

## HOMER SIMPSON: AN ANIMATED CARTOON CHARACTER REPRESENTING DYSFUNCTIONAL AMERICAN FAMILY VALUES

Murat MENGÜ\*

### *Amerikan Aile Değerlerinde Yabancılaşmayı Temsil Eden Bir Çizgi Karakter:*

#### *Homer Simpson*

A.B.D'de olduğu kadar dünyanın pek çok ülkesinde de popüler olan; çizgi dizi The Simpsons'ın (Simpson Ailesi), işlevini yitirmiş Amerikan aile değerlerini yansıttığı düşünülmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Simpson Ailesi'nin genel görünümü, dizideki iletişim sistemleri ve ağırlıklı olarak Homer Simpson'a özgü kişilik özellikleri ele alınacaktır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Simpson ailesi, yabancılaşma, çizgi film.

#### **Abstract**

The Simpsons, an animated comedy popular not only in the US, but also many countries in the world, is supposed to reflect the values of dysfunctional American families. This paper analyzes the general aspects of the Simpson family, communication systems in The Simpsons and more specifically, the characteristics of Homer Simpson.

**Key words:** The Simpsons, values in animated cartoons, dysfunctional families

.....

The Simpsons was first introduced as excerpts in Tracey Ullman Show on April 19, 1987. It was in December 1989 that The Simpsons was first shown as a series on the FOX Sunday. As a result, the first animated prime-time series since the 1960s was presented. The Simpsons displays a unique wit and sense of humor. Moreover, the characters created by Matt Groening are among the first 'emotionally real' ones of animated comedies. Considering the character development of the family as well as community in focus, The Simpsons presents a satire and social criticism in animated cartoon format (Korte 1). All in all, what

makes The Simpsons unique is that it can simultaneously educate and entertain the audience.

#### **The Benefits of Animated Sit-coms to Convey Messages**

Both reality and imagination can be presented in an artistic as well as dramatic manner in animated cartoons. As audience is carried into an artificial cartoon world in each episode of a sit-com, the intended message is effectively conveyed. As the characters are animated, the audience does not take their actions at face value in an artificial cartoon world (Rousseve 7).

---

\* Dr.

Therefore, animated cartoons enable not only the producers to convey their messages more effectively but also the audience to be open to social criticisms. Furthermore, seemingly unreal and bizarre situations can be created in animations. However, with regard to the solution presented in the end of each episode in *The Simpsons*, it is always possible to be involved in real situations.

Being animated characters, the members of *The Simpsons* appear to be the embodiment of the ideas they represent. According to Tingleff, if these characters were played by actors, the family would be seen as unrealistic and underdeveloped (2). Therefore, by animating the Simpsons, Groening only creates a higher realism, but also entertains and thus appeals to his audience (Steiger 5).

#### *General Aspects of the Simpson Family*

Generally speaking, *The Simpsons* is a primetime cartoon about a dysfunctional family living in the suburban town of Springfield. Since the location of Springfield is not revealed clearly, it is actually 'any town' in the USA as one of the on-going jokes between the authors and the audience (Rousseve 1).

Unlike the TV comedies of the 1950s, *The Simpsons* is rather a parody of happy television families. Therefore, the creator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening, wanted the animation to have "enough depth to appeal to grown-ups...with characters so vivid that people would forget it was animation" (Matt Groening 6). Thus, the show can be considered as a reaction against 'happy family sitcoms,' such as *Father Knows Best* and *Cosby Show*, displaying a world that is too perfect to be real. In fact, there has been a trend towards non-traditional family

structures on TV. For instance, in the 1970s the sit-coms "began to move away from the nuclear family as the norm and suggest that other forms of child rearing might equally be valid or even superior" (qtd. in Lamey 1). At this point, what makes the Simpsons unique is that this family represents the traditional nuclear family while satirizing it simultaneously. In addition, it is possible to observe many of the traditional American family values through this family. Interestingly enough, the Simpsons have been popular figures even in theological courses as well as in texts for students training to be priests (Bates 2).

