

Beyond a Joke

Teaching Satire Using *The Simpsons*

This workshop is a resource for teachers and includes conversational and anecdotal material. It in no way pretends to present academic findings. Where possible I have acknowledged sources and my thanks goes to all those who have had a creative input. However, some of the student material has come from the Internet and has proved unattributable.

Why teach and study *The Simpsons*? With what purpose and to what end? It is certainly partly for entertainment value, but that is only a starting point. Rather than making our classrooms more lounge-roomish, *The Simpsons* is a powerful tool for teaching the value of social comment, irony and an insight into expressive potential of satire.

As English teachers it is essential that we challenge and assist students to 'read for meaning', which includes their reading television and our raising their awareness of what they are watching and listening to. *The Simpsons* is a relevant, fruitful and challenging text for study in the ESL classroom.

When analysing *The Simpsons* one is struck by the frames of reference familiar to contemporary society: a flawed education system, a dehumanising workplace, a well-meaning but faulty family, corruption and consumerism. Keiron Jones, in her article *Homer+Bart equals a balanced diet*, says: "this is no Seinfeld, where the nothingness of the show is its humour. *The Simpsons* cleverly delves into a plethora of subtle and not-so-subtle issues of the 90s." (1)

The Simpsons is a text that most of our students will encounter and some will pursue regularly, owing to screen culture and the place of television in their lives. Many of my students spend two (or more) hours watching television every day. Rather than this time being spent passively viewing, I seek to raise their awareness of themselves as consumers and an audience that participates and brings meaning to the programs they choose to watch.

I have found that familiarity with the text can be immensely empowering to students, who bring a great deal of knowledge of characters and narrative features to the class. I have met few students who don't 'know' *The Simpsons* in some form, and I am certainly not suggesting that teaching satire using *The Simpsons* as a base is a compromise in which we meet students 'where they're at', on the couch. If students can develop a real sense and understanding of what satire is and the various comic techniques of expressing satire, the learning outcome is profound. This study is not about completing assessment tasks; it is about students increasing their skills as readers of television, society's infinite library of visual and non-print text. It is as important to learn about television as it is to study conditionals.

Figure 1

The Simpsons is a satirical look at a contemporary society.

- What is 'satire'?

Satire comments on and usually criticises society. Satire makes fun of a topic by making it seem ridiculous. Ridicule means to laugh at something, coming from the Latin verb, *ridere* ~ to laugh.

The techniques of satire:

exaggeration ~ give an impression that makes it seem greater or larger than it really is.
--

parody ~ humorous exaggerated imitation
--

generalisation ~ apply something to all cases, neglecting differences
--

incongruity ~ out of place, absurd

Inversion / reversal ~ reversal of normal order i.e: the roles people play, play on words
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The study of satire in *The Simpsons* encourages students to enjoy the comedy but also to look beyond the jokes for a more profound comment. If students are given enough time in the lexical field of satire they *will* begin actively to look for the 'comment' within

the narrative and not merely laugh at Bart’s pranks and Homer’s mental flabbiness. They also gain an insight into the persuasive power of satire with which to more fully appreciate the comedy.

When exploring a *Simpsons* script, one realises that the writers, amid all the jokes and buffoonery, use satire to invite their older viewers to pry open the many issues being dealt with. On analysis the scripts are clearly skillfully crafted—not just in places or certain episodes but consistently. *The Simpsons* provides a great opportunity for students to see satire at work. It is a stimulating medium through which we can assist students to inquire into contemporary issues and respond critically and creatively.

The identification of the various techniques of satire—exaggeration, parody, inversion, generalisation and incongruity (see *Figure 1*)—enables students to articulate the aims of the program and interpret what it means.

Figure 2

In the episode, Lisa on Ice, Bart and Lisa compete with each other in ice hockey teams.

Before watching can you predict who or what is being satirised?

After you watch make notes under the headings:

The importance society places on sport
The education system
Sibling rivalry
Parenting/Children competing for their parents attention
Violence on TV
Violence in sport

This graphic outline is a strategy for previewing a text—in this case an episode, *Lisa on Ice* (see *Figure 2*).

By using headings and sub-headings about the episode the reader constructs an outline that helps them to understand what the text may be about (2). It is an important foundation for note-taking skills. In early stages it might be teacher or teacher and student developed. I have found that students are more and more accustomed to note taking or developing a graphic outline. They have more of an idea of what they are looking for.

We can examine the various satirical techniques by looking at excerpts from several episodes:

Video:

Exaggeration

1. *Twenty Minutes To Tokyo*

The Simpsons are in Tokyo. The seizure cartoon is a highly exaggerated example of the dangers of television. It is also a satiric reversal of the idea that watching TV is a passive experience—Homer has worked up an appetite.

2. *Homer Simpson vs. The City of New York*

Homer has gone to New York to retrieve his illegally parked car. There is an exaggerated number of parking tickets and it is a parody of the big city with a lack of amenities—my students commented on the parody of zero policing that we had studied as an issue. This kind of cross-referencing into reality is a really valuable and important aspect of the study of satire.

3. *Homer Simpson vs. The City of New York*

Once again in Tokyo: Homer walking through the paper doors is an exaggerated cultural faux pas. He expects doors to open for him.

Depending on their level of maturity, some students view *The Simpsons* as a very amusing and sometimes quite radical cartoon. Others take a more analytical approach as they deconstruct the plethora of complex social issues. Its strength lies in its powers of persuasion. It is not by default that we teach *The Simpsons*.

One of the great virtues of using popular culture in a classroom is that one has the students' attention and interest as a given. Although I would not go as far as to say the creative consultant of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening, is the Shakespeare of the 90s, it is arguable that in today's world *The Simpsons* is just as valid and valuable and perhaps able to tell us more about contemporary society, or at least things not touched upon by 'high' culture.

Parody

1. *Twenty Minutes To Tokyo*

The *Hello Kitty* factory in Tokyo is a parody of the pollution and burning of junk culture. There's a suggestion of unethical business practice that they're actually using real animals to create these little *Kitty* products. My students thought this was really hilarious – their desks are littered with *Hello Kitty* paraphernalia.

