

**UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ**

**THE MYTHICAL MOTHER: REPRESENTATION OF  
MOTHERHOOD IN THE TELEVISION SERIES THE SIMPSONS**

**A Pro Gradu Thesis in English**

**by**

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THE MYTHICAL MOTHER:

Representation of Motherhood in the Television Series The Simpsons

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää äitiyden representaatiota televisiosarjassa the Simpsons. Päämateriaalina on käytetty sarjan viittä ensimmäistä tuotantopaksoa, yhteensä 105:tä Suomessakin televisioitua jaksoa. Päämateriaalin analyysiin ja tutkimuksen taustaselvityksiin on käytetty teoriakirjallisuutta kolmelta eri alueelta; naistutkimuksen äitiystutkimuksen peruskirjallisuutta, feministisen mediatutkimuksen perusteorioita sekä televisioon, populaarikulttuuriin ja viestintään keskittyvää kirjallisuutta. Tutkielma lähtee etsimään erilaisia äitiyden representaatioita televisiosarjasta the Simpsons äitimyytin pohjalta, hakien vastausta kysymykseen, kyseenalaistaako tämä maineeltaan kovin yhteiskuntakriittinen ja satiirinen sarja myös äitiyteen kohdistuvia myyttejä ja stereotyyppioita, vai päättyykö se, päinvastoin, vahvistamaan niitä.

The Simpsons on 1990-luvulla ”kulta-aikaansa” elänyt amerikkalainen, piirretty televisiosarja, joka nautti ennennäkemätöntä, hyvin laajalle levinnyttä suosiota. Sarjan ensimmäinen jakso lähetettiin vuonna 1989, ja uusintoja vuosien varrella nähdään edelleen eri puolilla maailmaa säännöllisesti. Sarja keskittyy amerikkalaisen ydinperheeseen, johon kuuluu isä, Homerin, äiti, Marge, sekä kolme lasta, Bart, Lisa ja Maggie, ja heidän arkeensa pienessä kaupungissa nimeltään Springfield.

Tutkielman varsinainen analyysi keskittyi ensisijaisesti sarjan äitirepresentaatioihin ja erityisesti niistä löyviin populaarikulttuurin äitistereotyyppioita vahvistaviin ja vastustaviin piirteisiin. Vahvana taustateemana oli äitimyytin käsite ja sen vaikutus the Simpsons-sarjan äitiyden representaatioon, sekä kolme populaarikulttuurin äitistereotyyppiä. Päämateriaalin äitirepresentaatio keskittyy vahvasti pääperheen äitiin, Margeen, joten myös analyysi joutui paljolti keskittymään hänen hahmostaan löytyviin piirteisiin. Myös muut sarjan äidit ovat osana analyysiä. Tutkielman tulokset ovat yllättävät: The Simpsons-sarjasta löytyi hyvin vahvoja, äitimyyttä vahvistavia representaatioita, ja eri äitihahmot täyttivät kolme populaarikulttuurin äitistereotyyppiä yllättävän selväpiirteisesti. Lisäksi päämateriaalista löytyi hyvin vähän stereotyyppioita vastustavia tai kyseenalaistavia representaatioita, ja vähäisetkin kyseenalaistukset olivat välähdyksenomaisia ja saivat hyvin vähän tilaa ja aikaa stereotyyppioita vahvistavien representaatioiden valtavaan määrään verrattuna. Yksi johtopäätöksistä olikin, että sarjan muita yhteiskunnan epäkohtia kyseenalaistava satiiri, joka pitkälti rakentuu perheen karrikoituihin mieshahmoihin ja komediaan, on pitkälti mahdollista juuri siksi, että äitimyyttä ja –stereotyyppioita puolestaan vahvistetaan

Asiasanat: mother myth, representation, hegemony, pop culture, television, sitcom