#### *General References in The Simpsons*

The American family life presented in *The Simpsons* appears quite normal as it turns around a lower-middle class family with three children and a dog.. The opposition to American middle class values; however, is created through the text. In other words, the attitudes of the audience "...about religion, education, politics and sexuality are challenged" (Hall qtd. in Tingleff 2).

Episodes of *The Simpsons* frequently highlight the conflict between personal desire, feelings, or interests, on the one hand, and the sense of moral duty, on the other. Each member of the Simpson family...contributes to the creation of a complex moral atmosphere, in which morality stands out in its significance as duty precisely because the contrary exists as well-the passionate desires, feelings and interests of strong personalities (Lawler, 2001: 148).

According to Paul A. Cantor from the University of Virginia, "For all its slapstick nature and its mocking of certain aspects of family life, *The Simpsons* has an affirmative

side and ends up celebrating the nuclear family as an institution" (Lamey 1). It is clearly stated in the episode 1X04 – "There's No Disgrace Like Hom" by Homer himself: "Now remember, as far as anyone knows, we're a nice, normal family" (Pond, 1989).

In the presentation of religion and government, there is a double-edged element. As Cantor argues, religious figures like the Flanders in *The Simpsons* are usually mocked; however, many characters in the show are depicted as churchgoers and religion is displayed as a normal part of life in Springfield (Lamey 2). Probably one of the most significant examples related to religion in *The Simpsons* can be seen in Homer's address to God: "HOMER: No! Ignore the boy, Lord. Now can the chatter and bow your heads. (clears throat). Dear Lord, thank you for this microwave bounty even though we don't deserve it. I mean, our kids are uncontrollable hellions. Pardon my French, but they act like savages. Did you see them at the picnic? Of course you did. You're everywhere. You're omnivorous. O Lord, why did you smite me with this family?" (Pond, 1989).

Even though *The Simpsons* may seem to be a mindless show to many people, it provides some sophisticated satire. According to Cantor, over the years, many serious issues, including "nuclear power safety, environmentalism, immigration, gay rights, women in the military..." are taken into consideration in *The Simpsons*. Cantor adds that paradoxically, the farcical nature of the show makes it serious in such a way that other television shows cannot provide (Cantor, 2001: 160-161). As for the nuclear plant safety, what Homer says when Mr. Burns wants him to be the technical supervisor is quite striking:

BURNS: Hear me out, Simpson. I don't want you to come back as a technical supervisor or a supervising technician or whatever the hell you used to do. I want you to be in charge of safety here at the plant.

HOMER: Safety? But, sir, if truth be known, I actually caused more accidents around here than any other employee. There were even a few doozies no one ever found out about.

BURNS: The generous offer I'm making is good for exactly 30 seconds, Simpson? He puts an hourglass in front of Homer.

HOMER (thinking to himself): Me, in charge of safety? This place could blow sky high. Nah, I'll concentrate on my work now. Gee, this guy's desk sure is big. I can't let Marge support the family. This guy's got the cleanest shirt I've ever seen. What should I?" (Wolodarsky and Kogen, 1990).

#### *The Values Represented by The Simpsons*

The characters in *The Simpsons* are the caricatures of the ideas they represent. As stated by Groening, "The Simpsons are all ruled by their impulses" (qtd. in Tingleff 2). Acting as a cross section of American culture, neither the Simpsons nor the people they have interaction with are fully developed characters. On the contrary, they are presented as "icons of belief" (Tingleff 3).

Considering the criticism of American family values, Tingleff argues that "...while The Simpsons does contain a sarcastic criticism of mainstream American life, this is often done outside of narrative structure. The plot typically reaffirms middle class myths and lifestyles. This affirmation permits the subtle critique contained outside of the narrative" (Tingleff 1). This issue is ironically held in

such a way: HOMER: Look, everybody. Yesterday was a real eye-opener. We've got to do better as a family. So tonight, we're not going to shovel food in our mouths while we stare at the TV. We're going to eat at the dining room table like a normal family." (Jean and Reiss, 1990).

