

# Tones of Morality Through Layers of Sarcasm:

## *The Simpsons* and Its Underlying Themes

By Gabe Durham

"Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here's the deal: you freeze everything as it is and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK, please give me absolutely no sign. [pause] OK, deal. In gratitude, I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. [pause] Thy will be done.' [eats food]" –Homer Simpson (Bowler 1996).

Homer Simpson seems to have gotten his wish: He and his family have been the same ages for the past twelve years. He is always eager to eat a plate of cookies, and his religious views are as misconstrued as ever. The Simpsons are a family of five: Homer, the father; Marge, the mother; Bart and Lisa, the children; and Maggie, the baby girl. This family of cartoon characters made its first television debut on *The Tracey Ullman Show* on April 19, 1987 (Vogl 2000). For about two years they were used as a short cartoon transition, known as "shorts," in and out of commercial breaks. As the shorts went on, soon-to-be-well-known characters appeared on the program, including Grandpa Simpson, Krusty the Clown, and the Space Mutants (Groening 14-15). The popularity of the shorts led the family to get its own series, *The Simpsons*, which aired for the first time on December 17, 1989 (Vogl 2000) as a Christmas episode entitled "Simpsons Roasting On An Open Fire" (Groening 16). The show enjoyed instant success, and the prime-time cartoon quickly became the source of countless merchandise from t-shirts to video games.

Since then, *The Simpsons* has successfully lasted through the new millennium, and is currently on its twelfth season. Today *The Simpsons* is the longest running prime-time cartoon ever, and is currently the longest running sitcom (Sohn 2000). The controversy over the past twelve years has been whether *The Simpsons* has affected the world for the better or for the worse. All evidence points to the fact that *The Simpsons* is one of the most socially conscious programs on television. One important aspect of *The Simpsons* is that it promotes family unity and good parenting as necessary parts of family life. Another factor is that the show portrays religion as being an important part of life. The Simpsons also expresses the problems and needs of America by poking fun at its politics.

At a glance, some see *The Simpsons* as a show that glorifies the dysfunctional family based on some of the conflicts the Simpsons deal with. In 1992 President George Bush stated, "We need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons" (Sohn 2000). He was referring to "The Waltons" because characters on the show were known for being a loving family, and in his opinion the Simpsons were not. The truth is that *The Simpsons* portrays the unified nuclear family as a positive institution, and encourages good parenting. In one scenario, there are the Flanders: a happy, near-perfect family who show the prosperity of loving parenting. In the other, there are the Simpsons: a family that faces its share of problems, but gets through them with a strong unity.

The Flanders are a healthy, well-run family who show the success of good parenting. As the heads of the family, Ned and Maude Flanders represent the ideal parents as they bring up their sons, Rod and Todd. Their conflicts with each other never seem to go beyond the petty things that they can easily work out. Ned brings up in a couples therapy session that he is bothered when Maude underlines passages in his own Bible (Bowler 1996). The couple constantly wants to improve their relationship, and their attempts show how little room for improvement there is in the first place. Ned and Maude also prove to be effective in disciplining their sons. When one of the boys swears at the dinner table, Ned sends him off to bed with no Bible stories (Bowler 1996). Ned's tactic is a success in that his son stops swearing, which proves that Ned and Maude know how to deal with their children. They see a problem and deal with it in a loving manner. As a result of this parenting, Rod and Todd Flanders are obedient, well-behaved boys. When Homer visits the Flanders' home, the boys argue over who gets to anoint his feet (Groening 131) and when they play, they play games like "Build the Mission and "Clothe the Leper" (Sohn 2000). Their parents have taught them to serve others, and they are eager to do so. When Lisa asks where the dice to their board game are, Rod and Todd tell her that they don't use them because their father says they are wicked (Groening 230). The boys obey their father's commands, even when they do not understand them. The Flanders' love and respect for each other are what keep their family so close.

