I'd like to, but if they don't kill the intruder, it's really bad for their society." These are just a few examples of Simpsons humour.

Simpson family analysis

Homer

From the shows beginnings, Homer has been portrayed as a well-intentioned, yet moronic person. Homer's virtually disabling stupidity is what makes him so funny. His job in the powerstation often provides much of the humour, as do his experiences at home and in Moe's bar. In one episode, when Homer takes on a student from Albania as part of Bart's foreign exchange programme, he takes him on a tour of the powerstation, unsuspecting of why a 10-year-old would show interest in such a tour. Later we find out through F.B.I. agents that the boy was actually a communist spy and Homer had unwittingly given him detailed plans of the station's nuclear reactor as well as several sticks of plutonium. In another episode, Homer and Bart adopt a new son and brother respectively. In a subsequent fight scene with Bart's new brother, Homer was punched in the face, and he fell and bent his back over a fire hydrant. To this he said, "This is even more painful then it looks".

Another facet of Homer's persona is his love of food and beer. At work, Homer consumes unending amounts of donuts, whilst at home his passion is pork, whether it be pork-rinds, pork-steaks or pork-chops. Homer also has a famous passion for 'Duff' beer, which at one point became so extreme that Marge challenged him to give up alcohol for a month. And he did. In another episode, Homer sneaked out of work half-an-hour early just so he could take a tour around the 'Duff' factory. Here he managed to consume one casket each of several varieties of beer, just to find out the difference in taste.

Thus, his stupidity, combined with an amazing luck, forms the basis for one of the funniest characters on television. Homer will manage to find the only way to completely ruin a situation and then, through sheer luck, he will find the only way to repair it. Indeed, he always manages to "pull a Homer."

Marge

Marge is portrayed as the most straight-minded, straight-thinking member of the family. Past episodes, namely the one where Marge and Homer tell the children how they met, portray Marge as an intellectual, linguistically gifted student with great career prospects. At least that was the case until she met Homer.

However, it cannot be said that Marge has not used her linguistic skills to her advantage. In one episode, "*Marge vs. the Monorail*", Marge single-handedly battles to stop the building of an unsafe, fraudulent rail line around Springfield. In the end she wins the battle, and the citizens of Springfield are grateful to her for saving their lives. In another episode, she becomes board with her housewife role and she decides to open up a business, choosing a pretzel franchise to make her fortune.

As well as this, Marge is the pillar that keeps the Simpson family standing. She is always the one who maintains the sanity and keeps the family going. She is the only voice of reason in the household, as evidenced when she goes away and the household nearly collapses. No sooner had she left for her healthfarm weekend then the family began telephoning her to ask her all manners of questions, such as Bart's question, 'where do you keep my socks'? Her answer, 'In the sock draw'. Another example can be seen in her crusade to ban the violent *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoon. This came about after she witnessed Maggie trying to stab Homer with a knife after she saw the same thing on TV. She continued her crusade, despite the fact that she knew Bart and Lisa were getting bullied at school, and eventually she won.

Marge provides the reference on which the rest of the family is based, so the audience can see just how bizarre everyone else is when in immediate juxtaposition with Marge. It would be strange to imagine what the show would be like if this were not the way of things, as much humour is born out of the family's dependence on her.

Bart

Bart is probably the most popular of all the Simpson characters, polling just ahead of Homer. In many ways, Bart is very like Homer. He has recently picked up the habit of saying, "Doh" when frustrated, and Bart has clearly inherited Homer's stupidity. For example, as part of a science experiment, Lisa tested Bart's intelligence to that of a hamster. She hooked up an electrical wire to a fairy cake. The hamster stopped touching the cake after the first two shocks. Bart, however, did not stop until he went into a state of shock, and every time a fairy cake was subsequently mentioned Bart would shudder in fear.

Bart, however, has his own unique personality that comes through very often. Bart can be described as simply evil, as he showed on one occasion when he dropped a cherry bomb down a school toilet, causing a massive flood. But there is more to him than that. He possesses morals and a conscience that shine through sometimes. This is especially evident when he gives up his Hall Monitor position to rescue his sister from expulsion, as well as in the numerous times he has helped Krusty.

However, Bart's disregard for authority is what makes for his funniest actions. Bart can create practical jokes like no one else. His "Garden of Eden" prank is one of his crowning moments, when he got the whole church to sing a rock and roll song instead of a regular hymn.

Lisa

Lisa is the most alienated member of the family. She adopted her mother's intelligence, and so far has put it to good use. Lisa stands up for what she believes in, sometimes taking her convictions too far. She stops at nothing to do what she feels is right, sometimes imposing her viewpoint on others, as can be seen when she ruined Homer's barbecue as a sign of protest to turn everyone vegetarian.