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is at the centre of our society; mothers are seen as those in possession of the emotional, magical power that comes with the ability to reproduce life. This power makes mother's love stronger than anger, frustration or sadness; it is the magic of maternal instincts that overpower any ambitions a woman may have had before getting pregnant; it empowers woman with such a sense of responsibility that she is fit to look after every aspect of her family's life. A mother is expected to fulfill the meaning of her life by living through her family members, endlessly yielding, serving and solving problems. This is the mother myth that is a significant particle of western culture. This, largely unquestionable myth sets quite rigid roles on both men and women, parents as well as singles, but its strongest objects – those whose very existence and identity are built on the mother myth – are mothers. The mother myth has empowered a slow but “righteous” development, a result of which is that the mother is separated into the invented “women's culture” where she is a mother rather than a person; “an instrument, a role, a womb, a pair of hands or a back or a set of fingers” (Rich 1995:xviii.)

In this thesis I will examine one of the most important popular culture phenomena, the television show the Simpsons in terms of mother myth and, thus, the representation of motherhood in the series. I do this through basic theory of television and media studies, feminist media studies and its specific field that concentrates on motherhood. Additionally, I will introduce the main facts about the Simpsons and its main characters, as well as those minor characters that possess relevance for this thesis.

The study itself is built on three stereotypical representations of motherhood mentioned in E. Ann Kaplan's popular culture study *Motherhood and Representation. The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992): “the all-sacrificing angel” mother, the selfish “over-indulgent” mother and the “evil, possessive, destructive, all-devouring” mother (Kaplan 1992:48.) These stereotypes form the frame of the three core chapters. The crucial motherhood theory, however, which provides the means of analysis and the “evidence” for conclusions, is mainly borrowed from Adrienne Rich's extensive study of motherhood called *Of Woman Born – Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995.)

In addition to basic literature, I have watched and observed the first five seasons of the Simpsons, 103 episodes altogether, broadcasted between December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1989 and May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1994. (Richmond 1997:17,145.) The relevance of the Simpsons is, however, quite strong even nowadays. Firstly, the Simpsons was the 1990's phenomenon that changed popular culture and TV situation comedy on a very basic level, receiving massive attention and popularity. It is "the longest running primetime cartoon in American history" and has received numerous awards, such as the Peabody Award in 1997, which is usually given to investigative journalists or documentarists (Turner 2004:41.) Secondly, the Simpsons has a contemporary status; reruns of the 1990's episodes are still constantly aired on television throughout Europe and U.S.A. (Turner 2004:37-39.)

The relevance of this study also relates to the importance and impact of television and popular culture in the everyday lives and attitudes of people. At its peak The Simpsons affected people's weekly schedule; it was considered important enough to arrange schedules around so that the weekly episode would not be missed. The series was, additionally, a communal phenomenon; episodes were aired in pubs, where people gathered to view them together, and the punch lines and catch phrases such as "D'oh" or "Eat my shorts" had made an effect on people's everyday language (Turner 2004:8.) In this light, it is quite certain that also the values and attitudes in the Simpsons have been, to some extent, adapted – at least observed – by the viewers.

Because television and popular culture is a tool of passing underlying values and attitudes, and the specific popularity and social effect of The Simpsons, it is important and necessary for both viewers and those performing media studies to carefully examine the representations of minorities, women included, in the series. I chose to look at the representation of motherhood firstly, because it projects very basic structures of western – patriarchal – culture and secondly, because I felt the presence of this mother myth quite strongly in the Simpsons, which is, otherwise, considered as quite an anarchistic, subversive series.

The Simpsons has been the object of two other theses in the English department of Jyväskylä University. The first thesis by Pia Saxlund concentrated on the representation of women in the Simpsons, and the second thesis by Kari Abspoel and Sami Huohvanainen focused on the nuclear family in the Simpsons. This pro gradu is

quite a relevant continuation to these research papers in the sense, that it is focused on a rather narrower part of the Simpsons' world than its women or its family portrayals. From another point of view, this pro gradu reflects quite basic themes of the show; where Abspoel and Huohvanainen merely stated that Marge is, as the mother in basic theory of nuclear family, the "problem solver" and the practical home-maker, I seek to reveal the patriarchal and cultural structures behind this phenomenon and the hegemony that is reflected in it (Abspoel&Huohvanainen 1999:26.) Saxlund, on the other hand, based her thesis quite loosely around feminist theory, concluding that the Simpsons "presents traditional as well as rebellious images of women in American society" (Saxlund 1995:70.) I wish to contradict this conclusion by stating that in reflecting the mother myth – which has an effect on all female representations – the Simpsons follows, quite exclusively, a rather stereotypical representation of women, and mothers specifically. In the following four chapters, I shall explain the theory and back ground which has lead me to this thesis statement. The first theory chapter introduces the base of this study; the mother myth.