Most families cannot live up to the standard set by the Flanders, and the Simpsons are one of those families. Professor Paul A. Cantor of the University of Virginia writes, "In effect, the show says, 'Take the worst-case scenario -- the Simpsons -- and even that family is better than no family'"(Lamey 2000). The Simpsons constantly fall short of perfection, but they get through their problems together as a family. The father of the family is Homer Simpson; he is lazy, overweight, and not especially intelligent, but he always remains faithful to his wife and children. When his daughter Lisa desperately wants a pony, Homer takes a second job at the Kwik-E-Mart so that he can afford to pay for one (Lamey 2000). The job almost kills him, but he is willing to do it out of love for his daughter. Lisa, the middle Simpson child, is a genius (Vogl 2000), as well as "the moral conscience of the show's creators"(Borrelli 2001). As a result of her intellectual superiority, Lisa is always trying to get her family to do what she believes is right. When Lisa becomes a vegetarian, she attempts to get her family to convert along with her (Goening 185). If she did not care about her family, she would not try to involve them in her moral pursuits. Marge Simpson, the full-time mother and housewife, holds the family together (Vogl 2000). She proclaims, "The only thing I'm high on is love. Love for my son and daughters. Yes, a little LSD is all I need" (Groening 184). Marge takes pride in her family, and loves them unconditionally. Bart Simpson, the oldest child, is the troublemaker of the family, representing "a child making his first experiences in life" (Vogl 2000). When Bart is caught stealing a video game, Marge is extremely disappointed in him. He makes it up to her by getting her a framed picture of himself, and paying for it with his own money (Groening 192). Bart is a problem child, but he loves his family enough to seek their approval. While the members of the Simpson family have their own individual problems, each adds to the family in a way the others cannot.

The Simpson family certainly does not match up to the Flanders family in terms of perfection, but both have the unity and loving parenting that create a healthy family. The Flanders give the

world a model of what families like the Simpsons are constantly in pursuit of. The Simpsons may not be the Flanders, or the Waltons for that matter, but they are trying. It is those honest attempts that prove the Simpsons' worth as a family.

Scarce religious material can be found on prime-time television, despite the fact that religion is a large aspect of the world no matter what people believe. *The Simpsons* is one of the few programs that promotes religion as an important part of life. According to Gerry Bowler, a philosophy professor at Canadian Nazarene College, *The Simpsons* "takes religion's place in society seriously enough to do it the honor of making fun of it" (Sohn 2000). Through all of the jokes, the same themes appear again and again. The theme that characters on *The Simpsons* are morally affected by their religions is displayed often. Another theme is that the characters consistently follow the traditions of their religions. The theme that characters pray to God also emerges.

The importance of religion is displayed with the consistent theme of religion affecting the morals of people on *The Simpsons*. An example of people working religion into morality is The Simpson family, which relies on religious beliefs when making decisions. When the family is trying to decide whether or not to take a man into their home, Marge reminds Homer that the Bible says, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers you do unto me" (Bowler 1996) and Homer grudgingly agrees to let him stay. Marge is doing what she believes is right based on her religious beliefs. When provided with the extra study time he had asked God for, Bart accredits part of his passing grade to God. He could have taken all of the credit for his accomplishment, but Bart recognizes an answered prayer (*The Simpsons* 1990). Another example of religion in action is Ned Flanders, who works religion into every aspect of his life (Pinsky 29). He is, as Gerry Bowler puts it, "television's most effective example of a Christian life well-lived" (1996). Ned hesitates before buying a box of red hots for his son because of a cartoon devil on the front (Pinsky 30). He lets his religion affect the food he buys- proving that pleasing God and doing what is right is constantly what is on his mind.

Religion's importance is further proven as characters on *The Simpsons* faithfully follow the customs of their religions. The majority of the town of Springfield attends the local church. Ned Flanders states that he can be found in church every week, rain or shine (Pinsky 32). Ned takes going to church very seriously, and will not let anything get in the way of it. When Homer decides not to go to church, Marge stresses the importance of his attendance (Groening 94). Marge does not want to see her husband skip a ritual that is so important to her. People in Springfield also send their children to Sunday school (Bowler 1996). The adults want their kids to grow up following the traditions that they recognize as significant. Apu strongly follows his religious customs, as he is faithful to the traditions of Hinduism. He keeps a shrine to Ganesha in the Kwik-E-Mart (Groening 94). The shrine seems out of place to his customers, but Apu knows the importance of keeping it with him. He goes along with the Hindu custom of a pre-arranged marriage, despite the fact that he has no desire to do so (Groening 18). Apu shows his faith by giving up his bachelor freedom for his religious customs. Though the traditions vary a great deal, characters on *The Simpsons* follow their religious customs.