Lisa is extremely intelligent, taking from her mother's side, and this alienates her from her peers. She responds to this by immersing herself in her hobbies, including the saxophone, and her schoolwork. Lisa is usually top of her class grades-wise. But, her competitiveness has sometimes caused her discomfort, as was the case when a girl one year younger than herself entered her class and took the crown of cleverest person and hardest worker. Lisa reacted to this negatively, by attempting to replace her science project with a cow's heart as part of a sick joke. Whilst Lisa herself usually isn't very funny, the amusing situations that she gets herself into as a result of her meddling constitute her contribution to the show.

Maggie

Maggie is the least developed member of the Simpson family. The fact that she has been a baby for the last ten years does little to help this. But this is not to say that she hasn't had her moments. Maggie, may be the smartest Simpson, as she has often shown. When she is placed in the day-care centre, she shows her intelligence by devising a way to get back her pacifier. She is clearly smart, as when Lisa quizzes Maggie with flash cards in the blood donation episode. Maggie provides an extra touch to many episodes, especially when she is revealed to be Mr. Burns' attacker in the two-part cliffhanger.

Codes and Conventions and the Surrounding Community

All of *The Simpsons* episodes follow a particular narrative pattern, which is not too dissimilar to Vladimir Propps' idea of equilibrium – enigma – equilibrium. During the now-famous credit sequence at the beginning of each episode, Bart can be seen writing out his lines in detention, each episode having different lines. Examples include, "I will not instigate revolution", "I will not call my teacher 'Hot Cakes'", "I will not belch the National Anthem", and "The Pledge of Allegiance does not end with Hail Satan". Also, the families running entrance into the living room to watch telly is also always different.

As well as this, several other areas of the show, which follow the daily routine of the characters, feature regularly. Firstly, at the beginning of each episode, the whole family is shown at the breakfast table. Homer will depart for work, the kids go to school and Marge stays at home. Bart and Lisa's friends (and enemies) make an appearance when the school bus comes by their house to collect them, and there is often a quick scene between Bart and either Milhouse or Ralph, as well as between Lisa and Martin. While the kids are at school, Bart is often caught in the middle of one of his practical jokes, either by Mrs. Krabapell or Principal Skinner. Later on in the day, during break, Bart can be seen on the receiving end of the bullies' torments. His arch-enemies are Nelson, Jimbo Jones, Dolph and Kearney, and they always attack in a group. Lisa too is often tormented but, unlike Bart, it is because of her intelligence, rather than her seeming a threat to the ruling playground elite. Also, at some point in the show, Bart and Milhouse will go out on an adventure together. Their experience of getting high on syrup was especially funny, as was their rivalry when Milhouse got his first girlfriend.

Homer's day often involves him being called up by Mr. Burns at some point for falling asleep on the job. As punishment, either Mr. Burns or Smithers gives him a filthy task which they fool him into believing is helpful and worthwhile for him as an employee. For example, Mr. Burns managed to convince Homer to become a sweep for the station's chimney, and Homer convinced himself that he was doing a good job.

While the family is at work, Marge is at home. However, Marge is usually shown only when the children and/or Homer are back home, and so we tend not to see Marge in her spare time. However, she has been the star in several episodes, most namely in her battle with the whole town against the Monorail.

The little baby, Maggie, is the most docile member of the family. She still hasn't learnt to walk or talk, and so her moments of invention are extremely amusing. Maggie's greatest moment, as mentioned, was when she was found to be Mr. Burns' attacker. In a new video, "*Sex, Lies and The Simpsons*", which will not be shown on television until after the year 2000, Maggie is found to be the illegitimate love-child of the alien, Zorg, after she grew a fang as her first tooth and sprouted tentacles. In a satirical twist, her pacifier actually turns out to be a signal transmitter, which the aliens monitored in order to see when she was 'ready'.

As well as this Maggie is perhaps depicted as the most enigmatic member of the family. At the end of the "*Sex, Lies and The Simpsons*" video, Maggie winks into the camera, almost signalling bigger and better things to come.

Next door to the Simpsons is the Flanders family. In stark contrast to the chaotic lives of the Simpsons, they represent the communal, God-fearing and caring social values of stereotypical white, middle-class America. Ned Flanders is foremost a religious man. He even goes to the extreme of having Rev. Lovejoy's telephone number on his emergency dial list. He is one of the few people, other than Bart, who is able to make Homer angry whenever they meet. On just one occasion the roles were reversed, and Homer instead made Ned hate him. His wife, Maude, occupies a minor role, but when she does play a role, it is usually in opposition to one of Marge's plans, as was the case when Marge attempted to start her pretzel business. The Flanders children are also "Bible-bashers", as Homer once described them. The children, Todd and Rod, are occasionally tormented by Bart and Lisa, and although this may sound cruel, these are in fact hilarious moments.