2. *Lisa On Ice*

You are going to meet Mrs. Krabappel, Bart's 4th grade teacher.

"Stop raising your hand!" is a great indictment on the education system and the behaviourist line. She is only interested in 'the *right* answer' and has no understanding of how crushing that is to Bart. So much for the communicative approach!

3. *Bart Gets An F*

When Mrs. Krabappel speaks, Bart hears 'Blah, blah, blah blah'; when the psychiatrist, Dr Pryor, speaks Homer hears 'Blah, blah, blah, blah.' Like father, like son: a point I will return to below. There is a parody of counseling, calling in 'the district psychiatrist' to deal with Bart's short attention span. It is worth drawing attention to some of the names in *The Simpsons*: Mrs Krabappel, which everyone but Bart pronounces literally as "crab apple"; many people miss this joke but the students are very appreciative when it is pointed out; or Dr Pryor, the psychiatrist making a living out of *prying* into people's lives.

More specifically then, what is satire?

Satire comments on and usually criticises society and its various institutions. It particularly comments on (and usually criticises) complacency. And at its best satire is

a vehicle for change, a new way of looking at something. It is “a sophisticated form of persuasion” (3). The comedian Rob Stinch, one of the writers of *Frontline* (currently on the VCE syllabus), says that he tries to tell the truth through humour (4). So the value or purpose of satire lies in its ability to open people’s eyes to new interpretations and new ways of looking at what is going on. And it also, I think, can prevent ideas from simply drifting over people’s heads.

The pertinent question is: how do we as teachers transform the episodes as resources into units of work/learning materials and implement them in the classroom? One of the first activities we do as a class is make a big list of all the institutions (in terms of their power structures) that satire could possibly target and we come up with corporations, schools (especially teachers and school principals), politicians, police, the military, the legal system, the medical system.

Inversion / reversal

1. *Twenty Minutes To Tokyo*

In Tokyo the Simpsons have decided to eat at ‘*AmericaTown*’. The Japanese waiter, who is a product of the American education system, declares his ignorance and Homer thinks this is a great joke. This struck a cord with my students, many of whom commented on the breakdown of their countries’ culture and their concern at aping other cultures.

2. *Lisa On Ice*

Frequently Homer behaves more like a child than the children, while the children are seen to be wise beyond their years. When Marge says: “Homer don’t you eat that pie”, her role as wife and mother are reversed.

3. *Round Springfield*

Lisa is crying over the death of her friend the jazz musician. Homer blows it again by suggesting she can get a new one. Maggie, the baby offers him her dummy and he takes it which suggests a role reversal.

4. *Lisa On Ice*

You are going to meet Principal Skinner and Ralph Wiggam, who is in Bart’s class, who is the son of Springfield’s police chief and best known for missing the point. In this

case he understands academic alerts to be some kind of prize: “I’ve won, I’ve won.” It is a reversal of understanding when they actually signify failure.

Thus, inversion can include inversion of the roles people play, of identity, of word order and play on words/meaning.

Figure 3

Look at the following quotes:
Who says it?

In what way are the characters making a comment on contemporary society?

- Oh Action News, the last place an impressionable kid can go for TV violence.
- It’s wrong for you to reward competitive violent behaviour.
- Don’t have a stereotypical view of me just because I’m your mother.
- Think of all the time I’ve wasted on you.

Play on words: Look at the quotes. Who says them and in what way are they playing with the meaning of the underlined words?

- Me, fail English—that’s *unpossible!*
- Lisa, the man’s a professional *mediarologist*.
- President Reagan *dyes*... his hair.

Quotes: “Blah, blah, blah.....”

Who said it? Who were they speaking to? What was the context?

- I inhaled my favourite whistle this morning.
- Just remember to have fun out there and if you loose I’ll kill you.
- I have to join the team or I’ll get an ‘F’ that will haunt me for the rest of my life.
- We’re laughing with her Marge, there’s a big difference.
- Hey Bart if Lisa is better than you at hockey, does that mean you’re going to become better than her at school?
- Bart Simpson will you stop raising your hand! You haven’t had one right answer all day.
- Lay off him, he’s with me.

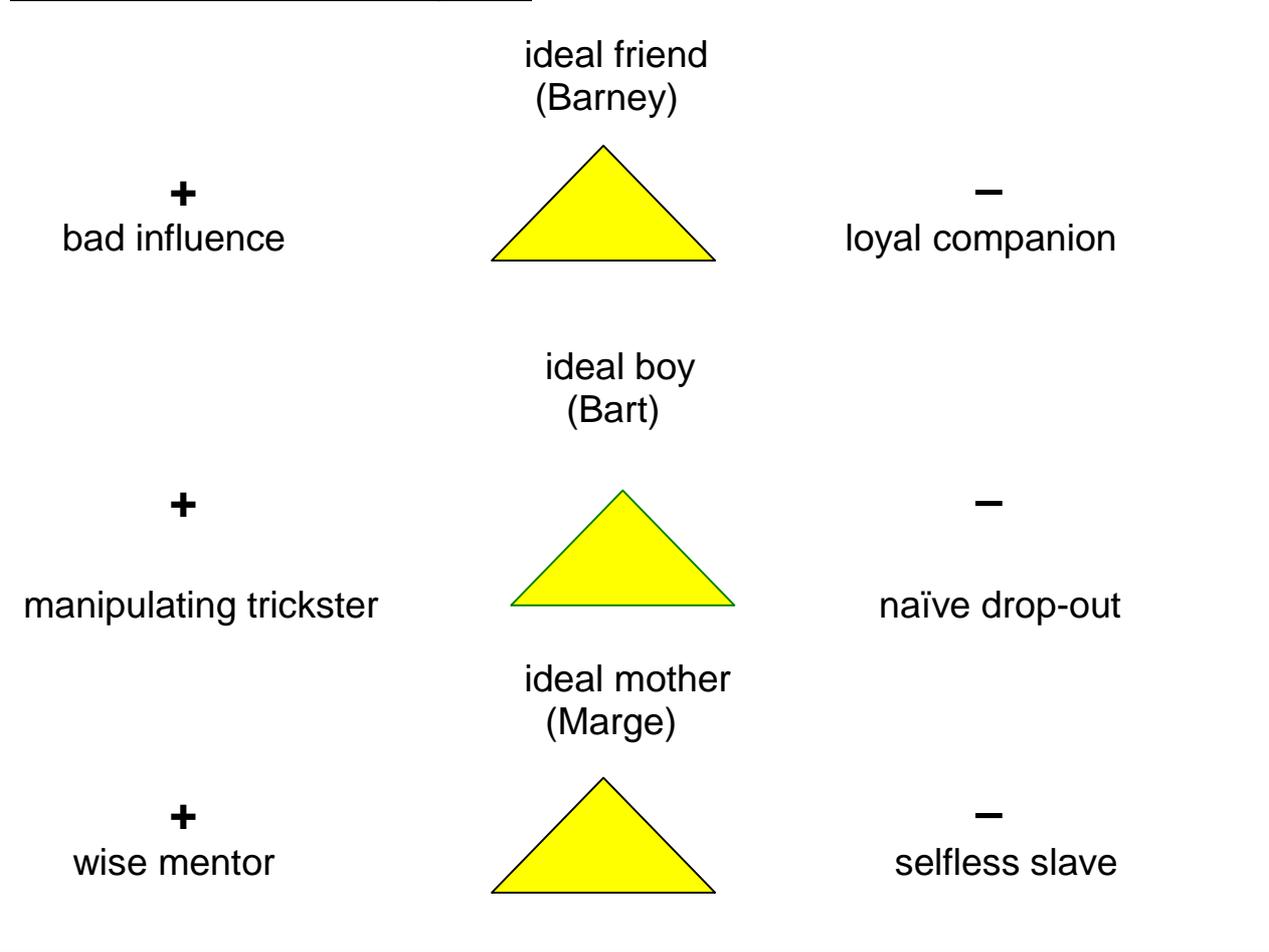
Figure 3 presents an example of a language analysis task for raising students' awareness of particular meaning, including three techniques for highlighting language.