## 2. THE MOTHER MYTH

“Mother is the word for God on the lips of children” is a line I heard in a movie years ago. It stuck to me for a long time because I found it to be one of the most beautiful – and true – utterances I had ever heard. Now that I have become a mother myself I can see the unbearable ideals associated with motherhood, such as unconditional love and the demand for altruism, and, through study, the ideologies behind the perfect beauty of the same line.

A myth is “a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature” (Fiske 1990:88.) In our western culture there is a very strong mother myth, or a motherhood institution, which has a strong emotional and social grip on the psychology of our society. It sets high expectations, to say the least, on mothers, and, additionally, restricts fatherhood considerably. John Fiske reflects upon the parenting myths and the way they work:

There is a myth that women are ‘naturally’ more nurturing and caring than men, and thus their natural place is in the home raising the children and looking after the husband, while he, equally ‘naturally’, of course, plays the role of breadwinner. These roles then structure the most ‘natural’ social unit of all – the family. By presenting these meanings as part of nature, myth disguises their historical origin, which universalizes them and makes them appear not only unchangeable but also fair: it makes them appear to serve the interests of men and women equally and thus hides their political effect.

(Fiske 1990:89.)

There are reasons and a history behind the social construct of motherhood; it is a historically constructed, ideological and fundamental myth that can be found at the core of our society and culture – it is not the “human condition” as represented (Rich 1995:33.) However, the mother myth, as it is today, is quite a young phenomenon. In this study, the mother myth and motherhood institution are looked at in light of western, European/North American culture and history, as it is relevant to the main subject of this particular thesis. Even though this study does not focus on the father myth, it is the silent company of the mother myth; one would not exist without the other. Here I, however, wish to concentrate on the mother myth for it has been a major factor in gender oppression as well as social and economical inequality in our society. This is not to deny that the father myth has meant emotional and functional absence of father

within a family and has, thus, been destructive in its own way. Fathers, as breadwinners, have often been left out from the more intimate and personal aspects of parenthood due to the traditional division of labor in a hetero sexual marriage; Homer, for instance, misses out on most of the pregnancy of his first born as he spends months away from Marge as he struggles to provide materially to his family. Both mother and father's emotional and social needs for partnership become secondary in this pursuit of the parenting myth. (*The Way We Was.*)

## 2.1 History of the Mother Myth

Before the patriarchal system bloomed – this is in prehistoric times – motherhood was a more important status to a woman than wifhood (Rich 1995:100.) Kaplan notes that in most languages, the word mother was the equivalent of a woman (Kaplan 1992:182.) This is an important aspect; mother was a woman and a significant part of society without necessarily being attached to a certain man. Before Christianity, Goddess worship together with many fertility rites were the core of many pagan religions. (e.g. Rich 1995:100,120.) Motherhood, in other words, was seen as divine, life producing, as a metaphor for all creation. Patriarchy, however, changed that view into seeing women and mothers as objects and mediums for male-initiated activity; they are impregnated by their husbands and give birth to their husbands' children; motherhood became owned (Rich 1995:120.) Later on, Judeo-Christian religions further developed these thoughts into ideas of female impurity and inferiority; even in today's western society women can often be seen and represented through a dualistic lens as “madonnas” or “whores.”

