

# The simpsons case study essay sample



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“ Good art that reaches thirty million people and makes them feel connected may have more to offer us now than great art that reaches three thousand and makes them feel more or less alone. In our time the standards for art have changed, expanded. The future belongs to Bart Simpson.”

-Tad Friend

In this investigation I aim to look at the generic conventions associated with a postmodern text and examine the use of them in the media series The Simpsons. Postmodernism is a current genre, one that reflects society's beliefs and attitudes of our time. I think the interest to look at these generic conventions would be to see how these values will be presented to future generations. The animated sitcom has been produced by Gracie Films for 20th Century Fox and Fox network since 1989 and has remained successful until now.

Genre is a categorisation of a topic. Initially its function was presumed to have been born for commercial access; allowing types of films to be distributed and targeted at particular audiences. Neale offers a useful definition ' genres are not merely categories of film styles and their corpuses, but an interactive system by which audiences decode screen content.' However film genres do not remain static, they are susceptible to change over time. The creation of new works, whilst first appearing to break with convention can eventually become part of a generic body.

Postmodernism offers a different method of categorising content. I use the term ' content' as postmodern works often contain a multiplicity of styles that make it difficult to categorise.

Postmodern works are dominated by eclecticism, hybridisation and pastiche. Jameson states the definition of pastiche as ‘blank parody’ – deliberately operating in a recognisable genre, bringing attention to the conventions of that genre, but without the intention of creating humour.

The hybridisation of different film genres is likely to have derived from the postmodern movement as a whole, taking something old and changing it into something new. This hybridisation is reflected in its eclectic qualities, selecting what seems to be the best from different sources and styles and including it within their new works.

Similarly Waugh states that postmodern texts ‘flaunt their implication in and complicity with Late Capitalism by deliberately incorporating aspects of mass culture.’ This statement is supported with The Simpsons display of intertextuality: the show includes material from all aspects of the cultural terrain, from film, television, literature, science fiction, and other comics. Chief Wiggum always quotes directly from Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* whenever there is an issue of crime to be resolved in an episode – “That’s some good work Lou. You’ll make sergeant for this.”

These intertextual incorporations, blatant transgressions of real-world boundaries, problematise the ontological status of cartoon’s fictional world by acknowledging its artifice. This self-conscious blurring of boundaries is, in fact, one of the ways that The Simpsons most effectively comments on itself and the culture that it is a part of.

The Simpsons is an animated sitcom and since its creation the narrative in each episode has conformed to the basic structure of a folktale, progressing

through several stages as hypothesised by Vladimir Propp, such as complication, preparation, struggle, recognition. The show also follows Marion Jordan's ideas of social realism by structuring the narrative in the form of a beginning, middle and an end involving characters from a working class background, or those associated with an ordinary, industrial lifestyle. The narratives for the episodes are also set in contemporary America, therefore making it possible for plots to satirically deal with current affairs.

The characters in The Simpsons live in a realistic setting, with community and environmental values. They represent human beings in their physical form rather than imaginative creatures that are often accommodated by the genre of cartoons. They live in what we would consider an ordinary home, in an ordinary street with home furnishings that the average person would identify with.

The Simpsons are a typical nuclear family, consisting of a mother, father, three children, a dog and a cat. They have regular contact with members of their extended family, such as Grandpa Simpson, Marge's Mum and sisters. The fact that they fulfil this definition of a nuclear family, is distantly echoed in Homer's job, as he works at a local nuclear power plant. However, even as a regular member of The Simpsons audience I realise that the characters must enforce social stereotypes of the various types of people they wish to represent. As unlike 'real' actors, whose physical appearance aids the audiences perception of them, cartoon characters aren't fully developed characters and instead appear to reinforce the values and ideas their characters represent.

Homer is a representation of masculine normality. He works for the largest employer in Springfield, a 'nine to five' industrial job, he has a wife, three kids, a house on the outskirts of the town, and two cars in his driveway. In his free time he enjoys going to Moe's tavern and the bowling alley. A typical man?

However he is often ridiculed, as his dominant characteristics that you would assume would accompany his stereotype so far, are not there. Homer is always governed by a need for his own self-satisfaction. He is shown to be close minded and full of contradictions. During a strike at the power plant his only duties are replaced by a 'mechanical sipping bird.' In mocking Homer are The Simpsons producers criticising the 'dominant' member of a family?

Marge however, is a complex character representing the reliable nurturer and servant. The opening credits demonstrate and summarise her daily and routinely tasks for example looking after Maggie and shopping. She is rarely seen as a male sex object as she embodies few exaggerating feminine qualities. She has big hair and eyelashes and wears dresses yet her dress is not 'suggesting' in a sexual way, but distinguishing her as a woman in a dominant sense. She has traditional feminine emotions and some feminist values yet she generally keeps her feelings to herself. Marge stereotypically fulfils the criteria for a housewife, making apparent the problems many women encounter. She is treated as the 'lesser' member of the family, ignored by her husband and unappreciated by her children. Her needs are constantly disregarded for those of her family. This disregard could perhaps represent American society's dismissal of women.