How do we go about teaching satire?

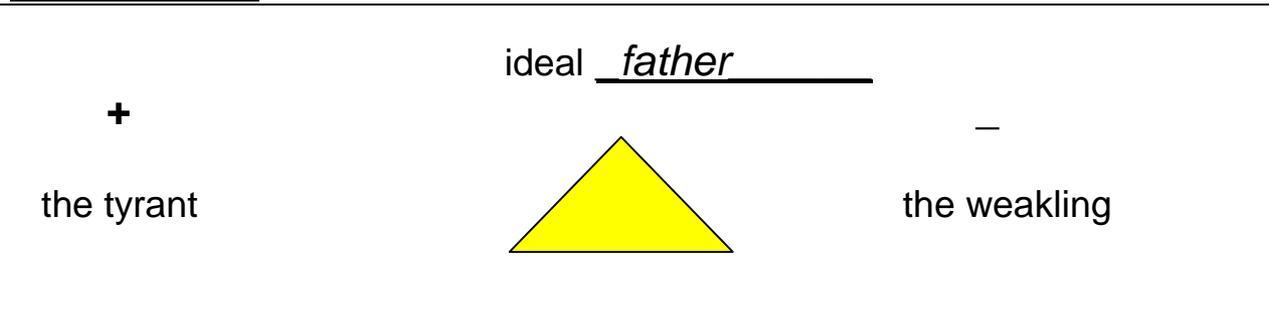
Satire is attractive as it bestraddles the line between fiction and non-fiction. We often hear that we should be teaching more non-fiction (students learn from non-fiction) and

Figure 4

Characters as archetypes



Character: Homer



then we should be teaching more literature (full-blooded fiction). Satire can resolve this dilemma.

Mike Scully, the executive producer of *The Simpsons*, says that one of the advantages of working with animation is that it removes a level of reality, and so it actually allows one to go a little further and exaggerate things a little more, yet still preserve a somewhat believable look (5). It has been suggested that if *The Simpsons* were a sitcom using real actors it would not have become as popular—the audience might not have received it as well, as it would be too much and too ‘in your face’. A character with vices and foibles like Homer would be really vulgar in real life.

Figure 4 is a character map of Homer weakling/tyrant. Homer shifts between the weakling—selfishly indulging himself, lacking power and authority, and easily manipulated by Bart, Lisa and Marge, who are all cleverer than him and the tyrant—in that he holds the ultimate power in the household and abuses this by mistreating Marge and the kids. But occasionally he is the good father, protecting, helping and loving his wife and children.

Archetypes show that there are many spheres of action we can be involved in at different times, many possible personas we can adopt in different situations. Media heroes and villains are like contemporary archetypal figures. Jungian analysis of media stories sees the characters acting out archetypal patterns of behaviour. The shadow side is the negative, dark side.

Of course Jung argues that we need to look at the negative aspects in ourselves in order to reach any kind of maturity. The comedy or satire is that Homer is incapable of this. It is not a question of denial. We (the audience) know that he is going to continue to exhibit all manner of anti-social behaviour; he has to: it is part of the code that underpins the narrative. Rather than repressing or denying his vices—greed, sloth, hypocrisy, ignorance—he is so flawed he is laughable. This grown man moans about why the world isn't a better place and why it doesn't treat him better but at the same time is not prepared to do anything about it to improve himself. Which brings us to the technique of generalisation.

Generalisation

1. *Homer The Great*

Homer asks, “Why doesn’t anyone like me?”

2. *The PTA Disbands*

Homer says, “Lisa if you don’t like your job—you don’t strike you just go in everyday and do it really half-arsed. That’s the American way.”

When Homer says, “that’s the American way”¹ he promotes himself as the status quo.

3. *Homer To The Max*

Homer has a meeting with a group of TV producers who have created a new sitcom in which the main character is called Homer Simpson.

He asks in earnest, “Why did they make me so stupid?”

4. *Bart’s Comet*

Bart has discovered a comet by default and just been accepted into an elite social group of academics who chant: “We are Superfriends”.

