"PEACE AND CHICKEN"

The Simpsons "*do diversity*" in the critical media literacy classroom

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Radical love forever—"*Oh yeahh"*

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Abstract

Now is a complicated time to be an educator. There are many facets underlying the issues that we face within our schools these days. Although we cannot tackle these challenges all at once, we can take small steps, one school, one class, and one student at a time. This thesis presents the animated TV series *The Simpsons* as a compelling example of the role popular culture plays in motivating and engaging student participation in the classroom. By focusing on the shows' satirical underpinnings, referential humour, and carefully-crafted subplots, *The Simpsons* becomes a powerful classroom tool for engaging students, *as well as* facilitating critical discourse around issues of diversity and promoting peaceful, interactive classroom communities. By discussing relevant educational theory, as illustrated by examples of the show's tongue-in-cheek critique of our society, we will come to see *The Simpsons* as a valuable classroom resource (and so much more than simply a silly cartoon).

Résumé

De nos jours, il est compliqué d'être enseignant. À vrai dire, les problèmes rencontrés dans les écoles englobent plusieurs aspects. Bien que ces problèmes ne puissent pas tous être réglés en même temps, il est par contre possible d'y aller à petits pas; une école, une classe et un étudiant à la fois. Cette thèse présente l'émission *Les Simpsons* comme un exemple important du rôle que la culture populaire joue sur la motivation et la participation des élèves en classe. En mettant l'accent sur cette émission satirique, remplie d'humour référentiel et d'intrigues secondaires bien pensées, l'émission *Les Simpsons* devient un outil percutant dans la classe pour motiver les élèves, les inciter à entretenir diverses discussions critiques et promouvoir une communauté paisible emplie d'interactions. En discutant de théories pertinentes tirées d'exemples ironiques de notre société, nous allons voir comment l'émission *Les Simpsons* peut devenir une ressource précieuse à utiliser en classe plutôt que de la voir comme un simple dessin animé.

"WE CAN NEVER ATTAIN THAT ULTIMATE GRACE WHILE THERE IS HATRED IN OUR HEARTS FOR EACH OTHER. CELEBRATE YOUR COMMONALITIES, SOME OF US DON'T EAT PORK, SOME OF US DON'T EAT SHELLFISH, BUT ALL OF US LOVE CHICKEN. SPREAD THE WORD, PEACE AND CHICKEN"

HOMER J. SIMPSON

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** Subheadings are borrowed from blackboard gags on *The Simpsons (Groening, 1989)*

Chapter 1- Introduction:

They all said you'd never make it far kid.

In 1989, *The Simpsons* first full-length episode aired on Fox television; we moved four times; my single mother, a self-proclaimed renegade/wanderer struggled with illness and poverty while trying to take care of two children; and my teacher told me I would never make it far in life. I was seven years old.

In those days, my grandfather let us live in a spare unit of an office building he owned. Since my mom worked night shifts, my grandfather would wake us up for school in the morning. It was his routine to take his dog out and walk her around the office building. As he passed by our office, he would rap on the windows with his wooden cane. I would wake up, wave to him and get myself ready for school. I was late almost all of the time. One day, my teacher decided to make an example of me. She had me stand at the front and announced that I had been late 27 times—more then any other student in the history of her teaching career. She continued that she was certain I would be a failure in life, as I couldn't even make it to school on time. I don't remember many other things that happened at school that year, but I remember thinking she was right. I was a failure. That is the first time I remember hating school.

The Day I Met *The Simpson* Family

Three days before my fifth birthday, on April the 19th, 1987, *The Simpsons* shorts were first aired on Fox television as part of the *Tracy Ullman show*. Two and a half years later, on December 17th of 1989 (around the same time I was learning to hate

school) our small black and white television set (complete with coat hanger bunny ears) sat perched preciously on the top of an overturned milk crate in an aging office building. It was playing the very first ever full-length episode of *The Simpsons*. My brother and I sat in that dimly-lit room (formally a Dr.'s office waiting area) with the glare from the tube reflecting off our wide-eyed faces, in much the same way we would see Bart and Lisa in so many of the episodes to follow. It was at that exact moment that *The Simpsons* became the only thing my brother and I would ever agree on. Simply put, the show was brilliant and as significantly, the characters were relatable and reliable. *The Simpsons* became one of the only constants in our lives. No matter where we moved, the yellow family came along to bring us together, to make us laugh and to help us forget our woes. I grew up with *The Simpsons* on TV. My favourite doll was a plastic version of Maggie and if you pushed her stomach she would suck on her pacifier. My brother wore shirts that said things like "kowabunga" and "eat my shorts". He had a picture of the famous yellow boy that he would tape beside his bed. I wouldn't know it in 1989, but my favourite family was going to make it big, very, very big. My brother and I are the generation defined by *The Simpsons* that Chris Turner (2008) refers to in *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Documented an Era and Defined a Generation*. Most of what I know about *The Simpson* family (and the world) is a result of twenty-two years of faithful viewership of the show; they were the friends who got me through tough times.

Why does someone who hated school become a teacher?

Throughout the years that followed my introduction to *The Simpson* family, I continued to enjoy school less and less each day. We moved a handful of times, I went to three different schools and I had loads of different teachers. Somehow, it seemed that no matter where we went that "failure" stigma followed me. It was as if almost all of my teachers shared a predetermined notion that due to my home circumstances I would never make it—at least not 'academically speaking'. It was the spring of 1996, when one of my teachers would finally 'tell it to me like it is'. Our grade eight graduating class was planning our end-of-year graduation party. We were all working during class time, cutting out stars and hearts and spray-painting foam balls for decorations. I leaned over to my friend and asked, "Isn't this a bit much?" My teacher overheard and asked me what I had meant. I said something along the lines of "Like! shouldn't this all be happening in high school or something? Like, this *is* only elementary school." She asked to see me in the hall and gave me one of those 'stern talking-tos teachers are wont to do. Word-for-word, I remember her hallway lecture. "YOU Emma, of all students, should be thinking seriously about this graduation. It is a celebration of your success in school, and it is probably the <u>last</u> time you will ever graduate from anything." My heart fell. At that moment, I believed her. She was my teacher after all. I was supposed to believe her. So I went to the eighth grade graduation. I wore a beautiful brand new dress, I had my hair done and I partied like it was 1996.

It took me a few years to get over thinking that teachers knew everything, and that they had some divine insight in determining what was right or wrong about the world. It was more than a decade later, and only after a long time engaged in the rigours of formal

education in a university setting, that I came to realize that the year that changed my life forever was one I spent liberated from any classroom. I was 16 when my mother, who was working as a nurse at the time, got a job in an isolated fly-in Ojibwa community in northern Ontario. While I am not of native descent, I accompanied her up there for a dose of the real world. It was in the north that I first dealt with death, addiction, and love. It was also the first time in my life when I experienced what it felt like to be *the other*. Before I left the south, I was told a lot of things about the people I would be meeting in the north. I quickly realized however, almost as soon as the small bush plane touched down on the dirt runway, that most of what I'd been told was over-zealous stereotyping or just plain lies. This experience forced me to think critically about stereotypes and ask as many questions as I could. Because of my year spent in the north, I found myself striving to learn more about the beliefs and cultures of others. It prompted me to become a self-proclaimed 'life-long learner" who no longer blindly accepted what I was told. I became concerned with manufactured images of *the other* and the ways in which media and technology were quickly influencing our lives. I noted the insidious ways in which carefully crafted stereotypes and images were being mass produced and foisted on the general populace. It made me wonder how, or even if, young children were being taught to assess or process this new type of information. In my quest to confront manufactured notions of the other, I would graduate again, four more times.

‘Become the change’

Like many others who chose to enter the field of education, I have spent copious amounts of time reminiscing and reflecting on my own lived experience as a student. In college, we discussed our memories of being in preschool or day-care; in university, we discussed our memories of elementary and high school; and in graduate school, we discussed our experience as undergraduate students. Among other topics, we discussed the teachers we loved and those we really didn’t, why we wanted to be educators and, how we were going to do it differently as a teacher, how we would be special, be inspiring. I believe each of us aspired to be that special teacher lauded in the popular anonymous poem. We all wanted for ourselves to claim that; “*100 years from now... I was important in the life of a child*”. We were the generation of teachers expected to take students out of their rows, place them in groups, or triads, or social learning contexts, however you word it, we were in fact going to make the difference, going to ‘be the change’.

As my education degree came to an end and I was granted a teaching license, I couldn’t help but wonder what made me any different from the teachers I’d known and hated. Looking in at the classroom from the side of the teacher, I realized we do need to ‘manage’ our students and classrooms. When colleagues would call it ‘controlling’ students, I would feel sick, but I knew they were right. In order for the classroom to ‘work’ there needed to be certain socially constructed conditions that everyone abides by. I reread the theories of Lev Vygotsky and Reggio Emilia. I thought hard and planned very carefully for every lesson, attempting to account for every student’s individual needs. The other teachers in the school told me I was crazy, it would never work. They

warned me that I would be worn out and quit the profession in the first five years. Since those are the statistics, I let them be right; I celebrated Easter and without thinking about my Muslim students, gave out gelatin bunnies for treats. I borrowed colleagues' crosswords with words like Jesus and Obey at Christmas time and I began reusing their old lesson plans. I even made all my students be quiet and sit properly and say 'may I' when they wanted to go to the bathroom. I hated myself as a teacher.

At some point, I realized that what I was looking for was 'real learning', the kind that happens outside of the type of classroom I was in. So, like many others who have sought to learn more or create change, I was convinced to attend graduate school. It was here that I finally found a few others seeking to create similar changes in education. As we discussed our multi-faceted areas of concern and interest in the educational field, I came to notice we all had two things in common; one, we were all educators dedicated to making a real difference and two, we all referenced *The Simpsons* in discussions more then any educational theory or theorist. This got me to thinking, if *The Simpsons* could interest teachers and students alike, motivate and support intelligent dialogue, why not use them as a tool in the classroom, and so, here we are.

Discourse and Action

Where we come from, how we have encountered the world and our every experience is all-important in how we will learn, teach, and approach all other situations in life. I have thought long and hard about what brings me to where I am now. In sharing how I have come to approach the writing of this thesis, I propose to accomplish two tasks. The first is to situate myself as the writer. The second is to emphasize the

importance of creating a dialogue with you as the reader. I hope to challenge your thinking about what has brought you to where you are, as a teacher, a learner, or loyal *Simpson* fan, and to encourage you to identify your own 'positionality' as you read. "Positionality involves the notion that since our understanding of the world and ourselves is socially constructed, we must devote special attention to the differing ways individuals from diverse social backgrounds construct knowledge and make meaning." (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p. 206)

As we think about our own positionality, we must also look at the aims and goals of those who have created the content that we consume. As such, it is essential to remember that twenty-five years ago when Matt Groening created the cartoon *The Simpsons* he wanted to do one thing, to "invade popular culture and see how far it could be taken" (Groening, 2010). He wanted people to talk about what they saw, ask questions and watch his cartoons again and again. With *The Simpson,* he (and hundreds of other *Simpson* employees) did just that. At every turn, the show includes hidden or obscure references to popular culture, traditional literature, politics, religion, science and even itself. If there is one thing that *The Simpsons* has done, it is make people talk, criticize and come back next Sunday at eight for more.

It is with Groening's approach in mind, and the support of critical theory, that I propose we begin to tackle some of the issues in education. We need to 'invade' the media literacy classroom and get our students talking about curriculum content, and encourage them to ask questions. We want those questions to linger in their heads for longer than just until the test, or the term or the semester. I propose our focus must be to teach students strategies to formulate questions, ponder content and draw informed

decisions about what they are seeing, hearing and understanding about the world around them. I argue that this approach comes in stark contrast to the traditional 'banking modal' (Freire, 1970) of teaching where the focus is on filling in regurgitated information, requesting formulaic answers and being told what to understand about the world. It will ask our students to engage *with* classroom content as individuals or as 'beings' through discourse and dialogue in the media literacy classroom. In *Education for Critical Consciousness* 1974, Paulo Freire wrote that "dialogue is the only way, not only in the vital questions of the political order, but in all the expressions of our beings" (p.43) I suggest it is through dialogue that we will be able to build trust in the classroom community, promote deeper thinking and employ useful strategies for life long thinking and learning.

Organization

This thesis has been divided into the following six chapters.

Chapter 1 - The Introduction, is designed to set the stage and elaborate on while clarifying key terms, motivations, and assumptions or bias that underlie the creation and compilation of this thesis.

Chapter 2- Literature Review—is most obviously a review of the literature highlighting how existing texts and resources have influenced the discussion throughout this process.

Chapter 3- The Phenomena of *The Simpsons* discusses a brief history of the show, how it

established its place as a popular cultural phenomena, how it responded to censorship, criticism, how it tackled issues of education and cultural diversity and how the show slowly but surely made a place for itself in many areas of academic discussion.

Chapter 4- Critical Media Literacy (CML) in the Classroom draws on current research in the field and classroom practices, and suggests a need to redefine our understanding and expectations of current media literacy courses.

Chapter 5 - Using *The Simpsons,* is an attempt to build a bridge between theory and practice and explain what exactly this might look like in a real classroom. It is also meant as a resource, for teachers to use and adapt in whatever way might work in their own classrooms. The conclusion in Chapter 6 is intended to wrap up thinking and perhaps trigger ideas about where popular culture in the classroom might take us next.

Key Terms

Culture: "Culture is recognized as the social field where good and social practices are not only produced, distributed, and consumed but also invested in various meanings and ideologies that are implicated in the generation of political effects." (Giroux, 2009, p.88)

Critical Consciousness: "Always submits that causality to analysis; what is true today may not be so tomorrow… it represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations" (Freire, 1974, p.39)

Medium: "a tool through which communication occurs" (Domine, 2009, p.9)

Critical Media Literacy: "is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, produce and

communicate using a variety of media forms." (Domine, 2009 .p18)

Praxis: Refers to what Joe Kincheloe (2008) defines as "involving a process of action-reflection-action that is central to development of a consciousness of power and how it operates." (p.120)

Referential Humour: Refers to *The Simpsons* tendency to "overflow with allusion and reference and name-checking of phenomena both recent and archaic." (Turner, 2008, 76) Turner (2008) explains it includes "scattershot collage of references to other things: bits of pop-cultural esoteric, bygone moments in time, big ideas and long abandoned theories so deeply imbedded in our culture that we might not even know where they originally came from." (p.77)

Simpsonize: To add a *Simpson*-esque quality to 'real life' people, places and things.

***The Simpsons*- C**reated by Matt Groening are an animated yellow family of five residing on Evergreen Terrace in Springfield U.S.A. The father Homer, Mother Marge and their three children Bart, Lisa and Maggie first appeared on Television on April the 19th, 1987.

Assumptions

This thesis is a discussion of conversations that exist within the area of critical media and cultural studies, framed within a proposed approach to implement theory and practice, using *The Simpsons* as it's contrivance. Specifically, because of my 'lived' experience, I frame my discussion primarily here within the context of Western ideology. It is my intention to open up the discussion by providing examples and encouraging action; most of the ideas proposed have not yet been implemented in a real

classroom at this time.

This thesis has been written with the understanding that there are some really serious problems facing our world today. Whether we think about it globally or locally, issues bombard us to the point we are becoming desensitized. People scream for help and we don't notice or react. Global warming indicates the environment is in serious trouble and yet we continue to demand larger SUVs and build bigger and 'better' houses. We sit back as some children and families starve, while we or our neighbours are getting fatter and sicker. As a teacher, it is of utmost concern to me in a traditional sense, schools have seemingly ignored or evaded teaching students about any type of 'real' issues. Some might say students are too young, or it is too much work, they don't know how, or it is the parents' job to teach students to think. I say enough is enough. It is time to stop making excuses and face these issues critically with informed and conscious minds. This is life, it is happening right now, and waiting until later will be too late. Whatever our issues are, they are real, and we need to start preparing this generation to be able to do something about them. This thinking, along with my own personal experiences, fuels the research and discussion ongoing throughout this thesis.

Additionally, as you embark upon reading this you might find yourself wondering how a cartoon can seriously be used as the basis for a Masters thesis in the field of education, let alone how it might address the aforementioned 'real' issues. I trust these questions will be answered as you continue to read, but identifying opposition is an important aspect to any piece of research. I argue that *The Simpsons* might just be the most controversial cartoon ever created and its uses could well be endless. I emphasize again my biased opinion of the show; I am a self-proclaimed fan. While I do know other

fans more dedicated then myself, I need to point out and own that my admiration for the show makes me inclined to find useful. I am aware and accept that not everyone will share my view, and perhaps even act in opposition against it and I am okay with that. After all, opposition is most often what sparks discourse.

