

Simpsonic / Simpsonian adj. *The ridiculously or bizarrely entertaining, humorous or hilarious.*

THE SIMPSONS: Morality from the ‘Immoral’ & Truth from the ‘Absurd’

by Frank G. Sterle, Jr.

Contrary to the perceptions of many television viewers, Matt Groening’s *The Simpsons*—a PG/14+/PGv/TVG/TVPGD rated (depending on the episode content and national origin of transmission) animation about a hilariously idiotic father (Homer Simpson), a ridiculously big-blue-haired mother (Marge), a contemptuous and very mischievous son (Bart), a very intelligent and humanitarian daughter (Lisa), and a soother-addicted infant girl (Maggie)—is one of the most moral and enlightening animated programs on modern TV, especially when considering the typically-socially-liberal audience for whom the show is generally produced.

In this satirical cartoon, intended for consumers with an adequately-mature mind (which admittedly can be subjective terminology and point-of-reference), *The Simpsons* mocks the imbecilic, hypocritical, callous and even mean-spirited attitudes of much of American society, including those of elements within entrenched, established religions and public institutions (e.g. political office and the justice system).

Yes, without doubt, the show can get overly bizarre and/or quite crude in its humour: A very-good example is the episode in which the Simpson family go to Japan, and Homer relieves his bowels into a hotel-washroom toilet bowl with a built-in camera at the very bottom; and meanwhile, his family incidentally (though very briefly) catch the grotesque action on a video screen in another room. Another worthy example is the annual *Simpsons* Halloween Specials, in which the viewer can see, among many other things, the attack of a mysterious gas that turns people inside out, with the odd globs of blood splattering, for effect.

Nevertheless, it can justifiably be said that such a sacrifice—i.e. having to watch a very-few potentially crude and somewhat disturbing *Simpsons* scenes—is worth it, since the show in return mostly procures heart-lightening laughter.

While “truth” is typically universally defined, “morality” can easily be more complicated, especially with the prevalence of moral relativism in contemporary society. Nonetheless, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) defines “morality” (noun) as, “[the] principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour ...” And to also utilize my own point of reference for this essay’s thesis statement, let the definition of “morality” also include: ‘To not practice greed, selfishness or the exploitation of others; to hold respect for all life and the planet on which that life exists; to feel and show consideration and compassion toward all life; to do one’s very best to not feel ill will nor practice ill deeds toward others; to practice what’s obviously in all children’s best interests; to treat all beings equally and fairly, and—most importantly—to avoid (to the very best of one’s ability) causing pointless, gratuitous suffering.’

Those who consume *The Simpsons* episodes as frequently and enthusiastically as

I, will likely, if they are objectively truthful, attest to the fact that the show parodies virtually all aspects of society. For the very most part, the show does not shield any proverbial sacred cow; rather, it exposes, ridicules and publicly re-examines basically all aspects, good and bad, of society.

Of course, the acts of societal idiocies and hypocrisies which *The Simpsons* mocks are too plentiful to include in this essay in their entirety; and the ones that will be included in this essay will be categorized:

HOMOSEXUALITY

Although *The Simpsons* does not promote the homosexual lifestyle, it nonetheless has a favourably tolerant attitude towards homosexual persons and their lifestyle; it also humourously mocks the unjustified homophobia displayed by some of the heterosexual characters.

Also, *Simpsons* consumers should note the homosexual character, Waylon Smithers, a rather noble man who devoutly admires his boss, multi-billionaire nuclear-power-plant owner Montgomery Burns, almost to the point of worship; indeed, Smithers is quite faithful to his boss, for whom he both lusts and holds love. Sure, Smithers can occasionally be a malicious character, but is so basically only when his relationship with Burns, in some manner or another, is being threatened.

A *Simpsons* viewer might recall the episode in which Smithers is portrayed as one with a tortured conscience when his boss orders him to have employee Homer Simpson severely beaten by hired goons (a consequence of a nasty letter to Burns by Homer); and even with Smithers' intense devotion to Burns and his wishes, Smithers is nonetheless compelled to do the moral/humane thing by not having Burns' order carried out. (Albeit, Smithers also had in mind the fact that Homer's son, Bart, donated life-saving blood to Burns.)

Smithers also (reluctantly and gently) rebukes Burns in another episode in which Burns, going mad and absolutely corrupt with absolute power, steals an oil well that was supposed to have greatly benefited the Springfield school, under which the oil pocket was situated. And Smithers challenges the (im)morality of Burns' deeds when the latter plots, through the use of a giant shield, to literally block out the sunlight from the dwellers of Springfield, so that the residents would be forced to purchase and consume even more of his power-plant electricity to light-up the darkened town. (Also in that episode, Smithers sadly reveals the fact that Burns "is the closest thing I've ever had to a friend".)

Admittedly, however, the show does simultaneously make Smithers' subtly-expressed homosexuality humourous to the average heterosexual viewer through Smithers' unorthodox focus of his adoration and lust: an evil, very ugly (physically and non-physically), withered, cruel, very rich yet very miserly, liver-spotted and scrawny 104-year-old man.

But on the other hand, in another episode, though allowing stereotypically-gay characters—i.e., blatantly flamboyant and feminine—to be the butt of the show's humour, *The Simpsons* mostly mocks the hilariously (albeit insensitively) homophobic attitudes of Homer ("Bart's going to grow up straight, for once!" in reference to Homer taking his son Bart on a deer-hunting trip) and his closest pals, Barney Gumble (the town drunk) and Moe Szyslak (the bar-owner and -tender). Furthermore, that episode's main guest and openly-gay character is portrayed as a very fun, intelligent, tolerant and quite-

forgiving man, who also eventually becomes the hero by saving the three homophobic men and Bart from a small herd of violent reindeer.