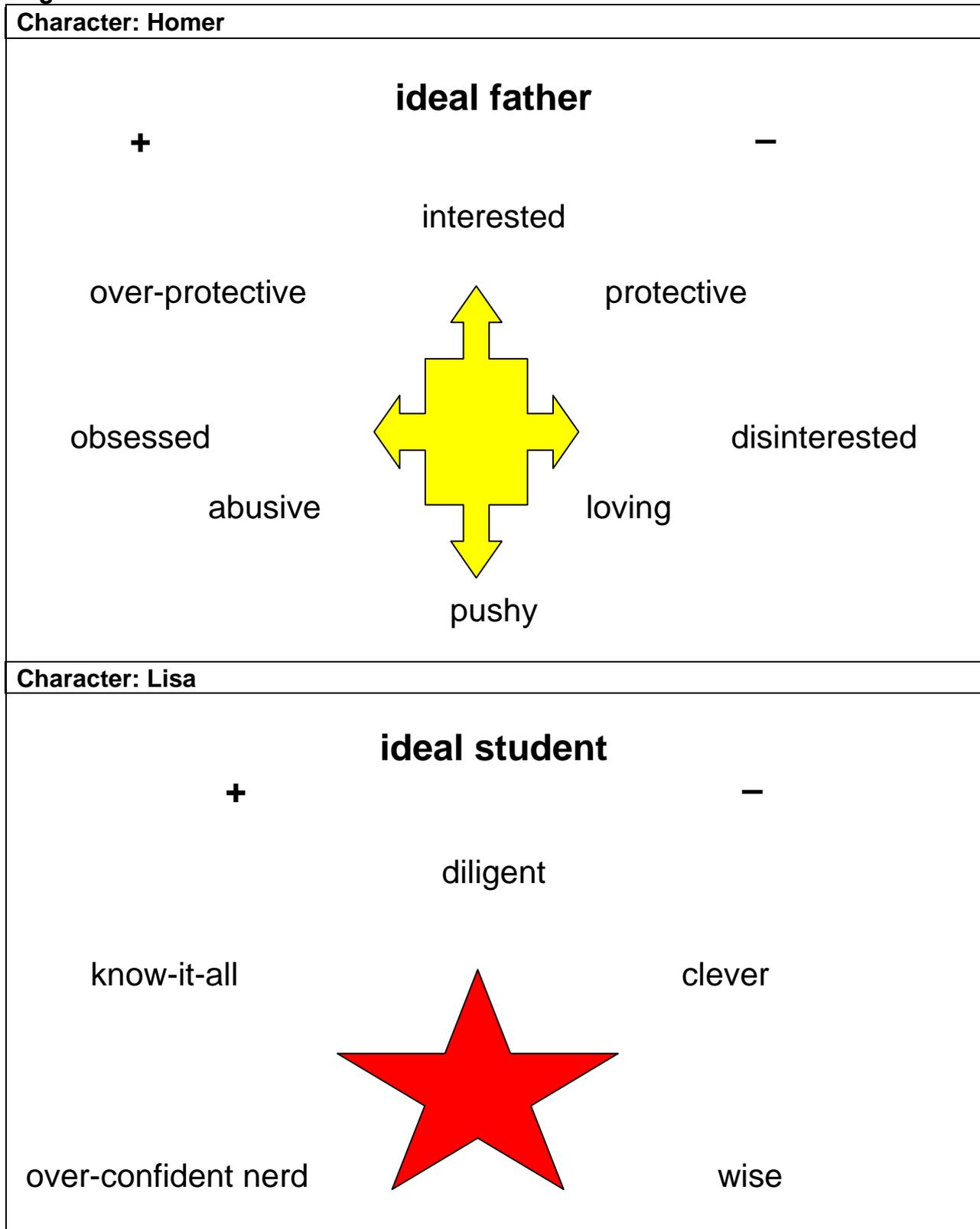
So with the technique of Generalisation we talk a lot about stereotypes. Students can come up with their own character maps. Character maps and analysis of what characters actually say gives students an insight into stereotypical behaviours and characteristics for example:

- The big boss
- Town drunk
- Shop keeper
- Naughty child
- Students—super smart and super dumb ones

Generalisation reinforces certain concepts; it almost becomes a truth. A lot of people who have never paid much attention to an episode pass *The Simpsons* off as just another kids’ cartoon featuring the exploits of Bart, the naughty boy; or they see it as a subversive influence. Indeed, I have been told about a woman who would not allow her ten year old child watch *The Simpsons*; she felt that every aspect of authority is undermined and that the child’s response to authority is undermined. I suppose she felt that one cannot win against that sort of representation. I can see why it might have

bothered her that the naughty child is a little boy. Lisa, the intelligent kid is virtually friendless.

Figure 5



Actually I would argue that virtually all of the characters in *The Simpsons* are redeemable. This is where *The Simpsons* is so cleverly written—at some point in some episode a character will do something that we empathise with or is truly sensitive. They are not two-dimensional characters. A study of *The Simpsons* includes insights into human fallibility.

Bart gets an F

Bart breaks down and cries when he has to repeat 4th grade. We, the audience, feel for him. It really matters to him; he really studies and tries to pass. And he is so happy when he falls over the line with a D minus that he kisses the teacher. It is touching that Bart’s test finally gets a place on the fridge door and one of Lisa’s A’s is moved aside.

Students can be introduced to the idea of redemption through mapping the various characters and seeing that there are qualities and faults or as I prefer to emphasise characteristics and their extremes or oppositions.

Figure 5 is an example of an activity of a character map, examining characters as ideals. This is of value in generating not only vocabulary and adjectives of character, but also ideas and a sense of character and closer analysis.

Figure 6

After watching the episode, <i>Round Springfield</i> , listen again to particular scenes and make note of some more things that the characters say:				
Areas of analysis:				
Who?	says what?	to whom?	when?	with what effect?
Bart	“If you ignore me and I die, you’ll get in a lot of trouble.”	Mrs Krabappel the teacher	During the test when he has a stomach ache	No effect: she doesn’t care and she doesn’t believe him.
Homer	“If you really want to preserve his memory I recommend getting a tattoo.”	Lisa	While she is grieving, after bleeding gums Murphy’s death	She feels her father has no understanding of her sadness.

Figure 6 presents an activity that gives students a structure on which to read *The Simpsons* as a text and say something specific (“Areas of Analysis”).

