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# The Simpsons Meet Mark Twain: Analyzing Popular Media Texts in the Classroom

Renée Hobbs

here are a number of reasons why the educators who wrote *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996, Urbana, IL: NCTE/IRA) have adopted the term “nonprint texts” to describe works that are not traditional classroom resources in the K–12 classroom. “Nonprint texts” is an umbrella that includes everything from photographs to web sites, TV shows to popular music, but this term also covers and avoids mention of the point that many of these works are—dare we say it?—popular.

Over the years, *English Journal* pages have included reports from teachers who use popular films, music lyrics, advertising, magazine photographs, tabloid newspapers, cartoons, animation, and more in the process of stimulating students’ speaking, writing, viewing, reasoning, and critical thinking skills. When these texts are used to strengthen students’ reasoning, critical thinking, or communication skills, then teachers are engaged in the practice of media literacy.

Teachers who have used popular works in the classroom know that such works can generate some remarkable, vigorous, and sophisticated reasoning, rich conversations, and dynamic writing from young people. Many teachers have told me that the writing they assign on media topics is among the best they receive all year. It’s a transformative experience for a young person to discover that the same skills used to discuss *The Tempest* can be applied to an episode of “The Wonder Years.” Students who discover this in a powerful way chant a mantra that many teachers who employ media literacy have heard frequently: “I’ll never watch TV the same way again!”

## USING “THE SIMPSONS” IN ENGLISH CLASS

In the classroom I have employed an activity where students compare an episode of

“The Simpsons” to some speeches and essays of Mark Twain, including selected passages from *Life as I Find It*, *Roughing It*, *The Gilded Age*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, and *The Prince and the Pauper*. It’s an instructional strategy which invites students to consider the categorization of texts into “high” and “low” culture, and helps students build media literacy skills by applying tools of textual analysis to a popular program.

Because students have background knowledge about “The Simpsons,” most can vividly describe the characters, the plot lines, and the controversies associated with the program. Some older students may remember the tensions associated with the “Bart as Underachiever” T-shirts which were popular among schoolchildren when the show first premiered in 1989. In the classroom, we create a list of all the contextual information we have about Simpson creator Matt Groening, the Simpson “home,” FOX network, and the show’s history, including specific information about how frequently old episodes and current ones are aired on local stations.

Since most students categorize “The Simpsons” as a cartoon, we begin by exploring the characteristics of this genre, discovering that the program’s success has spawned a host of adult-oriented cartoons. We analyze the elements of the program opening, which show the family members in daily life, with Bart being rambunctious and slightly deviant, Lisa being artistic and humane, Homer carelessly dropping nuclear waste throughout the town of Springfield, and Marge doing the grocery shopping. Students may write short paragraphs about the way characters’ personalities are suggested by these brief visual fragments which serve as character introductions.

## SOCIAL CRITICISM

We then consider elements of social criticism that are an essential component of many episodes of “The Simpsons.” Working

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through one episode carefully, we actively use the pause button while a student at the blackboard writes down other students' analysis as they try to document every instance where the program is making fun of something, somebody, or some idea. Our stimulus questions are, "What's being made fun of? Who or what is the target of the humor?" For example, in one Simpsons episode, Monty Burns decides to run for governor after "Blinky," a genetically mutated fish, is found in Springfield's river, and public scandal erupts concerning environmental pollution. Burns decides that, by running for elected office, he will be able to quash efforts to make him clean up the plant.

In this show, the list of targets includes: the role of government in inspecting the safety of nuclear plants; the use of bribery; the methods for identifying environmental destruction; the emotional pain of lying; lack of respect for elders; Charles Darwin and the theory of natural selection; the worker-boss relationship; women's intellectual freedom in relation to their husbands; and the political campaign process. (Monty Burns' team consisted of a "pollster, spin doctor, personal trainer, muckraker, character assassin, mud-slinger, and garbologist.") In this episode, visual references to the movie classic *Citizen Kane* are prominent, and in one scene, Burns gives a TV cover-up speech, "Don't Blame Blinky" that is highly reminiscent of Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech.

When we have completed analyzing the targets of humor for a single episode, we discuss the patterns which are evident. When I ask, "Would a different episode yield a list of targets very different from this?," students give examples from other episodes which demonstrate their rich card catalog of experiences from home viewing that they can use to support or refute this claim. "The Simpsons" has some common targets, including the hypocritical behavior of local government officials, corporate greed and power, the news media, and human stupidity, laziness, and self-indulgence. Students also note that a number of other television programs use humor to target these same social issues, and they frequently mention programs that are unfamiliar to me.

