

M0054038 NC

T2242

NC 0018042 4



National College of Art & Design

Faculty of Fine Art, Painting

"The Bardic Function of the Simpsons"

By

Lisa Hartung

Submitted to

The Faculty of History of

Art and Design and Complementary Studies

In Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Art

1999

Many Thanks
To Mathew May and Diarmaid MacAonghusa
For their research work and general support

Content :

	List of Plates	4
1	Introduction	5
2	The Bardic Functions	8
3	The Family	25
4	The Society	31
5	The Episode	42
6	Conclusion	53
	Bibliography	57

List of plates:

- Fig.1** Irish chieftain being entertained by poet and harper from a 16th-century woodcut
- Fig.2** The corrupt and grotesque society of post World War I as portrayed by George Gosz
- Fig.3** Diagram of the Simpsons' Family Tree
- Fig.4** The Simpsons Family
- Fig.5** Diagram of Springfield's society
- Fig.6** Burns trying to steal Maggie's lollie-pop
- Fig.7** Flanders the devil
- Fig.8** Homer and Apu

1

Introduction

The objective of this thesis will be to consider the cultural relevance of the now almost ten-year-old phenomenon of the *Simpsons*. The main purpose of my analysis will be to determine whether they fulfil the function of our own culture's bard.

We normally understand the traditional bard to have been a performer of poetry and song. He was therefore from an oral tradition and his function was to tell a culture's narrative and then to recount it, again and again, to as many of its members as possible. By doing so, the bard would inform the culture of its common heritage and shared experiences.

Among friends, for instance, there is the occasional reminiscing about childhood experiences and what figures most, as a shared experience, are children's programs watched on TV. I, however, can't join into these conversations when I am in Ireland, since I am from a different culture, from Germany, where we had different TV programs.

I admit, it is only a subtle difference, yet the very subtlety of it refers to the culture it defines. It is often the case that a cultural identity is formed through cultural differences. Especially when it is a reference to childhood memory, to our existence in

the past, which makes up our sense of being in the present, and also our sense of belonging.

*

The format of the *Simpsons*, the cartoon animation, also interests me, as I see it as part of a tradition of artistic interpretations of reality. Cross-cultural bards such as the church have always used visual representations. The biblical narrative inspired many generations of artists to depict scenes that not only told the story of the Bible but also the story of the culture in which the artwork was created. The paintings of biblical scenes act as a testimony of their time and that time's idea of reality.

*

This, its function as a bardic mediator, its formal qualities and connection with history, and the tradition of storytelling will be the main points in my analysis of the *Simpsons*.

First, though, I want to give a very brief account of *its* history and creator. –

The *Simpsons* made their first appearance in 1987 as a series of thirty-second spots on the Tracey Ullman Show. Its instant success led to the production of the "Simpsons Christmas Special" in December 1989, the first full half-hour show. The following January 14th of 1990 marked the beginning of the *Simpsons* as the now longest running cartoon-animated series on TV.

The creator, Matt Groening, started his career humbly with a satirical comic strip called "Life in Hell". He is from the generation of the 68' revolution and his outlook on life and society is clearly liberal and left wing. However, he manages to combine his idealistic past with practical commercialism. Each *Simpsons* episode, for example, is produced by a crew of 60 people including the actors, 50 musicians,

100 animators in the US, and 300 more in Korea. These days, other people write and produce the scripts, while Groening merely overlooks them and maybe changes them a bit to keep each episode in character with the rest.

Matt Groening still produces his comic "Life in Hell", which is published once a week in alternative newspapers, as he has for the past fifteen years. The little pay he receives for the actual work of drawing it by hand, is a residue of his Hippie idealism.

2

The Bardic Function



fig.1

bard, (bärd) n. 1. (formerly) a person who composed and recited epic or heroic poems, often while playing the harp, lyre, or the like. 2. one of an ancient Celtic order of composers and reciters of poetry. 3. any poet. 4. **the Bard**, William Shakespeare. [1400-50; late ME < Celtic; cf. Ir, ScotGael bard, Welsh bardd]

(Random House Webster's College Dictionary, 1991, p. 110)

It is always interesting to look up the dictionary's definition of a word that has been used in a theoretical context. The plain and simple description of the dictionary gives me a starting point to discuss the word's original meaning, and that ascribed to it in theory.

The bard is described to be a person who composed and recited poems, the use of the past tense indicating his/her existence in the past, but not in our present time. The fact, that the recitation was often accompanied by music, indicates a certain amount of emphasis was put on the entertainment value of the whole performance.

It also links the word with its origin, the Celtic language and culture, which seems so appropriate in terms of its rich and epic storytelling tradition.

Further, it explains that it can be *any* poet, suggesting the definition of the word poet and his/her poetry could mean *anything* of the *kind*.

In the critical book "Reading Television" by John Fiske and John Hartley, the bard takes on a slightly different and more contemporary shape to the traditional human figure, the shape of a box. A box that, although unseemingly, carries on a tradition of the *orally* delivered message. In a world, that puts so much emphasis on literacy, yet with so many of its inhabitants unable to meet this first, basic requirement, the box-television is beginning to make sense.

The idea of television being our own, modern version of the historically conceived bard, is put forward in the suitably titled chapter, "Bardic Television". (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 85)

"BARDIC TELEVISION"

The function of a bard is to communicate his/her message in a way, that it will be received and understood by a large section of the culture he/she aims to address. This is achieved by mediating the message in the culture's particular narrative code. First, though, the bard needs to be in a position of centrality. He/she needs to become part of the culture and its rituals. -

"It seems, then, that television functions as a social ritual, overriding individual distinctions, in which our culture engages in order to communicate with its collective self." (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 85)

Television's centrality and function as a social ritual, performed by almost every member of our culture, is an indisputable reality. However, since this quote was written in 1978, television has not only become ever more present, and indeed inescapable in our day to day lives, it has also become the mediator of a narrative particular of *one* culture, the American culture.

American television is transmitted and received all over the globe. You can go anywhere in the world, and find evidence of American culture's dominance. In Africa, for instance, when you take the bus, you can watch old episodes of "Dynasty" on TV. In Europe it is so extreme that you never even have to set foot on American ground to know what it's like. We *know* what it's like from the countless movies, television and other cultural exports from America.

American mass media, and especially American television, is therefore raising a global wide audience connected by one thing, literacy in the American way of life.

What used to be a local medium, subject to national boundaries, and mediator of that Nation's cultural narrative is now a global medium, subject only to global boundaries. (Although efforts have been made, aliens have so far been reluctant to respond to our calls) National and local television is still produced and watched, yet even these and all other channels will show products of American television.

The "*overriding of individual distinctions*", in this case, is overriding distinctions beyond local, national and continental proportions. "*Our culture*" is now a global culture, or from a broader perspective, the culture of humanity, and more particularly, America's idea of humanity which "*engages in order to communicate with its collective self*", the rest of the world. (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 85)

According to Fiske and Hartley, television fulfils the function of our own culture's bard. I would assert that, nowadays, it is American television that fulfils this function particularly well.

American television, as a bard, reaches an audience comprised of many different cultures, while still mediating it's own, exclusive narrative code.

Its position of centrality -its global-wide transmission, and the world's familiarity with its code, makes it a bardic mediator whose power and influence could never possibly have been envisaged by our Celtic ancestors.

BARDIC SIMPSONS

The *Simpsons* are a product of American television. The *Simpsons'* narrative is distinctively American. The issues they deal with, especially current political or social issues are again drawn exclusively from the American experience. Yet, they are watched by an audience that spans the globe.

Owned by media tycoon, Rupert Murdoch and his television empire, FOX, The *Simpsons* are broadcast to over seventy countries worldwide. (Wired, 7.2.1999, p. 116) In Britain last week, 9.13 million people tuned into SKY ONE and BBC 2 to watch the *Simpsons*. Of which 1.10 million were watching on Sunday evening alone, the only time that there is the chance of a new episode.

Since repeats of the *Simpsons* are shown as regularly as soap operas, it can only really be compared to those. While the two most popular soap operas, *EastEnders* (19.56m viewers) and *Coronation Street* (19.67m viewers) leave it behind by almost double the amount, it beats *Brookside* with its meek 5.28 million viewers. (Heat, 6-12 February 1999, p.12) The Irish ratings show that between 207.000 and 230.000 people watched the *Simpsons* on each of NETWORK 2 's two days showing. It doesn't really provide an accurate number, since most Irish people watch it on SKY ONE.

The *Simpsons'* popularity is partly due to the characters and stories general make up out of the basic ingredients shared by most Western societies, and partly because of

the mentioned seasoning in American culture, recognised by just about everyone who watches TV. That means a lot of people!

Further, it is the intelligence and accuracy of the writing/directing that doesn't only portray the American culture perfectly in all its inadequacies and petty anxieties (and we all love to laugh at the Americans!) but it describes the moron we all have a part of, the human moron.

At the beginning of each episode, the *Simpsons* family rushes into the living room and sits down on the couch in front of the television set.

