

Homer Simpson: Homophobic Hero?

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Recently, a man I'd just met said to me, "men are so ugly. I don't know how you women can put up with us, let alone sleep with us." I told him that I've wondered the same thing all too often. American men seem to embrace the unattractive stereotype of the simple male, from the irritating Belushi character in *According to Jim*, to the myriad husbands who are less attractive than their wives (*Congar Town*, *Family Guy*, *King of Queens*) to the borderline offensiveness of *The Man Show*. Homer Simpson, however, is America's favorite homophobic, simple, lazy, ignorant, overweight buffoon. But why would America have a favorite any of the above? Shouldn't American men be offended that they are habitually portrayed as dimwitted and utterly helpless without their wives? The ignorant, ball-scratching, balding husband is no new character to American sitcoms, but he is not appealing in the way that Homer Simpson is. I find it subversive that Homer displays all of the above unsavory characteristics, but yet he is still loveable. Al Bundy, Mr. Roper, and Archie Bunker all predate Homer, and while it can be argued that all four of these men are not good enough for their wives, not one of these characters could be considered likeable besides Homer. The laughter and applause was obviously canned when Al would put his hands in his pants or when Stanley would burn Helen with one of his harsh verbal zingers, but the audience genuinely wants Homer to succeed and to be happy.

In my quest for an answer to this conundrum, I set out to use my students to help me figure it out. I sent out an email questionnaire to my students, asking the males in particular to respond. They were to print out the questions and turn in without their names. Some of the questions I asked were:

“Would you be embarrassed to let others know you watch daytime or primetime soaps regularly?”

“Would you be embarrassed to let others know you are a fan of *The Simpsons*?”

“Have you ever had an emotional attachment to a television character?”

“Do you think Homer is cute?”

“Do you relate to Homer or see part of yourself in him? Are there other television characters that you relate to in the same way?”

“Which shows, if any, do you feel are insulting to men? To women?”

I received 38 responses from traditionally aged freshmen male students. In an attempt to achieve more well-rounded data, I conducted telephone interviews with several older men in which I asked the same questions. Male respondents to my surveys have suggested that the reason that viewers put up with the unsavory depiction of American men in television is because “everyone knows that that’s not how most of us are.” In a telephone interview, one male estimated that the stereotypes are “20 to 25 percent accurate.” Female respondents to the same question answered quite differently: “It’s generally okay to mock the status quo.” In comedy, it is generally okay to poke fun at the group or groups in power, while it is considered distasteful or offensive to have a laugh at an oppressed minority’s expense (unless, of course, you are a member of that minority group). Homer says it best when he states “I’m a white male, aged 18 -49. Everyone listens to me, no matter how dumb my suggestions are” (“Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” 1994).

While many scholars (and people with far too much free time) have written topical analyses of the show and its popularity, this paper seeks to explore the possible reasons why Homer resonates so strongly with American men, paying special consideration to the seemingly contradictory traits Homer displays of homophobia and bi curiosity. The data

mainly comes from personal observation of the show and its viewers and surveys of mainly college-aged viewers. (I had the good fortune to teach a composition class at Florida State University entitled “Writing about *The Simpsons*: Pop Culture and Theory” which has provided much of the data not gleaned in recent surveys).

Format of *The Simpsons*

The show intrinsically offers the emotional pleasures of a soap opera without the qualities that would stigmatize a male viewer. Soap operas, although expanding in male viewership, have always been aimed towards female viewers. Over half of the male respondents to my survey said they would be “somewhat” or “considerably” embarrassed to admit to their male friends that they watched a soap opera, while only one male respondent said he’s be “somewhat embarrassed” to admit to being a *Simpsons* fan. Bielby and Harrington argue that women who watch soaps over long periods of time grow an emotional attachment to the families and characters, even the fictitious towns, that they watch grow and change (838). Seasons and holidays are reflected, and sometimes the day of the week will even be mentioned, giving the soap a real-time feel. Like the viewers’ own children, soap opera children grow up, romantic relationships evolve and end, and the audience grows attached. (I have a fondness for Samantha Brady, and although I don’t frequently have a chance to see *Days of our Lives*, I do like to hear what she’s up to. One day, I hope she takes down Kate Roberts). Many American men think, or claim to think, that this is silly. (In 2005, 32 of 38 surveyed college males claim to never have had an emotional attachment to a character in a serial show that they watched regularly).