As stated by Paul Cantor, there might be a serious criticism towards the Simpsons as the father is displayed as dumb, uneducated, weak in character and morally unprincipled. However, there is at least a father and having such a family is even better than having no family (Lamey 1).

With respect to the impact of many economic and social changes through decades on American family life, *The Simpsons* appear to be realistic. As a result, the audience can easily associate themselves with that family. In other words, like many people, the members of the Simpson family do not exhibit considerable achievements; on the contrary, they are just lucky to survive the life they lead. In one episode, for instance, Homer is treated like a hero when he prevented a probable nuclear explosion, but he later admits that he pushed the right button accidentally.

All in all, *The Simpsons* indicates the significance of trust and solidarity in family life. In spite of all the shortcomings, quarrels and financial problems, the members of the Simpsons family love each other. According to Matt Groening, "Part of the Simpson appeal is the acknowledgement that you can still love the people who drive you crazy" (Matt Groening 7). The value of individualism is replaced by the value of paternalism through Homer

Simpson and his actions. Moreover, several communication systems are used in *The Simpsons* to give the audience positive messages about how the interaction in a family is supposed to be.

### **Communication Systems in The Simpsons**

For the purpose of analyzing the characters in television shows, Northrop Frye, a professor at Clemson University in South Carolina, developed a model on the communication systems in fiction. James W. Chesebro, a professor in the Department of Communication at Indiana State University, later adapted Frye's model. According to this method, there are two variables that generate and distinguish the major kinds of communications systems. The first one is "the central character's apparent intelligence compared to that of the audience" and the second one is "the central character's ability to control circumstances compared to that of the audience" (qtd. in Rousseve 4-6). Out of these two factors, five different kinds of communication systems have been developed. Before analyzing of the communication systems used in *The Simpsons* and determining the position of particularly Homer Simpson, it would be helpful to review these systems, namely: the ironic, the mimetic, the leader-centered, the romantic and the mythical systems.

The ironic communication systems possess a central character that is less intelligent than the audience and also is less able to control circumstances...The central character in the mimetic communication system is just like the audience. They have an equal intelligence and they are also able to control circumstances equally effective as the audience... The central character in a leader-centered communication system has an intelligence greater than others but [it is]

because they have special training or conditioning... In the romantic communication system the central character is more intelligent than the audience and they are [sic] also better able to control circumstances than the audience...The mythical communication system possesses a central character that is superior to others in both intelligence and in their ability to control circumstances (qtd. in Chesebro 21, 22).

In regard to these factors, the Simpsons can be considered a 'heroic family' having two different heroic communication systems that function simultaneously. Therefore, it is possible to state that *The Simpsons* reflects the view including the systems compensating or complimenting one another "...to produce constructive moral messages about how a family should act" (Rousseve 7).

The most common communication systems in *The Simpsons* are the "ironic" and the "leader-centered" systems. Homer Simpson is not only the "breadwinner of the family" but also "unintentionally the ironic hero of the show." Meanwhile, being an "underachiever and proud of it," Bart Simpson is depicted as a "minor ironic hero" (ibid. 7).

In each episode, the ironic hero, who is usually either Homer or Bart, passes through certain stages. In the first stage, a problem is created for the ironic hero due to his misbehavior and inability to realize its impact on his family. In the second stage, the "leader-centered" hero intervenes to correct the misbehavior of the ironic hero. The leader-centered hero in *The Simpsons* is generally either Marge or Lisa. In the third stage, the ironic hero finds the correct way through a "...very frank, open, and highly

successful dialogue about the problem...demonstrating to the audience a very effective behavior pattern for families" (Rousseve 8, 9).