Then, in small groups students discuss and write responses to these questions:

- What is the author's purpose?

- Who made money from this message, and how did that exchange take place?
- What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented about human nature and society in this text?
- In what ways is this message realistic or unrealistic?
- What techniques are used to attract and hold your attention?
- What knowledge (not presented in the text) helps enhance your understanding of this message?
- What historical, political, or social events does this message connect to?
- What does the author appear to really believe about some of the issues represented in this text?

For each of these questions, students must use evidence from the episode to provide support for their claims. In another writing assignment, students write their own stories where they try to make fun of some of the same targets that are addressed in "The Simpsons" episode we analyzed.

#### **MARK TWAIN AND THE SIMPSONS**

Students enthusiastically move on to read Mark Twain when they recognize the task is to search for connections between his work and "The Simpsons." Of course, Twain himself well articulated the function of the humorist in American culture, noting in 1888 that:

With all its lightness and frivolity, it has one purpose, one aim, one specialty, and it is constant to it—the deriding of shams, the exposure of pretentious falsities, the laughing of stupid superstitions out of existence; and . . . whoso is by instinct engaged in this sort of warfare is the natural enemy of royalties, nobilities, privileges and all kindred swindles, and the natural friends of human rights and human liberties. (cited in Justin Kaplan, 1966, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 147)

When we analyze selections from Twain's essays and speeches, we use the same process we used with "The Simpsons" episode, identifying the background and other contextual information students know about the author, outlining the targets for a specific written work, and responding to analysis questions. Students discover, for example, that Twain's targets in *The Gilded Age* include women's rights; coal mining; the jury system and the

insanity plea; the use of financial credit; and lobbying and bribery in Washington. We discuss the importance of knowing facts about the political and social historical context of nineteenth-century America in order to interpret Twain's social criticism and discuss why the target lists we developed for Twain and Matt Groening share many elements in common.

This simple compare/contrast activity has enormous power when students are encouraged to stretch between the familiar to the unfamiliar, the present to the past, and between the now "high" literary culture to the "low" culture of popular television programming. Students are surprised and delighted to learn that, during his lifetime, Twain's work was not regarded as suitable material for use in schools, just as some educators today might not find "The Simpsons" a suitable classroom text.

While teachers are most comfortable discussing the major Twain literary works as literature, it's a valuable experience to expand the study of this major American writer by examining his life as a public entertainer, because through this process, students can appreciate the economic, political, and social history of nineteenth-century America and Twain's popular public identity, which was essential to his financial condition. An essential component of media literacy skills is the inclusion of the study of the economic issues in the fields of message production, including book publishing, past and present. It also helps students recognize that great works of literature are being created now, but that we might or might not be able to identify which specific television programs, comics, web sites, popular films, contemporary works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and theatre will speak powerfully to future generations about the cultural world of the 1990s.

#### WEB RESOURCES

Stephen Railton of the University of Virginia has created a web site, *Mark Twain in His Times* (<http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/>), which contains a collection of resources designed to illustrate how Twain's works were composed, defined, marketed, and reviewed by people during his lifetime. Students can read many literary works on-line, see posters and marketing materials that promoted Twain, read excerpts from the letters Sam Clemens wrote to his wife while on the cir-

cuit making humorous speeches, and see the reviews published in newspapers after his performances.

After looking at Twain's newspaper reviews and letters, one student brought in a Simpsons comic book where in a letter to readers, Simpsons' creator Matt Groening humorously comments on his experience appearing as a guest with Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien on the late night talk show circuit. Another informed me that there is a Simpsons web site where readers can download an extensive bibliography of newspaper and magazine references to the program and an exhaustive collection of every episode, with details including the quotes Bart is made to write on the blackboard in the opening of each episode. Some episodes are documented with complete scripts (<http://snpp.com>).

#### CONCLUSION

In an interview on "60 Minutes" regarding media literacy teaching at the college level, media historian and English literary scholar David Marc commented on the value of engaging students in the process of applying their minds to the formal analysis of media texts. He noted that students bring an enormous reservoir of energy and interest in the works of contemporary media culture, and asked, "Should we squander that energy? Ignore it? Or use it towards the goal of building students' skills in analyzing the complex and powerful ways in which people create messages and meanings through communication?" If our goal is to prepare young people for effectively managing their lives in a media-saturated society, equipped with the critical and analytic skills that are essential for evaluating and appreciating information and entertainment, then for many teachers media literacy activities that build connections between popular culture and literature are a part of the answer to that question.

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