Characters on *The Simpsons* show the importance of religion in their lives by praying to God. According to student John Sohn, some of the show's most sincere moments are when people are praying (2000). These sincere moments appear when characters are in their times of greatest need. When Bart sells his soul and is unable to get it back, he turns to God: "Are you there God? It's me, Bart Simpson. I know I never paid too much attention in church but I could really use some of that good stuff right now. I'm afraid some weirdo's got my soul and I don't know what he's going to do with it" (Bowler 1996). Bart is calling out to God in his greatest time of need, because he knows he has a problem he cannot get himself out of. When Maude Flanders is suddenly killed, Ned turns to God for comfort (Pinsky 32). He cannot help but feel that God had made a mistake in taking his wife, but he still believes that the Lord is there for him through all of his pain. Characters also pray when they want something from God. When there is a hurricane going on outside, Marge prays, "Dear God, this is Marge Simpson. If you stop this hurricane and save our family, we will be forever grateful and recommend you to all our friends" (Groening 219). Marge does not know what to pray, she just knows that she wants her family to be safe from the hurricane. At a miniature golf tournament, Homer prays that Bart will win and Ned prays that no one gets hurt (Groening 40). The contrast is of one man praying completely selfishly, and the other for the good of everyone. Prayer takes on many forms on *The Simpsons*, but it is a sign of the characters' beliefs in God.

Gerry Bowler notes that "prayer is almost always efficacious – any regular viewer of *The Simpsons* will note that God answers his petitioners almost immediately" (1996). *The Simpsons* makes jokes about religion where jokes are due, but it certainly takes religion as a whole quite seriously. Though the main religion represented is Christianity; Judaism, Hinduism, and others are treated with the same respect and acknowledgement of their places in society. Religion is a part of the world- *The Simpsons* is one of the few shows brave enough to admit it.

According to Children's Britannica, the words "politics" and "politicians" have a touch of suspicion or dislike attached to them (108). Americans have warped the meanings of the words because of the untrustworthy reputation politics have taken on. The lack of trust comes from a general corruption, abuse of power, and incompetence that come from the politicians as well as the upper class. *The Simpsons* shows the concerns of Americans by making fun of America's politics. One concern that *The Simpsons* addresses is the amount of corruption that goes on in the American system. Another matter that *The Simpsons* deals with is the power of big businesses. *The Simpsons* also shows the incompetence of the government.

*The Simpsons* shows the abuse of authority that goes on in the American system. Clancy Wiggum, the chief of police in Springfield, is a perfect example of a corrupted cop. When Wiggum threatens to shut down Homer's carnival booth, he slyly tells Homer, "The guy I'm really looking for, wink, is Mr. Bribe, wink, wink" (Groening 25). The chief is implying that he will not shut Homer down if Homer is willing to give him a bribe. Here he shows that his own personal gain is more important than doing what is right. When Wiggum pulls Ned Flanders over for speeding, he proceeds to publicly and wrongfully arrests him for driving under the influence of drugs (Pinsky 31). Without any evidence, the chief disregards a man's rights and acts on an impulse. Diamond Joe Quimby, the mayor of Springfield, is an example of a corrupt

town leader. When the citizens of Springfield are mad about their new taxes, Quimby blames the problem on immigrants (Groening 209). He finds a scapegoat instead of dealing with the problem, which eventually results in the deportation of Springfield's immigrants. The abuse of authority in the upper ranks of power expresses a call for honesty in politics.

Addressing another of America's concerns, *The Simpsons* displays the power abused by the big businesses. The "ultimate capitalist" on *The Simpsons* is Mr. Burns (Vogl 2000). His motto is, "If you can take advantage of a situation in some way, it's your duty as an American to do it" (Groening 224) and his lifestyle is proof of such beliefs. When inspectors attempt to shut down his unsafe power plant, Burns simply tries to bribe them (Vogl 2000). Instead of caring for the safety of his employees, Burns wishes to take the cheapest and most dishonest way out. When Marge Simpson sues Mr. Burns, her cheap lawyer runs away screaming at the sight of Mr. Burns's top-notch group of lawyers (Sterle 2001). Mr. Burns knows that Marge cannot win with his wealth backing him up. All he has to do to defeat her is remind her of his power. It is also common for the corporations to take over in Springfield. When Homer starts his own computer company, Bill Gates visits him with hired goons and trashes his house (Groening 28). The owner of the giant corporation does not want to risk the possibility of having any competition, so he destroys smaller companies as they emerge. A corporation builds a mall over "Sabertooth Meadow," a possible site of prehistoric remains (Groening 20). Lisa attempts to stop the construction, but they do not listen to her pleas for more excavations. The corporation cares more for their mall than the possibility of uncovering prehistoric ruins. A concern of Americans is reflected as the big businesses on *The Simpsons* are always using their money to get what they want.