According to Larson, communication among the Simpsons is centered on parents and spouses offering support. The Simpsons are not a "grungy, bickering lot reflective of the squalid underbelly of life" (Larson 356) due to the support that family members provide to each other. Therefore, they appear as a functional family to the audience. Generally speaking, in each episode of *The Simpsons*, at least two heroic communication systems are used to provide a solution to a problem. Thus, a message about how a family should act is created by means of the communication systems either compensating or complementing each other (Rousseve 11).

#### *Characteristics of Homer Simpson*

Despite his being a fat, lazy, beer drinking and bowling TV dad, Homer Simpson is rated highly a role model for modern fathers. Contrary to common disparagement against Homer Simpson, Charlie Lewis, professor of family and development psychology at Lancaster University in England, recommended that people not consider "Homer's love of beer, bad food and even his employment at a nuclear plant," but "the love and loyalty" he gives to his family. Moreover, according to Lewis, the only place where the fathers who come home late from work like Homer can interact with their children is in front of TV. Thus, Homer Simpson can be considered as a "very good western cultural icon for fathers." In addition, he also deserves praise for his enthusiasm to "drive his children to social engagements in his own time" (Stanaway 1).

Homer Simpson is depicted as an ordinary person with respect to his tastes. He appears to be fond of "Duff beer, donuts, Marge's pork chops and watching the *Bee Guy* on the Spanish Channel." Moreover, he dislikes "his boss, Mr Burns, yard work, his neighbor, Ned Flanders" (*The Simpsons Bios-Homer Simpson 1*).

Homer Simpson is generally presented as a ridiculous character who is guided by his immediate self-satisfaction. Moreover, he appears to be a person with contradictions. "In ridiculing Homer, *The Simpsons* criticizes dominant knowledge as hypocritical and self-centered" (Tingleff 4). Although Homer spends his weekends for his own pleasure, frequently lies to Marge and drinks much, he is, in fact, a very sensitive person deep inside with very good intentions. As Marge expresses, his main problem results from the fact that he has "a misguided way of showing love" (cited in Rousseve 7). Actually, Homer's virtue stems from his loyalty and devotion to his family.

Considering Homer Simpson as "the site of dominant knowledge," Tingleff argues that through this character, all the contradictions and cultural myths of the American consumer lifestyle are shown. By working for the largest employer in town, having a wife and three kids as well as a house in the suburbs and a station wagon in the driveway, frequenting Moe's tavern and the bowling alley in his free time, Homer is presented as "an icon of masculine normality" (Tingleff 4).

Generally speaking, in the American western myth, the male 'loner' is focused. While the character wants to be alone and independent from the others, he is constantly needed by a community of people. Therefore, such a

character is usually obliged to decide between his own independence and the community in danger. In the end; however, he sacrifices himself for the good of the other people as well as society. In the same way, it is Homer in *The Simpsons*, who is exposed to the conflict of fundamental values.

In the kitchen, Homer breaks it (Bart's piggy bank) open with a hammer.

HOMER: Oh, no. What have I done? I smashed open my little boy's piggy bank, and for what? A few measly cents. (sadly). Not even enough to buy one beer. Wait a minute. Let me count and make sure. Not even close.

He marches over to the refrigerator and takes a "Dumb Things I Gotta Do Today" note. He begins writing.

HOMER: (To himself in his head): Dear family, I am an utter failure and you'll be better off without me. By the time you read this, I will be in my watery grave. I can only leave you with the words my father gave me: "Stand tall, have courage and never give up." I only hope I can provide a better model in death than I did in life. Warmest regards. Love, Homer J. Simpson (Wolodarsky and Kogen, 1990).