This framework is a useful crossover skill into analysing other kinds of media or non-print text—it is a way of structuring their understanding. It is also perfect ground/context for teaching linguistic structures and features: sentence level grammar (for example, ‘here’ conjunctions such as while, during, after, when; ‘if’ clauses). Students can scaffold their language acquisition and understanding of the narrative.

An example from another episode is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

After watching the episode, <i>Thirty Minutes To Tokyo</i> , listen again to particular scenes and make note of some more things that the characters say: Areas of analysis:				
Who?	says what?	to whom?	when?	with what effect?
Homer	“They’re years ahead of us!”	himself	In the toilet in a hotel in Tokyo when he sees a ‘talking’ bidet with coloured flushing water.	The audience thinks Homer is easily impressed by a ridiculous use of technology.
Japanese Waiter	“Don’t ask me—I don’t know anything. I’m a product of the American education system.”	Lisa	In a restaurant called <i>AmericaTown</i> in Tokyo.	He is ignorant of Japanese culture. He has adopted the American culture and lost his home culture. The American education system is faulty.

Another activity that this leads into is a debate: Is Homer a good father?

Both sides can win. Examples of students' work (of Celicia and Melani) are presented in *Figures 8 and 9* respectively.

Figure 8

HOMER IS A BAD FATHER

- **CRUEL** : He grabbed Bart's neck just after Bart had his operation. He said, "I'll kill you."
- **CHILDISH**: Homer did the same thing as Lisa and Bart did when he wanted to eat the pie. He said, "Don't blame me if the pie gets eaten."
- **TROUBLEMAKER**: When he said, "What I'm saying is we all have to go to the pound and get a new jazzman". It made Lisa feel more upset. He gave bad support when Bart had to repeat his fourth grade he said, "It's OK, you'll be the biggest kid in the class."
- **STUPID AND GREEDY**: He eats a lot of food that contains fat and he also ate dog food once.
- **RIDICULOUS**: He was afraid of his own baby, he couldn't control his own baby.
- **LAZY**: He just eats and sleeps at the office and becomes a couch potato at home.
- **CARELESS**: He threw the uranium out of the car window without thinking of the effect and the risk.
- **BAD INFLUENCE**: He drinks beer in front of the kids. He asked Bart to watch TV even though there was a test on the next day and finally, Bart couldn't study because he was too exhausted. He influences his children to be couch potatoes., He doesn't give Bart a chance to study and improve his skills.
- **UNFAIR**: He loves Lisa more than Bart. He displays Lisa's work all over the fridge and it is not good for Bart's self-esteem.
- **UNEDUCATED**: When the psychiatrist talked to him, he didn't understand what he was saying.
- **BAD EXAMPLE FOR CHILDREN**: He often breaks the law and he wanted to pee in the postbox. He drove his car with a wheel clamp on it through the streets of New York.

Figure 9

Points that Homer is a good father

- **Works very hard to do something for his family**
- **Doesn't do many illegal activities**
- **He is honest**
- **Tries to make his family feel happy**
- **Shares his experience-family understand him**
- **Responsible for the whole family**
- **Improves his family's lifestyle**
- **Quite helpful**
- **Accepts his children's characteristics**
- **Encourages his children's success in a particular competition or game**
- **Goes home on time-doesn't hang around in the city**
- **Likes to spend his time with his family**
- **Is not a perfect person –nobody is perfect**
- **Gives freedom to his children**
- **Always comes up with ingenious ideas**
- **Polite and friendly**
- **Feels proud of his children's works**
- **Looks wise**
- **Relies on his own skills to teach his children to learn from their mistakes**
- **Comforts his children**
- **Sensitive**
- **Buys things that his family needs**
- **Shares joy**
- **Protective**
- **Caring father**
- **Creates wonderful relationships with his family**
- **Persuades someone that is sad or having problems**
- **Looks for a better job to earn more money for his family**
- **Does not want his family to be hurt in certain situations**

This can be a writing topic: lower levels can produce a short written response or higher level students an extended written response. In this way, whether in debate, forum or argumentative essay, students are given ground to assess how fair the satire is, an important outcome or aspect of the study of satire particularly for higher level students.

- Students can produce posters to illustrate their opinion. This worked well with a lower level group.
- One major activities was to invent a new character. An episode can be stopped at a particular point and a new character written into the story. Potentially 3 minutes of script could be 5 pages long. This is a great group activity, building dialogue and role playing the characters.
- This can also be done without a new character but writing a scene: (see *Figure 10*, a sample of student work).

Figure 10

A Family Trip to the Cinema

At home.....

Bart: It's so boring today. Let's look for something for fun.....
Lisa: Let's go to the library. There are lots of books there.
Bart: Oh how ordinary, that's for the bookworm not for the active person like me.
Lisa: Oh then, what's your suggestion. Mr 'active'.....
Bart: Dad! (Bart shouts)
Homer: Hmm.....(still reading the comic. Bart feels angry and goes towards Homer. He pinches his leg)
Homer: D'oh!
Bart: Dad, did you hear what I was saying just now?
Homer: No, but now yes. What is it? (still reading the comic)
Lisa: Dad! Stop reading the comic.
Homer: All right. (He changes the comic to the magazine)
Lisa: Why do I have this kind of father..... Mum, have you any suggestions?
Marge: Hmm..... Let me see..... Aha..... There are some films at the cinema. Let's go to a film!
Bart: Good idea, Mum. What are we going to see? Which genre is that?
Lisa: I want to see '42 UP'. I like documentary films.
Bart: No way. I want to watch 'The Rage – Carrie 2'. Hehehe..... I like HORROR movies.
Homer: Let's watch 'Eyes Wide Shut'. I want to look at Tom Cruise's sexual scene..... Tom Cruise! Tom Cruise! Tom Cruise!
Marge: Homer! That's not suitable for children.
Homer: So what! Right, Bart?
Bart: Yeah.....
Marge: We'll just go and watch '42 UP' then. It's suitable for all the ages.
Lisa: Good choice Mum. Thanks Mum.
Homer & Bart: Boringggggg.....