It also needs to be emphasized that this particular cartoon was never meant for Saturday morning. While the show reaches out to the younger viewer in a limited capacity, it extends a hand to the more mature, educated and experienced viewer, inviting them to participate, identify and reminisce. I am not one to align myself in the direction of censorship, but it must also be noted that the content and complexity of the issues and activities proposed here are intended for students in upper elementary, middle and high school. After having worked extensively in early childhood education, I know it is important to teach children strategies to think about media images from as early an age as possible. However, in this context, it is assumed that with age, students will have a certain level of prior knowledge and experience in engaging with media that will support their learning and discussion in this area exponentially. As well, while I'll do my best to explain *The Simpsons* characters and episodes in detail, some general knowledge of the show will be required in order to grasp the full potential of the ideas I present. If you are one of the few that has not yet been as Chris Turner (2008) argues 'somehow defined by the show' I invite you to take a chance and find out more about it, come on, what's the worst that could happen?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

During my undergraduate years, I had extensive opportunities to read developmental theories and psychology texts focusing on child development, classroom management and methodology books for teaching 'core' subjects like English, math, and history. However, I was only ever briefly exposed to ideas like critical pedagogy and multiculturalism. For me, graduate school entailed finding out more about the latter and learning how to implement the former in ways that were meaningful to both my students and me. In the 'age of technology' my interests in anything with a screen brought me to focus my examination of curriculum development on critical media studies. During that time, I came across texts that have reignited my passion for teaching and learning, influenced my discussion here, and will undoubtedly inspire my future teaching. For that I will be forever grateful.

In preparation for the writing of this thesis, I wanted to ensure that I had built a solid conceptual framework with which I would be able to achieve the task of bringing *The Simpsons* into academic discussion. I began by reading and rereading theories of media literacy, cultural studies, critical pedagogy and critical discourse. When I wasn't reading, I re-watched every episode of *The Simpsons* that ever aired on national television, and the feature movie. Once I felt I had a solid enough case, I set out to read as many books about *The Simpsons* as I could. Sometimes this meant resorting to old comics and episode guides but it also meant hours of analysing articles and books which took my understanding of the show deeper, through discussion of psychology, philosophy, science, religion and its role as a popular culture phenomenon. Divided into two sections respectively, this chapter is a discussion of these resources.

I will not have fun with educational toys

Making the headlines everywhere from newspapers to social networking forums are stories of children in schools failing to meet standards, dropping out and giving up on formal education. Coupled with these headlines are evidences of hatred and violence hitting closer and closer to home. We hear about sex scandals and kids dying in the schoolyards, and we don't even seem to bat an eye anymore. In a time when we claim to have made the biggest scientific breakthroughs, we can't seem to get students to stop fighting with each other and stay in school, or to get teachers to stay in the profession or get parents to attend parent/teacher interviews. School has become a place where almost no one wants to be.

There are many notions as to why this might be so. In a recent American documentary entitled *Waiting for Superman* (which has been highly-publicized and funded by the likes of Oprah and Bill Gates) the finger seemed to be pointed directly at 'bad' teachers. Others have blamed the parents, society, poor role models and unmotivated students. Some attack curriculum standards or the influx of technology that bombards every aspect of our lives and 'promotes' the laziness of students. The problem with the blame game is that it isn't getting us anywhere. In his book *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938) emphasized that "it is the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations" (.p5). In addition to this idea, critical pedagogy asks the teacher to consider the importance of histories in any experience (Kincheloe, 2008). And so, this discussion cannot go any further until we have identified and 'culled out' some of the factors that have brought us to the state of

education we face today.

In the early days, school was a place for the elite to go. It wasn't until the invention of the printing press that education became more accessible to 'common folk'—so that they could learn to read the bible and obey societal 'norms' (Postman, 1992). For the most part however, schools (specifically in the West) have existed with the main goal to produce obedient workers for an industrialized, labour-driven consumer society. Perhaps this sounds a little harsh so let me phrase it in a more palatable manner. School is a place to prepare future generations to enter a workforce in a society that likes to buy stuff.

It appears over the last hundred years or so, the expectations and need for schooling has been directly related to societies economic activity. Think, for a moment, about the influx of children into formal educational systems, and thus the enormous boom in the building of schools during the economically roaring 1920's. Then, during the Depression times, of the 1930's children were removed from schools in the scramble to help feed their families. The post-war boom of the 1950's brought on the most notable changes in the approach and purpose of education. At that time, schools become constant and mandatory, and focused on preparing students to fuel the economic growth of a manufacturing boom based on the good-life consumption of the nuclear suburban family. Girls were encouraged to pursue literature and home economics class so that they could stay home and make good wives and mothers, while boys were prepared for jobs in the manufacturing sectors with classes like mechanics, shop and probably some mathematics.

Things have pretty much rolled along like this without change for quite some time now. We still encourage our girls to sit pretty and read, and our boys to get messy, play rough and 'hold their own. True, we have 'embraced multiculturalism', brought in technology (maybe on a laptop for everyone to share), implemented 'social learning' strategies and there are fewer rows in our classrooms, but when compared with the changes going on in the rest of the world, our schools have some considerable catching up to do. This lack of fundamental philosophical innovation is troubling as it fails to recognize our changing needs as a society. It is also likely that it is this stagnation that breeds most of our current distaste for school. While there is some comfort in following along with what is familiar and perceived as normal in the hopes that propping up societal 'norms' might promote peace and like-mindedness, the problem here is that no matter how hard we try to achieve 'normal', this increasingly antiquated notion is failing us.

In attempting to create 'normal', schools became places to groom a large number of people in acquiring similar skills to fuel factory productivity. Schools were thus strategically morphed into institutions that would spread understandings of 'order' and convince us of the rules we should abide by in order to achieve 'success' (Postman, 1992); Furthermore, school convinced us that 'success' was defined as a spouse, a house, a white picket fence, 2.5 children and maybe a dog or a swimming pool. It was long ago that Marx and Lukas aptly pointed out the power alliances that lie beneath the creation of class structure in our society (Hammer and Kellner, 2009). Through the economic analysis ensued by the likes of these two, we can see how issues of class structure in consumer-driven societies maintains the 'rich get richer' mentality, and how

schools were created to maintain this 'order' by producing a working class citizen who was educated to his station. 'Townsmen' who were oppressed just enough that they would undervalue their contributions and thus continue to work for low wages, which in turn only furthered to perpetuate cycles of class structure. Michael Apple in *Ideology and Curriculum (2004),* discusses how "schools exist through their relations to more powerful institutions" (p.61) Apple further elaborates on what he calls the 'hidden curriculum' by which our schools are "selected and organized around sets of principles and values that come from somewhere, that represent particular views of normality and deviance" (Apple, 2004, .p61). This 'somewhere' he refers to is the position in society held by the dominant upper-class elite white males who have historically established these dominating 'norms" and values with the intention of maintaining their place of power and wealth over everyone else. Drawing from the work of Kincheloe and Steinberg (2004), the notion of industrial capitalist power is framed with the understanding that it "involves a panoply of operations that work to maintain the status quo and keep it running with as little friction (social conflict) as possible...it is beneficial to individuals and groups who profit most from existing power relations" (.p21). Throughout this thesis, identifying the presence and structures of power that govern our schools is vital to identifying the issues and seeking to create change (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998).

In reaction to these issues of power and class, many theories have been brought to the table. The fact remains, however, that structures of class and power continue to control the media and institutions whose dominant voices drown out (if not silence) their oppressed opposition (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998). In addition, in this climate, frank

discussions of the mechanisms of power seem to make us somewhat uncomfortable and "such unease allows power wielders to hide in the recesses of the cultural and political landscape while shaping cultural expression and political landscape in their own interests" (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2004, p.20). Born out of intensified analysis of power and class during the 'hippie days' of the 1960's, the Frankfurt School "was among the first to develop critical theories of consumer society" (Hammer and Kellner, 2009, p.xxi). They sought to use critical theory to address these power inequalities directly. Hammer and Kellner (2009) explain, "following Marx and Lukas, Frankfurt School critical theory from the beginning characterized capitalist society as a commodity-producing society" (p.xxi). This is especially important because "the critical theorists concluded that commodification and consumption were playing fundamental roles in the contemporary development of capitalist modernity and attempted to theorize its new configurations in the consumer society" (Hammer and Kellner, 2009, p.xxi). Among other things, this theorizing led to a focus of study which centred on the ways in which capitalist consumer societies created or 'configured' schools and education systems to meet their own needs of obtaining and maintaining cheap workers who would consume more.

The focus of critical theory, specifically as it pertains to issues of school, education, curriculum and teacher education eventually came to be referred to as critical pedagogy. At the heart of critical pedagogy is the idea that all "education is a political activity" (Kincehloe, 2008, p.8) and that politics is driven by the quest for power. Critical pedagogy, however, is about creating change and taking action, not about pointing fingers. Critical pedagogues propose that by identifying the powers and

political interests that drive schools and form curriculum content, we can in fact answer questions about why schools are not working for our students. For example, in the documentary *Waiting for Superman* we are reminded several times of the failing test scores produced 'en mass' by millions of failing students in America. While in this instance the blame is being placed on the teacher, critical pedagogy asks educators to consider the political powers that influence the curriculum, the school system, the teachers and the making of the documentary itself. If, for instance, the exams are prepared by a group of people who represent one specific dominant culture (for instance- white American males) it is little wonder why a country with such a multi-ethnically diverse population might have failed to reach consensus on what exactly the students ought to know and how best to assess their learning.

This type of skewed testing of student learning isn't just happening beyond our borders, it happens here as well. In July of 2008, the Quebec school system was in the midst of marking a government exam taken by high school students that indicated high failure rates. When the results were further inspected, it was noticed that one particular question was answered incorrectly by a large majority of students. This question included unfamiliar wording to a population of students who were primarily French first language speakers. The failing question either indicates that grade eleven students in Quebec have no idea about history or it revealed that the particular choice of wording used in the question was irrelevant to the student population who were writing the test. In this case, many argued that if the question were re-worded most students would have answered correctly. Because ones response depends on how the question is framed, critical pedagogy strives to encourage students to confront what they see and question it

accordingly.

Joe Kincheloe (2008) explains that, "by utilizing IQ tests and developmental theories derived from research on students from dominant cultural backgrounds, schools not only reflect social stratification but also extend it" (p.8). Put another way, critical pedagogy proposes that if we continue to base our theories of education without taking into consideration the power and politics involved, we will only continue to develop inaccurate testing, content strategies and curricula that will keep failing students who don't belong to a particular cultural 'norm'. This will only continue to further perpetuate inequities of power relationships in our society. Kincheloe (2008) acknowledges that it is not the teacher's plan or intention to hurt students, but that administrators have set out unfair practices that they think will maintain order and then many teachers just follow the rules implemented by the systems that have long been established by our society. He points out that within such a system, power structures are essentially employed everywhere and it is our job to begin to at least acknowledge their existence (Kincheloe, 2008).

In addition to recognizing and acknowledging issues of power, critical pedagogues strive toward fostering a critical consciousness (Freire, 1974). In *Education for a Critical Consciousness,* Paulo Freire (1974), who has come to be recognized as the father of critical pedagogy, explained that once the educator has identified and discussed issues of politics and power they might be ready to engage their students in an active quest toward meaningful learning. The first step Freire explained was to help the oppressed acknowledge his or her own oppression. He described how as a teacher working with disenfranchised youth in Brazil, he engaged in this process through

creating a comfortable relationship with students built through developing a critical discourse and dialogue. Freire explains that the traditional 'top-down' approach to discourse in schools is far less effective and only promotes power inequalities compared to his proposed 'side-by -side' model where among other attributes empathy and trust promote a comfortable critical discourse. Through this critical discourse and dialogue, Freire argued that the disenfranchised would be able move forward, gain confidence in learning situations and perhaps learn to challenge, if not break down some of the barriers imposed by these structures of power (Freire, 1974).

Employing this type of critical discourse identifies that discussions of power are inseparable from analysis of race, culture and identity (all of which are socially constructed) (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998) and it becomes essential to introduce cultural studies into the conversation. In the 1980's, cultural studies began growing in significance and thus has both influenced and attracted admirers and sceptics alike. Underlying the discussion thus far are the issues of race, culture and religion because much of the power and class structures created in our society are based on the idea that if you pray to a different god, or if your skin is a different colour then a dividing line needs to separate the *us* from the *them.* These are the ideas that drive cultural studies because in reality, there is no *them or us;* this notion is a socially constructed idea that also involves power structures. Because we have chosen to draw this 'line in the sand,' cultural studies seek to identify the ways in which our society perpetuates and justifies these divisions. In addition to these imposed cultural divisions, increasing technology has brought otherwise 'distant lands' closer together, a term we have coined as globalization. The 'global communities' created by this 'closeness' have allowed for

things like easier communication and economic trade and have fabricated social landscapes that are in a constant state of flux. As we learn to adapt, our cultural landscapes also shift. "Cultural studies thus has always been proliferating a diversity of approaches, themes, methods, and projects, and is an open field, subject to [these] dramatic transformations and shifts" (Kellner and Hammer, p.xxxiv). Henry Giroux (2009) explains that alone cultural studies will not suffice. He points out that "in connecting the most critical insights of cultural studies with an understanding of the importance of critical pedagogy" (p.89) we will be better able to see the significance of its' ability to shift understandings and promote learning.

Within this discussion, it is necessary to focus more specifically on the ways in which critical pedagogy and cultural theorists can work together in clarifying how "media representations can serve pernicious interests of cultural oppression by positioning certain groups as inferior, thus asserting the superiority of dominant social groups and reproducing their hegemonic position" (Hammer and Kellener, 2009, p.xxii). Kellner and Hammer highlight that in the 1980's an increased interest in how the audience interacts with media "created complex notions of the politics of representation and the construction of meaning by stressing how audience could produce oppositional readings, reacting negatively to what they perceived as prejudiced representations of their own social groups" (2009, p.xxi). Obviously, a show that goes around 'dissing' a character that you can personally relate with will not make you eager to watch. This information helped mass media moguls boost ratings on prime time television by throwing the minority population under the bus at the butt of the joke, making the dominant (white) more likely to tune in and walk away with a good laugh and not a

scratch on them, except for their now perpetuated notions of the minority that served as the joke of course. As we will see, one of the reasons *The Simpsons* became so interesting is because they took the big fat American (yellow) guy and threw him under the bus as well.

Cultural theory takes the stance that "cultural representations are never innocent or pure, and that they contain positive, negative, or ambiguous representations of diverse social groups"(Hammer and Kellner, 2009, p.xxii) and that discussion of such representations must also include that which has been left out; "Exclusions of groups like Latinos or Asian Americans in the mainstream media, as well as demeaning stereotypes, were emphasized, as were the ways that framing, editing, subtexts, and the construction of pictorial images produced culturally loaded and biased representation of subordinate groups" (Kellner and Hammer, 2009, xxii). In combination with identifying power and recognizing shifting cultural landscapes, when we inspect the ways in which these divisions are perpetuated throughout the media representations (or lack there of) we can come to better understand some of the issues that we are facing.

Herman & Chomsky (1988) explain in *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media,* that the bigger the company is, the greater their ability to reach us. They discuss how hierarchies among media corporations are giant corporate conglomerates only eager to make money and they do so by selling us these advertisements and images, and encourage us into a life of excess consumerism. This has become more profitable for them than selling us the actual news or anything resembling truth, unless of course it is in their best interests and will bolster ratings (and even then we have to manoeuvre through a ton or more of corporate hype to find the

story). Herman & Chomsky further explain that these hierarchies have become so well established because the revenue within this power structure is dependent on those hoping to advertise and not those who actually consume the content. This forms media alliances that lay with corporate powers and not necessarily the general public or the truth. Ultimately this all boils down to corporate media companies that can charge much less and sell much more compared to those not aligned with corporate powers. If someone set out to produce something honest with more real content than advertising, they would have to charge so much more than the competition that it becomes virtually impossible for them to succeed and their voice is again drowned out by a dominant upper class (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Another significant influence underlying these hierarchies in the creation of media content that Herman & Chomsky discuss is that of the 'corporate censorship'. This refers to how the content is censored in order to portray the best interests of the companies advertising. For example, as we know, soda, with all its sugar, has been linked as a significant factor in childhood obesity and diabetes. However, since companies like Coke and Pepsi are owned, operated or affiliated with the big companies that govern our media, these risks are muted, and advertisements targeted at children continue to make soda a top seller among our young. Companies spend billions of dollars finding out as much as they can about us so that they can target us to buy from every possible angle, and the fact that we do buy into it, has led to the insurgence of omnipresent media that is present throughout our every waking moment.