Even though his main responsibility as a father is his wife and three children, he usually acts a bachelor without anyone to look after, but himself. As Rousseve cited, "in a number of episodes Homer has refused to go to church with his family despite its importance to Marge, danced with belly dancers, fantasized about a female coworker, told the community about his family's shortcomings, and gone fishing in the middle of a retreat designed to improve his

marriage (5)." On the other hand, such examples are not misleading to conclude about Homer's personality. When he is obliged to choose between himself and his family, he always favors them. Although he usually displays an individualistic attitude at the beginning of almost every episode, he does what is expected to do for his family by making "the necessary changes to be committed to his wife and three children." Thus, in the end of almost every episode, Homer "embodies the value of paternalism" (Rousseve 6). Thus, the central theme of *The Simpsons* is around Homer's worthiness as a father figure to his children and as a husband to his wife. According to US academics, Eric Masur and Kate McCarthy, "Homer fulfils the role of American spiritual wanderer" (qtd. In Bates 2).

As the father of the family, Homer is displayed as a self-centered, overweight klutz who likes to sit on either the couch in front of the TV or a bar stool in the local pub (Rousseve 1). He has a great skill to "rationalize his desires and interests as continuing moral duty itself, so that no difficult conflict arises for him" (Lawler, 2001: 148). Although he tries to be a good husband and father, personal interests and pleasures can easily wipe out the responsibilities from his mind.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of retaining peace and harmony within his family, he stands up to all common influences surrounding his life, such as television, Moe's bar and does not yield to the temptation of being egocentric (Rousseve 8). Even though Homer is depicted on the surface as a self-centered slob without any firm values, his strong will enables him to get over distressing situations. Although there might be a tendency to consider

Homer as a buffoon and uncouth person, his love of life should be taken as a praiseworthy feature.

Homer's love of life stands out as an important quality especially in our age, an age in which political correctness, over-politeness, lack of willingness to judge others, inflated obsession with physical health, and pessimism about what is good and enjoyable about life reign more or less supreme. In this age, Homer Simpson... shines as someone who flouts these "truths." He is not politically correct, he is more than happy to judge others, and... does not seem to be obsessed with his health. These qualities might not make Homer an admirable person, but... more importantly make us crave him (Halwani, 2001: 22-23).

As the longest-term entry-level employee at the Springfield Nuclear Plant, Homer

Simpson tries to assume the roles of "husband, father, safety inspector... bowler, drinker, (even) astronaut, small business owner and dreamer, and makes it all look easy" (*The Simpsons Bios - Homer Simpson* 1). Homer's work itself is ironical because there is nothing practically safe about him although he is employed as a safety inspector at the local nuclear plant.

In one episode, Homer's discontentment with his work at the nuclear power plant makes him realize his dream of working at a bowling alley. Although this job is more satisfying and rewarding for him, Marge's having Maggie soon obliges him to get back to work. In a way, he sacrifices his contentment with the job he likes to maintain his family. "Homer's unhappy status within capitalist hierarchy is justified with this return" (Tingleff 1). As a result, he

learns that “familial responsibilities necessitate and justify unpleasant work”. In the same way, it is also emphasized that “capitalism is a necessary reality for the middle class family” (ibid. 5).

### Conclusion

Displaying considerably sophisticated relationships with a family of 90s pop culture, *The Simpsons* has more realistic aspects than any other traditional families in similar sit-coms. In the same way, Edmund Leach, a British anthropologist, argued that “far from being the basis of good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all discontents” (qtd. in Steiger 10).

In the frame of such a family structure, being “an unaware hedonist” and at the same time “a lovable oaf” (Groening qtd. in Steiger 6), Homer Simpson is displayed as a character with many shortcomings, but at the same time with as whom one can easily sympathize. Homer Simpson has a very important dramatic function as the victim of the dominant forces of the modern world, such as media and politics. He

unconsciously “internalizes what the various components of pop culture... try to suggest: that violence is not that bad, mass-consumption of anything is a must and that nuclear power is the safest form of energy...” (Steiger 6). As a result, his being depicted as such a naïve individual affects the audience by pointing out the manipulation of popular culture with capitalistic aspects.