In more recent centuries, motherhood has been the centre of culturally and socially important developments. There are three incidents in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Kaplan, which have had a major effect on motherhood discourse, i.e. the development of the modern mother myth (Kaplan 1992:17.) The first is the Industrial Revolution, which gave women in the west new economic power as consumers – the middle class was created. Women were cheap labor compared to men, and were thought to have more stamina and endurance (Rich 1995:48.) Later on, in early 20<sup>th</sup> century the First World War put women yet in another social place as they



had to enter into the work-force to replace men who were at the front. Feminist activity grew and results, such as women's suffrage, were achieved throughout the western world. Women were freer than ever before; more women entered higher education and remained childless, preferring career and leisure over family. Kaplan (1992) suggests that the third wave, the Electronic Revolution after the Second World War with even more professional women, including 1960's Women's Liberation and Feminist Movements, continuing to present time with its new reproductive technologies, is the broad theme effecting the modern mother myth and its development. (Kaplan 1992:17-18.)

How has the history and the way it has boosted women's liberation effected the development of the mother myth? Kaplan has found three major changes in mother discourse in context with all the three major historical changes mentioned above. All these three discourses are good examples of hegemonic use of media and power; all are imposed on the general public by men, using power possessed exclusively by men (the Women's Liberation Movement had not had enough time to place women in positions of power in, for instance, media production.)

The first change in motherhood discourse that shifted it towards the mother myth came about as women started entering the work force in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. This new motherhood discourse was started by the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and his followers (Internet I.) The Rousseauian motherhood discourse had children in its focus; working mothers left the children's and husbands' welfare unattended to (e.g. Rich 1995:48.) The new discourse highlighted the mother's importance as "cementing the family through her skills in emotions and relationships" and introduced the idea that women's education should be restricted to only those issues and subjects suitable to her given role – a role, which was, naturally, that of being a mother and a wife (Kaplan 1992:19.) (Kaplan 1992:19-21.) In fact, the Rousseauian motherhood discourse saw it necessary to educate young mothers to fulfill the new expectations to a greater extent (Kaplan1992:21.) Considering the time, the medium for presenting these views was writing. The new motherhood discourse gained massive support; women were positioned at home, and a new, passive housewife was introduced to society – never before had women been expected to be exclusively mothers. (Rich 1995:44,47.) In addition, new dualities were introduced by

the Rousseauian motherhood discourse; the division between public male environments and private female environments were introduced to the extent that earning money, ambition and aggression, political life, and power in society were denied to women (Kaplan 1992:21;Rich 1995:46.)

Rousseau and his fellow thinkers set a new trend in motherhood. They were followed, however, by more men who further developed their ideas. Darwinian, Marxist and Freudian discourses all reinforced domestic motherhood and mother's central role as the caretaker and the family maker in the "mother-centered/father-dominated family." (Kaplan 1992:21,45.) The new theories, "the powerful ideology of the masochistic, angelic, all-sacrificing mother, produced through psychoanalytic theories as representing the healthy 'feminine' woman" backed up the mother's crucial position in the family and the raising of children – she could, indeed, be held responsible for the success of his family and children (Kaplan 1992:45.) Rich points out, that totalitarian politics, such as Marxism have always put women in the centre of the success of the nation – motherhood has been an essential "tool to revise and renew" existing institutions – and women's reproduction powers have been put under control of the totalitarian government in every revolution (consider China and its one-child-policy, for instance.) (Rich 1995:34,45.) Note that Marxism and Freudian discourse have had their resisting (a term used in feminist discourse to describe a point of view that resists hegemonic, i.e. main stream, attitudes) feminist approaches, whose position has remained quite marginal in comparison to the patriarchal, main line of discourse.

The postmodern era has changed and is changing the mother discourse once again, perhaps in ways which involve women themselves more. The main change in the postmodern mother discourse is, that motherhood is no longer taken for granted as the main and most important female role; women ask themselves whether to mother or not. (Kaplan 1992:181-182.) Even though this discourse has allowed more female representations to enter the media sphere, the anti-maternal female characters are represented in a negative way following the mother discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; single career women are often represented as manly and unlikable, and the mother, although allowed to be represented as sexually active, are still not working outside home (Kaplan 1992:200.) As Kaplan (1992) states:

For instance, alongside discursive acceptance of women's new career roles, there exists, as indicated, representation returning (1950s fashion) to the idealization of woman in the home, which embodies patriarchal need to control and restrict woman.