~end~

John	as	Marge	Writer:	Brian
Donny	as	Bart	Director:	Brian
Liliani	as	Lisa	Producer:	Brian
Brian	as	Homer		

There is a cross-reference here to reality; students are drawing on their knowledge of popular culture in a very apt way. *The Simpsons* are trying to arrange to see a film. They mention the documentary *42 Up*, which is Lisa's cup of tea but, of course, for Bart, a real yawn. He suggests another genre; he wants to see a horror film, and Homer would prefer to see a preview of something more perverse, like *Eyes Wide Shut*, not to check out the flesh, but to see Tom Cruise.

Another example of student work is presented in *Figure 11*. There is a play on the title of another TV series and a comment on the Metcard system.

Encourage students' creativity and online research skills. There are hundreds of Simpsons websites and they are of a really high quality. I have included a list of the best of those. *The Simpsons* official website is probably of greatest interest (see *Figure 12*). Another sample of student writing that gives expression to a strong criticism at the

Figure 11



Lost In Plane

Homer: Pa, we have decided to take you to Las Vegas.
Marge: Oh, do you think that is a good idea?
Homer: Don't worry, Marge, he's not a baby.
Bart: Dad, do you remember what happened when you took grandpa to Melbourne on the last trip?
Homer: D'oh!! That's because of the Metcard in that stupid country.
Grandpa: Yeah, Met... who???

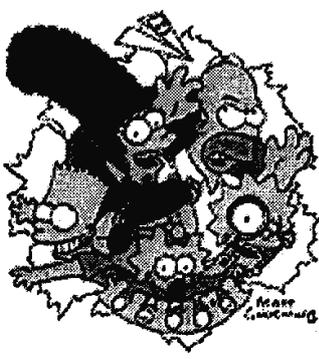
Bart: Metcard, grandpa!! The card that you wrapped your gum in.
[After they arrive in Las Vegas, Homer forgets to wake his father, so grandpa is still sleeping on the plane.]

Grandpa: Bart! Homer! Lisa! Marge! Hmmm... where is everybody? Why isn't the plane moving???

[Meanwhile the family is already outside at the airport.]

Marge: Homer, where is your father?
Homer: I Don't know Marge maybe in the toilet.
Marge: Oh my God, did you leave him on the plane again?
Bart: Here we go again Dad!!!
Homer: D'oh!!!
Bart: Quick Dad to the plane, Radiationman to the rescue!!!

Created by:
☺ Ruwan → Executive producer
☺ Faye → Assistant producer
☺ Powen → Writer and producer



time among my students at what was perceived as a defective legitimacy of the foreign involvement in the East Timor Crisis. This demonstrates that at its best satire can be a vehicle for articulate social comment. Students have rewritten *The Simpsons* in a different cultural context.

Figure 12

The Simpsons in East Timor Junaidi, Sisca, Wira, Zoe EAP4 10 September,1999

Homer: Marge, I have VERY VERY good news.
Marge: OH yeah, what's that? Do you have a promotion?
Homer: No, I don't want one! Tomorrow, we go to East Timor for about a year.
Marge: Hmm...It's better to go now. I can't wait! Bart, Lisa...Come here...pack your things. We are going to East Timor.
Bart & Lisa: Whaaat? Is that a good idea?
Lisa: Who invited us?
Homer: Honey, we don't need an invitation-we are proud Springfieldians, we are citizens of the world!!

In East Timor

Bart: Cool! These people like having a party. They are all coming out and shouting.
Lisa: Mum, look! There are huge fireballs lighting up the sky. It seems like fireworks. Look!! It's so lovely.
Marge: Is it always so crowded here?
Homer: I don't know exactly. Maybe they are having a party to welcome us!
(Then Homer says to the people, raising his hands...)
Thank you...thank you...thank you everybody.
Timorese1: Who are they? Are they crazy? Where do they come from?
Timorese2: Are they the peace-keeping team that has been sent by the UN? But, why are there three children in the team? Oh...maybe this is a new way by the UN to spread peace in Indonesia using CHILDREN. Hmm...the UN are very 'smart'!
Homer: What are you looking at guys? Where is the taxi that will take us to the five star hotel?
Timorese3: What taxi? The Military car?
Bart: YES! I've never been in that type of car. Let's go!
Homer: Why not! Let's go everybody!
Lisa: Mum! I don't think they know that we are tourists.
Marge: What do you mean, Lisa?
Lisa: I mean that they think we are the peace-keeping team because they sent a military car.
Marge: Oh Lisa, Honey this isn't Springfield-the taxis overseas are different colours. These dark green and black taxis are very attractive!
Homer: That's culture for you, that's Culture!

In *The Simpsons* certain institutions are open to criticism but upheld, namely the family and God. This is a political statement that Groening is making, supporting the family. He seems to know what America can cope with and how far he can go with satire.

Video:

Lisa's Wedding

This is a flash forward to the year 2100 but Lisa is in her 20s. Phillipa Hawker in *The Age* asks: "Is this a world where absolutely anything is possible?" (6) Surely Bart's response to that would be: 'maybe it is, maybe it is!' Lisa has been to a soothsayer

Figure 13



who tells her about her wedding. No matter how flawed, Lisa stands true to the family and makes a choice: her allegiance is unwavering.

The Simpsons is a groundbreaking series in terms of the way it plays across genres. This is what some media analysts refer to as ‘hybridisation’ or ‘bricolage’: the appropriation, and combination of different cultural elements into a new form. But actually *The Simpsons* is true to its literary form. Satire was invented in Rome in the second century BC, and was a hotchpotch or hold-all for mismatched subjects, written in an uneven style and overlapping with other genres (7). The Latin etymology of the word itself is an insight, coming from *Satura*, a mixed stuffing or sausage (8). I think Homer would say YUM! And I do think Groening and his team are very aware of their ancient precursors and have had some fun with the references. It is no accident that Homer is indeed called *Homer*. There are so many theories about the ancient Greek Homer, from poet whose *Illiad* and *Odyssey* became the basic textbooks that Greek children used to learn to read and study legends, to illiterate of exceptional talent whose poems were entirely oral texts that he dictated to someone and were written in a form of Greek that does not belong to any one city or historical period.