I believe that teachers responses to an increasingly 'technologized' society was supposed to be found in a media literacy and technology classroom, but, as we have

come to see, this has only made the invasion easier for corporate companies to move in. At some point in the 1990's, I can remember computers slowly making their way into my school along with the need to develop comprehensive media literacy skills. In this instance, it would seem that my teachers and governmental bodies saw no harm in teaming up with companies like IBM and Apple in an effort to lower the price tag of bringing technology into the classroom. I still remember being among a select few to test out a program put in our school by IBM at one of the elementary schools I attended. In the first class, we learned to play a computer game that involved a trucker travelling around Canada delivering goods, once the class had mastered that game, we were introduced to games like minesweeper and solitaire, when we got bored with those we worked with Mavis Beacon Teaches typing and then finally we were allowed to type up one of our stories in WordPerfect. The point I am getting at here is that this was not a media literacy class. This was a computer or maybe technology class that taught me that a machine could make my work look nicer and a day with video games was somehow a little more exciting then playing outside. They taught me how to use a computer so that when I grew up I would eventually buy one, and as I sit here with backups of this thesis on three computers that rest within arms reach, I know that clearly their plan worked. While I might have obtained literacy in *how* to use the computer, I was not taught to think about how this medium was going to help or hinder my life or our society as a whole (Postman, 1995). Nor was I encouraged to consider how "media stories provide the symbols, myths and resources that constitute a common culture and through appropriation of which individuals become integrated into their culture and society" (Kellner, 2009, .p5). Critical media literacy, as we will discuss in chapter 4, attempts to

find a balance between teaching the tools and addressing the messages presented by the media in a critical context.

There are many cultural media theorists and critical educators interested and devoted to tackling the issues brought on by the invasion of media within a critical pedagogy context. People like "Larry Grossber, Henry Giroux, Bell Hooks and others argue that cultural studies are a form of pedagogy and that media literacy should be one of the goals of cultural studies bringing major challenges to education to democratically reconstructing itself, and to teaching new forms of literacy" (Kellner and Hammer, 2009, xxvii). This new form of literacy referred to by Kellner and Hammer (2009) is slowly making its way into some of our schools and classrooms as the invasion of electronic media becomes more and more pervasive. Sadly, many of my own colleagues have argued with me that it is far more work to teach a student *how* to think for themselves then to simply tell them *what* to do and what to think about. This type of resistance is common and means that a critical approach to media literacy is still struggling to get into the majority of our classrooms (Steinberg, 2007).

We can all agree that the state of our society today indicates that this system of schooling is in many ways failing to prepare our youth to critically engage and create a change toward a more peaceful society. Critical and cultural theorists propose that the next step after acknowledging structures of power is to do something about it—praxis (Kincheloe, 2008). Many further propose that the action we take must also consider and address the manner with which the media frames and extends these issues by presenting us at every turn with carefully created images and reinforcing stereotyped cultural representations of the *other*. As personal technologies get smaller and more portable, we

see media culture invading our lives more and more. Most of us have become what Postman (1992) refers to as 'Technophiles'—someone who blindly accepts that technology can only make things better and does not consider what technology can make worse. As teachers, however, it is essential that we begin to insist on asking the questions that will bring a 'new' critical media literacy and awareness to the classroom in order to promote change. The new media literacy is no longer just teaching students the skills to become consumers of technological 'stuff'. Instead it entails using more relevant curriculum content to empower students to critique the media they consume and to engage societal issues actively, honestly. Through critical discussion the new media literacy aims to promote a much needed and significant shift in our critical consciousness as a society (Frerie, 1974). I propose, as explained in detail in Chapter 4, that using a critical media analysis of *The Simpsons* in the classroom can be a successful and engaging way through which we can open up this type of dialogue with our students in the classroom.

The Simpsons—So much more than a silly cartoon

While chapter 3 is dedicated to discussing and contextualizing the show in more detail, this section is intended to establish some of the major themes that underlie the significant success and usability of the show in an 'academic' sense while discussing the shows' messages and asking what *The Simpsons* might be able to teach us about ourselves.

Ever since the original conception of the show, *The Simpsons* have used referential humour to throw the issues of our society in our face (Turner, 2008). In the early 90's, I

was old enough to remember the public scorn and criticism that declared the show went against North American values and that it was going to ruin the minds of youth and make all husbands lazy dumb doughnut eaters. I remember thinking that this was a likely scenario of the ' adults just being lame' and I snuck away and watched it anyway. What I didn't realize was that the 'real' reason for the resistance against the show was because it came forward and underlined the problems within our society, and made us laugh about them. The truth is Homer's bad eating habits didn't "make America fat" and Bart's problems in school aren't "rubbing off on our students." These things would have happened with or without the show, but the ways in which *The Simpsons* are able to make us laugh about these problems was what made it something unique and contemptible at the same time (Turner, 2008). As I look back at how I understood the show when I was younger, I realize now that I didn't have a clue. I was never taught *how* to watch TV; it was just something you did to fill in the time when you didn't have homework.

One of my favourite episodes of *The Simpsons* is entitled *Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy*, it aired as the thirteenth episode of the fifth season. In this episode, *The Simpson* family visit a toy store after Grandpa Simpson decides to give the family their inheritance early (which isn't much more than some tokens and an old telegram). At the toy store Lisa buys a 'Talking Malibu Stacy' doll (This doll is clearly their cartoon take on Barbie—Lisa is a big fan but Smithers owns the biggest collection ever). Back at the Simpson home, Lisa pulls the cord and Stacy says, "I wish they taught shopping in school" Lisa pulls again and the doll suggests "Let's make cookies for the boys." As the screen fills with yellow we see a close up of Lisa's concerned face, and she holds the doll closer

pleading with it; " Come on Stacy, I have waited my whole life to hear you speak, don't you have anything relevant to say?" she pulls the cord again and Stacy replies "Don't ask me. I am a girl" the camera moves across the room to Bart who says, "Right on, say it sister" And an angry Lisa charges Bart angrily saying:

> " It isn't funny Bart, millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act. That they can never be more then vacuous ninnies who's only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband and spend all day on the phone with their equally evacuees friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband." (Lisa Simpson)

At the time it aired, the reason I enjoyed this episode so much was because my mother, who was worried Barbie dolls would turn me into the exact 'ninny' Lisa was referring to, never allowed me to have one. Since all of my friends had them I thought for sure my mom was the only person in the world who thought like this. That was until this episode pointed out otherwise.

Fifteen years later, immersed in this research I watched the episode again and it reminds me exactly why I have chosen this 'cartoon' for the focus of my thesis. As the show goes on, I watch mindful of the research I have completed. Lisa is outraged and decides something needs to be done about the Malibu Stacy dolls. In the true *Simpson* fashion, the show goes on to take a series of humorous stabs at structures of power within corporate companies, their missions to maintain conformity and sell as many Malibu Stacy dolls as they can. Lisa and Marge visit the factory where the dolls are made and Lisa realizes the company doesn't care if it is influencing the lives of millions of girls and that in fact this was exactly what they were trying to do. The picture moves yet again to the Simpson house where we see Lisa and Grandpa Simpson sitting at the table both with their heads in their hands, Lisa sighs "it's awful being a kid, no one

listens to you" Grandpa Simpson (who in a subplot is trying to regain his youth) replies "it's rotten getting old, no one listens to ya." and then, just in case we weren't paying attention to the underpinning theme of power structures, Homer declares, "I am a white male aged 18 to 49, everyone listens to me! No matter how dumb my suggestions are." Then he pulls a can from the cupboard that reads "Nuts and Gum—Together at last!" And, it is just like that *The Simpsons* manage to identify plights in society, highlight how they can make us feel down and powerless (or if you are a white male aged 18 to 49, powerful), and then they proceed to make us laugh at it all.

There are many subtle factors that play in to how *The Simpsons* tackle serious issues, and it is not possible to capture the whole impact of the show with only words. Chris Turner (2008) explains how the show uses "symphonic humour" to take the issues a little further. He explains that it is the 'blink and you miss it' gags that add that 'symphonic humour" to an already funny joke (Turner, 2008). In the clip just discussed, this symphonic humour is the label on the can, we have already started to laugh at Homer's comment (because we know it is sad—but true) and then we laugh even harder at the idea that someone would actually have the dumb idea to mix nuts and gum (it was Homers idea from a previous episode) and sell it. Not only that, but that someone (like Homer) is actually dumb enough to buy the nut gum takes the joke even further. Turner explains that *The Simpsons* employs a "good-joke-better-joke" strategy with which to employ symphonic humour in which a good joke is told and when we least expect it, a better one follows directly after it and possibly another and another. Turner explains that it works wonders to bring viewers a better laugh and he credits this as one of many reasons the show has succeeded at making its mark on an entire generation (Turner,

2008).

The very fact that each episode of *The Simpsons* contains layers of information, references, puns and gags has had a huge part in creating and maintaining its enormous fan base, because, he says there is "something for everyone" (Turner, 2008). The show airs in several different countries and in several different languages. The Internet is swarming with sites devoted to every aspect of the show from the famous opening sequences, to each and every character that has ever appeared, every famous quote, and why Homer's voice was different during the early episodes. There are quizzes you can take to test your *Simpson* IQ and ones that will '*Simpsonize* you' to generate a *Simpson* avatar that actually makes you look like you could be walking down the streets of Springfield. The list of things people have devoted their time to '*Simpsonizing'* goes on and on and on. There is too much going on in the world of *The Simpsons* to keep up with. Followers of *The Simpsons* go beyond just wanting to buy toys and watch old episodes with their annotated books. If you want to know every official *Simpson* toy released (there are thousands), there is a book for that. Or, if you want the inside scoop on every episode from the first twenty seasons, there is an 8.8 pound book for that too. The show has become one of my generation's relevant cultural resources. That *The Simpsons* is now the subject of analysis for fields of stud*y* in university courses encompassing religion; psychology, philosophy, science and most recently education is not surprising.

Probably the most popular example of *The Simpsons* being used in an educational institution is its inclusion as the focus of an Undergraduate course in the Philosophy department at Berkeley University. The course was designed as the result of an

assignment in an undergraduate course, where the students had to invent an original course in the area of philosophy. They decided to try it out as an actual course and it became a big hit with classes filling-to-capacity immediately. Since then, several other colleges and high schools have adapted these ideas and have also began to use *Simpson* clips to spike conversations about family, morals and ethics, nutrition and religious practices (Turner, 2008).

One of the most compelling aspects of *The Simpsons* is its capacity to reach so many subject areas and incorporate real-life situations. In the book *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! Of Homer (2001)* a collection of articles describes ways of viewing and discussing clips and episodes which lead to better understandings of some of the philosophic questions posed about how our society creates ideals, views ethics, moral obligations, and understandings of right and wrong. The articles explain how focusing our engagement with the show can help facilitate discussion of many-long standing philosophical ideas. Typically, an episode of *The Simpsons* uses situations familiar to us, things we do everyday, like mowing the lawn (which Homer does with everything from a farm tractor to a pair of scissors), doing homework (or in Bart's case evading it), or trying to have a "nice family dinner" (something Marge longs for, but will probably never happen). It is the universal popularity and familial connection viewers feel with the show that encourages scholarly scrutiny of *The Simpsons* from within the fields of philosophy and psychology. Philosophical analysis of *The Simpsons* primarily examines the different ways that this engagement interacts with us as an audience, and how it shapes our ideals and conditioning in and with society. Through critical discourse, the authors of these essays in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: the D'oh! Of*

Homer use the Simpsons' characters and situations to identify and resolve some of the age-old human questions. There is a somewhat different focus when psychology is applied to study of *The Simpsons*. In the compilation of essays entitled, *The Psychology of The Simpsons* (2005), psychology scholars look to see what the show can tell us about constructed notions of family, love marriage, self-esteem, being 'stupid', parenting, relationships, and being 'smart'. (Brown and Logan, 2005)

In addition, the topic of religion within the show has inspired (among other titles) a book called *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: Leader's Guide for Group Study* (2009). This surprising text, written by a Jew to be used in Sunday schools, uses the show to focus on various themes of religious culture. The show topics that the book brings up include discussions of scientology, missionaries, hell, and global warming. The book encourages Christian teachers to watch the show with their Sunday school students and discuss any themes or issues the show presents, which concern their faith.

Of considerable interest is the significant attention devoted to discussion of *The Simpsons* and their supposed expression of religious tendencies. In October of 2010, the official Vatican Newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* declared, in what has been recognized as "a last bid attempted to appear hip and impressionable," (O'neil, 2010) that the yellow family did in fact represent such Catholic ideals throughout the show, that not only should they be accepted by the Catholic church, but that Catholic parents should allow, and even encourage, their children to watch it. This declaration prompted many controversial reactions from Catholics around the world who perhaps hereto had been supporting an 'anti-Simpson' position for far too long.

How *The Simpsons* depict the issues existing within our schools and education

systems has not gone unnoticed among these aforementioned texts. While this aspect will be discussed in more detail later, it is interesting to note how two teachers have turned to these popular culture representations and brought them into their own classrooms. Karma Waltonen and Denise Du Vernay (2010) declare their admiration for *The Simpsons* in their book *The Simpsons in the Classroom: Embiggening the Learning Experience with the Wisdom of Springfield*. They go on to explain how representations of literature in the show can motivate both high school and college students to want to participate in activities such as written response. They describe several ways in which they have used creative writing, exploration of word meanings, spelling, and the construction of 'invented' words (ie: embiggening and Do'h) to create discourse and engage with students. In one chapter, they discuss the structure of stories and how the creator/writers of *The Simpsons* use techniques (available to them because they are cartoons) to move the viewer from one plot to another and then to another and back again. The authors explain that the opportunities provided by the show to teach grammar, phonics, structure, description and humour are endless. (Waltonen and Vernay, 2010). This book highlights current uses of the show and provides a good resource for teachers looking to utilize *The Simpsons* in their own language arts classrooms. Significant to this discussion are the stories the two teachers shared about how successful these learning and teaching experiences have been. They describe how they have already used *The Simpsons* in courses taught in high schools and college classes across the United States and how rewarding it has been for them. They explain that because the content, characters and situations are relevant and familiar to students this focuses and motivates themed discussion far more than when they have attempted to

launch similar discussions using resources unfamiliar to the students. (Waltonen and Vernay, 2010)

The accessibility of *The Simpsons* as a discussion starter is undeniable. Chris Turner (2008) explains that there is likely not anyone under the age of 60 who cannot name at least a few of *The Simpson* characters, and that as of 2004, there is not a student in university who has grown up without the show on television, newspapers, lunch boxes or T-shirts. While he acknowledges that some cases of parental censorship might have prevented a limited number of children from watching it on a regular basis, still, it is unlikely that anyone could have been prevented from knowing of the show's existence or from understanding its basic premise (Turner, 2008). The show's multifaceted omnipresence in our lives is exactly what makes it the perfect tool for reaching and teaching our students. And so, without further ado I introduce you to *The Simpsons*.

Chapter 3: The Phenomena of The Simpsons

Out of a Life in Hell comes The Simpsons

In the 1980's, Fox was a new broadcasting company struggling to get enough viewers to stay on the air and George H. W. Bush (not be confused with his son George W. Bush) was the 43rd Vice President of the United States about to become its 41st President. It was a time when television shows were created to edify and ingrain wholesome family values. We watched shows like; *Full House, Family Matters, Growing Pains* and *The Cosby Show.* On Sundays, the viewing public tuned in for salvation to Televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, and not too many people were willing, or perhaps brave enough, to challenge these 'television norms.' Of course there were a few shows like *Rosanne* and *Cheers* that pushed the boundaries, but even those played it comparatively safe. The one exception *Married with Children* went pretty far into left field, and clearly identified that there was something different about the struggling Fox network. Still, most television viewers watched other channels and appeared content with the edifying values based content. Then, along came a guy by the name of Matt Groening.