Despite all his shortcomings, Homer Simpson represents a glimpse of hope for particularly the social values related to family life. He usually overcomes his childlike ways and somehow succeeds with his moral standing. Although the family appears dysfunctional, the most important mission of this family is to make the audience think that if those characters can succeed they can succeed too.

Apart from all the other animated or real characters in family sit-coms on TV, being an ordinary nuclear family of the 90s, the Simpsons represent reciprocal backing, love and care among the family members.

### References

- Bates, S. (2001). Homer’s odyssey takes Simpsons into the theological textbooks. *The Guardian*, p. 1-2. Eylül 28, 2003, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles0,6109,562501,00.html>.
- Cantor, P. A. (2001). The Simpsons: Atomistic politics and the nuclear family, W. Irwin, M.T. Conard & A.J. Skoble (Derleyen), *The Simpsons and philisophy*. (pp. 160-161). Illinois: Open Court.
- Halwani, R. (2001). Homer and Aristotle, W. Irwin, M.T. Conard & A.J. Skoble (Derleyenler), *The Simpsons and philisophy*. (pp. 22-23). Illinois: Open Court.



- Jean, A. &  
Reiss, M. (Writers) &  
Vanzo G. &  
Butterworth, K. (Directors). Original airdate (Fox): 28-Jan-1990. There's no disgrace like  
hom (Episode 1x04). Kasım 6, 2005,  
<http://www.Twiztv.Com>.
- Korte, D. (t.y.). The Simpsons as quality television. Aralık 10, 2003,  
<http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/dk.paper.html>.
- Lamey, A. (2000). Simpsons revealed as models of family values. Kasım 3, 2003,  
<http://www.snpp.com/other/articles/simpsonsrevealed.html>.
- Larson, M. S. (1993). Family communication on prime time television. *Journal of  
broadcasting and electronic media*. Aralık 20, 2003.  
[http://library.tamu.edu/vgn/portal/tamulib/er/search/sop  
/results/0,2117,1724\\_2225,00.html](http://library.tamu.edu/vgn/portal/tamulib/er/search/sop/results/0,2117,1724_2225,00.html).
- Lawler, J. (2001). The Moral World of the Simpson Family: A Kantian  
Perspective, W. Irwin, M.T. Conard and A.J. Skoble (Derle-  
yen), *The Simpsons and Philisophy*. (p. 148). Illinois: Open  
Court.
- Pond, M. (Writer), &  
Silverman, D. (Director). Original airdate: December 17 1989. Roasting on an open fire.  
(Episode 1.01) <http://www.Twiztv.Com>
- Rousseve, D. (2003). Individualism versus paternalism: An analysis of Homer J.  
Simpson. Aralık 23, 2003.  
<http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/dr.paper.html>.
- Stanaway, G. (t.y.). Homer hailed as the ideal father. Kasım 15, 2003.  
<http://simpsonscrazy.com/homer/article4.shtml>.
- Steiger, G. (t.y.). The Simpsons-just funny or more?. Kasım 11, 2003.  
<http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/gs.paper.html>.
- Tingleff, S. (2003). The Simpsons as a critique of consumer culture. Eylül 28, 2003.  
<http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/st.paper.html>.
- Wolodarsky, W. &  
Kogen, J. (Writers), &  
Archer, W. (Director). Original airdate (Fox): 21-Jan-1990. Homer's odyssey  
(Episode 1x03). Aralık 14, 2003. <http://www.Twiztv.Com>.

- ..... Homerpalooza. (t.y.). Eylül 20, 2003,  
<http://simpsonscrazy.com/homer/profile.shtml>.
- ..... Homer Simpson. (t.y.). Eylül 22, 2003, *The Simpsons bios*.  
[http://www.the.simpsons.com/bios/bios\\_family\\_homer.html](http://www.the.simpsons.com/bios/bios_family_homer.html).
- ..... Matt Groening, Lackland AFB Literature Resource Center.  
Kasım 28, 2003, <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet>.