This happens in various obscure ways, like the family rushes in, and when they land on the couch, it crashes through the floor. Or they parachute down and only Homer's chute doesn't open, making him fall flat on his nose. Or the family's heads are all mounted on the wall as trophies, except for Homer, who is a rug. A hunter walks in, sits on the couch, puts down his rifle, and lights his pipe.

However way it happens, it is different for almost every episode, and can tell a seasoned *Simpsons* watcher, whether he or she can look forward to one of the nowadays, very few and precious new ones, or a ride on the familiar, but still worthwhile.

For a stranger to the *Simpsons*, on the other hand, it signifies one thing: normality. Never mind that they are a cartoon-animated family with yellow skin colour and strange hairdo's, they are watching television! There is nothing more ordinary, nothing more familiar, nothing more like us, the viewer, watching them watching TV. By mimicking the social ritual of watching television, the *Simpsons* establish themselves within that ritual and instantaneously become part of it.

*

Once they have established themselves within the ritual of watching television, they continue along those lines and create a more and more detailed picture of what is most familiar to us, ordinary day-to-day life.

The *Simpsons* present us with a typical yellow-trash, Middle-American family, who live in the suburban part of a small, average American town called Springfield.

The exact location of Springfield remains a mystery and provides die-hard fans with an enduring puzzle. For the rest of us, though, it adds to its universal significance, and suggests that it could be almost anywhere in the world. *Almost* but not quite, since the banality of the everyday life described is recognisable of many cultures, it is in the detail, that which makes it funny and acute, that it remains really and truly American.

The *Simpsons* draw many of their references from America's media culture. A culture, we are so familiar with, have grown up with and which has actually replaced some of our own particular cultural narrative. It makes it instantly recognisable and fit into what it reflects and questions, the continuous mind-numbing outpourings of our media culture.

There are references to soap operas and American produced family sitcoms com soap operas like *Rosanne* or *Married with Children*. The TV program *Rosanne* portrays the life of a working class family in a satirical way. The parents (Rosanne Barr and John Goodman) of which are both overweight and sluggish, and whose behaviour and interaction with the rest of the family is wholly sarcastic. *Married with Children* is an even bleaker and more cynical representation of the low-income, low-esteem section of American society. The father of the family, Al Bundy, is a frustrated shoe sales man who hates everything and everyone, especially his wife. There is actually a character like him in the *Simpsons*, which represents all the grey and tired salesmen in Springfield's shopping malls.

Both shows are similar to the *Simpsons* in their basic formula. The only down-fall being, that their real-life cast can change, grow older and get boring once their egotism becomes inseparable with their character's success. Also, their cast is generally

limited to the family and a few friends and neighbours while the *Simpsons* create a whole society. It makes the *Simpsons* more akin to the genre of the soap opera with its large and diverse cast of characters that deal with real issues set against an unimaginatively ordinary background.

*

"The traditional bard rendered the central concerns of his day into verse"
(Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 86)

The bard, who renders his/her central concerns into verse, does so, to remove his/her text from the subjectivity of his/her person as an individual. A bard must not act as an individual but as a medium through which the culture itself can speak.

Each culture has its own specific language, its code, shaped by its tradition and conventions, actual living relationships and interaction with the outside world.

Traditionally, a bard would present his/her text in an artistic way, like the Art of putting a text into verse. In Western cultural history existed, until recently, a strong connection between Art and the Divine. The Divine giving power and meaning to artistic expression not of the artist but the culture itself.

"... the structure of those messages is organised according to the needs of the culture for whose ears and eyes they are intended, and not according to the internal demands of the 'text', nor of the individual communicator.

Barthes (1977) comments: 'In ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose "performance" -the mastery of the narrative code - may possibly be admired but never the "genius".'

(Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 86)

In the course of history, the link between Art and the Divine was severed. People lost their faith in the church, the king his God-given right to the throne and the artist his former purpose. The human being was now the highest beings and especially the gifted, the genius among them. Art became less interested in telling the narrative of the culture as a whole and started to focus more on the expression of the individual. The mythology of the individual has become a driving force in our culture and its expression in Art has meant a drift into the obscure, the radically abstract and generally inaccessible manifestations of individuality.

That means someone else had to take on the role of promoting the culture's narrative and mythologies in a way that was accessible and understandable to most people. Commercial art fulfils that function nowadays and particularly its most powerful outlet, television. It is true to its underlying ideology, to reach as wide an audience as possible, and integrate them into the consumer market.

However, in order to reach their audience, they, like the historical bard, have to structure their message in accordance "*to the needs of the culture for whose ears and eyes they are intended and not according to the internal demands of the 'text', nor of the individual communicator.*" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 86)

In Russia, for example, after the fall of the communist regime, an American Coke Cola TV add was withdrawn because it was too elusive for the Russian audience, unaccustomed to 'post-modern' advertising strategies. It had to be replaced by an ad that was much more in-your-face-and-buy-it-now.

*

While Art has gone a separate way, the audience of the masses still has the need for the artistic representation and interpretation of reality. The visual and oral

representations figure most powerful in that regard since, as I have mentioned earlier, not everyone is so lucky to have been educated to read and write.

Television provides its viewers with a combination of both, which makes it an experience so real that it is called "secondary experience". Nowadays, people experience more through television than in real life. Since the reality created on TV is so convincing and the response similar to situations in real life, it can be difficult to deal with some issues that maybe critical of the culture itself.

Hence, the wrapping of the message can be decisive in the success of its delivery. The *Simpsons* are wrapped in a bright and colourful cartoon animated version of our reality. While a lot of the issues raised in the *Simpsons* can be highly critical and even controversial, it succeeds in reaching the audience off guard, and on prime time television.

"Modality is the apparent distance between the text and the real"
(Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 76)

A bard aims to involve the viewer or listener in his/her 'text' by setting off intimate identification processes. The 'text', however, can deal with a wide range of issues, some of which might not be comfortable for the individual to identify with. Hence, it is wise to put a certain distance between message and reality. This distance can be created in various ways, by putting the text into verse, wrapping it in humour or redrawing it altogether.

The hand-drawn world of the *Simpsons* puts a distance between itself and the reality it mocks. Its imagery reminds me of the disturbing drawings by German artist George Grosz, depicting the corruption and decadence of post World War I society.



"We go to pray before God the just!"

fig.2

The type of creativity that is responsible for some of the great paintings and drawings of our time has found another outlet in animation. There is no limit to what you can do with your imagination. You can create a whole society and make it the playground for social criticism and political satire. And however cynical, cruel or grotesque the picture is, you get away with it because it's *only* a cartoon.

The Seven Bardic Functions

I have established that the *Simpsons*, as a product of American television, fulfil the position of centrality required of the bardic mediator. The modality or method with which they are presented also allows them to deal with issues in a way the viewer might not accept, if it were presented to them in real life action.

At this point, it would be fitting to introduce the seven bardic functions as articulated by John Fiske and John Hartley in their book "Reading Television". (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p.88) It will help determine, whether the *Simpsons* fit the description of a bard.

1 To articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality (and therefore the reality of nature)

The *nature of reality*, in this case, is a simplified, exaggerated, and a lot more entertaining version of our reality. The simplification makes it more logical, the humour more positive, and the banality of its subject more convincing, than the reality it sets out to parody.

The backdrop for the *Simpsons* family soap opera is the small town of "Springfield". Springfield's society, culture and inhabitants are the product of American mass culture and generally derivative of Western power structures and cultural narrative. Hence the viewer, even if he/she has only the faintest notion about Western culture, will be able to recognise the *Simpsons'* portrait of it, and probably laugh and think we're all mad.

The picture perfect painted by the *Simpsons* is comfortably simplified and repetitive. However, its deceptively bright and colourful characters like to reek havoc over such *main lines* as the *established cultural consensus*.

2 To implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value-systems, by exchanging a status-enhancing message for the endorsement of that message's underlying ideology (as articulated in its mythology)

The *Simpsons* implicate the individual viewer into its *dominant value-system*, the family. The strength and validity of the family mythology is illustrated in the

comparison to the individual family member's status on their own, measured on their performance in the world-out-there.

The individual members of the *Simpsons* family do quite badly in that respect. -

Homer's sluggishness and incompetence at his job, Marge's losing battle to keep up appearances, Bart at school and Lisa's failure to be popular.

None of them, except for Maggie, who has not yet left the safe haven of home, have much status or credibility to call their own. It is the family home that gives sanctuary to all of them and together, as a family, they gain confidence and strength.

The dominant value-system of our culture very much relies on the traditional family since its hierarchical order resembles that of the society around it. The strength and togetherness of the family is therefore an important building block in the overall structure, and the endorsement of that structure is rewarded with the gain of status. However, for the strength of the family myth to be illustrated, it must be challenged first.

It is one of the favourite exercises of the *Simpsons'* family members to challenge the family institution, and to try and escape the ordinariness and inevitability of their life. Both Homer and Marge, for instance, have come close to having an extra-marital affair. Only *close*, since in the end, the risk of losing the comfort and security of the family outweighs the urge to satisfy selfish desires.