And at least as favourable to the “homosexual person” was the episode in which Homer, through the use of a new-breakthrough product on the market, grows a full head of hair, literally overnight. Thus, when Homer gets noticed and promoted by Burns (because of his new hair, of course), Homer must hire an assistant, Karl; and Karl turns out to be an absolutely great human being, who also is obviously (at least to me) a gay man. Indeed, the actor who does Karl’s extremely hoarse voice is an openly gay man).

FIREARM-OWNERS RIGHTS MENTALITY IN AMERICA

Not surprisingly, *The Simpsons* also mocks Americans’ rampant gun-ownership mentality and its obvious resulting dangers.

One noteworthy episode had Homer almost-effortlessly acquire a handgun to “defend my family” and championing completely unhindered gun-ownership rights; and being the utter fool that he is, Homer very-dangerously handles his firearm to the point of absurdity (e.g. opening his can of beer with his handgun). And while staunchly supporting unconditional gun ownership supposedly to defend national sovereignty, Homer asks his daughter Lisa, “How would you like it if the King of England came over and started pushing you around?” Also, when Bart asks him if the former can hold the handgun, Homer tells him, “Only if you clean your room”.

IMMIGRATION & FOREIGNERS

Judging from the show’s parodies on this issue, the story/script writers of *The Simpsons* likely sympathize with the plight of immigrants at the hands of intolerant, bigoted and often-ignorant American-born citizens. (Bart proves that he’s of the latter with his ironically-ignorant reaction to sister Lisa’s rational assertion that one should not judge another nation especially when one has not even been to that nation: “Yeah, they do that [prejudge] in Russia,” he says, oblivious the fact that he’s never been to anywhere near Russia.)

One episode on this issue began with the Springfield community demanding basically unlimited protection from stray bears—including a stealth bomber as a part of the new “Bear Patrol”—but end up focusing their outrage over a small tax increase because of the expensive “Bear Patrol” at the mayor, Diamond Joe Quimby. (Homer idiotically calls the tax “the biggest tax increase in [U.S.] history”; however, Lisa immediately rebuts him: “actually, Dad, it’s the *smallest* tax increase in [U.S.] history”. Regardless, Homer rebuts his daughter with his irate, brainless suggestion: “Let the bears pay the Bear Patrol tax; I pay the Homer Tax”; and Lisa again corrects her foolish father: “You mean the Homeowners’ Tax”.)

At another point in the episode, Homer says to Lisa, “There’s not a single bear in sight—the ‘Bear Patrol’ is working like a charm”.

“That’s specious reasoning,” Lisa retorts.

“Thanks, honey,” Homer says to her, adoringly.

“According to your logic,” she says, picking up a stone from their lawn, “this rock keeps tigers away”.

“Hmmm. How does it work?”

“It doesn’t.”

“How so?” Homer asks further.

“It’s just a rock,” she says. “But I don’t see a tiger, anywhere.”

“Lisa,” concludes Homer, while pulling out his wallet, “I want to buy your rock.”

As for the town’s mayor, he soon, in a cowardly and typically-political fashion, blames “illegal immigrants” for the miniscule \$5 “Bear Patrol tax”. “Tackling this issue calls for real leadership,” Quimby boasts to his assistant, just before the scene changes to one in which the mayor is making an announcement to the townspeople: “Your taxes are high because of illegal immigrants,” he erroneously accuses, to the agreeing grumble of the gathered mob. “That’s right—illegal immigrants.” He goes on to say that the town needs to get rid of them through Proposition 24 (which eventually passes with ninety-five percent of the popular vote). Of course, the town gets all riled up—with the obvious exception of the foreigners, the much-more-enlightened Lisa and her compassionate mother, Marge. One town bully child, Nelson Muntz, tells a foreign exchange student, “Hey, German boy; go back to Germania”. The episode is, rightly so, rife with ironic examples of blatant hypocrisy, such as that by Moe; although he’s one of the most vocal supporters of Proposition 24, he, while donning a fake moustache, ends up being one of those taking the last-minute citizenship test. Also, in one scene, while charging that the illegal immigrants should at least learn proper English if they wish to stay in the U.S., Moe is shown painting onto a large wooden sign the revealing proclamation, “United States for United Statesians”. But after Homer sees the proverbial (humane) light, he makes a hilarious attempt at some last-minute coaching of illegal-immigrant and convenience-store clerk Apu Nahasapeemapetilon in anticipation of the latter’s taking of the U.S. citizenship test. Ironically, though, it turns out that Apu knows far more about the U.S. and its history than do the American-born Homer and other proud, born-in-the-U.S., anti-immigration thinkers. Homer, while trying to teach Apu about the U.S. presidential election system, ignorantly and foolishly makes a reference to the American “electrical college”.

TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

I, a meat eater, found that the only issue on which *The Simpsons* apparently takes an ideologically partisan, albeit also informative, position is that of meat-consuming society, even at the risk of offending/losing a large portion of the show’s meat-eating fans.

In that most profound episode on this very worthy issue, he parodies (i.e. mocks and intellectually exposes) the barbarity of the inhumane, claustrophobia-inducing, production-line conditions that carnivorous society utilizes for producing the meat we so crave.