Born in Portland, Oregon on February 15, 1954, to Margaret and Homer, Groening was the middle of five children who grew up exploring the abandoned grounds of the Portland zoo and sneaking into movie theatres (Ortved, 2009). In John Ortved's (2009) book *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History,* Ortved describes Groening's childhood as "idyllic...especially for someone with creative ambitions" (p.12). His father was "a cartoonist, filmmaker, and writer who showed by example that one could put food on the table and succeed using one's creative faculties" (Ortved,

2009, p.12). With his father as his creative role model, Groening began sketching cartoons at every opportunity, including during school hours.

Groening developed a knack for challenging authority in a 'tongue-in-cheek' sort of way from an early age. In an article appearing in the *Portland Tribune,* author Don Hamilton discusses an influential schoolyard memory of Groening. Hamilton describes how Groening, in grade one at the time, had let out a high-pitched squeal on the playground for no obvious reason other then the joy and excitement of a six year old playing on the playground. Well, apparently the principal was not impressed and began to scold the children for blowing some type of whistle. "To the great amusement of the kids, she went crazy searching each one of them for a whistle that didn't exist" (Hamilton, 1993). To this Groening further elaborates " "The rest of my life, has been blowing invisible whistles and making people wonder" (Hamilton, 1993). From this point forward, Groening would tread the fine line between following the rules and pushing the limits to get people thinking and talking about real issues.

During the 1960's, Groening's expression of creativity in school was not supported or considered acceptable (not that it is much more acceptable these days, but one hopes we might have made some small steps at least). Groening's preoccupation with creating sketches in class and challenging societal norms would get him into some troublesome and now familiar situations including serving detentions and having to write lines on the board in school. In a 1990 interview with Groening in *The Seattle Times* author Paul Andrews discusses the importance of Groening's experiences in school; "the childhood memories which stand out most - as they do for many of his generation - involve "my history of getting into trouble," he [Groening] says. He

[Groening] would sit on a bench outside the principal's office and vow to himself that someday he would make up for all the wasted time adults had cost him" (1990). His cartoons would become his tools for payback.

Upon graduation from high school as the class president, Groening "applied to only two schools: Harvard (which said no) and Evergreen College. The latter was a newly progressive state-funded college in Washington, where there where no grades or exams" (Ortved, 2009, p.13). While attending this liberal arts college, Groening became the head of the school newspaper *The Cooper Point Journal* and his critical approach to issues did not waver. "[He] sensationalized the paper, getting political with his attacks on the state legislature, as well as lampooning the school's countercultural piety" (Ortved, 2009, p. 14). After graduation, Groening would move to Los Angeles, but the quest for fame and fortune in Los Angelus didn't come as easily as it does in the movies. Groening worked a series of dead end jobs. "[These] included being a writer/chauffeur to an ancient director, writing slogans for horror movies at an ad agency, landscaping at a sewage treatment plant and working for a copy shop" (Ortved, 2009, p.15). However horrible, these jobs would prove to be a great fodder for Groening's future work as a cartoonist.

By the early part of the 1980's, Groening had work drawing an underground cartoon sketch series called *Life in Hell* about two humanized rabbits which focused on universal issues such as sex, love, religion and a life of working towards an eventual and unavoidable demise. Most of the issues covered throughout the *Life in Hell* series would emerge from the pointless jobs that kept Groening employed during his early days in L.A. Ortved (2009) explains how Groening had moved to L.A. and "immersing himself

in the punk rock scene and working stiff jobs to pay the rent. He recorded his disgust with the city through his comic strip" (p. 4). Groening made small booklets of the *Life in Hell* comics and sold them to friends and anyone else who would buy one. Eventually, the strip was published in a variety of newspapers. It was there these cartoons were spotted by none other than James L. Brooks.

Brooks invited Groening to present his ideas to a team of executives at Fox for a possible gig creating shorts that would air before the commercial breaks on *The Tracy Ullman Show.* As the story goes, Groening decided on his way to meet with Brooks and the Fox executives that a possible chance at losing his legal rights to his *Life in Hell* series wasn't worth the risk. And so, right there in the waiting room of Brooks' office, in less then twenty minutes, he created a rough sketch of *The Simpson* Family naming and loosely basing the characters Homer, Marge, Lisa, and Maggie after his own family. According to various sources, Bart is simply an anagram of brat but his character's personality is supposed to be based on Groening's little brother, Mark. Fox would bite and productions of the first Simpsons shorts were soon underway. Classic to *Simpson* tradition, episode eighteen of season thirteen pays homage to Groening experiences in a parody entitled *I am Furious Yellow.*

The Simpson shorts would first air on April the 19th, 1987, and those who tuned in said it was like nothing else they had ever seen before. Even *The Flintstones* couldn't compare to the allure of this new cartoon family. Almost immediately, people were talking and more importantly they were watching *The Simpsons* shorts. Three seasons and 48 one-minute clips later, the family left the nest of *The Tracy Ullman Show* for their own spot on prime time television.

The Simpsons and Springfield

After much anticipation, speculation and some criticism, Fox TV aired *The Simpsons* first full-length episode on an exciting December night in 1989. The first episode of the first season was entitled *Simpsons, Roasting On an Open Fire* and it gave the 'everyman' viewer something to relate to. The show, set in Springfield, U.S.A, located just outside of 'Capital City', has been carefully crafted to mirror all aspects of a typical American town. It is a place in which everyone in Springfield knows everyone else, where rumours spread through the town faster then a wild fire and where town meetings held to contain (or inflame) angry mobs are organized at the drop of a hat. While many have speculated that the mountains shown during the opening sequence show a significant resemblance to Portland where Groening grew up, it is still unknown exactly which town or state Springfield is actually based upon. One can imagine that the obscurity of Springfield's location is meant to increase the shows universal appeal by simply representing *The Simpsons'* home as every town USA. Wherever Springfield is, what we do know is the characters who live there have made their way into our television viewing hearts forever. Like us, the residents of Springfield confront universal issues of both huge and insignificant import, those of corporate power, religion, personal identity, family values, ethics, and growing old and whether or not our stomach can fit another donut. Whether you are a father, mother, child or barkeep there is a Springfieldian who we can relate to, facing choices you can identify with and making you laugh while they ponder their options and often succumb to temptation. It is this universality of appeal that makes audiences come back for more each week.

The main characters of *The Simpson* family include Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and

Maggie. They live in a pretty average-looking home on Evergreen Terrace in Springfield U.S.A. The family consists of five perfectly crafted characters; Homer, 36, is the father and head of the house. Viewing audiences have come to love and sympathise with Homer, a paradoxically kind-hearted but easily frustrated, lazy, clumsy everyman oaf who is forever blundering into stupid mistakes due to choices based on selfishness and ignorance. For example, Homer is known for having a bottomless stomach, and will eat pretty much anything (including his arm or the expired ham from the Quickie-Mart liquidation bin). He has also gained considerable fame and credibility outside of the show for coining the catchphrase "Do'h". D'oh is Homer's vocal equivalent of an unconscious epiphany uttered when he realizes he has launched himself into yet another consequence of stupidity. By 2001, "D'oh" had been adopted and utilized by *Simpsons* fans so often that it was officially added to our lexicon by the Oxford English Dictionary.

Viewers embrace the character of Marge Simpson (34) as a sweet and nurturing mother and mostly-sensible housewife who demonstrates the patience and obedience of a good Christian woman. On occasion, she is known for being swayed by her renegade family, fellow Springfieldians and her not-so-secret gambling addiction. She, however, always finds her way back to the morally 'right' decision by the end of each episode.

The eldest of the three children and most recognizable member of *The Simpson* family, is a troublesome 10 year old Bart, a skateboarding daredevil who dreams of becoming famous for completing dangerous stunts. Universally popular with younger viewers, Bart has been criticized as a horrible role model for today's youth due to his negative attitude toward school and authority figures. Bart's eight-year-old sister Lisa,

on the other hand, is a clear genius with an innate awareness of societies rules. She is also a gifted saxophone player (especially considering the stubby fingers she has inherited from Homer). Lisa is a feminist, vegetarian activist who later becomes a Buddhist who likes to play with Malibu Stacy dolls and longs for a pony all her own. As is often the plight of the middle child Lisa is often ignored; and her brilliance is dismissed because she is only a kid. The youngest member of the family is 1-year-old Maggie. Despite her small size, Maggie has been in many exciting situations, (including the time she shot Homer's boss, Montgomery Burns), but she is most recognizable for constantly sucking on her famous red pacifier.

Initial Reaction

Many can remember some of the controversy ignited when *The Simpsons* first exploded to dominance on national (and international) television. The most notorious criticisms against early episodes of the show in the early 1990's came in a series of ongoing comments and derision from the American President and his family. In an article with People magazine in 1990, the first lady Barbra Bush declared, "*The Simpsons* is the dumbest thing I have ever seen" (Turner, 2008) In response to this public statement, Fox wrote Barbra Bush a letter which they signed from Marge Simpson. Relenting, Barbra Bush issued a formal letter apologizing specifically to Marge (Ortved, 2009).

As *The Simpson* franchise grew, and *Simpson* merchandise was everywhere from cereal shelves to underwear drawers, tensions between the Simpson cartoon family from Evergreen terrace and the First Family occupying the White House would heat up again.

When George H.W. Bush was campaigning for re-election as president he decided upon insulting *The Simpsons* in an attempt to win votes. On January 27, 1992 Bush declared "We are going to keep on trying to strengthen the American family, to make American families a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons". The gauntlet was thrown and *The Simpsons* creators prepared to strike back. Three days later, during the opening scene of the season premier for season three entitled *Stark Raving Dad*, *The Simpsons* would reply in typical symphonic humour. The show begins with *The Simpson* family in front of the television. This time Marge's sisters Patty and Selma are over. As the camera moves out, we can see a cartoon version of the Presidents' address extolling the Walton's family values as American Family values playing on *The Simpsons'* set. Always quick for a comeback, Groening filled the screen with a close-up of Bart who faces us to declare, ""Hey, we're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the Depression too" (Ortved, 2009&Turner, 2008). This would not be the end of the show's enactment of the Bush/Simpson family feud. In 1995, the 13th episode of the 17th season features a retired animated version of Barbra and George who spend the episode living on Evergreen Terrace. (Ortved, 2009) In that episode, Bart embodies a parody of 'Denis the Meanace' first ingratiating his way into the former first family and then inadvertently destroy the first draft of Bushs' presidential memoires. This launched a feud that escalates into neighbourhood warfare until finally the Bushs accept defeat and sell off their house to former president Gerald Ford. Off screen the Bush/Simpson feud eventually faded but not before everyone understood that *The Simpsons* creators weren't going to take the criticism without fighting back.

(Ortved, 2009)

During the early 90's *The Simpsons* broadcasts were the subject of much controversy. People, not just the Bushs, took offence at content of the show, regarding it as an attack on society and 'North American values'. The ever-ready solution for many became to censor anything that had to do with the show. (Ortved, 2009) This one hit so close to home in the early 90's I can still taste it. I will never forget how angry my brother was when he got home after getting in trouble for wearing a *Simpson T*-shirt. Anything *Simpson* had been barred from our school, including lunch boxes and silly toys. If it said *The Simpsons,* we were not allowed to bring it on the playground let alone into the school. Looking back at it now I wonder if this ban was really because the teachers thought the yellow family presented a negative example deriding 'wholesome' values, or if it was merely a reaction to the crass commercialism that plastered the Simpsons faces on copious numbers of over-priced must-have products. Truly, the merchandise effort for this show was pervasive. I wouldn't say it was unnecessary, because from a marketing stand point, the merchandise facilitated the 'recognisability' of the show and thus helped to maintain viewer interests, but truth be told, there was a lot of *Simpson* junk out there. There is no disputing this fact.

Eventually the controversial news story of *The Simpson's* trashing family values cycled out of the lead story position and onto the back pages. Groening summed it up nicely in this 2003 interview; "they said we were going to bring down America back in 1990. We had people very upset about the show. Now, either our critics and enemies have come around or they've given up. I think it's the nature of pop culture. Today's outrage is tomorrow's beloved classic" (Groening, 2003). As it stands now, *The*

Simpsons are embraced as a beloved classic—they are not totally free from controversy, but really, what is?

****I will not celebrate meaningless milestones****

While Matt Groening is undoubtedly the mastermind behind the conception of the family and the underpinning of satire and referential humour, it would not have been possible for one man to make it the phenomenon that it is today. In fact, it is essential to know that the real emotions that underpinned the humour of the show can be credited to the mastermind of comedy known as James L. Brooks. John Ortved (2009) explains Brooks' considerable contribution to the show:

> " If there is a driving force to James L. Brooks, an event that informs his sensibilities as a writer, is his own unhappy childhood. "He loves funny" one friend told me, "because funny is what makes you live through the pain." Or as, Jim told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993, "In my mind, if you write a comedy where human beings experience pain, you're just being realistic." Later, when critics praised the early *Simpsons* episodes for the real emotions found in their silly, cartoon world, they were praising the key contribution of James L. Brooks" (2009, p. 28)

In addition to Groening and Brooks, there are hundreds of writers, animators, voice actors and media specialists who had a hand in escorting the family to their place of prominence today. *The Simpson's* have become a television phenomenon. New episodes continue to air, while the show also clinched syndication spots on a variety of channels in at least 17 different countries—the Phenomenon has been a community effort.

The phenomenal long-lasting success of the show is indicated by the number of years on the air, the following of devoted fans and the list of awards the show has received throughout the years. Chris Turner (2008) describes winning the Peabody

award as perhaps the most significant of awards that the show has garnered. He goes onto list the accumulated accolades;

> " By, 2008, the show had won 23 Emmy Awards, including nine for outstanding animated program. *The Simpsons* got a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame in 2000. It won the Peabody in 1997 and received its first-ever Golden Globe nomination in 2003... It has been called "TV's answer to the great American Novel" and the prime time TV equivalent of Manet's *Olympia. Time* names it the best TV show of the twentieth century; *The Seattle Times* declared it one of the "52 Works That Changed the Millennium." (Turner, 2008, p.51)

Chris Turner (2008) believes the success of the show could be credited to two main things, firstly, its virtual carte-blanche freedom from the network to push the boundaries (including mocking and making fun of the very network that supports it) and secondly, the almost unconditional funding it receives during the production stages. This steady financing often allowed producers to add small and relevant gags (like the response to Bush) at the last minute, which, without the funding, would not be possible.

With each new episode, we also seem to still be meeting new characters. To date, there are hundreds of characters whose *Simpson* persona lives on forever in the cartoon. The stellarly talented regular Simpson actors gave voice to many of these secondary characters, but many celebrities have appeared as characters on the show as well. Included among the guest voices were; Michael Jackson, who was not allowed to sing his own music and was credited in the closing credits as John Jay Smith (Groening, 2010), Aerosmith, Ringo Star, Tony Bennet, Elizabeth Taylor—who gave Maggie her first word, Sting and the list goes on. Daniel Radcliffe, who stars as Harry Potter in the hugely successful movies based on the J.K. Rowling novels, played a vampire character

in a recent episode. He was quoted on Entertainment Tonight in October of 2010 when asked about being invited to give voice to a character on *The Simpson,* admitted that it was a "big deal" because "there was a time when [he] was 12 or 13 when most of what [he] knew about the world came from *The Simpsons"* (CTV, 2010).

For many, the show is indeed a 'big deal'. Most people find it funny, captivating, engaging and relatable. For others it is crude, distasteful and harmful to younger or sensitive viewers. There are many fewer in the Anti-Simpson camp now than there were when it was first broadcast. The show has survived long enough to clench the title of longest running animated series as well as longest running prime-time entertainment show in television history including drama and comedy. With *The Simpsons* poised to enter into its 23rd season, the animated yellow family has become a constant on prime time television and critics rave that even the "Worst. Episode. Ever" (insert comic book guy's voice here) is still worth watching.

Looking beyond the obvious

There are many examples when *The Simpsons* appear to be saying one thing when they are really inferring the opposite. This strategy is meant to make us pay attention and ponder what various statements actually mean. To underline this point, Homer can often be heard saying something like "D'oh, it's so confusing when you say one thing and really mean something else." The creators use Homer himself to employ this strategy because he is portrayed to be such a dimwit that we expect him to say the wrong things. Usually Lisa is there to correct him by scolding "umm dad, I think what you meant to say was this when what you said means something else entirely." To which Homer is

likely to reply “D’oh”. It is when you actively watch *The Simpsons* and look at for these subtle or passive messages in the show that you can really grasp it’s full potential as a teaching tool.