(Kaplan (1992:215.)

Thus, new, freer motherhood discourse has been shaded by anxiety and interrogative tones; and new reproductive technologies – e.g. artificial insemination – have, from a feminist point of view, further added to the restriction of women and their fertility.

(Kaplan 1992:181,217.)

## 2.2 The Mythical Mother

The mother, who, according to the myth, is the “source of angelic love and forgiveness... the feminine, leavening, emotional element”, is together with heterosexuality at the very center of patriarchal ideology (Rich 1995:43.) In the following I will explain briefly the function of the mother myth in the patriarchal system and, additionally, some of the main characteristics of the mother myth.

There are several “rules” that hold western patriarchy together; not surprisingly, most of them are connected to femininity and motherhood. The division of labor by gender; emotional, physical, and material possessiveness; monogamy; marriage as the environment for legitimate reproduction; economic dependence; male authority in the family; and the imprinting and continuation of heterosexual roles – these are a few examples of how feminist studies have seen the patriarchal oppression at work (Rich 1995:61.) These “rules” are the setting for the “negative or suspect status” of single and childless women as well as the idealization and separation of mothers, whose quite common difficulties are, through domestication, made individual (Rich 1995:34.)

First of all, the division of labor by gender means that women have been positioned as the main carers of family and children according to their “natural instincts” (King 1992:17;Rich 1995:i.) As a result, there is an unequal division of labor within the family – traditional fatherhood means, slightly provocatively, providing the sperm and earning money, whereas motherhood has meant carrying, delivering, nurturing and bringing up a child (Rich1995:12.) Consequently, women have been left

without significant political and social power. Monogamy, marriage, and the emotional, physical and material inequality and possessiveness that can be connected to them – nowadays there is a notion of love involved, gladly, on an individual level – can all be seen as patriarchal ways of controlling the female reproductive system. Through these institutions it is made significant, that a mother gives birth to a man's child (Rich 1995:120.)

The “natural” division of labor is in connections with dualities, which are rather common in the patriarchal world view and in the formation of the mother myth. These contrasting pairs describe well the patriarchal way of “making sense” of reality, and their relevant characteristic from a feminist point of view is that in a pair there is always a subordinate and a dominant part; examples of these pairs are private-public, body-mind, nature-culture and emotion-reason (King 1992:17.) In a patriarchal culture, these dualities are seen as opposites, and, additionally, either feminine or masculine qualities; the feminine being the subordinate one. In other words; according to patriarchal ideology, there is a divine order, dualism of characteristics, and the feminine character is subordinate to the masculine. The mother myth has further developed this idea; there is, in fact a dualism within a dualism. In the division of qualities, feminine is subordinate and the female body, especially, is seen as impure and weak. However, motherhood, according to mother myth, makes a woman pure, sacred and nourishing – if, of course, the child is conceived in a marriage. (Rich 1995:34,61.) Womanhood, therefore, includes a pair of opposites; mother-childless. Thus, if different aspects of womanhood are in such a way evaluated, in Kaplan's (1992) words; “...how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her?” (Kaplan 1992:4.)

The mother myth is the theoretical backbone of this thesis. It is the base on which the thesis statement as well as the whole study is built on; the existing phenomenon that gives this particular thesis a purpose and meaning. However, the area of Feminist Media Studies has provided this thesis with useful terms and more practical theory. In the following chapter I will introduce Feminist Media Studies.

### 3. FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

Feminist media studies and its “frame”, Feminist Media Theory, has arisen from critique of traditional media studies. (To simplify the use of the terms, I will from now on refer to feminist media studies with FMS and to Feminist Media Theory with FMT.) FMS are interested in the relationship between gender and power in media; as a study it is closely tied to the feminist movement. Basically, FMS sees the power to be possessed mostly by men, but the focus is more on the hierarchy of power and the effect gender has on it. FMS is an interdisciplinary area of study, as are communication studies in general, using the terminology and approaches of, for instance, psychology and linguistics. The point of view, naturally, is that of women studies and feminist movements. (Van Zoonen 1994: 4,128.)