In one scene, Lisa Simpson, who is just acquiring a vegetarian philosophy and has expressed her moral concerns to her school’s principal, Seymour Skinner. In turn, he decides (for the sake of having “open dialogue”, he claims) to have Lisa and her class watch a pro-meat-consumption, meat-industry propaganda film titled *Meat and You: Partners In Freedom*. In that film, the contents of which are wallowed-up by Lisa’s classmates in conformity to the meat industry, “actor Troy McClure” tells “Jimmy”, a coached little boy, how important and not immoral meat-eating and the meat industry are. Jimmy—who tries to regain his composure following his quick tour through a slaughterhouse, in which he witnesses the assembly-line slaughter of cattle—asks/tells

McClure, “I have a crazy friend who says it’s wrong to eat meat. Is he crazy?”; to this, McClure matter-of-factly replies in his typically-buoyant voice, “No, just ignorant!”

Later on in the episode, when Homer throws an everybody’s-invited all-meat-barbeque, Lisa gets mocked by all of the guests when she offers them a large bowl of iced tomato soup and tells them that thus nobody there needs to eat the meat. “Go back to Russia!” is Barney Gumble’s opinion of Lisa’s vegetarian suggestion.

Not surprisingly, towards the episode’s conclusion, Lisa, observing the plethora of pro-meat-eating advertisements all around her and ready to give in (though she doesn’t), frustratingly exclaims, “Uuuugh! The whole world wants me to eat meat! I can’t fight it anymore!” She goes into the Kwik-E-Mart, purchases what she believes to be a regular hot dog and bites into it: “There! Is everyone happy?!” Then, Kwik-E-Mart clerk Apu (a vegetarian Hindu), having asked her what she thinks of the new Veggie Dog prepared-products, takes her upstairs onto the store’s roof, where he keeps a garden along with *Simpsons* guest-stars Paul and Linda McCartney (known vegetarians and animal-rights activists). Lisa rhetorically asks them, “When will all those fools learn that [meat-eating is not necessary]?”

In another episode about a travelling carnival and two of its employees, Homer and Bart were at the last second spared from having to bite off the heads of live chickens to practice for the carnival’s freak show. Homer stuffs the two chickens back into a small cage already inhumanely packed full with other chickens; as he does so, he quite-ironically reassures the two chickens how fortunate they are to still have their heads attached: “You must be the luckiest chickens in the whole world!”

The Simpsons again brilliantly exposes meat-eating society’s hypocrisy in one particularly hilarious episode in which Homer acquires a love and adoration for a lobster he bought in its infancy to raise/grow for the sole purpose of eventually harvesting for his consumption. However, Homer unexpectedly becomes quite attached to the baby-eyed lobster and instead decides to keep it as a family pet; though he later accidentally cooks his good crustacean friend when he attempts to pleasure his pet by treating it to a nice, relaxing hot bath. Homer, while in bitter mourning, nonetheless eats the meat from his beloved pet; in fact, as he weeps, Homer simultaneously savours eating the delicious lobster meat, in between mournful sobs, with every mouthful of his cherished pet. Homer’s ludicrous behaviour is indicative of society’s (general) claim to love some animals while allowing other animals to suffer so we can enjoy eating a delicious slab of meat for but gratuitous purposes.

In another episode, the Simpsons go to a new restaurant at which one can choose a live cow to have slaughtered right before you. In response to Lisa’s revulsion at the very thought of such, her mother says to her: “Maybe the animal likes to be the center of attention”.

THE JUSTICE SYSTEM & ITS CORRUPTION

According to *The Simpsons*’ parodies, the justice system (at least in the U.S.) is, at best, incompetent and sometimes even corrupt.

In one episode, multi-billionaire Burns gets caught and arrested, tried for and convicted of repeatedly depositing barrels of his power plant’s toxic waste in city-park tree trunks. Having been ordered by the judge to pay a large fine to the town as punishment, Burns, who’s bodily restrained, tells Smithers to reach into the former’s

pocket to give the judge the fine money, while adding, “Oh, and I’ll take that statue of Justice, too”. The judge, in return, slams his gavel down hard and exclaims, “Sold!”

When Burns, in another episode, romantically pursues Marge but then fires her when she refuses his advances, she hires the inept (and thus quite cheap to hire) lawyer Lionel Hutz. Marge, Hutz and Homer meet with Burns and his plethora of high-priced lawyers, and at the sight of Burns’ expensive, multitudinous Dream-Team, Hutz runs off screaming in panic. A downcast Marge then suggests that the two of them go home— “Well, I guess that’s it; people like us can’t afford justice ... We might as well go home”.

CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Apparently, the biggest jab that *The Simpsons* takes at contemporary society is directed at the infestation of violence in American (and Canadian) entertainment.

The most prominent indicator of violence in *The Simpsons* is when Homer, furious at Bart, throttles the boy’s neck, basically for some mischievous act on the boy’s part. Although this behaviour on Homer’s part is not tolerated in our society, it’s still paraded as humor within the show. However, though not explicit, Homer’s violent behavior is designed to act as a negative characteristic on his part, mostly by the hysterically-emotional expression on his face as he assaults the boy.