While the show almost always resolves with a typical ‘happy ending’ of the main plot, the thing that sets *The Simpsons* apart from other shows is the satirical humour found in the subplots. These subplots are famous for their ‘in your face’ approach to the issues facing ‘typical’ Americans everyday. One of the most essential tools necessary for satisfactory viewing of *The Simpsons* is a capacity for reading between the lines of the show, catching half-hidden puns and loaded references to politics, religion and popular culture. If the viewer can do this, the show truly becomes more than a silly cartoon. Learning to incorporate referential humour and allowing extraneous knowledge to inform one’s viewing experience is necessary to really get the humour in the Simpsons, and provides an excellent example of how we could/should be watching all television. Critical media literacy encourages television viewing with an alert and ‘critical consciousness”. It challenges the viewer to always be asking; what are the aims and goals of this show, of its creators and of the network? *The Simpsons* invites the viewers to question what is not obvious and if you still don’t get ‘it’ they will try even harder to engage your attention (Turner, 2008).

Take for example the famous opening credits, have you ever asked yourself why they swipe baby Maggie through the checkout at the grocery store? If you were paying attention you would notice that the cost that flashes across cash register is $847.63. If you were prone to asking questions and chose to investigate it further, this price tag might galvanize you to discover that $847.63 represented the average monthly cost to

raise a baby in the United States when the show began (Ortved, 2009). For those who have never paid attention to this detail, the creators made a point of returning it to our focused attention in *The 138th Episode Spectacular* that aired in season seven. In a skit that was meant to 'challenge' the avid viewer, there was a trivia segment hosted by Troy McClure. One of the questions asks the contestant what flashes on the cash register. When the answer is revealed to be NRA4EVA. Viewers identified the bait-and-switch and they started wondering; why would the show be seemingly promoting the National Rifle Association? In true *Simpson* fashion, this was another gag joke inserted to get us to thinking about the intensified controversy surrounding gun laws at the time the show aired. In a subsequent episode, the Simpson's creators follow up with an opening which had Bart writing "five days is not too long to wait for a gun" on the chalkboard.

The creators of *The Simpsons* have been known for keeping some things about the show totally secret. For example, there emerged something of a perhaps justified paranoia attributed to Groening that accounted for the arbitrary manner in which the voice credits on *The Simpsons* included or excluded the names of the actors who contributed to each episode. The fear was that if viewers put human faces to the voices, then the characters might become less believable. Not wanting to mess with success, *The Simpsons* creators, supported by the Fox network, discouraged the voice actors from public association with their characters in order to preserve an insular *Simpsons* mystic. When a dispute arose because the voice actors wanted their rightful credits, Groening was said to have insisted on this voice anonymity and even eventually resorted to writing some characters out of the show in order to preserve the believability of the whole. (Turner, 2008)

****Chalkboarding is not torture****

Season 3, Episode 18--*Separate Vocations*

Mrs. Krabapple: "Well class, I told you I had a surprise for you today"

Miss Hoover: " The Career Aptitude Normalized Test or CANT"

-Students sit in their chairs frantically filling in the test and hand them back to their teachers.

Jamie: "Well that was a waste of time"

Lisa: "Jamie! School is never a waste of time!"

Mrs. Hoover: "Well class, we have fifteen minutes before lunch, please put down your pencil and stare at the front of the class." (Groening, 1989)

All the children in class put down their pencils and stare ahead, the bell rings and students flee out of the doors. When the test is handed back the next day it indicates that Lisa will become a homemaker. She is clearly saddened by this (We know Lisa to be a feminist activist who plans to go to University to become a lawyer to fight for "justice for all") She returns home to write in her journal; "Dear Log, this will be my last entry, for you were a journal of my hopes and dreams. And now I have none" Lisa closes the journal and rests her head on her desk, a saddened expression on her face.

There are an alarming number of us who can remember moments in school that crushed our hopes and dreams. *The Simpsons* highlight this and use it as the butt of jokes on a regular basis. So, it wouldn't make sense to discuss how *The Simpsons* can be used in education without first mentioning some of the ways education has been portrayed throughout the extended run of the show. Take the opening sequence for example, after the picture zooms through the clouds it moves though the window of Springfield

elementary school where we see Bart living out an endless punishment writing out lines on the chalkboard and then fleeing from the building the second the bell chimes. The strict band teacher scolds Lisa for her creative saxophone playing and the viewers are given the impression that Springfield Elementary School seems like an unpleasant place to be and this is only the first twenty three seconds of the show.

While the references to education are often very evident, they are also quite casual. Take for example the following throwaway comment from Bart as seen in season two episode sixteen, *Bart's Dog Gets an F.* In this episode, the Simpson family dog Santa's Little Helper gets into trouble running away and eating Homer's brand new 125$ Assassin sneakers. The scene moves into the backyard where Homer attaches the dog to a heavy padlock and Marge flipping through a phone book says "well it looks like they have a number of good obedience schools for dogs" to which Bart replies in an obvious sarcastic tone "right school, that is your answer for everything." Bart's casual off the cuff remark is typical and reflects the schools role as a negative space on the show.

In another episode that aired in season three entitled *Bart the Lover,* the students at Springfield Elementary go yo-yo crazy after watching a school performance. When Bart accidentally breaks the class fish tank with this yo-yo, Mrs. Krabapple confiscates it in addition to assigning him one month of detentions. As Bart pleads for one more chance, his teacher asks him "Bart if you were me, would you give it back?" Flash to a Bart's imagined vision of himself as a giant towering over a miniature version of his teacher as he teases her with the yo-yo. Clearly, this vision emphasizes that teachers are often remembered as overpowering dictators that speak down to students and intimidate them.

The show also makes a habit of highlighting the plights of the public education

system. Countless references are made to out-dated schoolbooks that are missing pages, irrelevant content and the stress of report cards and standardized testing. In episode one of season two, entitled *Bart Get's an F* the show opens with Martin Prince the fourth grade class nerd presenting an animated and compelling book report. As he finishes Bart Simpson is called to the front of the class to present his report, however having obviously not read the book, Bart struggles to cover up by simply explaining the picture on the front of the book. His teacher, Mrs. Krabapple, had assigned him *Treasure Island*, this does clearly not impress her and she keeps Bart after class. As Bart serves out another chalkboarding penalty Mrs. Krabapple (who appears to be much larger then usual) scolds Bart. As she scolds Bart all we hear is her saying "blah, blah, blah" (probably an homage to *Charlie Brown)* and Bart answering mechanically over and over, "Yes Ma'am". As the show goes on, Bart struggles not to fail the fourth grade by making friends with Martin Prince (who ends up tasting mischief and not helping Bart study for the big test), Bart keeps falling asleep while trying to read through the boring history books and is clearly very stressed about potentially failing the forth grade. He prays for a miracle, which he gets (it snows in June and school is cancelled). Bart has to stay while everyone in town frolics and plays in the snow. When he finally takes the test Mrs. Krabapple prepares her giant red pen to fail Bart, but in the end Bart does manage to pass with a D- after Bart demonstrates "applied knowledge" of the history. The undertones of the episode leaves the teacher in me feeling like everything that happens with regard to the test, the teacher and school is indicative and a pretty fair example of how stressful school (especially writing tests) can be for students.

Finally, there are many references made about the lack of funding available to the

schools, the low teachers wages and the increasing class sizes that currently plague the public education system in the United States. In one episode, Principal Skinner walks into Bart's class and announces there will be a new student arriving. To which Mrs. Krabapple replies, "that's right, cram them in here." In a number of the blackboard gags seen during the opening credits Bart infers the issues of low salaries for teachers; Season 21, episode 7 Bart writes "Teachers' unions are not ruining the country," Season 20 episode 17 " I will not mock teacher's out-dated cell phone" Season 20, episode 5 "I did not see teacher siphoning gas", Season 19, episode 19 "I will not look up what teacher makes", and again in Season 12, episode 12 "I will not publish the Principal's credit report"(Groening, 2010). These 'off the cuff' shots leave it to our imagination that Bart is pointing out these things when we are not around, the joke pokes fun at our society and if we recognize our folly, we probably laugh, because it is true.

From Superintendent Chalmers, Grounds Keeper Willie, the affair between the forth grade teacher and the Principal who still lives with his mother, school nerds who are hall monitors that tattle-tell, and school bullies roam the halls throwing kids in lockers, cheating on tests and giving wedgies, *The Simpsons* portrayal of education reminds us of time spent in school as something of an endurance test, but as they do so they makes us laugh about it.

The Simpsons did it

After 21 years of writing shows, it seems unavoidable that *The Simpsons* would have to redo an old idea, but it has fans talking about how the show might just be losing its' edge. Actually this isn't a new conversation, most followers of the show say that the

decline began years ago. Chris Turner (2008) explains that the show has survived through three ages, the first he explains as the "Early Days" (p.43) during this time he says that the show was still "learning to hone in on its satirical edge into a mighty samurai sword" (2008, p.43). The second era Turner refers to as the 'Golden Age' lasting from 1992 until 1997 when he says the show achieved it's place as a cultural phenomena, wiping out *The Cosby Show* in a head to head bid for ratings and achieving a "near-flawless"(2008, p.48) five year run. Turner discusses how the decline that occurred with the show happened during "the second instalment of season 9" (2008, p.48) in an episode entitled *The Principal and Pauper.* After this, he writes, "the show took a quick tumble off its dizzying peak, followed by a long and relatively stable existence on what I'm calling the long plateau" (2008, p.48) the third and final stage. While there are others that discuss the rise and fall of the intellectual appeal of the show, this one brings it together in the most comprehensive manner.

Just in case we thought that *The Simpsons* were not aware of their own decline, they have pointed it out a few times. When they know an episode is sub-par you will probably hear Comic Book Guy illustrate this with his famous "Worst. Episode. Ever" remark. Just last week they aired another episode (*Flaming Moe*—not to be confused with the episode *Flaming Moe's)* where Moe attempts to make his bar more successful. The beginning of the episode begins with Moe looking at pictures and making light of the times he has already employed some "dumb ideas" to get his bar going. The characters from *South Park* (who can credit their very existence to *The Simpsons*) have also pointed out that by now *The Simpsons 'already did it'.* In an episode that aired in 2002, entitled *The Simpsons Already Did It*, the characters of South Park, animated with

a Simpson-esque edge, lists off numerous ideas for something to do, but aptly point out that it has already been done by *The Simpsons*. Since this episode has 'gone viral' (so the saying goes) and become a kind of reference point, *The Simpsons* creative crew themselves have referenced it as well as several other television shows, radio hosts and pretty much everyone I know. The type of place that *The Simpsons'* holds as a cultural phenomena seems to make the repetition acceptable to some, and bone of contention for others, but the fact remains that regardless of whether the show is a remake of an old idea, fans continue to tune in.

"Peace and Chicken": The Simpsons and Diversity

Over the last twenty-two years, a typical episode of the show has taken the viewer through a whirlwind of events, guessing what will happen next is more predictable in some episodes than others, however, the avid Simpson fan learns never to expect or assume that they know how the plot will unfold. In an episode that begins with an innocent family breakfast, the family can wind up on a trip to Israel, Canada, New York, Japan, Australia or anywhere else for that matter. These international animated jaunts by the yellow family haven't always been free of negative fallout. The show has been known to make a few countries upset over the stereotyped images presented by the cartoon. While some countries want *The Simpsons* to stop perpetuating stereotypes, creators of the show explain that it is not their intention to reinforce these stereotypes, but to open the conversation and challenge people to become aware of how ridiculous these stereotypes really are (Turner, 2008).

The Simpsons and its creators have faced many criticisms for their stereotypical depiction of many countries they have visited throughout the twenty-two year run. One

of the first questions that often surfaces in discussions about *The Simpsons* and diversity pertains to the dominantly yellow cast. Much speculation exists as to the underlying reasons for this, but Ortved describes that "Matt said in a recent interview that he found the colours used for human beings in previous cartoons "freakish," so with *The Simpsons,* Gyorgyi Peluce chose yellow skin" (2008, p.52) From this, I think it is safe to deduce that the yellow cast members, which claim to be based on Groening's own family (who are white) are representative of the dominant white population 'average' American.

With the yellow palette, The Simpson characters are assumed to represent dominant white culture, the measure of what *The Simpsons* brings to the conversation of diversity might just be immense. On a regular basis, they point out these issues by presenting an "over the top" character or scene that can get you to thinking about these topics. At the very heart of *Simpsons* satire lies their incarnation of the American dream—that is, the image of the lazy American husband who rears rude American Children and a wife who bakes cookies all the while humming a tune. And then the camera moves to the owner and operator of the Quickie Mart Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, who is known as a highly, racially stereotyped character from India who charges too much for the products at his store, has to 'talk American' to pass a citizenship exam, and has eight children (although they were octoplets) who were conceived after Apu makes a comment about the under-population of America. The show most commonly addresses the issues our society associates with age through using Grandpa Simpson who shuffles around town grumbling about the struggles of an elderly generation that is milked for their money, ignored by society and unappreciated for their experience. Societal norms

regarding hierarchical class systems are highlighted through the examples of characters such as the nuclear plant owner Montgomery Burns, who wields the majority of the wealth and power. Burns' wealth is in contrast to the poverty of characters like Nelson Muntz the school bully, and Cletus the possum-cooking redneck that has 28 children. Lisa, being a feminist, is regularly pointing to issues of the oppression of women in American society. Religion is revisited in almost every episode with the Simpson family attending church on a regular basis with a traditionally stereotyped Reverend Love Joy. Probably intentionally, some of the most recurring characters on the show are: *The Simpsons'* Christian neighbours, the Flanders (or Flandresses to Homer). Ned Flanders, is a very devout Christian, who is forever trying to 'save' Homer from the devil. The popular children's' entertainer, Krusty the Clown, is the Jewish son of Rabbi Hyman Krustofski. Dr. Hibbert is of African American descent and wears a large Afro in flashback clips. Grounds Keeper Willie speaks with a thick Scottish accent and drinks, curses, plays the bagpipes and points out his illiteracy on a regular basis. The list of examples is literally still growing.

Chris Turner (2008) points out in his book that, "ironic juxtaposition, the inversion of expectation, the twisting and bending of long-standing cultural forms into clever new shapes—these are as central to *The Simpsons'* Humour as Homer's Stupidity" (p.78). In season 20, episode 7, *Mypods and Broomsticks,* is a perfect example of this twisting and bending. In a scene in Moe's bar, Homer, who is always easily convinced, is told by Moe "this is serious, this Bashir [who's last name is bin Laden] kid is Muslim, and therefore up to something" to which Homer replies "Oh I can't believe that until I see a fictional TV show espousing your point." Moe flicks on the bar TV to a cop show, (that

is supposed to resemble the popular CBS show 24) and just like that Homer is convinced and he sets out to expose the new Muslim family as terrorists. The show goes on like this, pointing out the absurdity of believing in and acting upon something you have crafted based on media images.

That our societies tendencies to make and act on these assumptions and prejudices have allowed for the creators to tackle issues of racism and prejudice in almost every episode throughout the last 23 years, thus creating quite a collection for us to draw on when bringing *The Simpsons* into the critical media literacy classroom. Let us look now at how critical media literacy allows us to bring television into the classroom and "suggest that [perhaps] knowledge and reality exist outside the classroom" (Domine, 2009, p.19).

Chapter 4: Critical Media Literacy

****I will not investigate revolution****

In *Literacy for the 21st Century: a balanced approach* (2006) Gail Tompkins states that, "in a balanced approach to literacy instruction, teachers integrate instruction with authentic reading and writing and experiences" (p.1). She further describes through listing ten components to this 'balanced approach' that must include, "reading, phonics and other skills, strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content area study, oral language, writing and spelling" (p.1). This list is typical to the traditional ways we have come to define literacy. Now, however, the enormous popularity of various screen medias is swiftly outstripping the written word as the preferred communication strategies of the 21st century. In this climate of change and with this burgeoning new mediated realities enveloping us, many argue that it is time to reconfigure our notion of literacy. It is true that in the traditional sense, literacy must be about learning to read and decipher texts, but given the overwhelming trends toward screen communications, perhaps we need to begin to re-examine our notions of what a 'text' is.

If we consider media (Internet, TV, movies, video games etc…) in the literacy classroom as legitimate texts, then media becomes the original source to be examined and deciphered, a tool for learning, language and communication in the same way a novel would serve as the basis for a novel study. As media devices allow us to facebook, tweet, text and surf the web from almost anywhere, the need to address this situation and legitimize these new forms of communication as text to be studied and mastered has never been more urgent.