There are certain quite common prejudice against feminism, which I would like to recognize and argue against here before further examining FMS. First of all, feminism is not a crusade against men (and all feminists are not women!). When talking about power structures and existing gender inequality, it is important to understand that, despite of terms such as *male bias* and *male gaze*, they are not “blamed” on men as a gender or individuals. The goal of feminism is, rather, to recognize and question the unequal cultural reality and history – patriarchy – which is and has been created and maintained by both men and women. One must not forget that it is women who pass on stereotypical roles to each other; mothers who, if only through their example, teach their daughters to adapt to the mother myth; women who have, even violently, enforced patriarchal roles on other women. (e.g. Rich 1995:60,61.) In addition to feminism not being an attack against men, I would like to point out that, secondly, women are not the only ones to suffer from the consequences of patriarchy; men are, in fact, as much oppressed by the patriarchal roles as women are. (Hietala 1992:47,54.)

On a very basic level FMS was formed from a critique towards traditional science, and communication and media studies. FMS sees significant male domination in traditional communication and media studies’ scholars and, thus, male-biased themes in research and even sexist projects. Additionally, science in its traditional sense is seen as sexist because of the common use of masculine modes of

thinking as the “higher quality of knowing” (Van Zoonen 1994:14.) Some feminist writers rebel against this tradition by adapting an untraditional, more subjective tone of research; a personal point of view – in addition to traditional, objective information – and experience is seen more as an enriching rather than jeopardizing element in research. It is, thus, one of the goals of feminism to include the “female way of thinking” in the academic/literary tradition (Rich 1995:65.)

### **3.1 Terminology: *Media Text, Representation and Hegemony***

In modern media studies, the term *media text* or simply *text* refers to the *media* that the *sender* and *recipient* communicate through; i.e. books, movies or television programs in addition to the conventional text (Van Zoonen 1994:66.) In other words, the *text* or *media text* is, firstly, seen in a broader sense than merely as a written document. Secondly, the traditional linear view of message being sent, received and then interpreted by the receiver is seen as a more complex, more interactive process. (Fiske 1990:6-7,e.g.25.) In this process, contrary to the traditional view, the sender is seen as a conscious, active part of interpretation; both sender and receiver create the meaning of a media text, together. Understanding this more multifaceted point of view towards text and the message it conveys is essential in understanding the meaning of *hegemony* and *representation* in FMS, as well as in any communication study that takes the point of view of a minority group.

The representation of women in the media is one of the most significant focuses of FMT; it sees a “symbolic conflict about definitions of femininity” in the present-day media (Van Zoonen 1994:12.) In a similar way as a *genre* classifies cultural production, *gender* in FMS is seen as classifying people; FMS sees women as a group as being widely under and misrepresented in the television (Birch 1992:43;Bonner 1992:190.) The term *representation* can, therefore, be seen working on two levels in FMS. Firstly, quantitative study reveals, on a surface level, the possible under-representation of women and then, qualitative research can be used to get a deeper understanding of how realistic these representations – or misrepresentations – of women are. In this study, I made a statistics of the first four seasons of the Simpsons to reveal the amount of female and male characters (see Appendix 1.) I counted all the characters

in each episode that were a part of the dialogue. I found that women in the Simpsons, at least in the first four seasons, are quite under-represented; only 20% of all characters with dialogue were women.

Key terms in observing representation in media texts are, thus, *representation* and *hegemony*. The term *representation* refers to the way a realistic (i.e. existing) character or a group is “transferred” or “interpreted” into a media text; in FMS the focus is on the representation, specifically misrepresentation and under-representation, of women and other minority groups. (Bonner 1992:190, Lehtonen 1998 1998:45.) As a matter of fact, it is odd that women are treated as a minority in media although they form more than half of the general population of the world (Goodman 1992:288.) Koivunen (1997) points out that the importance of representation lies in its relationship to other representations; it is possible to study power relations and ideologies in the structure of representations (Koivunen 1997:210.)