Another matter that is dealt with on *The Simpsons* is the incompetence of the government. One way the show reveals such foolishness is when it makes fun of the American two-party system. It points out each party's faults when it shows signs at the Republican convention that read "We're just plain evil" and "We want what's worst for everyone," while signs at the Democratic convention read "We hate life and ourselves" and "We can't govern" (Goldberg 2000). The signs are funny ways of pointing out real opinions people have of each party. When Bart asks Grandpa if he had wondered why he was getting checks for nothing, he replies, "I figured, 'cuz the Democrats were in power again" (Goldberg 2000). Through his senile comment, Grandpa is expressing the belief shared by many that Democrats support giving money to freeloaders. Another form of incompetence is when political leaders are portrayed as under qualified on *The Simpsons*. When Police Chief Wiggum catches Homer using an auto-dialer, he reminds Homer to bring the evidence to court with him. "Otherwise, I got no case and you'll go scot-free" (*The Simpsons* 1996). The chief is foolishly telling the law-breaker how to evade punishment, and making himself and the police force out to be incompetent. When Mayor Quimby is accused of being an "illiterate, tax-cheating, wife-swapping spend-o-crat", he replies, "Hey, I'm no longer illiterate" (Goldberg 2000). Here he indirectly implies that he is all of these accusations but illiterate, and is obviously unworthy of the position of mayor. The foolishness of the leaders in Springfield expresses the need for better leaders all over America.

Often people do a better job proving their point with a well-timed sarcastic comment than a direct expression of their opinions: such is the case with *The Simpsons*. The show often calls for change from the leaders of the nation or with the small-town police chiefs. The voice of the people is heard with *The Simpsons*, as the feelings of Americans are reflected through the funny things cartoon characters have to say.

Statistics alone could be used to prove the worth of *The Simpsons*. The show has won 15 Emmy Awards (Pinsky 34). An estimated 14.4 million people watched *The Simpsons* each week in the 1999-2000 season, and 4 million people watch the reruns that air every weekday (Pinsky 34). Time magazine named *The Simpsons* the best television show of the century (Pinsky 34). People all over the world watch *The Simpsons*, and the show affects them. Those who are not experienced in the deeper meanings that often lie behind sarcasm should perhaps avoid the show, as it could have a negative effect on them after being taken at face value. That being said, the underlying socially conscious themes of the show make *The Simpsons* a positive influence for anyone with the wit to pick up such themes. Homer Simpson will be a lovable, misunderstanding, middle-aged underachiever until the day he dies. Until then, all of the world will be listening to what he has to say and learning from it.

## Works Cited

Borrelli, Christopher. "Liberated Lisa." Blade. 11 March 2001.  
<[www.toledoblade.com/apps/pdcs.dll/artikkel](http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pdcs.dll/artikkel)>.

Bowler, Gerry. "God and The Simpsons." The Simpson Archive 1996.  
<[www.snpp.com/other/papers/gb.paper.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/gb.paper.html)>.

Children's Britannica. Vol. XIV. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1988.

Goldberg, Jonah. "Homer Never Nods: The Importance of The Simpsons." National Review, 1 May 2000. <[www.nationalreview.com/01may00/goldberg050100.html](http://www.nationalreview.com/01may00/goldberg050100.html)>.

Groening, Matt. Ray Richmond and Antonia Coffman, eds. The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family. New York: HarperPerennial, 1997.

Groening, Matt. Scott M. Gimple, ed. The Simpsons Forever. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999.

Lamey, Andy. "Simpsons Revealed as Models of Family Values." National Post. 25 March 2000.  
<[www.snpp.com/other/articles/simpsonsrevealed.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/articles/simpsonsrevealed.html)>.

Pinsky, Mark. "How Big Is The Simpsons?" Christianity Today. 5 February 2001: 34.

Pinsky, Mark. "Saint Flanders." Christianity Today. 5 February 2001: 28-34.

Sohn, John. "Simpson Ethics." April 2000. <[www.snpp.com/other/papers/js.paper.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/js.paper.html)>.

Sterle, Frank. "The Simpsons: Morality from the 'Immoral.'" 2001.  
<[www.snpp.com/other/papers/fs.paper.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/fs.paper.html)>.

The Simpsons. Writ. David M. Stern. FOX. 10 November 1990.

The Simpsons. Writ. Mike Scully. FOX. 15 December 1996.

Vogl, Bastian. "The Simpsons and Their World—A Mirror of American Life?" 1 February 2000.  
<[www.snpp.com/other/papers/bv.paper.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/bv.paper.html)>.

© Gabe Durham ([GJoe007@aol.com](mailto:GJoe007@aol.com)) 2001