In *Teachers as Researchers* (2003), Joe Kincheloe highlights that the once commonly accepted view of knowledge and the human mind as capable of taking in information and storing it "like a squirrel [stores] his nuts in data banks, … is woefully inadequate" (pg. 4). The teachers need to be 'researchers' of all media and "connect disciplinary and counter-disciplinary information with fears, joys, questions, dreams, aspirations and interpersonal relationships of their students." (pg. 7) Kincheloe emphasizes that only when teachers are able to connect teachings and new concepts to the student's personal lives and experiences, will they be able to have meaningful educational experiences.

In addition, Postman explains that any "new technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character or symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop" (Postman, 1992, p.20). This makes it imperative for the teacher to get to know their students and find out about their personal experiences with the media that they are currently talking about and using. This interaction encourages a much better connection between students and content. Just as we teach students skills to comprehend and decode the symbols of language in written texts, we need to teach students to do the same with the symbols and language brought to them through media outlets. *It is beyond argument that reading and writing are absolutely essential skills*, but, embracing that as a given, I propose that we also teach strategies to decode and comprehend all media, (specifically television in this case), differently. Domine (2009) discusses the impact on the critical conversation when we include television as the medium that "at school, work, and in social settings we report to each other what we watched or who we voted for (or against)

in the latest reality program" (p.121). By now, we are well aware that by including relevant and engaging content in the classroom, we can increase the chances for students to achieve more meaningful long-term and transferable learning. In order to do this however, it is important for the teacher to first, "carefully [re]consider the question, "What is the purpose of the classroom?"(Domine, 2009, p.121)

"It (media literacy) requires students, teachers and administrators to go beyond a technical skill toward a disposition of participatory citizenship" (Domine, 2009, p.18). The goal or purpose of the critical media classroom should first and foremost be about engaging students to think about and actively engage with media images they are encountering everyday (Kellner, 2008). Once we have established the relevance of the medium, we need to encourage students to examine how the messages therein shape our understandings of the world. Brian Johnson *(2008)* points out in his article *"Doing Diversity" with Film"* that conversations of media should most definitely bring forth conversations of race, class, gender, body image, ability, age, sexual orientation, and religion.

It is essential that this dialogue also includes and takes into account, our stories and histories. As teachers identify the relevant media and identify how it is influencing the classroom community, it will also be necessary for them to engage students in exploring the significance of history by highlighting the influences underlying the media content we have today (Johnson, 2008). For example, we would not discuss new reality shows like Jersey Shore and *American Idol*, without discussing cultural stereotypes and remembering shows like *Cops*, and *Survivor.* When various media are used as content in the classroom, there is never only one direction the conversation might go. For example,

with a clip as short as when Lisa writes a poem about her cat Snowball entitled *Meditations of Being Eight* we might discuss her character, the literature she enjoys, the fact that she is an avid poetry reader, and then wind up bringing in samples of the poets Lisa references on various occasions throughout the show's run. Or, we might use it to talk about the death of pets, or morals and ethics by discussing things like 'why didn't Marge tell Lisa the truth about Snowball?' Or is it ethical for Marge to tell Lisa that her cat is sleeping when she is really dead? There are so many ways to expand.

With diversity and cultural theory in mind, teachers view the episodes or clips beforehand and ponder the possible places the conversation can go before anything gets brought into the classroom (Kincheloe, 2004). Teachers must remain mindful of how stereotypes are portrayed and perpetuated and use language that facilitates student awareness of these constructed biases. So much jargon is used these days it is hard to keep up. Many of us throw around words without defining them for our students, instead, teachers need to spend time talking about how words like hate, discriminate and racism can be used to converse about these topics as an informed citizen (Kincheloe 2009).

Henry Giroux (2009) explains the importance of bringing cultural studies together with media literacy in order to make sure our students are informed about their worlds,

> "Within this discourse, cultural studies becomes available as a resource to educators who can then teach students how to look at the media, analyze audience reception, challenge rigid disciplinary boundaries, critically engage popular culture, produce critical knowledge or use cultural studies to reform the curricula and challenge disciplinary formations within public schools and higher education." (Giroux, 2009, p.89)

It is fundamental to remember how "media culture helps shape people's view of

the world and deepest values, defining good or evil, their positive ideals and who they are as people." (Kellner, 2008, .p5) Once we are aware that these influences exist, critical media literacy focuses on teaching students how to become conscious and critical consumers that do not blindly accept media content. We must ask questions and approach with caution. Joe Kincheloe (2008) points out that, "such critical pedagogical ways of seeing help teachers reconstruct their work so that it facilitates the empowerment of all students" (p.7). The empowerment of students is essential when engaging students actively in the classroom.

Within the conversation of what critical media is it is also imperative to address what it is not. As I have already indicated, critical media literacy is not about encouraging students to consume media or not to consume media, but instead it is about teaching students the skills so they can actively and critically ponder the media messages we know they are already faced with, and hopefully those they will be faced with in the future.

When we employ the use of the word critical it is not meant to carry with it the usual negative connotation. Neil Postman (1993) explains that by a 'critical' approach it "does not imply a negative attitude toward technology...To be "against technology" makes no more sense than to be against food." We can't live without either." (p.191) Domine (2009) suggests that, "instead, [critical] media literacy is about acknowledging the different codes and conventions relative to all forms of communications technology and the ways in which those media forms work together to construct messages" (.p18). Finally, critical media literacy does not accept the notion that leaning only happens within the walls of the classroom, but rather that it is everywhere, within everything

'media related'.

Contextualizing Content

In the media literacy classroom "technology is contextualized by the ways in which teachers choose to use it (or not) within the classroom setting (2009, .p19)" In 2007, I had the opportunity as a student teacher to work with two classes of grade six students in the eastern townships of Quebec. Their teacher handed over her class to me as I worked to learn how to teach, complete lesson plans and implement my first big teaching project. We focused on media literacy, specifically on how advertisements were designed to sell to their particular age group. Through a series of activities we discussed and explored: how they were regarded as 'target audiences' because they are said to influence the biggest amount of household spending; and how advertisers used this information to construct strategies to make products appealing. The students applied their learning by creating their own advertisements using iMovie.

During one particular lesson, I brought in an ad made by the *Dove Campaign for Natural Beauty* (2006). In this particular clip, we see the transformation of a model from her waking moments to her appearance on a billboard. The clip showcases the process of hair and make-up along with changes made to the model with a computer. When I planned the lesson I assumed my students would understand it and that it would not require much discussion. As I played the clip however, I was shocked by the student's comments. I heard the girls say things like "wow, I didn't know it was that easy to be beautiful". One boy said, "the girl at the beginning was a dog, but the one at the end was hot". As a new teacher, I was at a loss for words. I didn't know how to tell my

students to think about this issue more critically and I struggled to make it through the next half hour without breaking into tears in the middle of my lesson.

This particular teaching experience allowed for me to teach one class rethink my teaching and then teach it again to another group. While I acknowledge that this didn't fix the situation that happened with the first group of students, it did allow me as a teacher to reconfigure my own understandings and present the lesson in a different way. The second time, I began by asking questions about what made someone beautiful and how do we decide someone was 'hot' or 'not'. I asked students to think about celebrities that came to mind when they of the words handsome or beautiful. We used the projector and a computer to look up pictures of them and discussed what they where wearing, how their hair was done and how much make-up we thought they were wearing (the boys where shocked to learn that males in media also wore make-up). After this lengthy discussion, I played the Dove clip for the class and referred back to our discussion about being beautiful.

The response this time was different, girls stated that "they wouldn't want to not be real" and boys said that they "never would have thought about beautiful girls in magazines as being so fake". This experience taught me that the way in which I contextualized the media content was essential in ensuring I would promote the learning I had intended to impart. It also taught me in that critical media literacy, sometimes our biggest mistakes become our greatest learning achievements. I returned to the first class and we explored the concept of beauty in a different context. We were able to take the conversation even further and students discussed ideas of inner beauty, skinny models and stereotypes. The contextualization of content really is of the upmost importance, so

make sure you are familiar with the chosen content as well as the language to talk critically about it.

Television in the Critical Media Classroom

"Poverty is a great educator. Having no boundaries and refusing to be ignored, it mostly teaches hopelessness. But not always. Politics is also a great educator. Mostly it teaches, I am afraid, cynicism. But not always. Television is a great educator as well. Mostly it teaches consumerism. But not always."

(Postman, 2009, .p ix)

These days, we have TVs in almost every room, even refrigerators come with one built in now, and yet, there are not very many in our classrooms. My own personal experience in the classroom has been that televisions are used as a reward, to show old movies, to pass the time or to cover uncomfortable questions. I have done it myself as a teacher and as a student my most vivid memory of television in the classroom was how my grade six teacher used it to avoid talking to us about puberty. For health class, the boys and girls were separated and taken into two different rooms in the library to watch a video that was supposed to explain puberty. The one I watched showed a girl 'becoming a woman' and used charts and animated pictures to help explain the menstrual cycle. When it was over, without any discussion of the video we put condoms on bananas and just like that, my teacher had avoided having to say anything regarding this 'uncomfortable' subject. Critical media literacy proposes that teachers take on a new understanding of television in the classroom and use it to enhance and not replace the

teaching of content. By drawing on television content that students are interested in outside of the classroom, teachers will have a better chance of engaging students in media conscious conversations.

As teachers prepare to embark on critical media literacy studies, however, it is imperative to remember that it is not all gold and glory. In *Reel Diversity: a teacher's sourcebook* (2008), the authors explain that not everyone will understand or agree on the importance of bringing television into the classroom. (Johnson and Blanchard, 2008) In fact, television shows make it a habit to portray television in the classroom as a 'time waster' for the 'lazy' teacher to turn on while they sleep at the back of the class. Johnson and Blanchard (2008) explain that, "because we often think of television as a mindless activity, we aren't prepared to watch it critically. Part of teaching students to think about visual media is getting them to think about it differently" (p.3). When we get parents on board, teachings can become so much more successful, both for the students and also for the educator. As I worked on that advertising media unit with the grade six classes, it became apparent to me for the first time, the huge influence that television had on my students' lives. I quickly found out however, that parents didn't much like to talk about the amount of time their children actually spent in front of the television. With childhood obesity rates and dropout rates a place of common conversation these days, no one likes to admit that life gets busy and sometimes, perhaps, the TV gets left on a little 'too often'.

As I began talking about advertising with the grade six students, I realized that I really didn't know what shows kids were watching after school anymore. I knew that in order for this unit to reach its' full potential I had to find out what was relevant to my

students and I figured what better way than to ask my students. I sent them home with a worksheet to record all of the shows they watched and keep track of as many commercials as they could. Needless to say, the students were superlatively happy that they could tell everyone that they watched television for homework, but the next day I had four letters from parents asking me why I was using television watching as a homework assignment. They wanted me to sign in the agenda indicating that their children were actually telling the truth that they had "TV for homework". At this point, I wrote a letter to all parents explaining the nature of the assignment, the theory, my learning expectations and I gracefully invited them to join me at home in making their children critical media consumers by providing a few resources and ideas. These days, I send this letter out before the homework goes home and I teach my students the vocabulary to explain what they are working on in the class, so that they know how to answer when someone asks them why they are doing a certain task.

There are several books including *Reel Diversity: a teacher source book (2008*) by Johnson and Blanchard, *Teacher TV: 60 years of Teachers on Television* (2008) Dalton and Linder and *How to Watch TV and the News* (1992) Neil Postman, that have already presented useful ideas about how to bring television into the classroom which align with the notions presented about critical pedagogy, culture and media. More I am sure, are coming off the presses as I sit here typing. This is because screen media is almost irresistible. Televisions and movies have the ability to tell stories and embody moments in a way that attracts, connects and compels us like no other media. They can make us laugh or cry, or inspire an infinite variety of passionate new interests. It is because they are so effective at evoking a response in us that screen media can be so useful in helping

us to learn.

Kellner and Hammer (2009) explain that, "Our own notion of critical media/cultural studies also involves studying media culture to gain insight and knowledge about the contemporary world" (p.xxxv). In this sense, critical media literacy teachers look at all the things visual: media, television and film, can teach us about our world. In *"Doing Diversity" with* Film (2009), Johnson explains how teachers can use movies like *Happy Feet* to teach for social justice, *Harry Potter* to teach about classism, *Pleasantville* to teach about dominance, *V for Vandetta* to teach about oppression, and the list goes on. I have only had time to briefly discuss the book *The Simpsons in the Classroom* (2010). By the time I found out about this book, I had already begun this work. I pre-ordered it and was elated to see when it arrived that others share the value of *The Simpson* phenomena in relation to education. The various authors demonstrate throughout the 332 pages, that the relevance and cultural wealth of the show as a classroom resource is unending. They illustrated how *The Simpsons* could be used to inspire discussions about the conventions of language, storytelling, plot and character development as well as thematic analysis of religion, psychology, science and philosophy. The combined essays lauding the versatility of this animated series as it pertained to the classroom also reinforce its usefulness as a primary source in teaching about diversity.

Popular Culture and Possible Curriculum

Within the possible critical media literacy classroom, curriculum is limited only by the imagination and exposure of the teacher when finding ways to engage students. In

Media Literacy: A Reader (2007) teachers discuss a variety of ways in which they have already implemented these ideas in the classroom. For example, one article from the reader entitled, *Masculinities on The O.C.* we see a discussion of gender and comedy in television and in particular how a critical reading of *The O.C* can help illustrate how hierarchies are created and perpetuated (Meyer, 2007). Within the critical media classroom, the teacher is instrumentally useful in directing analysis of a seemingly innocent popular television show like *The O.C* so that it becomes a relevant source for creating critical discourse. In another example from the same reader, Loraine Wallowitz discusses how the increased attention her fourth grade students paid to *Disney's Lizzie McGuire* prompted her to further explore who exactly this character was, and how she might have an impact on her students (2007). Whether the critical media literacy teacher brings in ideas that they have discovered are of significance to the students, or the students let the teacher know what content is important, the media classroom is ultimately a place to empower a 'critical' conversation about all media.

Identifying what popular culture texts like *Lizzie McGuire* or others are relevant to your students is an essential step in planning for the critical media classroom. In most schools, you will begin to see what students are watching on the first days of school, with the Hanna Montana book bags and Jersey Shore pictures plastered on binders and notebooks. Television and media are not slow at responding to high ratings by slapping pretty faces on items we use everyday. It is up to the teacher to decide how television and film can fit into their classrooms as a tool to extend conversations and make meaningful connections to the classroom content.

When we consider the potentiality of popular culture in the classroom as a tool for

engaging students, we know it will work. How many times have you heard parents, teachers, and grandparents say that they can't get the kids to stop watching TV? Powerful media corporations have spent billions on finding out how to hook the viewers so that they keep them watching. There is no disputing this fact. The challenges is to stop ignoring the impact of television and other media and begin drawing a bridge between the theory that tells us to consider popular culture and its implications in the classroom. The following chapter attempts to provide examples of how *The Simpsons* can be used in critical media literacy, and encourages you to see your own ways of taking it in new directions.

Chapter 5: The Simpsons "do Diversity"

Situated within the frame of the preceding discussion, this section serves to turn ideas toward practical examples and potential ways that *The Simpsons* can promote conversations of diversity in the classroom. The following lessons have been prepared to open up a dialogue about the media and it's messages, using the show as a conversation starter, 'the hook' if you will. Brian Johnson (2009) explains that topics of diversity education must include conversations of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, religion, body image and ability (p.33). Organized into two sections, this chapter provides a compressive list of many *Simpson* episodes that touch on each of these areas and more specific conversations that might be possible in the critical media literacy classroom. I cannot emphasize how hard the selection of these episodes has been, the richness of this show allows the critical teacher to find so many teachable moments. Should you choose to utilize *The Simpsons* in your teaching, please do not limit yourself to only these episodes, there is so much more in *The Simpsons* that we can explore.

Eleven Episodes that Spark Classroom Discussion:

I have selected these episodes because of the way they fit together within the theme of diversity. For each selection I have provided the episode and season listing, a short synopsis of the episode and highlighted themes of diversity that it touches upon the most. I leave it up to you as the 'teacher researcher' to find relevant connections to curriculum content and standards wherever you might be teaching. However, I have included some quotes from the show that might be used to spark conversation, discussions and possible questions to engage you as you begin to plan for these classroom experiences.