The Simpsons is decidedly NOT a soap opera. It does not try to create any consistency or believability that Springfield is a real place. The children don’t age, and (with only a few

notable exceptions such as the Van Houtens' divorce, the death of Maude Flanders, and the marriage and fatherhood of Apu), the characters do not grow and change. Despite all of this, *The Simpsons* has long been admired for its realistic depiction of the American family. They fight. They slack off. They watch television. They have marital problems and almost cheat. Homer is, in many ways, realistic. Much of the show's appeal is the one main characteristic that it shares with soaps: it offers an emotional pleasure that other satirical/cartoon sitcoms cannot. Homer's occasional emotional sincerity (such as crying and sexual confusion) appeals to a level of expression that American males would like to, but feel unable to partake in.

I received an email recently from an FSU student who took my *Simpsons* writing class in 2001. He mentioned that he hadn't seen the show for a while and he was "really starting to miss Bart." I have heard other such comments about Homer, but never about Peter Griffin (of *The Family Guy*), for example. For the sake of discussion early in the semester, I asked one class which *Simpsons* episodes were their favorites, and which, if any had made them cry or upset. One male student raised his hand and said " 'Lisa's Substitute' is very poignant." So, while *Family Guy* is satirical and sometimes subversive like *The Simpsons*, is it poignant? No, it certainly does not offer the kind of emotional pleasure that *The Simpsons* offers.

Cuteness as a Feeling

Although none of my survey responses corroborate, one reason I suggest that people, especially men, connect to Homer so well is that he's *cute*. He's cute in his sassiness; the way he walks is cute. His voice is incredibly cute; but the cuteness that resonates with his audience on a subconscious level is that Homer is neotenous. In this context, cute is more of a feeling invoked in the audience than a characteristic he holds. He, like all member of the

Simpson family, is drawn with the enormous eyes that make the viewer want to protect him in the same way that adults of a species want to protect the juveniles of a species.

Sociologists refer to this feature as neotony, and claim that it all stems from the cutie's incongruously large eyes. Gary Cross argues in his book *The Cute and The Cool* that there is a crossover in this culture between cute and cool, demonstrated by the popularity with adults of cute things like Sanrio characters such as Hello Kitty.

Homer as Homophobe

In many ways, Homer is a stereotypical simple guy, if not an all out red state Republican. He is politically stupid in that he naively believes what he hears. (This gives liberals hope that such thinkers can change). In one episode, Homer almost loses his family because he joins the NRA and puts his guns ahead of the family's safety and Marge's wishes ("The Cartridge Family" 1997). In "The Grift of the Magi," (1999) Homer catches Bart and Milhouse cross-dressing and Homer demands a "non gay explanation." When Milhouse quickly comes up with the explanation, "We're drunk. Really drunk," Homer is relieved. This exchange (although not true) demonstrates that in this culture, getting drunk is an expected and accepted rite of passage for young boys, much more appropriate than dancing in the living room wearing wigs and women's clothing.

Since Homer is a stereotypical male, and stereotypical men love meat, Homer is completely incapable of understanding why Lisa would go vegetarian. When she tries to convince him not to serve meat at his barbecue (which he is only having in order to compete with Ned), Homer tells her "You don't win friends with salad" ("Lisa the Vegetarian" 1995).

In 1997's "Homer's Phobia," Homer meets John (voiced by John Waters), owner of Cockamamie's collectible shop. At first, he isn't at all uncomfortable around John and even invited him to the house for the "snacking hour," but when Marge informs him later that

John is gay, Homer's reaction is panic: "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! I danced with a gay! Marge, Lisa, promise me you won't tell anyone. Promise me!" Marge is confused why Homer is reacting this way, and he offers an explanation that fails to offer any rational reason: "It's not *usual*. If there was a law, it would be against it." Marge and Lisa's calm reaction (as they often supply reason) and the episode's playful pokes at gay stereotypes demonstrate the episode's anti-homophobic message. More so, the pathetic cowardice of Barney, Homer and Moe juxtaposed with John's heroic rescue of the four very blatantly makes homophobes look ridiculous. This is furthered by Moe. After all his disparaging remarks about homosexuals throughout the episode, after the rescue he then informs John that he'll do anything he (John) says, repeating, heavy with meaning, the word "anything."

Perhaps the viewer is more inclined to forgive Homer for his faults because he is cute. Perhaps it is freeing for men to excuse Homer for his sometimes unappealing and contradictory characteristics, especially those for which they cannot excuse themselves. The United States is regressing in social progress. There is a war against homosexuals that, if it was at all veiled before, is now out with flying colors after the last presidential election in which eleven states had referenda on their ballots to rephrase state constitutions in order to "protect marriage." Many American males, including those who are fans of the show, are so terrified of homosexuals that it doesn't seem likely that they would allow Homer Simpson to have gay tendencies. And yet, he does.