Having pointed the above-mentioned out, in one quite-memorable episode, Marge takes up the cause of eliminating—or at least reducing—gratuitous cartoon violence after her infant Maggie hits Homer on his head with a hammer, after having just watched a typically-violent scene from the show’s children’s cartoon, *Itchy & Scratchy*; one of the cartoon’s two characters (*Itchy*, the mouse) hits the other character (*Scratchy*, the cat) on his head with a large mallet. (It should be noted that the *Itchy & Scratchy* cartoons solely consist of that mouse viciously dismembering, beating, burning, blowing-up, etc., the cat.). Towards the end of that *Simpsons* episode, Marge is asked to take up the cause of banning the genital-revealing sculpture of Michelangelo’s *David*; however, when she, for artistic reasons, respectfully declines, adults who had defended/tolerated the gratuitous cartoon violence of *Itchy & Scratchy* were quick to demand the censorship of the frontally nude *David* sculpture. This scenario is indeed quite typical of American mainstream TV-entertainment, in which you can see a man cave in another’s chest, but you cannot view a woman’s bare breast.

Nonetheless, in *The Simpsons* world, all children (with the notable exception of the unusually-pacifistic Flanders boys) absolutely love *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*. Bart and Lisa are frequently shown breaking out in fervent laughter when watching the hideously-violent cartoon, which any objective viewer will accurately perceive as being about as humorous as a headache, i.e. not the least bit funny—a fact which is very likely the show’s creators’ full intention: for much is said about society’s children, and society’s morals, when such a gratuitously-violent cartoon amuses the youth and keeps them intent on their continuous consumption of the cartoon. For example, in another very memorable episode where Bart and Lisa have just watched the cartoon and have cracked-up laughing, Bart immediately asks of Lisa, in a quite serious and sincere tone of voice, “If I ever stop loving violence, I want you to shoot me”; and to his request, Lisa, who’s uncharacteristically fond of the intensely-violent cartoon, assuredly agrees.

Also quite memorable was the episode in which Bart and Lisa battle each other on opposing Pee Wee ice-hockey teams and become violent with each other—both on and

off the ice—for no other reason than a “little, healthy competition”. During the games, the audience members are also filled with anger and rage because of this competition, and mindless violence breaks out amongst them.

Although *The Simpsons* viewers are very unlikely, if there’s any chance at all, to see violence endured by any of the female characters, the opposite goes for the male characters, especially violence against the latter’s most sensitive and vulnerable part of their bodies—the genitals.

Note one such groin-bashing-humour episode, where Homer builds a small tennis court in his yard. He playfully and (unfortunately for him) successfully pulls open the front of his shorts to catch a pop-fly-like return of the tennis ball—“It’s *in* the bag,” he says, cockily—though not without literally keeling over sideways onto the tarmac in excruciating pain.

WEALTH & POVERTY

Watching *The Simpsons* forces the show’s consumers’ to (a large extent) acknowledge our society’s wealth gaps, poverty and food wasting; although in one episode, included was a reference (through the mouth of the most passive, friendly and perhaps quirkiest Christian in town, Ned Flanders) to some welfare recipients as being those who “just don’t feel like working—God bless ’em”.

In the episode where Bart ruins the family Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner, Smithers prepares for his master, Burns, a many-course dinner that would feed a multitude. Burns takes a tiny bite of turkey and says, “Mmmm—delicious! Smithers, every year you outstrip yourself in succulence ...”; and to this, Smithers replies, “Would you like some candied yams, sir?” Astonishingly, Burns casually tells his minion, “No—I couldn’t eat another bite”; and gesturing to the plethora of untouched prepared foods on the long table, Burns instructs, “Now dispose of all this, Smithers”. But Burns then adds, “However, I do have just enough room left for some of your delicious homemade pumpkin pie”. (All the while, Bart, who has run off away from his angered family, is so hungry that he plots how he can make off with Smithers’ pie, which is cooling off on a mansion windowsill.)

In another episode, *The Simpsons* takes a much-deserved jab at capitalist society and its allowance of the wealthiest of citizens to pay the least—if any at all—income tax, through their utilization of tax-law loopholes. In that episode, while all of the working stiffs in Springfield are hurriedly filing their tax forms on tax deadline day, Homer, having gotten the previous tax year confused with the current one, foolishly believes that he already has done his duty. But when Marge and Lisa enlighten him on the matter, Homer does his tax-form preparations and filing at the very last minute; and as a result of his ludicrous sloppiness, he ends up getting audited by the IRS. Meanwhile, multi-billionaire Burns asks Smithers if they (i.e., Burns, through Smithers) had filed his tax forms and how much he’d have to pay; and Smithers replies that, “Actually, sir, with our creative accounting we’re only paying \$3 a year”. Burns then curses the tax-grabbing IRS for soaking him and irately expresses his displeasure to Smithers, “You’re right—we’re getting screwed!”

As well, through another episode, the show takes a (perhaps also deserved) jab at chronic-billionaire Microsoft-chairman Bill Gates. When Homer decides to start up his own website-service business, Bill Gates, with the aid of two goons, “buys out” Homer’s

new enterprise; but rather than pay Homer, Gates has his goons tear apart Homer's meagre desk and equipment. At Homer's astonishment, Gates maliciously giggles: "You don't think that I get rich by writing cheques, do you?"

However, *The Simpsons* does not fail to implicate perhaps life's most bitter of ironies and greatest injustices: i.e., very/too often those who need greater wealth the very least—those who are the richest—are the most likely candidates to receive the loot.