The *Simpsons* implicate the individual members of our culture by acknowledging their inherent egotism. However, it also upholds the ideal that the individual's desires, sometimes, have to come secondary to the greater good, the upkeep of the family unit. The *endorsement* of that ideal is rewarded with a *status-enhancing message*, the love and support of the family.

3 To *celebrate*, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's individual representatives in the world out-

there; using the mythology of individuality to claw back such individuals from any mere eccentricity to a position of socio-centrality.

The individual is *celebrated* with the character of Homer Simpson. Homer represents an individual who is truly, insanely human. His eccentricity is to act out all the dubious desires and erratic anxieties inherent in human's sinful nature, yet rarely combined in one individual.

The mythology of individuality is a fundamental element of capitalist societies. Every individual represents a potential consumer whose desires and wishes are first created and then satisfied by the consumer market. Marketing strategies evoke a continuous sense of lack and inadequacy that can only be compensated for by buying the products it promotes.

In America particularly, the cliché of the "dishwasher-to-millionaire" ideal and a constitutional right to happiness, make for a potent mixture of generating unhappiness and feelings of inadequacy. The disparity between these, almost religious, American ideals and the reality of most American lives is dramatised by Homer Simpson's character.

Homer is a spectacular failure on both counts and feels, quite rightly, that he has been let down by the society he lives in. He therefore feels in the right to break the rules of that society, and to try and achieve these ideals with desperate and often criminal schemes. His schemes rarely work out and by the end of the episode he will be just as bad of as before, or worse.

Homer's display of human's worst possible trademarks acts as a *claw back* for even the most eccentric individuals. And despite his many flaws, he is still loveable in the eyes of his wife and accepted and supported by the whole family. His *doing*, his often more than half-witted demeanour, is therefore clawed back into a *position of socio-centrality*, the family.

- 4 To *assure* the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies/mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world.

The *Simpsons* assure the viewers of their *practical adequacy* in dealing with the world out-there by using the ideology/mythology of the family. Certainly, a family that is highly dysfunctional and whose individual members are wholly inadequate, but in a world that is not just unpredictable but equally dysfunctional and more corrupt, they cope quite well.

The *Simpsons* family is regularly confronted with situations where the whole world seems to gang up against them. Normally, it is just one of the family members who manages to draw the wrath of Springfield upon him- or herself. The initial reaction of the rest of the family can often be its total disintegration and complete lack of support. Again, this is a formula to first challenge the strength of the family bond, before proving its validity and adequacy in the end.

Hence, the *Simpsons* family reunite eventually and, together, they find a solution to whatever problem they may be faced with. The family that proves their *practical adequacy in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world*, in this case, presents *the culture at large*.

- 5 To *expose*, conversely, any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which might result from changed conditions in the world out-there, or from pressure from within the culture for a reorientation in favour of a new ideological stance.

The exposure of *all* our culture's *practical inadequacies* is an inherent part of the *Simpsons'* basic make-up. Its function as a political satire constantly seeks to *expose* our society's cardinal failure to keep its promise of a real democracy and equal treatment of its citizens.

While Homer Simpson assumes the response of those at the bottom end of the stick, his daughter Lisa lends her voice to articulate the viewpoint of the writer/director. A smart eight-year-old, the position from which Lisa voices her liberal, left-of-centre opinions is both innocent and unassuming.

The *Simpsons* deal with a wide range of issues, which are all treated with the same brutal scrutiny and revealing a suicidal society driven by corruption and greed. The *ideological stance* favoured by the *Simpsons* is obviously liberal and left wing. However, it doesn't present us with a *new* ideology or with an alternative to the current system. It therefore acts more as a reminder of existing inadequacies while, overall, accepting the system and its imperfections.

6 To *convince* the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole.

The *Simpsons* *convince* their audience of their right to be themselves by presenting them with a cast of characters that is riddled with flaws and weaknesses. The individual members of the *Simpsons* family, for example, love to act excessively selfish and greedy. Still, their failures are allowed for, even when their egotism causes disruptions to the family as a whole.

It seems that no matter what they do, *their status and identity as individuals* is untouched, and as a consequence of their behaviour are not propelled out of the family for good, but remain forever involved.

Indeed, the whole of "Springfield" is filled with individuals that would ordinarily be deemed asocial freaks and hence pushed to the margins of *normal* society. Contrary to the world of the *Simpsons*, where they occupy the centre stage and portray individuals with a real sense of humanity.

**7 To *transmit* by these means a sense of cultural membership
(security and involvement)**

The *Simpsons* use the established family myth to convince the viewer of his or her designated place in society. Since no real person can be as insane as Homer Simpson can, and since he is accepted and has a place in society, his family, it should follow, the viewer does as well.

Each of the *Simpsons'* family members and all the other characters of "Springfield" have the right to be themselves as individuals, and still enjoy the *security and comfort* of being involved in the society as a whole.

The *Simpsons transmit* the view that *cultural membership* is not acquired by being or behaving a certain way, but is rightfully that of whoever wants to be involved.

*

My analysis of the *Simpsons* so far, suggests that it does fit the description of a bardic mediator in accordance to the seven bardic functions. (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 88) However, it is not the only objective of this thesis to determine *if* they meet the criteria of a bard but also *how* they fulfil the bardic function.

The *Simpsons* invest an incredible amount of detail into the characters and stories that give an almost comprehensive account of American culture. There are millions of

references to the very fabric of Western, our, cultural narrative, ranging from fairy tales, to Hollywood movies, to real events.

The individual characters of the *Simpsons* family, for instance, each fulfil a particular aspect of the human condition. While the family alone, alternatively, could not be dramatised as realistically and convincingly without the society of "Springfield".

Hence, it would be appropriate to have a closer look at this miniature, cartoon-animated world of the *Simpsons*. First, though, the family is due an introduction.

3

The Family

The Simpsons' Family Tree

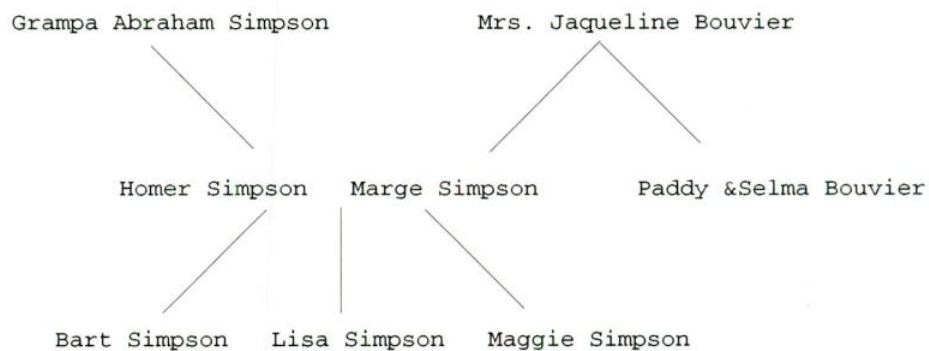


fig.3

"D'oh!"

"D'oh!" is the war cry of Homer Simpson, head of our famously dysfunctional family. Homer says "D'oh!" after a ball hits him on the back of the neck; when he realises he is out of Duff beer, or when he finds out that Marge is pregnant with Bart.

"D'oh!" is the outcry of despair that has become a reference in real life, where people use it as often and in as many different situations possible. It is used, when "D'oh!" you hit your knee against a sharp object, or "D'oh!" when something goes disastrously wrong, or when you just said something incredibly stupid, "D'oh!"

Homer's character (Dan Castellaneta)¹ has become an important reference in real life for a lot more than just a three-letter phrase. He represents the balding, over-weight, middle-aged, Middle American male in all his facets, dreams and anxieties. He is the unskilled, incompetent safety inspector at "Springfield's Nuclear Power Plant", a job that has, after all the years of working there, rendered him impotent and earned him little to no respect.

The frustration Homer experiences at work is compensated for by overindulging in everything he can effort. Beer, for example, and doughnuts count as favourites, but anything edible will do. If he is not at the bar or the convenience store, he can generally be found on the couch from the entrance scene, watching TV. There, he displays an admirable endurance, and the ability to consume a truly astonishing amount of trash.

Homer does not shine as a great father or husband, and his attempts to better himself or his life are doomed to failure. Yet, it is because of his flaws, the mistakes he makes, the frustration and anger he feels, and his laziness that make him so identifiably human.

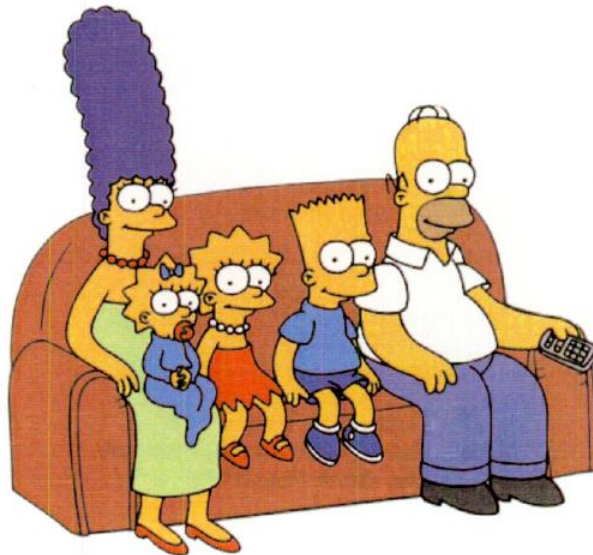


fig. 4

¹ The name of the actor, who does the voice for the character.