The Simpsons frequently adapts mainstream film plots as the basis for stories and it often parodies famous film scenes. It is surprising how savvy students are with the references. Satire is a really useful way of raising students’ awareness to the important skill of making links with other texts and sources). It has its own inbuilt triggers to intertextuality. The suggestion is that through the audience’s understanding of a mixture of genres, the audience is offered more pleasure and there are more possibilities for the writer (see *Figure 13*. Here advertising man in grey flannel suit Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) runs for his life through desolate Midwestern cornfields, chased, north by northwest across the nation by a faceless assassin flying a cropduster. Thornhill’s suit and tie are peculiarly but aptly out of place in the heart of the country. Marge’s nightmare is a satirical play on the Psycho-anxiety genre. Obviously the writers are enjoying the idea of Marge, a fictional character acting out the invented role of a film character. The Thornhill character was a mistaken identity he was thought to be a spy who turned out to be a fictitious character invented by the CIA. It is a very playful satire on the psychological / thriller genre. Lisa has turned into a mini-Marge in her mother’s signature lime green dress and exaggerated mauve beehive. Its playful statement—just as *North by Northwest* became an emblem for

America in the sixties and seventies. A cartoon called *The Simpsons* seems to be a satirical emblem of the 90s. It is fun to draw students' attention to incongruous details: where is Marge's headscarf? On the end of her beehive. What a fashion statement! It is the mirror detail of Cary Grant's tie flying over his shoulder. It is possible to elicit from students many details about similarities and differences.

Incongruity

1. *Lisa On Ice*

Lisa's dream ambition of becoming president is thwarted by failing 3rd grade gym. The nightmare sequence of monsters chasing her is highly incongruous.

2. *Twenty Minutes To Tokyo*

Homer is on the toilet in Tokyo, a parody of advanced technology with the incongruous use of a closed-circuit camera in the toilet.

3. *Simpson and Delilah*

Homer is tired of being bald and he has just spent a lot of money on a new hair tonic (actually he used medical insurance). On Homer's self esteem jaunt he waves to the funeral mourners. It is the incongruity of misplaced vanity. It is also incongruous that Homer, who is known for his laziness, is jogging through the streets at daybreak.

4. *Simpson and Delilah*

Homer needs comforting but his vulnerability quickly turns to self-indulgence. "You've got me. I am so beautiful to you." There is something incongruous about a grown man being lullabied to sleep.

Each year *The Simpsons* has its own Halloween episode and this is an exploration of the horror genre; Marge makes an announcement:

"Hello everyone you know Halloween is a very strange holiday. Personally I don't understand it. Kids worshipping ghosts, pretending to be devils... things on TV that are completely inappropriate for younger viewers. Things like the following half-hour. Nothing seems to bother my kids, but tonight's show—which I totally wash my hands of—is really scary. So if you have sensitive children, maybe you should tuck them into bed early tonight instead of writing us angry letters tomorrow. Thanks for your attention." (9)

Actually she is not joking—viewers do write angry letters offended by or defending the satire. This can be a research activity: students use *The Age* CD Rom to search for the letters that were sent to the *Green Guide* in response to the episode, *Bart v Australia*. What are the points of view expressed in those letters? Why are people offended at being the target of satire? In what way do they think the satire is unfair? Part of the bite of satire is that it demands that the audience be robust enough to look at things with clear eyes.

The Simpsons frequently sends up television and its effects:

Bart slumps down in front of the nightly news with his homework saying: ‘Oh, *Action News*, the last place an impressionable kid can go for a bit of TV violence’ (10). I have found it very valuable to follow this unit with two or three episodes of *Frontline*. *The Simpsons* have their own current affairs show *Smartline* (the equivalent of *A Current Affair*) on which Lisa has made 13 appearances. She is certainly an 8-year-old with a well-developed social conscience.

There is much that can be done with the opening credits. There are several hooks and students should be assisted to look for the subliminal messages

- The Blackboard sequence is a feature. Students make up their own with a joke, designing a blackboard punishment for Mrs Krabappel.
- Pause and look at bits of writing that you may have missed. Graffiti and signs on the walls of buildings (the church, the nuclear power station where Homer works). It is a reminder of how rich the text is and students should be encouraged to look at the background and details. For example in the episode, *Homer versus the City of New York*, my students were taking note of signs like, ‘No Screaming -\$50 Fine’ and ‘Crime Up By 900%’.

See *Opening credits*:

- Blackboard
- Bart on skateboard – can’t wait to leave school, drops the chalk
- Homer leaving work at the nuclear power plant; cannot wait to leave on the clock—he drops his tools. Bart leaving school and Homer leaving work is another example of like father, like son: it is a mirror image.

- Marge at the supermarket. There is a suggestion of irresponsibility; she has her head in the trashy magazines and thinks for a moment that she has lost Maggie, the baby who gets scanned through. She is so relieved when she is dropped in the shopping bag.
- Lisa, a talented saxophonist is cast out of rehearsal. She has too much rhythm for the traditional sound of the orchestra.
- Homer speeding home from work discovers that a nuclear rod has become caught in his overalls; he throws it out the window like litter and of course the first one to be harmed by that kind of negligence are the children—Bart rides over it on his skateboard.
- The opening credits take you through the streets of Springfield – you see a cameo flash of all the characters and as students familiarise with the narrative they can recognise them.
- Marge and Maggie—aping her mother’s behaviour—role models
- In fact all of the characters are gathered on the Springfield reserve.
- Couch gag changes every time. Once again this is where *The Simpsons* is quite true to the roots of its literary form. Roman satire combined music and mimetic dancing (11). It is that kind of good-humoured biting and semi-dramatic opening when, for example, the light is turned off they all glow in the dark because they are nuclear contaminated Springfieldians.

I hope this workshop has practically demonstrated that *The Simpsons* can be used at more than one stage of language development. If we are willing to work with *The Simpsons* enthusiastically and systematically, the rewards of genuinely communicative classes and steadily increasing student involvement and language will develop. Because *The Simpsons* and the study of texts and literature don’t simplify the subtleties or complexities of life, it can engage the whole personality of students whose linguistic ability may not yet equal their broader experience or personal maturity.