Such as with the episode in which Kent Brockman, the very-well-paid Emmy-winning newsman for Channel 6, reads out on air the big-jackpot-a whopping \$130,000,000-lottery's winning numbers and realizes that indeed *he* is the winner. (Making multi-billionaire Burns the winner would have been pushing it a little too far.)

But the Burns character was utilized as such an example in the episode in which Marge becomes a Springfield police officer. Kwik-E-Mart clerk Apu, believing Marge to be just another typically-corrupt Springfield police officer, places down a thick wad of bribe money down onto the checkout counter for Marge to take. However, both turn and face in opposite directions, each expecting the other to remove the money (a fair amount a cash, from appearances), though both refuse to budge. But sure enough, Burns happens to be walking by (though neither notices him), sees the vulnerable wad of money and exploits the situation by taking the cash, unseen. A couple of seconds later, Apu and Marge finally turn around to see the money gone, each convinced that the other had taken the bribe money: "That's better," the two say, simultaneously.

POLITICS & THE ENVIRONMENT

In *The Simpsons*, politicians and ecological degraders, along with the gratuitously and greedy rich, receive the brunt of the show's often-stinging parody.

During one episode, Bart, one of two class-student presidential candidates (who was nominated by the purple-haired twins, Sherri and Terri), tells his classmates, "I had a speech ready, but my dog ate it"; to this witticism, he, of course, receives an approvingly amused classmate audience.

Furthermore, when his concerned political opponent, Martin Prince, competently points out to his peers that an asbestos sample taken from their very own classroom infrastructure revealed a health-hazardous 1.74 parts per million of cancer-causing asbestos, Bart declares that his opponent's promise to remove the hazardous element is wrong: "That [the amount of asbestos in the school's structure] is not enough! We demand *more asbestos! MORE ASBESTOS! MORE ASBESTOS! MORE ASBESTOS! ...*"

To top off his ludicrous demagoguery, Bart politically slams his opponent: "He [Martin] says, there's no any easy answers; I say: *he's not looking hard enough!*"

Of course, in response to all of Bart's demagoguery, his fellow students wildly cheer him on; though justice wins out at the end; for, while his classmates are foolishly careless enough to vote for Bart, they are also foolishly careless enough to forget or simply not bother to cast a ballot for their favorite demagogue candidate, Bart. Thus, Bart loses the election.

As for "democratic" politics, *The Simpsons* drips with cynicism on the subject.

In one episode, in which Sideshow Bob ("Robert Underdunk Terwilliger") fraudulently gets himself elected (briefly) as mayor of Springfield, sitting mayor Quimby expresses his main concern while in political office—doing what the mob-like masses of the town want of him so that he can get perpetually re-elected: "If that is the way the

winds are blowing, let no one say that I don't also blow."

In the particularly hilarious episode about Homer's campaign for and election to the office of sanitation commissioner—an unforgettable episode in which the show mocks the near-insanity with which too-much of society treats its solid waste—Homer's utterly-lazy (non)response to bartender Moe's suggestion that Homer come up with a catchy election-campaign slogan is to whine, "Awwwwe! Can't somebody else do it?!". But ironically his whine, thanks to Moe's exploitive thinking, turns into Homer's winning motto, "*Let somebody else do it!*". (Relevant to this episode and its message is that of another in which Homer matter-of-factly explains to daughter Lisa about politicians' purpose: "The whole reason we have elected officials is so we don't have to think all the time.") In order to fulfill his crazy election promise of having the homeowners' job of getting their own refuse to the curb done for them, Homer, desperately requiring the funds with which to pay the wages of the extra garbage collectors, agrees to accept with open arms the syringe (etc.) infested refuse of neighbouring towns. Homer—typically unable to foresee past the end of his stubby nose—then packs so much garbage into the ground that he simply leaves no more space in which to hold further waste; thus the trash begins to literally pop up through the ground elsewhere—and in quite poetic manners, too: it pops up through the green at the luxurious local golf course right where the rich and famous are playing their sport; and up through the podium at the town hall, right into the face of the adulterous, corrupt mayor Quimby. When the town has had enough of this repulsive mess, Homer simply and literally ups the town of Springfield onto large moving trucks and has it moved to ground not yet befouled by man.

In another episode, an oil freighter becomes grounded and a crude-oil spill occurs at Baby Seal Beach. When Lisa, who's watching the news in the company of her family, learns of this disaster, she laments, "Oh, no!" And Homer, being the incredibly idiotic buffoon he is, gently reassures her: "Don't worry, sweetie; there's lots more oil where that came from."

And Homer's ridiculous reassurance to Lisa sounds just like something Burns would say. Indeed, environmental/ecological concerns are way beyond his narrow scope; for example, when Lisa asks Burns if his power plant has a recycling policy, a quite bewildered Burns looks wide-eyed down into Lisa's face and barely pronounces, "ree-cyy-ccliing??" He then scans his mental dictionary, in which such a revolutionary, radical concept as "recycling" is nowhere to be found.

However, the absence of a power-plant recycling policy pales in comparison to Burns—in the episode in which he unsuccessfully runs for governor of state (where ever that may be)—permitting, amongst some other atrociously-dangerous power-plant practices, one of his nuclear-reactor's cracked exterior casing to be sealed with a piece of chewed bubblegum: "I'm just as shocked as you are!" Burns attempts to convince the unconvinced safety inspector.

THE MEDIA

Not surprisingly, *The Simpsons* throws much-deserved jabs at the media, both news and entertainment.