Bart is often used to show the failures of public schools. He is the child that the system has predetermined will fail. The opening sequence of an episode shows Bart repeatedly writing a phrase on the class blackboard. These phrases are usually critical of issues reflecting society's fears, especially the education system. " I will not expose the ignorance of this faculty" and " this punishment is not boring and pointless" to

name a few. Bart exposes a hypocritical and uncaring nature of the education system and criticises in many ways.

Lisa on the other hand, is not a failure. She is intelligent beyond her years making her an outcast amongst her family and her peers. She is the idea of rationality, and the voice of reason personified. She is often at odds with the entire community, suggesting the dismissal of reason in American culture. She definitely does not see Homer as a bearer of knowledge, and talks to him bluntly about and against his thoughtless plans as though he were a child. Although at heart she loves him for all his stupidity and his naively, caring nature. Lisa crusades against injustice and continually strives to correct or improve things that she sees as wrong. She does all this despite the pressure from her mother and father and the community she lives in not to do this. Her character captures rationality in the insane world of The Simpsons.

A controversial character Waylon Smithers is a closet homosexual. He is forced to forever hide this aspect of this life from his peers and work colleagues to gain their acceptance. He is infatuated with his boss Mr. Burns, and every opportunity that arises for him to declare his true self he declines.

The programme attracts a wide variety of audiences, ranging from the young to the old. Predominantly, it would seem that the immediate audience would be the youth of our society, as it has been children that animation and cartoon producers target. Traditionally this statement could be supported by comics such as Peanuts and The Beano that were largely purchased by the children of that time. However it is obvious that The Simpsons has a larger, mass audience, as it appeals to many different people on many different levels. Each episode of The Simpsons is an open text, allowing the audience to decide upon their personal reading of the text, be it preferred, negotiated or oppositional. Every issue raised within a specific episode results in a different interpretation depending on the individual. The Simpsons possesses a ‘top layer’ that allows the mass audience to be entertained by the humour and the jokes used with the series. However the deeper jokes lie beneath this, relating to issues of historical occurrence, current events, popular culture and many more. The true comedy of these jokes are revealed when the moral of these issues is truly understood.

An example of this within the text could be found in the episode “E-I-E-I (Annoyed Grunt)” In this episode Homer cultivates a product, a hybrid of tomatoes and tobacco with the aid of radioactive chemicals. The tobacco industry make an offer to Homer when they hear of his addictive product. Homer refuses, yet the tobacco company steal the product in the night. Meanwhile the farm animals on the cultivating plant have become addicted to the ‘tomacco’ plant and kill the directors of the tobacco industry in order to feed their addictions.

Some audience members could portray this episode as being purely entertainment, with no moral consequence attached to it at all. This would be a reflection of McQuail's Mass Communication theory. However it could also be read as an apparent satire on the tobacco industry – the addictiveness of its products and the negative moral issues surrounding the marketing of these products.

The Simpsons also uses techniques associated with postmodernism in order to subvert and critique traditional sitcom notions such as the 'warm moment,' wherein everyone embraces, all problems are solved and we learn a valuable moral lesson. This is displayed prominently in the episode "Blood Feud." In this episode Bart donates blood to save the life of Mr Burns; Homer's boss, and the owner of the town's nuclear power plant. Hoping to ingratiate himself, and thereby receive a generous reward, Homer forces Bart to donate. When the family receives nothing more than a "thank you" Homer dashes off a sarcastic note, infuriating Mr Burns, who in turn immediately decides to have Homer killed. But Mr Burns has a change of heart and decides to give the Simpsons a gift after all: a stone head, an ancient Olmec Indian carving so large it completely fills their living room. With the Simpsons gathered round the head, staring at it, eating dinner on trays, the episode denies us closure and any sense of a lesson by self – consciously ending with a debate on the moral of the show:

Marge: The moral of this story is "A good deed is its own reward."

Bart: Hey we got a reward. The head is cool!

Marge: Well then, I guess the moral is "No good deed goes unrewarded."

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Homer: Wait a minute. If I hadn't written that nasty letter, we wouldn't have gotten anything.

Marge: Well, I guess the moral is "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Lisa: Perhaps there is no moral to this story.

Homer: Exactly. It's a bunch of stuff that happened.

This self-conscious/reflective quality of The Simpsons is plentiful, with numerous examples. The beginning sequence for The Simpsons possesses the same structural basis each episode, although there are three distinctive features that alter. The first being Bart's blackboard lines, detailing his mischievous behaviour, for example "I will not....." "I will not..." "I will not..." Secondly is Lisa's saxophone solo, with which she disrupts her orchestra practice. The solo that she plays is evidently different each time. But the feature with possibly the greatest force of importance is the title sequence's final 'scene,' when the family join together in their living room. In one particular episode the family run in together from the left-hand side of the screen. They run across to the right hand side and run straight out of the frame. Filmic frames, with the end of a photographic roll are shown and the rest of the space is white. The family run back into the frame with their living room drawn out and sit together on their sofa.