Episode:	**Season 6, Episode 09- *Homer Badman***
Themes and Trends:	Media tricks and techniques.
Synopsis:	Homer gets two tickets to go to the candy industry tradeshow after opening almost every Krusty Club bar at the Quickie Mart. He decides to take Marge with him because she will be able to collect more free samples than Bart or Lisa. As the babysitter arrives, Bart and Lisa are outfitting Marge with a large trench coat so she can collect extra candies to bring home. While they visit the booths collecting free samples, Homer spies a rare gummy Venus di milo and decides he must have it. As he grabs the gummy an alarms sound and they have to flee from an angry mob trying to get it back. They make it to their house and Homer takes the baby sitter home. As she gets out of the car he notices that the Venus di milo is stuck to her bottom and without thinking he pulls it off. She is disgusted and runs away. By early the next day the babysitter has organized a mob outside of the Simpson house that accuse Homer of sexual harassment. Homer makes many attempts to try and explain he only wanted the gummy but that only makes matters worse and a media frenzy ensues. Even Marge and the kids are beginning to believe the media. Finally, Groundskeeper Willie finds a video that proves he was telling the truth. Quickly the media forgets him they frame someone else. Homer is the first to jump on the bandwagon and his family asks him if this experience has taught him anything. He tells us that it hasn't.
Discussion:	While this episode can bring about conversations of human rights issues as well, I find it a very important starter for discussions about the influence media has in shaping our perceptions of the truth. For example: Marge, Bart and Lisa and Maggie, know that Homer's intentions would have focused on nothing more than getting the gummy, but when everyone and everything around them seems to be telling them differently, they being to wonder themselves. Even Homer wonders if TV is right after they watch a series of channels recreating the 'incident'. "Lisa: Sorry dad we do believe in you we really do Bart: It's just hard not to listen to TV, it's spent so much more time raising us then you have. Homer (sighs): Oh maybe TV is right, TV's always right.

	Bart and Lisa run to hug the television. Even though Homer knows that the Media is not telling the truth, he still considers that they “ If your class doesn’t have time to watch the whole episode, a good 10-minute clip to demonstrate. Try starting at about 10minutes 46seconds into the episode. After you have viewed a clip or episode, ask students questions like: Why did everyone seem to think the story about Homer was true? What tactics are used to make us think that Homer is guilty? How does the show point out to methods that the media can use to change a story to look true? Talk about the impact that this can have on what we see as truth, connect to other current news issues, popular shows, books, etc… When was this episode made? Has technology changed our abilities to do this? How so? How does faster internet and easier video making technology enable or disable truths from being changed? Discuss the clip when Homer gives the interview to the news channel. Watch it again and point out the clock on the back wall, how did they change Homer’s story? If you have access to knowledge & equipment, film the students and edit the video to change the conversation. Discuss how you did this with the students; show students how easy it is to edit videos. (Hint: this can be very easy to learn using iMovie or windows media). If you want to make this into a larger unit you can have students make their own videos.

Episode:	**Season 21, Episode 13-*The Colour* Yellow**
Themes and Trends:	Slavery, racism, histories.
Synopsis:	Miss Hoover assigns a class assignment and Lisa sets out to learn more about her Simpson ancestors. Grandpa Simpson convinces Lisa that there are no 'noble' Simpsons. She finds the Diary of Eliza Simpson written in 1860. As Lisa reads she learns that Eliza was going to buy and free a slave on the underground railroad to Canada. Homer tries to stop Lisa from reading the journal, because he is certain that she will find out something bad about the Simpson family members. He hides the journal in a vent, but when she dreams of Eliza, she awakes in the middle of the night and sneaks downstairs to read it anyway. Flash back to 1860. In a Large ballroom we see many characters that closely resemble the current Simpson characters. Eliza sneaks outback of the ballroom toward a small shack. There she meets and attempts to free a slave named Virgil. They are chased through the woods by guards and then.... The rest of the journal turns to dust before we know if Eliza was able to get Virgil to freedom. In hopes of finding out more, Marge takes Lisa to the library where they find the rest of the story in an old cookbook. As they read we are again taken back to a vision of the Simpson ancestors where it seems that Virgil and Eliza survived the guards. Lisa presents this information in a power point at school. When she finishes Milhouse tells a different and conflicting family history that in fact shows the Simpsons of 1860 to have cowardly given up to the guards. Back to the present, Lisa who is quite sad that there really was no noble Simpson, returns home where Grandpa reveals the real story of how Eliza's mother ran away with Virgil and was in fact his great grandmother. There was a noble Simpson after all.

Discussion:	This episode can open up a lot of topics for conversation. Depending on what your overall learning objectives are. You could use this episode to spark conversations about black history, slavery, the underground railroad, importance of histories, storytelling and stereotypes and probably more. Before you show the episode to students, make sure that you have discussed what the students already know about these topics. Are they familiar with the history of slavery or the underground railway? Etc..
Possible Discussion Quote:	Using this quote talk to students about black stereotypes, where do they come from? How are stereotypes created? Identify some other stereotypes that the students might know about. How about white stereotypes? Where else to we see these created? Extend to personal examples making sure to maintain focus on creating a safe space to share ideas free from ridicule. "Lisa: We're 1/64th black, Bart: so that's why I'm so cool, Lisa: that's why my jazz is so smooth, Homer: and that's why I earn less than my white coworkers. Lisa: Grandpa, why did you try to keep us from finding this out? Grandpa: well it's hard to explain this to a young person, but people of my generation are you know… Lisa: Racist? Grandpa: That's it! "

Episode:	**Season 8, Episode 15- *Homer's Phobia***
Themes and Trends:	Homophobia, stereotypes
Synopsis:	The Simpsons get a gas bill that they cannot afford to pay after another prank by Bart goes wrong. In order to pay the bill they take an heirloom to sell at an antique store, where they find out it is worth nothing, but make friends with the owner John anyway. John is gay but Homer doesn't realize this at first. When Homer does find out his new friend is gay, he decides that he doesn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. Marge and the Kids tell Homer he is wrong and maintain their friendship with him. Many stereotypical references are made here and there and Homer begins to think that John is going to make Bart gay as well. In an attempt to 'fix' Bart, Homer, Moe and Barney take him hunting. When they can't find any deer to shoot they take Bart to a reindeer pen and tell him to shoot one. When the reindeer start to attack, John saves the day and Homer sees that he has been wrong in judging him. They all go home and another episode ends happily…
Discussion:	Discuss why/how we make the decision that John is gay? What are the stereotypes presented by the show? Why do you think *The Simpsons* showed us these images and stereotypes? How are they exaggerated? Was there a purpose to this exaggeration? Brainstorm answers on a board or have students take notes. What are some stereotypes exist? Are they true? Take a vote in the class to see how many girls like sports, or how many boys like art and music, etc. Do we fall into stereotypes? How are these same stereotypes presented in other places in our lives? Do we choose to like certain things because people say we are supposed to? Why does society think all gay people act one way or only like certain things? What can we do to change these misunderstandings? Discuss school or community groups. You can also talk about how this episode won the GLAAD Media award in 1997. Explain what the GLAAD Media awards are, and bring in various shows that have also won it.
Simpsons Extensions:	Season 14, Episode 17- Three Gays in a condo

Episode:	**Season 20, Episode 7-*Mypods and Broomsticks***
Themes and Trends:	Islamaphobia, stereotypes, bullies.
Synopsis:	This episode opens as the Simpson family goes boxing day shopping at the new Springfield mall. Well they are there the family visits the Mapple store. Krusty gives Lisa a MyPod that she becomes obsessed with and Bart is chased out of the Mapple store for making fun of the people that would buy the products. On his way home Bart follows a smell he describes as "a hamburger cooked in a rug store". He peaks through a fence and meets a little boy named Bashir (who just moved to Springfield from Jordan) his family invites Bart to stay for dinner. The next day on the way to school Bart walks with Bashir and explains to him what he needs to do so that he can fit in at school. When the bullies do attempt to pick on Bashir, Bart turns the bullies on each other instead. Homer's friends convince him that because Bashir is Muslim he must be "up to something" and he believes Bashir's family must be terrorists. Homer invites Bashir's family over for dinner, but convinced they are terrorists he is very rude to them and they leave. Marge sends Homer to apologize to them but when he gets there, he sees Bashir's father arranging dynamite in the garage. Homer sneaks around their house trying to prove that they are terrorists and finds the plans for the Springfield mall. He rushes to the mall, steals the dynamite and throws it into the river where it blows up the towns' new bridge. It turns out Bashir's father who is an engineer was supposed to demolish the old Springfield mall. The Simpsons have Bashir and his family over to apologize and bring out their 'Pardon my intolerance' banner. Lisa ends up working for Mapple to repay her myTunes bill.

Discussion:	In Moe's bar, a show on the TV is what 'proves' to Homer that stereotypes about Muslims are true. Ask the students if they watch shows like this at home, i.e.: CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.., How do they normally portray Islamic characters? How do they help or hinder our understandings of these stereotypes? Discuss the ways fear is used within these shows to build up stereotypes. How does fear play in how quickly we jump to conclusions? Use Homer as an example, and discuss how he reacted in ways that showed a fear and why? Where do these ideas come from? What are the histories behind these issues? Relate to current news publications and discuss what can be done to combat these falsehoods.

Episode:	**Season 12 Episode 19- *I'm going to Praiseland***
Themes and Trends:	Religious strategies.
Synopsis:	A giant sign on the Springfield church reads "Ice Cream Social: A sundae service you can swallow." Out back are several stands that contain all kinds of ice cream with Christian theme names. Springfield Christians gather eating free ice cream as The Simpson family arrives. After everyone has had a fill of ice cream a famous Christian musician, Rachel Jordan, takes the stage. Bart and Homer make fun of Ned Flanders for having a little crush on her. She ends up staying over at his house and Ned struggles with missing his deceased wife, Maude. Later Ned allows the Simpson family to go through his house and get rid of things that remind him of Maude while he goes to the eye doctor. When they are finished the only thing left is Maude's sketchbook that contains pictures she had drawn of a Christian amusement park. Ned decides to make Maude's dream come true and builds Praiseland, where children have to hear bible versus on roller coasters and eat Christian shaped chocolate. The guests find the theme part 'lame' and as they begin to leave a 'miracle' causes hallucinations making everyone want to stay. Turns out it is a gas leak and not a miracle at all. Ned struggles with telling the truth or ruining everyone's faith and attendance at his theme park. In the end he tells the truth and the park is closed. As the show ends and Ned attempts another date with Rachel Jordan.
Discussion:	Lately churches have been doing a lot to get our attention. Commercials, theme parks, free weekends and T-shirts. How does *The Simpsons* call attention to this in this episode? Do the characters like going to church? What are some of the things Reverend Love Joy does to get people to attend his church? Why is it so important that people attend his church? Is it right to go to church just to get free stuff? Should people be making money off of the faith of others? What is the purpose of church, religious study, and belief? What do these mean? How are they exploited or situated within business models? "Reverend Love Joy: Marge, you can save more souls with roller skates and easy bake ovens then you can with this 2000 page sleeping pill. (holds up a bible.)"

Extensions:	Christian Cross Over Music can be a very interesting topic to discuss with a music class. What bands have 'crossed over'? What makes 'crossing over' so appealing? What are the similarities and/or differences in the music? Quote: Ned-"Where did the rest of your band go?" Rachel- "Oh they switched from Christian music to regular pop" "All you do is change Jesus to baby." Discuss, listen to examples and examine.
Literature Connection:	If you are interested in the topic of how Christianity is "Selling Jesus" Check out the book *Christotainment Selling Jesus through popular culture (2009)* Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinburg

Episode:	**Season 16 Episode 3- *Sleeping with the Enemy***
Themes and Trends:	Body image, stereotypes, bullying, personal health.
Synopsis:	While playing hopscotch in the schoolyard Lisa's friends make fun of her for having a big butt. When she goes home and tells Homer his answer if for her to hide it by tying a sweater around her waist. Bart comes home with his first ever 100% on a test and Marge and Homer have to throw him a party. Lisa goes to the mall where she is further pressured to ponder body image norms and Bart's party has a boring guest list including Nelson, Ralph, and Patty ad Thelma, and Grandpa Simpson. The party is split up when Lisa comes home and is upset when Marge offers a giant piece of cake. Lisa goes on a diet and reads a book entitled *Thin By Third Grade*. Feeling unappreciated for her efforts trying to throw Bart the party, Marge ends up spending some mothering time with Bart's bully Nelson Muntz. Lisa struggles with her feminist ideals that challenge her issues with body image until Nelson Muntz moves in and teaches Lisa how to be a bully back to the girls bullying her. That makes the other kids stop teasing her but her issues with body image remain unresolved.
Discussion:	By now we have addressed issues of media representation, and stereotypes. After watching this episode with students discuss how body image ideals are also a fabrication perpetuated within the media. Where do they come from? Bring in advertisements from all different eras and look at how these images of beautiful have changed. How does Lisa envision this beauty? How does it conflict with her feminist ideals? What impact did the bullies have making fun of Lisa when she was already feeling sad? Discuss the harmful effects of not eating. What is it about skinny that the media likes? Skinny hasn't always been beautiful. Why? Discuss what this means.
Extensions:	There is so much information out there on body image education, advertising and image creation on the internet that can take this topic anywhere.

Episode:	**Season 9, Episode 17- *Lisa the Simpson***
Themes and Trends:	Intellectual ability
Synopsis:	The episode opens with the children of Springfield complaining about the cafeteria food. Lisa has picked up her lunch at the gas station that has a brainteaser that she cannot solve but the other kids all answer it quickly. This leads her to forget about a science project, forget her combination and have trouble playing her saxophone. Grandpa Simpson explains she has the 'Simpson gene' and how at about her age, all Simpsons end up "dumbining". She seeks help from Dr. Hibbart who shows her a video about DNA. Not answering any of her questions, she leaves thinking that there is nothing she can do to prevent herself from being dumb. While watching TV with Homer and Bart they kneel on the floor sneaking old melted chocolate bars that they had hiding in the sofa. They offer her one and the screen flashes to a vision of her married to Ralph. Lisa runs away and in a last attempt to share her knowledge gets herself on the news. Homer invites all of the Simpson relatives over and they learn that the Simpson gene is only on the male side and that Simpson women are actually all brilliant.
Discussion:	What makes someone smart or 'dumb'? How do we associate being good or bad at something with being able? What emotions are attached to these labels? What was Lisa afraid would happen to her life if she really did have the Simpson gene? Being smart is so much a part of Lisa's identity on the show, how does this engage the audience? How does Lisa feel that being smart makes her better then everyone else? What relationships exist between being smart and being powerful? Are there different levels of what is smart or not as smart? Can you be good at something with have the 'smarts'? Can a golfer make the putt if they don't know the physics behind it?

Episode:	**Season 9, Episode 13- *The Joy of Sect***
Themes and Trends:	Religious cults, beliefs and ideas.
Synopsis:	The episode begins with Homer allowing Bart to skip school to go to the airport to welcome back the home football team. Homer declares that, "I always thought a boy could learn more in an airport then in any school." While at the Airport Homer and Bart meet two Movementarians who invite Homer to a free weekend a resort to learn more about how to achieve loving serenity on the distant planet of Blisstonia. Homer, not one to give up something free, attends and at first he remains resistant to strategies employed by the Movementarians to convince him to surrender to the 'leader' but a repetitive song finally works. Homer trades the family savings and the deed to their house to join the cult that has by now taken over all of Springfield. Marge escapes and Reverend Love Joy, Ned Flanders and Grounds keeper Willy kidnap Homer and the kids and in the end the whole thing is revealed as fraud and the leader attempts an escape with all of their money but fails. In the end everyone is happy to be able to think for him or herself again.
Discussion:	What is a cult? What do we know about these types of organizations? What is the purpose of life? What is the ultimate salvation? What would this look like? Is it the same for everyone? When the people of Springfield try to leave what strategies do the Movementairans employ? Even though they are free to leave they do not. How do we make choices to do things so as not to stand out in the crowd? How does this episode bring forward discussions about different beliefs?
Extensions:	This episode is discussed in the book *The Simpsons and philosophy: the d'oh! of Homer by* Irwin, W., Conrad, M. T., & Skoble, A.(Eds.). (2001).