Although the rest of the episode was unrelated to media conduct, the very beginning of one episode had Marge opening up the day's mail at the breakfast table, which is surrounded by the Simpsons family. "It's from *The New Yorker* magazine

subscription department,” says Marge, disappointedly, reading the contents of one letter. “They’ve rejected our subscription application, again.” Obviously, no publication would turn down a subscription request; however, anyone familiar with the aristocrat-like, ivory-tower publishing policy of *The New Yorker* would understand the above-mentioned dig at that publication.

As for parodying the news-media’s influence (usually negative, in this animation) on the often-gullible masses, *The Simpsons* makes its mockery through its cocky and confident character Kent Brockman, the local news anchor and host of *Springfield Action News*, *Eye on Springfield*, *Smartline* and *My Two Cents*. In the episode about a staunchly-feminist-minded babysitter’s (mistaken, though sincere) accusation that Homer sexually harassed her, Brockman notes that a local public-opinion poll found that 98 percent of the public believes that Homer is guilty of the accusation made against him; though (unfortunately, according to Brockman’s tone of voice) the poll is not legally binding—though it will be binding if a referendum on a relevant Proposition is passed by the people, he adds.

The entertainment media receive a figurative slap in the face via *The Simpsons*, particularly in one area all too prevalent in and typical of Hollywood clichés—an area that apparently will never become too tiresome, and especially never too immoral, for entertainment-media consumers: i.e. swift whacks to the male genitalia, where the unfortunate recipient keels over in excruciating pain:

Such is one episode in which Springfield holds a film festival, and Homer acts as one of the judges. One film, titled *Man Getting Hit by Football in the Groin*, is produced and submitted by Hans Moleman—a shrivelled, short, myopic, elderly Springfield resident, who’s also a hapless driver that wears glasses with lenses two-inches thick. His film consists of naught but him stepping out of his house only to have a thrown football land in his groin. He, of course, drops his walking cane, clasps both hands over his crotch and falls over sideways onto the ground, trembling with what us males know to be unimaginable suffering. Homer, unlike the rest of the judges and audience, breaks out in roaring laughter, barely containing himself in his seat: “This contest is over!” Homer laughs. “Give that man the \$10,000!” (A prize that doesn’t even exist.) Marge, sitting next to him, embarrassingly and angrily informs him, “Homer, this isn’t *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. Later, after Marge has scolded him for his stupidity and lack of professionalism, Homer, who holds the tie-breaking vote, weighs the pros and cons on which way to vote: “... but *Football In The Groin* has a football in the groin”. And near the end of the episode, *Man Getting Hit by Football In The Groin* is entered and played for another audience at another film festival (though not in Springfield); but in this version, Hans Moleman is replaced with an animation version of actor George C. Scott, who keels over sideways onto the ground and painfully groans after getting hit by the football—“Ughhhh! ... my groin!”

CHARITY

It is in that same episode about the crude-oil spill that *The Simpsons* duly exposes the propensity of the people, as a whole, to be choosy about which charitable/social cause they will support, usually depending on how fashionable that cause happens to be.

When Lisa, rather desperately, coerces her mother (Marge) into making the extensive trip (by car) to Baby Seal Beach to help clean oil off of all the cute animals,

they are immediately told upon their arrival, and much to Lisa's disappointment, that all of the oil-covered animals have already been allocated to Hollywood superstars for public-relations purposes. This parody is quite warranted, for there are, for example, many food banks in reality at which a potential volunteer will find an actual *waiting list* for volunteer-work positions.

POETIC JUSTICE

Through *The Simpsons*, the viewers quite-often are treated to a strong sense of poetic justice.

Especially so is with the episode in which Burns is non-physically forced to chew on a chunk of a genetically mutated fish—caught by Bart and nicknamed “Blinky”, due to its third eye—when he runs for the office of governor. (The Burns-candidate-supporting Homer, as idiotic as he is, dismissingly accuses his wife, “I bet before the papers blew this whole thing out of proportion, you didn’t even know how many eyes a fish has”.) The media cameras focus on him as he attempts to score political points by eating dinner with the “average” power-plant employee and his family, who coincidentally happen to be the Simpsons. But Marge, who’s campaigning for Burns’ environment-friendly political opponent and had been begged by Homer into preparing the dinner for Burns, prepares “Blinky”, which had resided in the creek severely polluted by toxic refuse from Burns’ own power plant. Marge serves Burns the first piece of “Blinky” (with the skin still attached) and then waits for him to take a bite; and when Burns can no longer hold the foul piece of grotesque mutated fish in his mouth, he spits it out right across the entire table and onto the floor, all of which is fully captured by all of the story-hungry photojournalists in attendance. (One reporter phones-in the thesis of his planned story: “Burns can’t swallow own story”.) Burns, with Smithers’ assistance, then begins angrily overturning and breaking the Simpsons’ living-room furnishings, presumably as his retaliation for Marge’s/Lisa’s trickery and destruction of his would-be political career; and Burns almost-immediately having exhausted himself, he and Smithers leave the residence, the former telling the latter, quite incredulously, “It’s ironic, isn’t it, Smithers ... [the Simpsons] cost me the election; yet if I were to have them killed, I would be the one who’d go to jail. That’s democracy for you!”

ETHICS, MORALITY & RELIGION

It’s through the multi-billionaire, nuclear-power-plant owner Montgomery Burns that *The Simpsons* exposes the evil behaviour that virtually absolute power and seemingly unlimited wealth can procure from the corruptible human mind and will. However, the show does not let the common folk off easy with its parodies of human misconduct.