The Simpsons manages to shatter the fictional illusion that most narratives own, and does so, knowingly. The fact that The Simpsons is a cartoon, aids the matter, and it allows the characters to live in a world of absurdity. The Simpsons deal with implausibility, in that their lives consist of events that are

unlikely to happen to the average, everyday person. For example in several different episodes Homer becomes an astronaut, a pop icon, a ‘stunt’ man, and a manager of a Country and Western female singer. Homer is able to rise and fall to any economic or social level of importance rapidly. A characteristic that seems to belong to those who live a wealthy lifestyle, and not one for the working class.

An episode of The Simpsons speaks of both the rampant commodification and the postmodern qualities of the show. In Bart Gets Famous, Bart becomes a commodity in his world, within the television show, when he appears as a fill-in on the Krusty the Clown variety show. Frightened and excited by his opportunity to perform, Bart forgets his single line, and accidentally destroys the set. His immediate reply “I didn’t do it,” is an automated response, his excuse derived from his years of ‘bad’ behaviour. But the audience accepts it as part of the act, think it hilarious and instantly it is reproduced. So Bart unintentionally becomes a pop culture icon. His commodification is compounded by the rapid production of a cheap biography, a recording contract and a hit song, a Bart – Chat hotline and a Bart Simpson doll.

The irony of this episode is that this commodification is really happening in the ‘outside’ world. After the initial televised success of The Simpsons there followed: ‘Bartspeak’ -well known phrases such as “Eat my Shorts,” “Ay, Carumba” and “I didn’t do it, nobody saw me do it, you can’t prove anything,” the distribution of his image, comic books, a hit album ‘The Simpsons sing the Blues’ and recently figurines of characters featured within the series, beyond the Simpsons household. The shows producers, obviously

aware of the parallels created between this particular episode and the ‘outside’ world, self – consciously played upon this.

They realise that the irony in The Simpsons depends upon a certain degree of sarcasm on the part of the audience regarding commercial television and its mission of providing advertisers with a market. This episode cited however ends on a tellingly self – reflective note. Having found himself suddenly unpopular, when the hype has died and the next trend has begun, Bart is at home with his family, absorbing their consolation. Bart’s sister Lisa says “ Now you can go back to being you instead of a two – dimensional character with a silly catchphrase,” which in one sense, is all that Bart Simpson ever was. The episode then develops and we hear the remainder of all the other major characters catchphrases. Lisa however refuses to follow the development, and simply states “ I’ll be in my room.” Homer, Bart’s Dad then asks, “ What kind of a catchphrase is that?” So, we can see that The Simpsons is critical of its role in the production of popular culture.

Among other things The Simpsons is able to blatantly expose, hypocritically, issues that affect the Western world, particularly that of modern day America. During a particular series it raises topics of pop psychology, child – rearing, commercialism, consumerism, religion, the environment, corporate greed and education. It deals with these issues satirically, with one common, focus, issue of the show’s satire displayed in “ The Itchy and Scratchy Show.”

“ The Itchy and Scratchy show” details the exploits of a cat and mouse comedy team possibly modelled on Tom and Jerry, but there is one major difference, the narratives of the Itchy and Scratchy show every gruesome

detail of the ways in which this cat and mouse team seek to destroy one another. They are forever being sliced, disembowelled, skinned, beheaded, impaled, and exploding. Of the violence in cartoons and live-action shows, Matt Groening has said: “ My problem ... is that there’s an anticipation of cruelty which I find really repugnant.”

Groening satirizes America’s desire for cruelty by offering it up in spades: “ The Itchy and Scratchy Show” takes the violence associated with contemporary cartoons to the extreme, and confrontationally exposing the powerful appeal of violence, the manner in which it is marketed to children, and the blasphemous attitude towards it that parents adopt.

“ The Itchy and Scratchy Show” appears regularly on The Simpsons offering violent entertainment for its two primary audiences – both the Simpson family and the viewers of The Simpsons show. These programmes were always without any overt commentary at the sitcom’s diegetic level – the satire was allowed to speak for itself. But in “ Itchy & Scratchy & Marge” Marge is disturbed by the amount of time her children spend watching this cartoon, and the influence that the exposed violence has upon them.

Marge organises a moral campaign attempting to ban the Itchy & Scratchy cartoon. They win the case, and the children of Springfield lose their cartoon. The following scene is accompanied by the sounds of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, where the children emerge from their homes into the sunny streets outdoors. It appears to be the first time that their existences are freed from society’s traps. But this traditional happy ending is quickly abolished, when a new problem arises. The campaign group that Marge

founded wish to ban the appearance of Michelangelo's "David." Marge is opposed to this idea and realises that if 'great art' is to be protected from censorship, popular art must be as well. At the closing of this episode Bart and Lisa are again watching "The Itchy & Scratchy Show," and Marge looks on, wondering if she has done the right thing.

This episode addresses its own complicity in the controversial issue of violence on television and the censorship issues regarding children. As David Berkman, rightly enforces to question whether it is only in the cartoon, the "visually unreal," that we are able to accept the harsh realities that show is attempting to display to us.

Through looking at the aspects of The Simpsons that make it a postmodern text I conclude...

#### Bibliography

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