Marge (Julie Kavner) is Homer's wife, who shows an endless capacity of forgiving, accepting and loving her husband despite his many failings. She is the foundation on which the family is built. It is she, who maintains and nurtures the marriage for both of them. She, who raises their children and makes them feel loved and cared for.

Her sexy rasping voice acts as a continuous reminder of forgotten moral values, and her fabulous tower of blue hair is like the beam of a lighthouse that, visible at all times, radiates the direction home to security and comfort

Marge is from a generation of women that has experienced the sexual revolution and even had a stint at feminism, yet gave up on the ideals for the sake of the family and the status quo. Most of the time, her occupation is being a housewife and mother, which is certainly a fulltime job. Yet the isolation, the low status and no gratitude received for all her work can, sometimes, even get to a person as patient and obliging as Marge. That's normally the point, when she goes out to get a job for the length of an episode.

The value and importance of her occupation is emphasised when, without her, the household and family life disintegrates with astonishing speed. Fortunately, she always returns and, as yet, shows no inclination to give up on her helplessly dysfunctional family.

Bart (Nancy Cartwright) was Homer and Marge's first accident, which led to a shotgun wedding and, eventually, the family, as we know it. Although he is only ten years old, he is already wise to the bleak future ahead of him, when he says that -

"Kids should stay in school 'till they kick you off the education gravy train screaming - otherwise you'll have to go to work."

This is not a reflection on his attitude towards school, which he hates, but more a general attitude towards growing up and taking on responsibilities. Bart represents a generation of young people that are ignored by the system because they are troublesome and challenging. And instead of trying to motivate them into becoming constructive members of society, they are cynically given up upon.

Bart has his own philosophy on that subject matter, which holds that extreme underachievement will stop any further development and therefore maintain his current position of head prankster and teachers most unwanted student.

His youthful rebelliousness strikes a chord with the adult audience, because they miss it. Kids like him because he's funny and makes good jokes. Either of which made him the most popular character and led to the *Simpsons'* initial success. That was, until he was upstaged by his father Homer, and his portrayal of human's true nature of utter insanity.

Lisa (Yeardley Smith) is Bart's younger sister and, unlike him, teacher's pet. At the sweet age of only eight years, she is already highly intelligent and articulate, plays the saxophone, concerns herself with environmental issues and hence, eats vegetarian.

She embodies the potential of a different future as a woman than her mother's reality. Already, she supports Marge in her business ventures and stands up, in front of the whole of Springfield, to expose grave inequalities and injustices. She is also very ambitious and keen to learn.

However, she finds it hard to make friends, since most girls of her age are not interested in making the world a better place, nor do they want to change the image of womanhood. It is clear that Lisa's ideals are still only shared by a lonely few among the masses.

Maggie is the *Simpsons'* youngest child of one year. For most of the time, she has a soother stuck in her mouth, which she uses to express a wide range of emotions. She normally draws attention to herself by being ignored, especially by her father Homer, who likes to forget she exists at all.

Maggie delivers a silent commentary on the going-ons, like *Harpo* from the *Marx Brothers*, and adds a bit of slapstick by tripping over her "baby grow" at climactic moments of the story.

The nuclear family unit presented in the *Simpsons* is, of course, part of a more extensive family. There are exactly three generations of *Simpsons* and *Bouviere*. -

The first generation is represented by *Grampa Simpson* (Dan Castellaneta), Homer's father, who spends his dull and purposeless days in a retirement home. He is quite confused and senile at this stage, and never was the brightest either. He was not a great father to Homer, one of these family traditions that are carried on through the generations.

There is also Marge's mother, *Mrs. Jacqueline Bouvier* (Julie Kavner), whose name is the same as Jackie Kennedy's maiden name. One of many references to the Kennedy dynasty that has been so influential in America's recent history and still is to some extent. She also lives in a retirement home.

In the second generation there are, apart from Homer and Marge, also Marge's sisters *Paddy and Selma* (both by Julie Kavner). Hairy-legged, chain-smoking and single, *Paddy and Selma* represent every man's nightmare and act as is expected of them.

All of the *Bouviere* disapprove of Marge's choice of husband, and make sure to mention it on every occasion Homer is present.

Each of the characters I have described represents a building block in the overall structure of the *Simpsons'* story. A very old story about everyday life and ordinary people in a very modern setting and dealing with contemporary issues.

Homer represents the imperfection that is called human. His wife Marge is the nurturer, the immovable rock amidst the turbulence of life. Bart is everybody's inner child, both daring and bold. Lisa is a reminder of youthful idealism, when we still had a conscience. Maggie is open to interpretation.

Yet, what would the *Simpsons* do without the society they love to hate? Where would Homer go for his pint of Duff beer? And who would Bart play his tricks on?

4

The Society

"Springfield", the town and its inhabitants, represents a mirror-ball reflection of American society, ultimately fractured, diverse and complex. There is so much detail and so many characters, each representing a different aspect of American culture, that it is an almost impossible task to identify all of them. In order to give at least a reasonably adequate, if not complete picture of the society and culture portrayed, I have made a careful selection of "Springfield's" main establishments and most prominent personalities.

A selection that, hopefully, will give an idea, how "Springfield's" society and its inhabitants help *"articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality."* (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p.88. see chapter 2)

The examples I have selected are partly structured according to their place in the hierarchical order, typical of most Western cultures, and partly, according to their relevance in terms of the *Simpsons* family.

Springfield's society

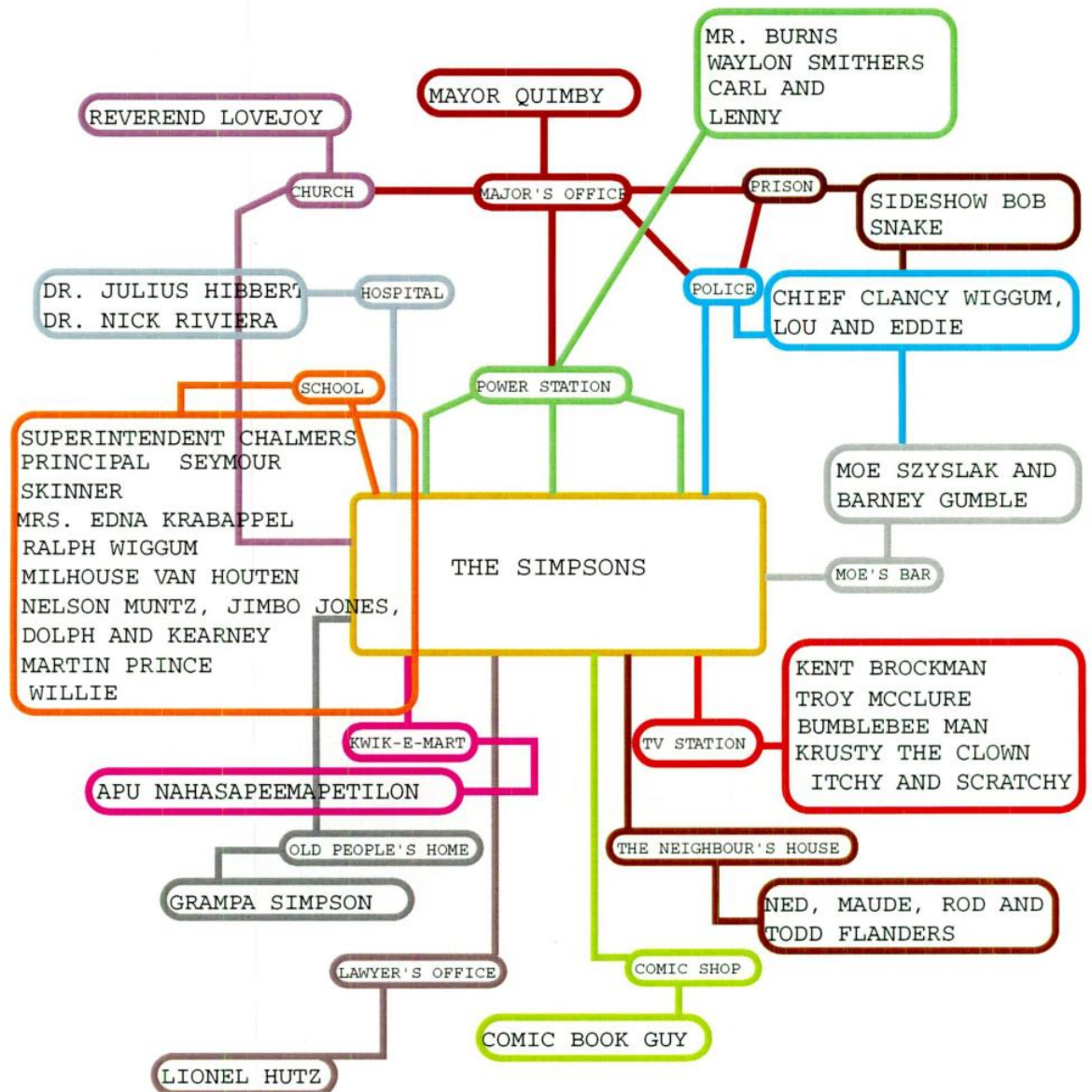


fig.5

EXECUTIVE POWER

Mayor Quimby is "Springfield's" chief of command. His voice, lend to him by Dan Castellaneta, displays the curious intonation of that of America's President John F. Kennedy. His now famous philandering is subtly referred to with *Mayor Quimby's* tendency to appear in public, guarded by at least two attractive women.