In an episode in which Lisa uncharacteristically cheats on a school test, every external element around her is intensely pressuring her to not admit to her cheating, mostly in order to keep her school’s grade-average high enough to acquire greater government funding. Indeed, she must eventually rub directly against the proverbial grain by *forcing* her school’s officials to hear her professions of guilt. Admittedly, though, the fact that there are some truly virtuous characters—however few—in society is indicated through *The Simpsons’* utilization of Lisa and (in that same episode) her adamant insistence on confessing, with only justice and her cleared conscious to be gained.

In another episode, the show’s creators appear to have pushed the proverbial

social envelope too far to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum when they produced an episode that was apologetic of bawdy/whore houses. When one such house was discovered in Springfield, the sole focus of the show was to expose the hypocrisy of the puritanical members of socially conservative society, to the point of appearing quite apologetic to the aforementioned, sordid profession.

Also, there are many who'd feel offended by the episode about the origins, and the citizen partisanship within each, of the towns of Springfield and neighbouring Shelbyville, through which the show alludes to one particular religious sect and its propensity towards polygamous unions (a.k.a. plural marriages) within their religious tribe: The towns were established many years before when Jebediah (Obadiah Zachariah Jedediah) Springfield and his supporters parted ways with his counterpart, Shelbyville Manhattan, and his followers because the latter wanted to commence their new community (having just arrived in the wild, untamed land) by allowing the men to "marry our cousins". Asked by Jebediah, however, "why would we want to marry our cousins?", Shelbyville replies, "Because they're so attractive ... I thought that was the whole point of all this [the migration]". When Jebediah refuses to go along with such a social order, Shelbyville angrily denounces his counterpart by insisting, "I tell you, I won't live in a town where a man can't marry his cousins!" Thus, each, along with his followers in agreement, went his own way to establish his town.

In the realm of religion and theology, *The Simpsons* points out an apparent conflict of faith/ideas present in the practice of prayer—i.e. why would the Creator grant good fortune to one person who prays for it, while rejecting another person's prayer for the same good fortune? In one episode, Homer basically forces Bart to become an expert at miniature golf and to compete against the son of Ned Flanders, his very Christian and kind-hearted neighbour—a person for whom Homer feels and expresses utter, without-reason contempt; and it becomes a match on which Homer goads Ned into agreeing to bet, the loser's father being the one who'd have to mow his lawn donned in his wife's Sunday dress. On the day of the big game at the golf course, Homer finds the Flanders family praying, in a circle while holding hands; and to this, Homer mockingly informs his neighbour, "hey Flanders, I already asked God to let Bart win, and He can't very well let both of them win".

In many episodes, attorneys are the show's favourite targets.

In the episode in which bully-boy Jimbo Jones joins Homer's 'order-enforcing' posse but then later discovers that the posse is not what he'd thought it would be, Jimbo bitterly proclaims that he has thus given up on justice and integrity and therefore might as well join a very-well-paid though morally-corrupt profession: "You let me down, man. Now I don't believe in nothin', no more: I'm going to law school". To Jimbo's decision, Homer lets out a disapproving bellow, which reverberates throughout the area—"NOOOOOO!"

The Simpsons also takes a deserved dig at contemporary society's prevalence towards moral relativism in the episode in which Bart and an initially-hesitant Lisa fool their babysitter, Grampa (Abraham) Simpson, into giving/buying them whatever they want (e.g. junk food, coffee, a large damaging party at the Simpsons residence). When Lisa reveals her troubled conscience to Bart, the sneaky boy reassures her: "Lisa, in these turbulent times, who's to say what's right and what's wrong."

But the animation deserves credit for taking a warranted jab at what's commonly

considered by society to be one of this planet's greatest evils—Big Tobacco.

In the episode in which Lisa eventually becomes Little Miss Springfield, Laramie Cigarettes, the (not-surprisingly) corporate sponsor of the little girls' beauty pageant, briefly uses her to sell their nicotine product, until she takes a bold and daring stand against being "a corporate shell". In fact, the morally-corrupt Laramie president, Jack Larson, has his cigarette company's ad-producers put Lisa on a Laramie ad poster, in which Lisa, kneeling in prayer by her bedside with a lit cigarette in her mouth, says (with her words in large print): "God, Please Bless Mommy, Daddy and Laramie Cigarettes".

THE MASSES

Humanity, according to *The Simpsons*, can be (as a whole) selfish, inconsistent, quite ignorant and irrationally reactionary.

In one episode, Mrs. Edna Krabappel, Bart's Grade 4 schoolteacher and the head of the teachers' union, is at considerable odds with Principal Skinner, regarding the formers' salaries and the school's serious lack of instructional supplies. The students' parents meet with the teacher and principal in the school's auditorium; there, the parents are led back and forth like sheep to the points made by Krabappel and Skinner: "We're doing it [teachers seeking more money] for your children," Krabappel emphasizes to the parents, who all mutter in agreement to one another. (To this, Reverend Timothy Lovejoy's wife, Helen, makes her typical and somewhat-hysterical exclamation, "Won't somebody *PLEASE* think of the children!!") But, responds Skinner, "We [the school employers] have a very tight budget—in order to give the teachers a raise, we'd have to raise taxes" (a prospect against which the parents mumble in discomfort). However, Krabappel reminds them all that, "It's your children's future," again to which the parents all concur. And to this, Skinner lifts his hand in view of the parents and simply rubs his thumb, forefinger and index finger together, and the parents murmur and grumble, "oh, no—more taxes". And so forth it goes, to and fro. It's quite clear that the parents indeed want it both ways—to have their proverbial cake and eat it, too.