In preparing this unit of work and paper I’ve been pondering the question of where the study of satire as a genre necessarily meets critical literacy, an educational issue maybe orthodoxy that is receiving some focus. David Corson from The University of Toronto raises some interesting questions: Is the current educational focus on the issue of Critical Literacy just another linguistic orthodoxy for The Lucky Country? (11) Are we

so susceptible to educational orthodoxies? And more specifically: What is 'critical' about academic literacy?

- 'First it would be something that young people could use for exploring, interpreting and questioning their own real-world setting' (12). A study of satire in *The Simpsons* provides for this.
- 'Second it would be an enabling device that allowed them to pry open and strip away the ideologies and other distortions that lurk in the many message systems and orthodoxies that surround them' (13). A study of satire in *The Simpsons* is this.
- 'And third, it would be a ready tool for them to use in taking as much control of their own lives as they wanted' (14). A study of satire in *The Simpsons* is springboard into free speech and social commentary.

Satire seems to have Critical Literacy inbuilt. Satire is, in itself, the agent that interrogates the issues being dealt with. Of course the reader will still need skills to examine and comment on that treatment. But that is why we teach *The Simpsons*.

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Appendix 1

Activities for studying satire using *The Simpsons*:

➤ Focus Teams

Students form teams and are asked to cover one technique—exaggeration, parody, reversal, incongruity or generalisation—and look for examples in a particular episode of how that technique is used.

This can be done as a viewing, note-taking, research activity and each group presents their understanding to the class.

➤ Character Maps

Create a character map of your favourite character or of a stereotype:

The big boss

Shop keeper

Town drunk

Naughty child

Students—super smart and super dumb ones

The bully

➤ Create your own character and write him or her into the script

➤ Write a scene with five minutes of dialogue. Think of a real aspect of society on which you can make a satiric comment.

Short and extended written response topics:

➤ “Matt Groening and his team tell us a great deal about contemporary life in the 1990s.” Discuss

➤ Study an episode of *The Simpsons* and examine the references to real social issues.

➤ Springfield Elementary School is a target of satire. In what way do laugh at the school, the students, the teachers and the rules?

➤ You work for a consumer protection association. Make an inquiry into the Krusty O company. Examine three of their products that are unsafe for consumer use. Include a warning to consumers and point out why the products are unsafe. The episode *Round Springfield* is a good starting point.

➤ ‘Springfield is a fictitious town but it is like many towns all over the world.’ Discuss

➤ ‘It is entertaining to see guest stars from the real world drawn into the fictional world of *The Simpsons*’. Discuss examples of this or write a real person into an episode of *The Simpsons*.

➤ Nelson, Jimbo Jones and Dolph are all presented as stereotypical bullies who are underachievers. In what way is this realistic? Create a list of examples from

various episodes. What other stereotypes do the students of Springfield Elementary School represent? In groups, compare and discuss your lists of examples.

- Research the creator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening, and present to the class some of the ideas that are important to him. Read *Explaining Groening* at: <http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~kwyjibo/matt.html>
- Role-play an interview with a character from *The Simpsons*. Try to ask them open questions about their opinion on life in Springfield, the characters and issues that affect the town.
- Create a mind map of an episode of *The Simpsons* as a PowerPoint slide or an overhead and then explain it to the group. You may like to include:
 - highlights of the episode, such as funny moments or quotes
 - particular examples of satire: exaggeration, reversal, parody, incongruity, generalisation
 - the social comment that is made
- Create an online forum to discuss a topic:
 - Are Itchy and Scratchy a bad influence on children?
 - Is the Springfield nuclear power plant damaging the environment? Consider the episode , *Two Cars In Every Garage and Three Eyes On Every Fish*
 - 'Homer isn't stupid, he's a street-smart genius who is misunderstood.' To what extent do you think this is true?
 - 'Kent Brockman (aka Kenny Brockelstein) has no credibility as a newsreader and *Action News* is a parody of sensationalised TV news.' To what extent do you agree?
- Debate
 - Is Homer a good father?
 - Marge is a good role model to her children.

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<http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~kwyjibo/matt.html>

Appendix 2

Outcomes of the Workshop Forum:

Finally the participants of the workshop had a forum in which they discussed their ideas and strategies for teaching popular texts in the ESL classroom.

Forum questions:

What popular texts have you used in the classroom?	What teaching strategies did you use?	What other strategies could be used for teaching satire using <i>The Simpsons</i> ?

Year 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was suggested that Mr. Bean could be used as a way of scaling down satire for lower stage students, by asking questions such as: What made you laugh? Why? The focus might be on parody.
Year 8/9
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus on satire was on values and beliefs. It was found that <i>The Simpsons</i> had a strong appeal given the students' prior interest in the show. <i>The Simpsons</i> was used as a text studying scripts of the episodes. • Students wrote a review of a TV show. The focus was on the episode in which Grandpa Simpson is sent off to a nursing home. • <i>The Simpsons</i> was used as a trigger for ESL students in the mainstream to make their own films.
Year 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Simpsons</i> was a text for a unit on cults, using the episode that focuses on cults.
Year 11/12 (VCE)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus was on character analysis and how to sustain a voice. <i>The Simpsons</i> was used as a creative writing trigger: e.g. Interview with a character. • Students were asked to look at articles in the media about the value of <i>The Simpsons</i>. • A comment was made about the difficulty of teaching <i>Frontline</i> in a support setting given the Australian idiom, whereas <i>The Simpsons</i> is more universal. • <i>The Simpsons</i> was used as a stepping stone to film as text; in particular it was compared to <i>The Castle</i>. • <i>The Simpsons</i> was also used to look at film techniques such as camera angles. • <i>Strictly Ballroom</i> was also used with a focus on satire, exaggeration and stereotypes. It was compared with <i>The Ugly Duckling</i>. This study created links to personal writing and techniques for Writing Folio.

Other comments:

- LOTE and SOSE student teachers commented on cultural stereotypes presented in *The Simpsons* and suggested there may be a clash in exposing or reinforcing them.
- A comment was made about the importance of visual literacy and that *The Simpsons* can be used to teach more than English and satire. This participant's school used *The Simpsons* to teach Geography.
- It was suggested that if there is a difficulty of slotting a study of *The Simpsons* and satire into an already busy program, it could be taught in short units or a breakdown of techniques to consolidate student understanding.