The reference to president Kennedy is instrumental in showing off the royalty-like supremacy rule that goes on in America's political elite. It also refers to a certain type of behaviour towards the opposite sex that seems to have become something of a tradition in the White House.

Mayor Quimby's flagrant sleaziness and corruption is typical of the *Simpsons'* bleak and cynical view of those in charge.

WORK

Mr. Charles Montgomery Burns (Harry Shearer) is the owner of "Springfield's Nuclear Power Plant", the primary source of all power and man-made disasters. He is the richest and therefore most powerful man in "Springfield", and Homer's employer from hell. His decision, to give Homer the position of safety inspector of his plant, is a curious one, since there has never been any doubt about Homer's total incompetence. —Obviously, safety is not one of *Mr. Burns'* primary concerns. His main concern is to accumulate more wealth and more power. It is his responsibility as ultra capitalist to do so.

The character of *Mr. Burns* is based upon the mythology of evil, a mythology, that has captured human imagination since time began, and has manifested itself in so many different shapes and forms unequalled by it's comparably dull rival, goodness. *Mr. Burns'* physical appearance is witch-like, skinny and scrawny, with a hooked nose, and a slumped posture that looks like he has a hunch back. Despite his enormous wealth, he

is the most stingy and penny-pinching of all. His favourite past-time occupation is stealing sweets from little children, which is a reference to Charles Dicken's famously greedy character *Ebenezer Scrooge* in "A Christmas Carol".



Fig.6

Another typical feature is his incredible physical weakness, and old age of a hundred-and-four years, which turns even the above, the robbing of sweets from babies, into an insurmountable challenge. It is the classic description of those afflicted by evil to be in some way physically affected by it. As if the evil spirit consumes their strength and well-being, and then manifests itself visibly in physical deformities. The pay-back for a life of meanness and cruelty, it seems, but in reality, it only proves it's cockroach-like endurance, since it obviously outlives everyone, including the good.

Established to represent the Baddy in terms of ancient and classical narrative, it remains to be found out, whether he fits the modern description of evil. There, we find references to the classical medium of modern narrative, Hollywood films, and their take on the old theme. -

In the episode "Treehouse of Horror IV", *Mr. Burns* becomes a blood-lusting vampire in the parody of Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of Bram Stoker's "Dracula".

He is also the collector of garments made from rare animals, in the episode "Two dozen and One Greyhounds" - with the evil plan to make the thirty-something puppies of Bart's dog *Santa's little helper* into a nice coat, in a reference to Walt Disney's feature-length animation, "101 Dalmations".

Naturally, by the end of each episode, his malicious plans are corrupted by the people, he most likes to ignore, the *Simpsons* family.

The character of *Mr. Burns* represents the necessity of evil as a storytelling device. Evil, that is to be confronted and finally overcome by the heroes. A device, as essential to the plot of movies today, as it was to the orally delivered message of the bard throughout the ages.

EDUCATION

Seymour Skinner (Harry Shearer) is the principal of "Springfield's Elementary School". He is a dedicated, if somehow out-of-touch principal, and a devoted son to his mother *Mrs. Agnes Skinner*, he lives with. Their relationship is somehow reminiscent of the eerie mother-son relationship portrayed in Alfred Hitchcock's film "Psycho", with *Skinner* like Anthony Perkins being totally overpowered, controlled and patronised by his mother. The only difference being, of course, that *Mrs. Skinner* is very much alive and healthy.

What we know of his background includes a stint in youthful motorcycle rebellion, then fighting in Vietnam, a time he still misses and remembers with fondness and, finally, becoming what he is now, a dull, meticulous principal and a mummy's boy.

In one episode, it turns out, that *Skinner* has been an impostor all along. The real *Skinner*, fought beside him in Vietnam and was believed to have died there, yet, in reality, was held prisoner all this time. After finally being released, he returns to Springfield to *his* mother and *his* dream of becoming the principal. However, after an initial outrage and the immediate dismissal of the fake *Skinner*, "Springfield's" community soon find the real *Skinner* unbearably decent and dedicated, and everyone, most of all his mother, want the old *Skinner* back. He is quickly reinstated and the real one is tied up and sent off by train.

Skinner's more than turbulent background adds a certain amount of humanity to his otherwise pedantic and boring persona. Yet, it never seems to affect his authority in

front of his students, or does he lose any more in the eyes of Bart, who knows most of the skeletons in *Skinner's* cupboard. It is due to Bart's need for a counter part in the world out-there that motivates him to actually help reinstate *Skinner's* authority. Or, as Lisa puts it –

"I think you need Skinner, Bart. Everyone needs a nemesis. Sherlock Holmes had his Dr. Moriarty, Mountain Dew has its Mello Yello, even Maggie has that baby with the one eyebrow."

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Clancy Wiggum (Hank Azaria) is chief of "Springfield's Police department", and according to the features of his nose, he really and truly represents the chief of 'pigs'. His main duties include organising a decent supply of doughnuts and "Krusty Burgers", and leaving other, less nutritional police work to someone else. To "Homer the Vigilante", for example.

Apart from his feeding habits, his work ethic stretches as far as to never decline a bribe, and sometimes take the police helicopter for a ride to keep a watchful eye on his entrusted. -

"Do not be alarmed, continue swimming naked. Aww, c'mon, continue! Come on! Awwwww...Alright, Lou, open fire."

Chief Wiggum, flying over the Simpsons' back garden, where Homer and Marge are trying to have a private, naked moment in their new pool. ("Bart of Darkness")

Chief Wiggum is also the father of Lisa's classmate *Ralph Wiggum* (Nancy Cartwright), who already surpasses him in terms of stupidity and incompetence.

There is also an affinity between the Chief and *Mayor Quimby*, which is not totally unrelated to money.

THE DRINKING EMPORIUM

Moe Szyslak (Hank Azaria) is the owner and bartender of "Moe's Tavern", the place, Homer spends most of his time and money.

His character portrays the typical, surly and greedy owner of a depressingly dingy bar. His sole purpose in life is to convert as many poor and lonely souls to the faith of alcoholism.

At the tab of power, *Moe* often seems like a friend in the blurred eyes of his believers. A grave mistake that becomes apparent, as soon as they run out of money, or have discredited themselves otherwise.

Homer has experienced *Moe's* two-facedness on several occasions. In the episode "Homer Badman", for instance, Homer's mildly eccentric behaviour is once again misinterpreted by the townsfolk of Springfield, and *Moe*, instead of coming to his rescue, starts taking bids for dishing out the real dirt on Homer Simpson.

Moe's only vulnerability is his total failure in attracting the opposite sex, which is due to his staggering ugliness and veil nature. In the end, he's just a lonely guy, who doesn't trust anyone, least of all himself.

THE CONVENIENCE STORE

Apu Nahasapeemapetilon (Hank Azaria) is the shopkeeper of the local "Kwik-E-Mart", another stop on Homer's daily feeding trail. *Apu* is from one of the major minorities in the States that includes many different cultures, yet are grouped together because they are all from one continent. The group I am referring to are, of course, Asian Americans.

The name 'Apu' is a reference to the Hollywood-created character cliché of 'Apu the cheeky little thief' from Middle-Eastern fantasy films like "The Thief of Baghdad".

Although a thief, deep down he is good and decent, and his worldly wisdom proves crucial in helping the main character to get out of trouble and the woman of his dreams

Hence, *Apu* the shopkeeper has some cheeky business tactics up his sleeves, like covering the long expired dates on packets of meat with a bargain prize-tag, and then selling it to the biggest sucker of a customer –Homer Simpson. Only, in the episode “Homer and Apu” this experienced formula goes wrong, when, as a result, Homer is rushed to the hospital, and subsequently exposes *Apu*’s violation on the TV-show “Bite Back with Kent Brockman”. *Apu* is made hand in his prising-gun, and remorsefully, offers to be Homer’s personal valet. James Wood gets the job at the “Kwik-E-Mart”, for the purpose of studying a role as a shopkeeper. While *Apu* enjoys working for the *Simpsons*, and they enjoy his services and also his company, it is revealed, in the song “Who needs the Kwik-E-Mart”, that it is a desperately longing *Apu* who sings, ‘I doo.” Homer, feeling responsible this time, agrees to accompany *Apu* to his native country, India, to visit the world’s first convenient store and headquarters of the “Kwik-E-Mart” corporation to try and get *Apu*’s job back.