Episode:	**Season 21 Episode 16-*The Best Story Ever D'ohed***
Themes and Trends:	Religion, similarities, dialogues.
Synopsis:	A church group in Ned Flanders living room argues over using 'computer words' to engage youth interest. As they pray a naked Homer slides past the window down a waterslide set up in *The Simpsons* backyard. When Ned gets upset at Homer for interrupting Reverend Love Joy convinces Ned to invite Homer and his family on a trip to the Israel. After harsh sarcasm Marge convinces Homer. As *The Simpsons* travel Jerusalem's historic sites Homer (who is dressed from head to toe in an American outfit) continues to frustrate Ned with his lack of respect for Jesus. Ned and Homer have an argument and Homer wanders into the desert looking to apologize to Ned. He takes a "sand horse" (camel) and ends up lost in the desert where talking vegetables convince him that he is the Messiah. Marge finds someone to help her rescue him. When they do he has 'Jerusalem Syndrome' and sets out to "unit all faiths" and spread the word of "Peace and Chicken"
Discussion:	Discuss the importance of Israel in the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths. Why does Ned think that Homer is not going to make it to Heaven? Lisa reminds Krusty that, "Jews do not believe in hell." Use this as a stating off point to and discuss different ideas of heaven hell and purgatory. Discuss the importance in understanding that there are differences and similarities within our cultures and ways we can work to find common ground. Have students talk about the importance in having some things in common and also about what makes us different from each other. Facilitate and encourage students to talk about ideas of faith, belief and uniqueness. Marge Simpsons: "Shalom is the Aloha of this place." Homer: "Attention! Christians, Muslims and Jews. I have come to gather you into a new faith. From now on you shall be called ChrisMuJews. Because when you get down to it, aren't all religions the same? They tell you what to eat, when to pray. How this imperfect clay that we call man, can mould itself to resemble the divine. But we can never attain that ultimate grace while there is hatred in our hearts for each other. Celebrate your commonalities, some of us don't eat pork, some of us don't eat shellfish, but all of us love chicken. Spread the word Peace and Chicken"

Episode:	**Season 4, Episode 17- *Last Exit to Springfield***
Themes and Trends:	Ageism, histories, unions, strikes, power, class.
Synopsis:	This episode begins with Bart and Homer watching a mob show on television and then moves to the office of Montgomery Burns. Smithers and Burns discuss ways to save the nuclear power plant money and decided to eliminate the employee dental plan after a union representative stands up a meeting with Mr. Burns. The next day Marge takes the kids to the dentist and finds out that Lisa will need braces. In a follow up union meeting in which Burns tries to trade the dental plan for a keg a beer Homer realizes that some free beer is not worth having to pay for Lisa's braces and he organizes the employees to reconsider the trade. They all decide to elect Homer as Union President and he eventually organizes a strike and wins back the dental plan.
Discussion:	Monty Burns –Discuss the dirty 30's and stories and how the elderly are portrayed as a boring second-class citizen. (Start at: 16min 18seconds) This is a good starter for talking about the importance of history and listening and recording the stories of our elders. The dirty 30's were a time of great conflict between classes and are important in discussions of class structures in our current society. Find out what students know about these ideas and bring in material from the past and make connections to the ideas Abe Simpson brings up. How have things changed or stayed the same?
Extensions:	This episode contains many allusions to the stereotype that British people have bad teeth and breath that students might be interested in discussion. There are also many references made to several existing characters including the three stooges, and Dr. Seuss and Batman.

Episode:	**Season 10, Episode 15-** ***Marge Simpson in Screaming Yellow Honkers***
Themes and Trends:	Gender stereotypes
Synopsis:	This episode begins with a musical performance at the school prepared by the teachers. At intermission everyone flees the school at the same time and everyone ends up in traffic. Marge is driving and afraid to be too aggressive. A guy passes by in a Kaminario and then Homer is at the dealership where he purchases one of his own. As he drives through Springfield he is made fun of because it is a 'girlie' car. Homer leaves the Kaminario with Marge and as she sits in traffic with melting ice cream Bart and Lisa convince her to cut through the grass and she develops a new sense of roadworthiness. She speeds past a funeral procession and is pulled over by Officer Wiggum and ends up having to attend traffic school. After traffic school Marge, not rehabilitated, hits a jail fence and as the criminals escape Chief Wiggum revokes her license. When rhinos at the zoo escape Marge is given back her license and saves the town.
Discussion:	What is it about the Kaminario that makes Homer not want to drive it to work the next day? Why? What are the features Lennie and Karl explain make it 'girlie'? Marge is generally portrayed as being a busy house wife, often saying things like "I have dust that needs bustering" and is always busy keeping the house in order and preparing supper. How does this reinforce our understanding of her role as the women of the house?
Extensions:	In the Last few minutes of this episode the characters talk about learning all kinds of things on NBC, since Fox makes the shows there Homer is made to declare that Fox is actually much better. This could be a good clip to spike conversations about how the show has been framed within its broadcasting station. Also, you can discuss the different broadcasters and the types on information they are known for brining you. Who owns the companies, their aims and goals in creating the shows that they do. What are other shows that are relevant and interesting to your students? How can you include them into your curriculum as well?

Finding Diversity Examples in *The Simpsons*

The Following are episodes that can get you started using *The Simpsons* in the diversity education classroom. To date, there are 470 episodes of *The Simpsons* that touch on relevant issues, I have compiled a little taste of what I think is possible with this source. I invite you to use what you can think about where else popular culture might take you.

Diversity topics	Episode	Episode Description
Race		
	Season 7, Episode 23 *Much Apu About Nothing*	After a vote at a town meeting in which it is decided that all illegal immigrants will be deported. Apu gets help from Homer to pass an American citizenship exam. Throughout the show we are presented with numerous stereotypes of Indian and American culture.
	Season 9, Episode 7 *The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons*	Apu marries Manjula in an arranged Hindu ceremony where we are presented with a very stereotypical depiction of Hinduism.
	Season 10, Episode 23 *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo*	The Simpsons go on a family vacation to Japan where there is an excess of technology and Homer learns to make origami. After the family runs out of money the family goes on a Japanese game show where ignorance and a few dangerous stunts wins them the tickets to get home.
	Season 13, Episode 15 *Blame it on Lisa*	The Simpsons end up on a trip to Brazil where the viewer is given the impression that Brazil is crime filled, poverty-stricken country overrun with monkeys, rats and shysters that conga line everywhere.

Diversity topics	Episode	Episode Description
Gender		
	Season 6, Episode 8 *Lisa on Ice*	After Lisa almost fails gym class she beings playing goaltender on the hockey team. She turns out to be very talented and a rivalry between Bart and Lisa develops.
	Season 9, Episode 6 *Bart Star*	The boys of Springfield all join a football team as a response to critique that they might be getting a little 'doughy'. Homer pushes Bart to get better at football and a flashback shows Homer completing a gymnastic routine.
	Season 9, Episode 21 *The Girly Edition*	In the subplot of this episode Homer brings home a monkey named Mojo that messes up the house and drives Marge crazy preventing her from completing her daily chores.
	Season 17, Episode 19 *Girls Just want to Have Sums*	Principal Skinner publicly states that he thinks boys are inherently worse at math and science then girls. An outraged mob forms outside of the school and Superintendent Chalmers hires a new female principal who divides the boys and girls. Lisa pretends to be a boy so that she can attend the boy's math class.
Age		
	Season 2, Episode 19 *Old Money*	Grandpa Simpson inherits money from his deceased girlfriend and uses the money to make over the retirement home where he lives.
	Season 6, Episode 24 *Lemon of Troy*	The children of Springfield take it upon themselves to restore town pride and make the adults of Springfield listen to them.
	Season 8, Episode 13 *The Old Man and Lisa*	Mr. Burns looses his fortune and convinces Lisa to help him get it back. We see many stereotypes of 'helpless'

Diversity topics	Episode	Episode Description
		elderly and Burns continues with his evil money grubbing ways.
	Season 20, Episode 14 *In the name of the Grandfather*	The Simpson family becomes to busy and neglect Grandpa Simpson, in an attempt to make it up to him, the episode delves into the importance of reminiscing and listening to stories and histories.
Sexual Orientation		
	Season 7 Episode 17 *Homer the Smithers*	Smither's takes a vacation and Homer attempts to fill in for him. That doesn't last long, and we see how dependant Mr. Burns is on Smithers. Flashes to Smither's on his vacation show several off the cuff references and stereotypical images of homosexual activities.
	Season 8, Episode 15 *Homer's Phobia*	Homer finds out that a new friend the family has made is gay. He suddenly becomes paranoid that the new friend has also made Bart gay and many stereotypical images are presented.
	Season 16, Episode 10 *There's Something About Marrying*	In an attempt to regain tourism dollars, Springfield legalizes same-sex marriages. Homer opens a chapel out of his garage and Springfield becomes the same-sex marriage capitol of the USA.
Class		
	Season 3, Episode 8 *Lisa's Pony*	Lisa has always longed for a pony. When Homer finally buys one for her we are presented with several class stereotypes and the pony is eventually too expensive for the family to keep.
	Season 7, Episode 3 *Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum Doodily*	After a series of unfortunate events the Simpson children are taken away from their parents and put into the care of the Flanders family. In a court ordered parenting class, there are several class

Diversity topics	Episode	Episode Description
		stereotypes presented that connect class status with 'good' parenting knowledge.
	Season 8, Episode 12 *The Twisted World of Marge Simpson*	Marge takes on big businesses as she attempts to compete with them with her own pretzel company.
	Season 18, Episode 13 *Springfield Up*	In a documentary of how Springfield has changed over the years, we learn of the Homer's dream to live in a mansion and be rich. As the documentary flashes between years we see Homer as a very poor manure farmer and a then as a very wealthy businessman after he invents the condiment pen. The division between the two highlights class divisions.
	Season 21, Episode 7 Rednecks and Broomsticks	The Simpson's go on vacation where they have a car accident and are pulled from frozen waters by stereotypical hillbillies that cook with possums, drink moonshine.
Religion		
	Season 2, Episode 13 *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th commandment*	Homer steals cable and Lisa and Reverend Lovejoy try to convince him that it is a sin and goes against the 8th commandment "thou shalt not steal".
	Season 4, Episode 3 *Homer the Heretic*	After skipping a day in church and dreaming that God is okay with it, Homer starts his own religion that is designed to allow everything that Homer likes to do.
	Season 8, Episode 15 *In Marge we Trust*	Marge becomes 'the listen lady' and devotes so much time trying to help the church congregation that they begin to question the usefulness of Reverend Lovejoy.
	Season 13, Episode 6 *She of Little Faith*	The Springfield church in dire need of financial assistance, allows Burns to commercialize it. This causes Lisa to

Diversity topics	Episode	Episode Description
		question her faith and in search for answers she becomes a Buddhist.
Body Image		
	Season 4, Episode 4 *Lisa the Beauty Queen*	In an attempt to help Lisa bolster her self-confidence she is entered in a beauty pageant and becomes Little Miss Springfield. When she finds out one of her duties is to promote cigarettes, she decides this not the right job for her to be doing.
	Season 7, Episode 7 *King Size Homer*	Mr. Burns implements a new work out program at the power plant and in an attempt to get out of doing it, Homer decides to become obese so that he can claim disability and work from home. After a near disaster Homer saves the town and Mr. Burns pays for Homer to have liposuction.
		Brian C. Johnson "*Doing Diversity" With film" –" Body image is likely to not be talked about in most discussions of diversity, but the influence of body size in our society should not be ignored. Open any beauty magazine and you can see the normativity of being thin." (2009, p.33)*
Ability		
	Season 9, Episode 17 *Lisa the Simpson*	Lisa fears that she has inherited a Simpson gene that will make her dumb. Many references are made to the correlation between being 'smart' and having a successful life.
	Season 9, Episode 18 *This little Wiggy*	Ralph Wiggum is known to be of lower intelligence than the rest of the town and is usually just a bystander that has coined several memorable quotes. In this episode Marge notices that Ralph has no friends and arranges for Bart and Ralph to have a play date. Bart is at first embarrassed to be seen with Ralph and later uses it to his advantage to gain popularity.

Beyond simply talking about these episodes and topics, I want to encourage students to do something about the issues they face now and will face the future. In *Critical Pedagogy* (2008) Joe Kincheloe explains "the combination of theory and practice resulting in informed action" as "the notion of praxis"(p.120). He explains that engaging in praxis is a necessary and essential move in the "critical complex teacher educators attempt to engage students in questions about the relationship between particular thoughts and actions as they confront lived experiences". (2008, p. 120) Teachers need to reconsider the content that they bring into the classroom and engage students in meaningful activities. We need to choose examples that are *real* to students and teach them ways of engaging *with* the material. For example, many of our students know *The Simpsons,* like them and would be interested to talk about them. Bringing in clips of shows that are familiar to students like *The Simpsons* and using them to initiate discussion on pertinent issues allows the teacher to point out ways in which education is framed, characters are stereotyped, or cultural groups are included (or not). Stopping the clip to explore how the segment might express the creative and personal aims of the shows creator Matt Groening or the potential goal of its network broadcaster Fox can aid students in reaching deeper levels of understanding and participate in a deeper more critical discourse towards new learning. Kincheloe explains "such recognition moves us to new appreciation of the multi-dimensionality of theory and practice relationships." (2008. p.121) and argues that this is essential in our quest to create students equipped to face issues and problems in the real world.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Importance of Discussion

The purpose of this thesis from its very beginning has simply been to add to already existing discussions in the field of education. As we know, many have sought to identify, discuss and solve issues in education. Discussion creates change by sharing different viewpoints, experiences, histories and encouraging us to think about things in new ways. I am not the first graduate student to discuss cultural diversity, *The Simpsons* or critical media literacy in my thesis, and I am sure I am not going to be the last. By bringing these topics together however, it has been my intention to open up a new aspect of the conversation. It is my hope that this will encourage the reader to see *The Simpsons* as something they can use in the classroom, or prompt them to choose a different popular culture muse or to at least '*think differently'* about the importance of media in our society- anything to get discussion rolling.

Application

In creating this thesis, I began by sharing parts of my own personal history that have led me to this place. To a very real extent a working mom and a yellow cartoon family raised me. In that I would align myself with Daniel Radcliff about everything he knew about the world when he was younger came from *The Simpsons*. Because of it's relevance and popularity, because it refuses to pull punches and insists on exploring and exposing the politics behind everyday life, I propose that bringing *The Simpsons* into class and using it to initiate discussion is

the right direction. As a teacher I strive to be a researcher (Kincheloe, 2004), a conversationalist and a listener. I have researched, listened and now sought to converse with you about all that I have gathered to share within this context. I have discussed briefly the topics of critical theory, pedagogy, cultural studies, and media education and I have invited *The Simpsons* to be the critical fodder for this discussion not just because they are familiar to us and our students, but because they have been pointing critically at societal issues and challenging their audience in ways never before attempted on television. Finally, I have provided information and examples that I hope will help engage colleagues, and students, in their endeavours to engage *with* media education.

I propose that each teaching and learning situation is dependent upon a variety of factors including the school, teacher, students, content and a plethora of other external or 'hidden' aspects influenced by power structures. Being aware of them is the first step to doing something about them. I have discussed the pressing immediate need to engage students by finding content that is both relevant to their learning within the school walls, but also relevant to their real *lived experience.*

Expectations

If all goes according to plan, bringing *The Simpsons* into the classroom to initiate critical conversations of diversity can help strengthen a peaceful classroom community. By opening up dialogue about the falsehoods represented in the media we can embark on an even bigger classroom community conversation. We ask

ourselves to reconsider the ways in which we previously thought about our selves, our friends, strangers, our community and our world. When all students are engaged in these questions together, through the medium of a common dialogue like *The Simpsons,* we can promote the exact "side to side" dialogue that Freire (1947) encourages. This is no longer the vision of the overbearing teacher making us feel small and misunderstood, but rather of an empowered, equal, explored understanding that we are in this dialogue together. Freire (1974) explained that when there are mutual feelings of respect within the learning context or community, more meaningful learning is achieved and the community is better able to work together through a common dialogue. This common dialogue is in essence the peaceful classroom I think we are all looking for.

Further Research

I do not think that there will ever be a time when we can sit back and say, all right, that's enough; there is nothing more to write, or to do, or to say. Each new person, experience, each new minute gives rise to something that is different. There are so many aspects that influence our classrooms and so many directions and approaches. While this is only but a fraction of the larger discussion, as I move forward, I look toward implementing my ideas in a classroom, and developing my professional competencies and practical experience within the classroom. As a teacher, I intend to continue researching, consuming media and looking at places it can take my students

and me next. With popular culture as my muse, there are so many places this conversation could take me.

"Homer: But talking about the problem is the first step towards a solution right?

Lisa: I guess but there's a looong way to go.

Homer: Come on say something conclusive.

Lisa: I am afraid this is a very open ended problem.

DEDICATION

TO MY ZAIDA HARVEY AND THE DAYS WE SPENT
WITH THE SIMPSONS IN GIMLI.

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