Homer as Conflicted

However, Homer's bi curious tendency is there from early on in the series when, mistaking something Burns says about union contracts as a come-on, Homer tells him that he is "flattered, maybe a little curious, but the answer is no" ("Last Exit to Springfield")

1993). When discussing the Oliver North trials, Homer quips that North was “just poured into that uniform” (“Sideshow Bob Roberts” 1994). When Homer sees Ned Flanders on the top of a ski hill, he begins to slide down the hill and is unable to remember the safety hints offered by the ski instructor because he is distracted by the image of Ned’s rear end in his skin-tight ski pants. Homer blames his mental lapse on “stupid sexy Flanders.” (“Little Big Mom” 2000). Although Homer pierced his ear as a young boy, he is horrified that Bart has done it (“Simpson Tide” 1998). Also interesting, we know for sure that Homer has worried about his own transvestite tendencies. In “Springfield Confidential,” Homer feels emasculated because Marge has become a police officer. It comes out that he wears her underwear sometimes, and he defends himself by saying “which we’ve discussed, is strictly a comfort thing.”

More recently, when Marge and Homer have marital difficulties, Homer moves in with two gay men and adopts many of the more stereotypical elements of the gay lifestyle. He needs to know how much to tip a leg waxer and he carries around a lap dog. Instead of meeting Marge for a possible reconciliation dinner, he opts to stay home and drink with his new gay friends. In his defense, to Marge he says “the velvet mafia made me a margarita I couldn’t refuse.” Curiously enough, this episode is entitled “Three Gays in a Condo” (2004).

Homer has a bi curiosity, if not all out gay tendencies, and the show occasionally pokes fun at homophobes. My aim is not to argue that Homer is bi or gay, but rather to ask why the average American viewer puts up with the message of tolerance in the show. One subject of a telephone interview was a 37 year old male and self-proclaimed die-hard Simpsons fan from Milwaukee who defined himself as “anti-homosexual” but not a homophobe, as he is not afraid of gays. I asked him to explain the presence of Smithers and the pro gay tolerance depicted in some of the episodes. “Bob” responded that the writers

simply don't want to alienate any potential viewers. He continued on to suggest that *The Simpsons* are merely trying to keep up with changes on the rest of American media, with changes made mainstream by such shows as *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and an allegedly gay ("I don't know of any straight men who wear thumb rings") weatherman on Fox morning news. I found it fascinating that his affection for the show made him conveniently forget that Smithers predates *Queer Eye* by approximately thirteen years.

Homer as Hero?

Well, no. But many of my male respondents claim that he is. "Bob" mentioned that Homer is able to maintain a home, a stay-at-home wife, two cars, and his two children while still being lazy and drinking as much beer as he wants. Apparently, heroism in American culture is the ability to be a glutton but yet maintain a certain standard of living. Homer resonates with his male audience because, although he is a cartoon, his is more realistic than the more positive sitcom dads, such as 80s dads Steven Keaton and Cliff Huxtable. Perhaps the average American male viewer wants to believe Homer is a hero because they see so much of themselves in him. One responder remarked that Homer is "more complicated than other TV dads because he draws on his emotions when need be."

One 19 year old male student told me that one reason that he likes Homer is that he knows that no matter how much he lets himself go in the future, he will never be as lazy, pathetic, bald, or fat as Homer is. Conversely, a female colleague suggested to me that perhaps one main reason why Homer strikes a chord with the average American male, especially my college-aged survey group, is that he sees his future not unlike Homer's – he has resigned himself to the understanding that one day he too will be an overweight family man with little excitement to look forward to.

Conclusion

As I stated earlier, I did not expect to be able to definitively answer the question of why American men love Homer even though he most certainly shakes the comfortable foundation on which they shape their own sexuality. Instead, I contend that this is a relevant question to ask in the context of the sociology of the American male. Homer is indeed a true “guy” with his love of football, beer and laziness. He is clearly straight as his love of Marge, and his attractions to other women such as Maude Flanders and Mindy (a short-term power plant employee who appears to be his soul mate) demonstrate. But the show challenges the stereotypes placed upon straight men by disrupting their identification through this occasional display of Homer’s homosexual and cross-dressing tendencies and his often sincere and warm displays of emotion.

Works Cited

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