The enlightened president and CEO grants three question, which Homer wastes immediately, and therefore wrecks *Apu*’s chance to be re-hired. *Apu* is not impressed. Back in Springfield, *Apu* saves James Wood’s life during a robbery attempt. Eternally grateful, Woods offers the job back to *Apu*. Everything is back to normal.

While *Apu* is portrayed to be greedy and self-seeking, he is nevertheless like-able. He is one of the few characters that can almost be considered a friend of the *Simpsons*.

NEIGHBOUR FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION

Ned Flanders (Harry Shearer), wife *Maude* (Maggie Roswell) and sons *Rod* (Pamela Hayden) and *Todd* (Nancy Cartwright) are the *Simpsons*’ neighbours from the parallel goody-two-shoes dimension. *Ned Flanders* is forever obliging and giving, and hence, the perfect neighbour, whose trusting nature is open to endless abuse from Homer.

He is also the proud owner of a shop for left-hand appliances, and "Springfield's" most fanatic church-goer. He once had a short stint at being the principal of "Springfield's Elementary". A career that came to an abrupt end, when he said the word "Lord" over the school's loudspeaker. ("Sweet Seymour Skinner's Baadasssss Song") It shows that any utterance of sectarian belief is a very definite No-No in America's public education system.

It also refers to the fact, that *Flanders* and his family are a representation of America's new Christian fundamentalists. A group of people that consider themselves to be better Christians, because they are radically puritanical and morally extremely conservative. True to the *Simpsons'* twisted world, *Flanders* also personifies the devil. Or, is it really that twisted?



fig.7

SPIRITUAL MAINTENANCE

"Springfield's First Church" is lead by pastor *Reverend Lovejoy* (Harry Shearer), who assembles "Springfield's" more or less devout followers every Sunday morning. A trap, Homer and Bart are forever trying to get out of, since it so imprudently interrupts their lying on the couch.

Reverend Lovejoy is firm in his belief of material and not just spiritual proof from his devotees, for which they receive a dull and spiritless recitation from the Bible.

His response to those in need of advice is mostly impatient and cynical, especially if it is *Ned Flanders*.

In the episode "Secrets of a Successful Marriage", Homer gets a job teaching a course on marriage to adults, and to maintain his student's interest, reveals personal secrets about his marriage. Marge soon finds out, and tells him to stop, but Homer can't help himself, and continues. When Moe teases Homer about one of their private secrets right in front of Marge, she kicks Homer out of the house. Feeling, Homer has betrayed her trust, and not knowing how to forgive him, Marge consults Lovejoy. His advice is to get a divorce.

Marge: "But, isn't that a sin?"

Lovejoy: "Marge, just about everything is a sin. (holding up the Bible) Y'ever sat down and read this? Technically, we're not even allowed to go to the bathroom."

The portrayal of the church is one of the most cynical and vicious of all the cultural institutions in "Springfield". And there definitely is no love, nor joy to be found in the character of the reverend.

THE GOGGLE BOX

The television enjoys an honorary status in the *Simpsons'* household itself.

Television is the centre, around which the *Simpsons* family's life revolves. It brings the family together and helps Marge raise the children, for better or for worse.

"Springfield's" local TV station combines a whole array of different characters, but there are only a few, who appear in almost every episode. There is Kent Brockman, for instance, news presenter and host to various other pseudo-news like programs, and Bart's hero, *Krusty the Clown* and his show's ultra violent cartoon in a cartoon, "Itchy and Scratchy".

Kent Brockman is representative of the media's cynical and indifferent treatment of issues. It doesn't matter whether it is dealing with real tragedies or total

nonsense, in the end, it is only the entertainment value that counts, and will decide whether it will get shown at all.

"Springfield's" most popular kids' entertainer and morosely corrupted, *Krusty the Clown* gives an equally bleak picture of America's most trusted babysitter. Above all, he is not a bit funny, hates children, and is interested in only one thing, money.

The cartoon "Itchy and Scratchy" is an even more gruesome and violent version of "Tom and Jerry". It questions the use of violence in cartoons that are watched by children yet, I feel, it also questions itself and the effect the *Simpsons* themselves might have on their audience.

*

"Springfield's" society and its cultural institutions portray an environment that is largely motivated by egotism and greed. Those at the top are all, without exception, utterly corrupt and selfish and only act with their own best interest in mind, and never in the interest of those they are in charge of. Those at the lower end, representative of the service industry, are equally self-seeking and dubious in their business tactics. The interaction between the different cultural institutions is also corrupt. -The powerful help each other, while the rest is trying to get at each other's throats.

Since I have established the function of Springfield's most important establishments and the characters that personify them, it would be interesting to see them in action. In my next chapter, I will discuss one episode in detail, in order to illustrate that interaction.

5

The Episode

In the previous chapters I have tried to give a modestly detailed account of the *Simpsons'* basic make-up, the characters, the society, and cultural context created. Together, they fulfil the key requirements necessary to mediate the bardic functions, as outlined in chapter two.

At this point, it would be appropriate to give a more in-depth account of what the actual story, the cultural narrative consists of, and how the mediator, the writer and director delivers his/her message through the medium, the *Simpsons*.

I will proceed by giving a chronological account of what happens in the episode, like a short version of the script. Important references will be mentioned when they occur, and explained further in the analysis, that follows after the summary. References that are not essential to the story, but add to the overall texture of the narrative, are explained in the footnotes.

“Much Apu About Nothing”

Episode: EF20 / Original Airdate: 5.5.96

Written by David S. Cohen and Directed by Susie Dietter

The title is a reference to Shakespeare's comedy “Much Ado About Nothing”. A curiously fitting reference in the context of this thesis, since, in the quote from the dictionary, the one bard that is mentioned by name, is also William Shakespeare. (see chapter 2)



fig.8

The episode begins with a wild bear on the loose in “Springfield”. Followed by *Kent Brockman* in a helicopter, presenting live news coverage of the event, the bear is found in “Evergreen Terrace”, chewing the “Impsons” family’s mailbox.

Watching the TV, Homer mocks the “Impson’s” family bad luck while the rest of the “Impson” family are looking out of the front window, worriedly. After Homer realises their precarious situation, he goes to check their supplies, only to find that there is nothing but two packets of baking soda in the fridge.

Anguished he cries out: “If I’m going to be trapped in the house, I gotta go out and get some beer.”

His escape plan brings him to an eye to eye with the bear, and it is only in the last minute, that he is saved by the police, who tranquillise the bear and *Barney Gumble*,

the local barfly, who happened to walk by at that moment. The bear is carried off in a truck by the U.S. Forest Services. *Moe* carries *Barney* off in a wheelbarrow.

Homer's reaction is to be outraged by the 'constant' bear attacks, and to quickly form a vigilante group with the rallying cry: "We're here, we're queer, we don't want anymore bears."²

The mob, led by Homer, soon arrives at *Mayor Quimby's* office, and demands immediate action against Springfield's "bear infestation". The "Bear Patrol" is brought into action and Homer watches proudly as the "Bear Patrol" plane³ thunders over his head. Though, his initial satisfaction is overshadowed, when he finds a five Dollar bear tax deduction on his pay check.

Once again, the mob gathers in front of *Mayor Quimby's* office.

"Down with taxes! Down with taxes!" - Chants the mob this time, and *Mayor Quimby* saves the day and his position by announcing that taxes are high because of illegal immigrants. He sets a date for a special referendum on "Proposition 24", the proposition to get rid of immigrants, in one week's time. The crowd cheers.

*

"Proposition 24" is an un-missable reference, at least for the American audience, to the real-life Proposition 187 on the 1994 California ballot. Governor Pete Wilson made the issue of illegal immigrants into the centrepiece of his political campaign for re-election, while conveniently ignoring real issues like California remaining in a recession, while the rest of the country was recovering.

Proposition 187 essentially meant, that illegal immigrants were prohibited from receiving any public money, including welfare, medical care, or public schooling.

² "We're here, we're queer" is a chant taken from the more aggressive gay rights factions at what Homer calls the 'moustache parade' -the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

³ One of the American army's high-tech B-2 Stealth Bombers.

At home with the Simpsons, a discussion has started between Homer and Lisa, who tries to talk him out of supporting Proposition 24. She even coaxes Grampa into recounting the *Simpsons'* own immigrant past, when his father left the 'Old country'⁴ to take his family to the New World, and to live in what first came into sight, the Statue of Liberty. They had to vacate this first home, once they filled it up with rubbish. A reference to the sorry state, visitors have left the Statue of Liberty in.