TODAY'S YOUTH

Perhaps the greatest (though admittedly understandable) misperception held by critics of *The Simpsons* is that the show downplays, or perhaps even promotes, disrespect by youth toward their elders.

Indeed, many viewers often misinterpret Bart's apparent irreverence for his father—frequently referring to Homer by his first name, in one episode Bart, while watching TV, casually tells his father to "Crank it, Homer"—combined with the boy's disrespectful attitude towards virtually every other authority figure, as a negative influence on the younger viewers. Well, aside from the fact that the show is not produced for an under-14 (and very impressionable) audience, Bart's behaviour is implicitly marked as an undesirable factor of his character that will likely result in an undesirable future for him in society, not to mention his current dismal status academically and amongst the school officials. Lisa, on the other hand, is hard-working, considerate and respectful towards others—young people as well as adults; and she is portrayed as being one who's very likely to achieve great accomplishments and status in life. Whenever there is disrespectful behaviour in the show, it implicitly reflects poorly (for the astute viewer, anyway) on the characters displaying their irreverence.

On the issue of whether contemporary children are taking on greater adult-like responsibilities and dangerous habits at an earlier age than in previous generations, according to *The Simpsons*, the answer should be obvious: In one musical episode, Bart sings a request of his father, “*Can I be a booze hound?*” and Homer replies in song, “*Not till you’re fifteen*” (as if Homer is being a responsible parent in requiring this irresponsibly-low minimum age of his son). And in another episode, Homer replies to Bart’s request for some beer with an idiotic, “No, Bart; that is for Daddies and kids with fake IDs”.

However, it’s quite worthy of mention that *The Simpsons* does not completely portray a bad-brat Bart Simpson as but a proverbial “bad seed”, or create him as a write-off that was a lost cause since conception (albeit, during an ultra-sound, Dr. Hebert tells a very-pregnant Marge, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear he was mooning me”). Indeed, one episode offers a revelation into Bart’s very-first year of schooling—a time at which Bart was actually enthusiastic about school and uncharacteristically behaved himself. It was only when his teacher seriously discouraged Bart—at one point blatantly letting him know that he has no hope of acquiring talent(s) and thus achieving a fruitful life. In fact, Bart becomes such a despondent little boy that he pencils a large stick-figure drawing of his unhappiness and death, a drawing at which Homer screams, “Aughhhh!! Burn it!! Send it to Hell!!” Then, after reaching a climax of discouragement at school—and, to an extent, even at home (Homer, though with good intentions, builds Bart a horrific-looking clown-shaped bed)—Bart suddenly perceives (or, perhaps, *realizes*) that the closest he’ll come to having a productive talent is making his classmates laugh by his acting goofy; when principal Skinner tells him out-flat that it’s the precise point in his life at which he is at a crossroads, of being an achiever or a loser. Bart’s response to Skinner, after some seconds of contemplation?: “Eat my shorts”; to which Bart’s fellow students laugh and applaud.

But then again, one can discount the above by simply recalling the episode in which Bart is in his first few years of life and he (assumably amongst other misdeeds) lights his father’s tie on fire, as well as flushes his keys and wallet down the toilet; not to mention, cuts off all of his baby sister’s (i.e., Lisa’s) hair, so that she would not appear so adorable to her new parents, Marge and Homer.

Furthermore, we’re existing at a societal point in time at which it’s somewhat fashionable to suppress any “blame” in life towards those who may have left us scarred—physically, emotionally or psychologically.

Admittedly, *The Simpsons* occasionally includes annoying aspects—such as its inclination towards frequently exposing the bare buttocks of only the male characters, its confinement of wedgies against only the male characters and its bewildering propensity for the inclusion of wisecracks particularly aimed at the French (Bart even makes an outrageous, erroneous serious-toned reference to that ethnic group’s collective foul odour!).

Also, for many viewers, the show goes too far in a few of its jabs at Christianity that appear more ideological than humourous, perhaps overly-philosophical enough to be construed as naught but political *Simpsons* script-writing—such as when devout-Christian Ned Flanders makes sure to burn tangible evidence of a godless universe while his two pacifist sons view a Christian-cartoon-show character telling his talking pet dog

(and thus conveying to the Flanders boys) that he has just finished “making a pipe-bomb to blow up the Planned Parenthood clinic”.

Having said this, however, the show’s creators make a wise choice in allowing *The Simpsons* to be produced mostly with the morally gray area in mind. Such is done by having Homer and Lisa sneak inside (“break into”) a museum late at night so Lisa can have what would be her last chance to experience the presence of ancient Egyptian artifacts on display. Also, episodes were produced in which Homer reveals his albeit-rare compassionate and decent side; for example, when he wishes misfortune on Flanders’ new business (a store selling items for only left-handed people) but at the end expresses sincere sorrow for Flanders’ misfortune and thus enables the business to recover. For in so doing, the show more reflects real life, which rarely consists of the proverbial moral black-and-white/good-and-evil.

The Simpsons blends genuine humour with the vulnerability and corruptibility of human nature to produce a hilarious TV program. Granted, it could be more explicit in some of its moral stances; however, through its implicit morality, the observant viewer receives the same relevant message without the often-discomforting force and rigidity usually experienced with explicit morality.*

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