Several other characters play a regular role in the proceedings. Firstly there is Barney and Moe. They often appear at the same time, when Homer pops into Moe's bar for a while after he has finished work. Apu, the owner of the 'Quick-Mart' convenience store, appears in every show in one of two usual situations. He is either serving Bart or Homer, or he is being held-up at gunpoint, usually by Snake. On one occasion, James Woods made a guest appearance as himself, wanting to work in the store as training for his new movie role. Chief Wiggum also appears regularly, usually just in time to apprehend Snake or Shideshow Bob. He is the stereotypical cop that all America dreads – prejudiced, fraudulent and lazy. In one episode Kent Brockman, the news presenter, embarrassed him when he was shown taking a bribe from the ruthless Mayor Quimby ("You just couldn't have picked a better time, could you?"). Grandpa Simpson adds another touch of humour to the proceedings. In one episode, he takes his underpants off in front of Bart and Lisa – without removing his trousers first. When asked how he managed to do this, he simply replied, "I don't know". Lastly, Krusty the Clown appears on his own show, and the animated adventures of Itchy and Scratchy form part of his show.

The remaining characters play only minor roles within the programme. (**NB.** For a list of names, please refer to the Character Analysis sheets at the end). On another note, it is worth mentioning that *The Simpsons* has been graced by more celebrity appearances than almost any other show. Stars like Bette Midler, Sting, Scully and Mulder of the *X-Files*, Paul and Linda McCartney, Tom Jones, Jerry Springer and many others have graced the show with their voices and animated likenesses.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be argued that *The Simpsons* is very much representative of American family and social values, although the approach is one of satire and stereotypes, rather than a strict attempt to depict things seriously. But then this is a comedy, even if it is animated. Homer and Marge are good parents, even though Homer is more incredibly stupid than he may care to admit. His conversations with his brain are hilarious, and more often than not his brain still does not function when he wants it too. His love of 'Duff' and anything pork is one of his personalities major points and it is hard to imagine his character now without these traits.

Marge can be seen as the mother that everyone wants – loving, supportive, understanding. Whenever they have problems, she will be there to support them at all times, even to defend

them from Homer's name-calling. Marge is also portrayed as being sexually attractive – something that Homer does his best to take advantage of.

Bart, in contrast, is the son that every parent dreads to have. He is naughty; he does not obey authority; he has a very small conscience. However, his conscience has come through on several occasions, most notably when he managed to re-unite Krusty and his father.

Lisa is both intelligent and understanding. She is occasionally cruel to Bart, but her treatment is minimal in comparison to Bart's treatment of her. She occasionally tries too hard to force her views onto other's, such as when she wanted all of Springfield to become vegetarian, and she thus becomes a target of people's anger in the process. However, she learns from her mistakes, never making the same wrong move twice.

Maggie has not been allowed to grow up enough for her character to develop significantly. What we have seen of her offers great potential. She may in fact be the smartest Simpson, if Lisa's blood-type card test and Zorg's DNA are anything to go by. She is still very prone to negative influences, as was the case when she tried to attack Homer in the episode concerning the effects of media violence on the young. But, she has a caring family that does all it can to protect, and she seems to be learning this.

The surrounding community interacts with the Simpsons family like any other small-town American community. Occasionally, disputes break out between a Simpson and a member of the community. But their knack for communicating means that any trouble is quickly resolved. Sometimes, for the better, these communications break down, and the end result is a fight or riot, as was the case when Homer punches the alien Zorg on the Jerry Springer show in the latest yet-to-be-shown video episode.

Credits: All of "*The Simpsons*" pictures used in the following posters were obtained from **The Simpsons Library**, an internet site dedicated to all things concerning *The Simpsons*.

Evaluation of Print Products

The central theme that I hoped to convey in my three posters was how *The Simpsons* has managed to cross over into other areas of media production from its original guise as a cartoon. The first of my posters is a new version of the “Do the Bartman” single cover. In 1991, *The Simpsons* had its first screening on Rupert Murdoch’s Sky One channel. Within a few months the show had become so popular that a huge wave of cross media production took hold, and within a few years, *The Simpsons* were everywhere. My second piece simply shows the regular *Simpsons* cast list, highlighting the links between the family and the surrounding community. My last piece is an impression of a web page, of which *The Simpsons* occupy many sites.