At the "Kwik-E-Mart", Homer tells Apu how great it'll be once all the immigrants are shipped out of Springfield. Apu has to reveal to an unbelieving Homer that he is an illegal immigrant and will have to leave if the proposition is passed. -

Apu: "I wish I could have stayed one more year or two. There was so much I wanted to see and to do and have done to me."

Homer almost changes his mind, but then buys a "Yes on 24" button, and sticks it on his shirt.

At "Moe's Tavern", Moe and the barflies are putting up pro "Proposition 24" signs, while exchanging platitudes in common racial prejudice. -

Moe: "You know what really aggravates me? It's them immigants. They wants all the benefits of living in Springfield, but they ain't even bother to learn themselves the language." (sic)

To which Homer agrees: "Hey, those are exactly my sentimonies."

A crowd of picketers has formed in front of the Kwik-E-mart, and Marge and the children have to struggle to get through. They find *Apu* feeding his Ganesha statue (Indian god in the shape of an elephant and guardian over trade and wealth) with "Yoo-Hoo" (chocolate flavoured soda) in the hope of making the protesters go away.⁵

Apu tells Marge the story of how he graduated at the top of his 7.000.000 class at "Calcutta Technical Institute" to come to study in America. After having bid fare well to his parents and child bride, he starts studying at "Springfield Heights Institute of technology" under the tuition of *John Frink*. (Hank Azaria) *John Frink* is Springfield's scientist and inventor, who predicted then, that "within a 100 years computers will be twice as powerful, 10.000 times larger, and so expensive that only the five richest kings in Europe will own them."

His predictions, much like his inventions, are predictably way off the mark, sometimes dangerous, and always a spectacular non-event. He therefore represents the model portrait of a scientist.

After nine years, *Apu* finally completes his thesis and to pay off his loan, starts to work at the "Kwik-E-Mart". He decides to stay after his visa has expired.

Marge shows understanding, once she realises that "really, your only crime was violating US law."

She decides to vote No on 24.

In his desperation, *Apu* is lead into the dark alley of illegality, personified by none other than *Fat Tony* (Guest voice: Joe Mantegna) himself, head-mobster of Springfield's own branch of Italy's Camorra. *Fat Tony* is a wonderful portrayal of the small-time Godfather. He has the melancholic eye-bags, the gentle manners and his voice has the

⁴ According to the "I can't Believe It's An Unofficial Simpsons Guide", the Simpsons emigrated from Ireland to the US. I wouldn't necessarily believe it, since it doesn't say so in the episode.

⁵ This is a reference to the "milk miracle" that occurred in India six month before the episode was aired. All of India went crazy over a statue of Ganesha drinking milk when it was offered to him with spoons. Some people tried to explain the miracle with the theory that the marble most statues are made out of and its surface properties would make the milk that was offered form a very thin and invisible layer, and eventually drip down.

husky softness of Al Pacino in his prime. *Apu* buys a fake ID and birth certificate of *Fat Tony*, who urges him to act American.

The "Kwik-E-Mart" now displays American attire on every visible corner and *Apu*, wearing a N.Y. Mets baseball cap, greets the incoming Homer with the now American-English pronounced words:

"What do you say we take a relaxed attitude towards work and watch the baseball game? The nye [New York] Mets are my favourite squadron."

Homer is fooled, but when he inquires about *Apu's* statue of Ganesha, *Apu* cracks and breaks down, when he realises he failed his parents and exclaims:

"This passport is a cheap forgery! A cheap \$2,000 forgery!"

Now Homer is impressed:

"You must love this country more than I love a cold beer on a hot Christmas morning!"

It was all he needed, to finally say: "Darn it, *Apu*, I'm not gonna let them kick you out!"

And pulling the Yes on 24 button of his shirt: "I never should have bought this button.

Can I have my three dollars back?"

"Store credit only." *Apu* replies, business minded even in grief.

Back at the house in "Evergreen Terrace", the entire *Simpsons* family and *Apu* are trying to work out what to do. Then Lisa suddenly realises that there was an amnesty for people, who have been in the country as long as *Apu*. All he has to do is take a citizenship test before the referendum. Homer volunteers to teach *Apu* American history, everyone looks worried.

Fortunately he forgets everything Homer has taught him, and passes his test without any problems. The only small problem being that he is maybe a little too well informed about the numerous causes of the Civil War. He is cut short by the American proctor: "Wait, wait..just say slavery."

Apu: "Slavery it is, sir."

Apu is now an American citizen and Homer throws a "Welcome to America" party. A conversation between *Apu*, Lisa and Homer adds a little confusion:

Apu: "Today, I am no longer an Indian living in America. I am an Indian-American."

Lisa: "You know, in a way, all American are immigrants. Except, of course Native American."

Homer: "Yeah, Native American like us."

Lisa: "No, I mean American Indians."

Apu: "Like me."

Afterwards, Homer holds a rousing speech against "Proposition 24" and makes another chant. Everyone cheers in agreement, yet the proposition passes with a record 95% vote in favour.

At the "Kwik-E-Mart", *Apu* celebrates his first act as a true American citizen by throwing away a letter, containing a summons for jury duty.

In the end, the ship leaves Springfield's harbour with only one deportee on board, groundskeeper *Willie* from Scotland.

*

As Election Day approached, the real proposition 187 became "politically incorrect" among most Californians, and only right wing fanatics would publicly admit their support. Nevertheless, come Election Day, the proposition passed with a huge majority. Proposition 187 should have taken effect on January 1st of 1995, but was overturned by the courts.

The Analysis

It is not unusual for a *Simpsons'* episode to start off with a side story that seems disconnected from the main story it leads into. This can be a recipe to make the story more interesting and unpredictable, and to cover more jokes. It can also make a connection between seemingly unrelated incidents, like in this case, the runaway bear

acting as a reference to the California State Bear, and therefore making the connection with the real event.

In California, Governor Wilson diverted people's attention from the recession, by crusading against illegal immigrants. In the parallel universe of the *Simpsons*, Mayor Quimby uses the always-blame-the-immigrants device, because of the "Bear Patrol Tax".

In fact, for some of the American audience, the bear part was already a sufficient enough reference to the real event. The more direct parody, with the fake "proposition 24", was criticised for being too "obvious" and "preachy". The lack of subtlety is a compromise, the American audience has to suffer, for the sake of sharing the *Simpsons* with a worldwide audience.

This episode of the *Simpsons* is obviously very serious about the exposure of the *"practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which might result from changed conditions in the world out-there, or from pressure from within the culture for a reorientation in favour of a new ideological stance."*

. (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 88, see chapter 2)

The subject matter, immigration, is closely connected to American culture's sense of itself and, hence, American identity. A culture's identity is formed through its history, and immigration played a very important part in America's recent history. Indeed, it *created* America and its population, as it is now. The other major factor that shapes a culture's sense of itself is by comparison with the world out-there. Since immigrants are by definition from the world out-there, and America is the land of immigrants, the line between inside and out-there becomes blurred.

Hence, American culture and identity is a structure that is built on very shaky ground. A point, Lisa tries to make, when she asks a grudging Grampa to tell Homer about his own family's immigration. The fact, that Homer himself turns out to be only second generation American, makes no impact on his current frame of mind.

Homer's ignorance of his own immigrant past is typical of a belief shared by a large proportion of white Americans. A belief that maintains, that white people have somehow been endowed with the unequivocal right to stay, before anyone of another race, in the United States of America. It is, of course, the bigotry and arrogance typical of the racist belief.

The narrow-mindedness and plain stupidity of the racist conviction is exposed in the bar scene, when Homer and *Moe* complain about the immigrant's disrespect for the American culture and language. While expressing their racist prejudices, they only prove their own eloquence in babbling. *Moe*, who is always first and most prominent at finger-pointing, actually turns out to be one of the characters taking the American citizen-ship test, disguised by a moustache. His petty vindictiveness has once again landed him where he belongs, at the pointed end of the finger. The crudeness of some of these jokes is a reflection on the crudeness of the racist argument.

At the citizenship test, Apu is better informed about the causes of the Civil War, than the American proctor himself and, made feel uncomfortable about that, the proctor cuts in and delivers the wanted answer himself. A note on the popular presumption, that immigrants know less, when often they know more about American history than the 'Americans' themselves. It is probably due to their relatively insecure position, which doesn't allow them to be that complacent.

As in many episodes before, Homer Simpson is used as a device to get the political satire rolling. His character represents the common white American man, and takes upon himself the sins of hatred, narrow-mindedness and prejudice. He becomes the racist per se, a parochial blockhead, beyond any reasonable argument. He even becomes the anti-bard, the demagogue, who also taps into the sub-conscious of a culture's narrative. Only, the demagogue attracts his followers not by the song of comforting familiarity, but by the bellowing sound of hatred and vindictiveness.



Under Homer's command, Springfield's cast of characters become a mob of brainless automatons that moronically follow, whatever brings out the hatred burning in their petty and paranoid little hearts. It is the trademark of the mob mentality to act on an emotional level, which feeds erratic anxieties and denies reason. The danger of people falling victim to the demagogue's luring sound and our democratic system's failure to deal with such instances, is expressed in Homer's outcry: "When are people going to learn? Democracy doesn't work!" This is after Homer performs a U-turn from a racist moron to being a liberal-minded anarchist. It is also after Springfield's mob pretends to follow Homer's change of heart and his speech against "proposition 24", only to do what they did in California, vote yes. Hatred still burns brighter than love.

Homer's *doing* is *celebrated, explained, interpreted and justified* as an individual whose *eccentricity* is to act out his potential for hatred and intolerance. The *Simpsons* acknowledge the fact, that everyone can be a racist at some time or other. Not everyone might act as extreme as Homer Simpsons does, yet a lot more might feel that way. Hence, his portrayal of a racist acts as a *claw back* for those individuals into a position of *socio-centrality*, political correctness. (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 88, see chapter 2)

The other character, whose *individuality* is celebrated and whose *status and identity* is *guaranteed* is Apu. Apu finds himself in the position of the victim, yet, instead of being portrayed to evoke pity, he remains himself, self-seeking and business-minded. Doesn't he even sell the pro proposition "Yes on 24" buttons for a whooping \$ 3? And when Homer turns from enemy back to friend, and tries to trade in his, now obsolete, button for cash, he gets what he deserves, store credit. Apu's reason for immigration, and his decision to stay in America once his visa had expired, is also a cliché, and not a heartrending story about torture or starvation awaiting him upon his return. Instead of trying to rectify common prejudice about Asian Americans, Apu simply personifies them, and therefore practices his right to be himself.

The *Simpsons* also *transmit a sense of cultural membership* by involving Apu into their family life. (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 88, see chapter 2)

The *ideological stance* favoured by the writer and director is communicated via Homer's daughter Lisa, who maintains the politically correct point of view throughout the episode. It is she, who finds the solution to *Apu's* problem and she, who reminds Homer and *Apu* of the real Americans, Native Americans. The confusing conversation about Americans, Native Americans and American Indians, once again expresses America's fractured sense of identity. An issue that is highly complex and that will not be solved easily or in the imminent future.

In the end, it isn't *Apu* from India, but groundskeeper *Willie* from Scotland that is deported. Both had the same status of illegality, yet most Americans would, given it was their choice, let a white Scotsman stay, instead of a 'coloured' person from the Indian sub-continent. But this is the *Simpsons*, and being created and written by left-of-centre liberals, we are made sympathise with *Apu*, even though he is self-seeking, and laugh at groundskeeper *Willie*, who is a bit of a *Donald Duck* in his attraction of misfortune.

6

Conclusion

My analysis of the *Simpsons* leads me to conclude that they do perform the function of our own culture's bard. Our own culture, in this case, means all cultures of this world, the culture of humanity. The world portrayed in the *Simpsons* is familiar to us, because it is, for a cartoon, unimaginatively realistic. The element of it, that is typical only of the American culture, is also familiar to us, since we have seen it on TV many times before.

Each of the main characters represents a different aspect of humanity's sense of itself. Especially Homer Simpson's character describes the ambiguity of what it means to be human: It means to be eternally flawed, while all the same time seeking perfection. It means to be anxious at times you should show courage. It means to be forever wanting, when really, satisfaction is only achieved once you stop wanting.

Homer is not just a character that bolding middle-aged man can identify with. His character is not a portrayal of white American male kind, but of human kind and human sins. By taking on our sins, Homer takes on the role of Jesus Christ in the *Simpsons'* epos. An epos, that is truly biblical in its dimension, its detail, its countless characters and stories.

The characters combine elements that derive from ancient mythology and our, modern, version of those. The mythological evil for instance, traditionally dragon-headed, now comes in the shape of the ruthless capitalist, or the corrupt politician. It even finds an incarnation in a Christian fundamentalist.

The stories follow a set formula that is repeated over and over again, like a fairy tale. The couch scene at the beginning, for instance, acts as the "once upon a time" of the *Simpsons'* narrative and its repetitiveness creates a comforting sense of familiarity. The stories often carry morals the same way fairy tales do and the end of each episode is as predictable as "...and they lived happily ever after". Only, in the case of the *Simpsons* it is "...and they continue to be inadequate and dysfunctional forever after."

The *Simpsons* can therefore be seen to continue a tradition of cross-cultural narratives, such as the Bible, ancient mythologies and fairy tales.

The language in which the *Simpsons* perform their narrative is both literally and conceptually the "lingua franca" of this world. Literally because it is in English, the international language, spoken and understood by a large part of our global population. In concept, because the American culture and that includes the *Simpsons*, continuously communicates its narrative to its collective self, the rest of the world.

Its visual language continues a tradition that used to be carried out by the Fine Arts. That was until the tradition was broken by Art's development of a more specialised, abstracted and conceptual language. The *Simpsons* are obviously a product of commercial art, yet they function in just the same way as Art used to, by giving the audience an interpretation of reality in accordance to its culture and time.

The artist, who was in service of the church or commissioned by a rich patron, was obliged to fulfil their expectations and restrictions. One of the reasons, artists sought to free themselves from their former purpose. The *Simpsons* are under the patronage of FOX and therefore very much part of the evil establishment, they seek to criticise.

However, they still manage to expose the establishment with the same viciousness and are particularly ruthless, when it comes to their own patron, FOX.

These days, it seems the general practice of our media culture to simply integrate subversive elements into its system of multiplicity that, ultimately, has a uniforming and levelling effect on everything it draws in. It has happened to Art many times. – The Janis Joplin's song "Oh, Lord, why don't you buy me a Mercedes Benz", for instance, was highly critical of commercialism and especially its evil embodiment, Mercedes Benz. Nowadays, we hear it played in a commercial, advertising Mercedes cars.

In our times, it may be more effective to put yourself right in the middle of the establishment, rather than being sucked into it from an outside position, in which case you and your message are rendered powerless and mainstream.

The *Simpsons* act as a testimony of our time. Their representation of reality reflects a generation's concept and ideas about the nature of reality. A generation, that has grown into adults, now in their middle age like its creator, Matt Groening. A generation, that has grown up with the world of cartoon animation. It is definitely one of the reasons for the *Simpsons*' huge popularity among adults and its main character, Homer Simpson, who represents that generation. The following generation, now in their twenties and thirties is even more adapt to the medium and find its interpretation of reality particularly fitting of their time and the culture they live in. It has caused a huge increase in feature length animations, blockbusters in their own right, and cartoon animated TV programs specifically directed at an adult audience.

The cartoon-animated series *South Park*, for example, is the present hit. Its crude cut-out characters spew out an extraordinarily vicious commentary on our culture, in its parody of the real town and town's folk of South Park in cow country, Colorado.

Which leaves us with the question, how the next generation will see their idea of reality represented, once they have grown up into adults. What will my children, the next of

the next generation, talk about, when they reminisce about their childhood experiences? Will they have to share their experiences with the rest of the world, with no memories that will connect them to the particular place they have grown up in, and that place's history and cultural heritage? What, indeed, will happen to the culture's specific narrative?

The globalisation, the evening-out of cultural differences, also mean the loss of many culture's heritage and therefore the link with their past. As I have said before, our existence in the past, our history, makes up our sense of being in the present and our sense of belonging. If that is gone, the feeling of belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time will increase and also further disperse our already fractured sense of identity.

However, I do consider the *Simpsons* to be a good thing in the overall picture. Since globalisation seems set on a course of no return, the *Simpsons'* narrative contributes to the growing together of the many different and diverse cultures of this world in a positively critical way.

I leave you with a reminder of Matt Groening's message to *his* people: "The authorities don't have your best interests at heart." ("Wired" magazine, February 1999, p.116)

Bibliography:

name	title	year
Brüder Grimm	Kinder-und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm (Fairy Tales)	Marburg, Germany, Insel Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979
E.H.Gombrich	The Story Of Art	London, Phaidon Press Ltd, 1995
George Grosz	The Face Of The Ruling Class	London, Allison & Busby Ltd, 1984
John Fiske and John Hartley	Reading Television	London, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1978
Matt Groening	The Simpsons –A Complete Guide To Our Favourite Family	London, HarperCollins Publisher, 1997
Peter Lord & Brian Sible	Cracking Animation	London, Thames and Hudson, 1998
Random House	Random House Webster's Colle Dictionary	New York, Random House Inc., 1991
Warren Martyn & Adrian Wood	I Can't Believe It's An Unofficial Simpsons Guide	London, Virgin Publishing Ltd, 1997
title	journal	date
Interview with Matt Groening	"The Guide", in "The Guardian Weekend edition"	Saturday August 15 – Friday 21, 1998, p. 12
One-Eyed Aliens! Suicide Booths! Mom's Old-Fashioned Robot Oil!	"Wired" Magazine, interview with Matt Groening	February edition, 7.2.1999, p. 115
The Charts of last week's TV, Film,Video, Books and Radio ratings	"Heat", a weekly entertainment Magazine	6-12 February 1999 edition, p. 12
other:		
Internet	Alt. TV. Simpsons	Newsgroup
Television	Sky One	6 p.m., Sundays