When a representation of a certain group is done through stereotypes, and specific genres are formed where these stereotypes are consistent, the use of power and the term *hegemony* enters the picture (King 1992:34.) When using the term *hegemony* one sees representations mirroring an ideological – in this case, patriarchal – motivation behind media texts; media is used to maintain the views and power of a specific ideology/social group. (e.g. Hietala 1997:36; King 1992:35.) It is “an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant”; this order of hegemonic views is effectively projected by e.g. the mass media which is, therefore, a major hegemonic tool (Press 1991:16.) Through, for instance, hegemonic television representations, power relations are strengthened by “obtaining the consent of the people to their own subordination” (O’Shaughnessy 1990:89.) The danger of representations and hegemony is, thus, that a single point of view is in a way smuggled into people’s consciousness through consistent, simplified message, and its “truths” are often accepted without questioning them.

### **3.2 Roles and Role Models: Theory Frame**

FMS sees a major part of media texts and genres formed by male creators, from a male point of view, which results in male bias in the representations

and ideologies transmitted (King 1992:34.) Bonner and Goodman 1992 call this bias *male gaze*; a considerable part of media is created by men, for men (Bonner 1992:5; Kaplan 1992:50.) Bowes recognizes the *male gaze* in sitcoms: “Part of the problem may be that most writers of sitcom are men, and even when they aim to avoid sexism in their humor they still find it easier to write for male characters. Women rarely get strong roles in sitcoms” (Bowes 1990:135.)

Much of the hegemonic use of representations is quite subtle and easily acceptable because one can see many of the familiar qualities of those represented in the representation. However, there is a notion of *restricted representation* in FMS; instead of completely silencing women (as is the case, e.g. in hard-core pornography), women are given a narrow, simplified, representations. “A picture of a woman as a Madonna submits her to government by showing not a range of possible different subjectivities but a single ‘true’ one.” (King 1992:37.) One of the goals of FMS, which is also the essential one in this thesis, is to reveal the hegemonic use of representations and to reject the power structures imposed through them (Rich 1995:64.)

The representation of women in media has been handled through three different aspects in FMS. The first focus is stereotypes and gender socialization, the second is the broad area of pornography and the third is on the ideology/ideologies behind the representations of women (Van Zoonen 1994:15.) Leslie Stevens (1987) has labeled these themes according to broader feminist “branches”; liberal feminism (stereotypes and gender socialization,) radical feminism (pornography) and Marxist and socialist feminism (ideology) (Stevens 1987 as quoted in Van Zoonen 1994:12.) This thesis can be categorized as a part of liberal and socialist feminism, since I examine both stereotypical representations of motherhood as well as the ideologies behind these stereotypes. However, the “glue” that combines liberal and socialist feminism in this thesis is the study of motherhood and, more specifically, the mother myth, which reflects both stereotypical representations and their ideological background.

Stereotypes and gender socialization are concerned with the difference between women’s roles and societal functions in the real world, and the reality represented in the media. As an example of FMS’ findings, even though more than 50 % of the American work force are women, the number of working men is dominant on television. (Van Zoonen 1994:15; Tuchman 1978:8.) A late 1970s research showed that



television also restricts the kind of occupations women have; men on television have a wider range of professional options than women (Fiske 1990:137.) As far as stereotypes are concerned, television traditionally portrays women as housewives and mothers, who are, in many ways, incompetent, inferior and subservient to male characters. (Van Zoonen 1994:15; Tuchman 1978:7.) In their research Hole and Levine have found three stereotypical – and rather restrictive – functions for women in the media. According to them, women are wives, mothers or housekeepers, sexual objects or simply people trying to make themselves beautiful. One quickly notices all these functions objectify women as subservient to men – as caretakers of men or their children, sex objects, or as people craving for male acceptance and admiration – complementing male action. (Hole & Levine as quoted in Van Zoonen 1994:66.) One can but wonder what kind of confusion these television women offer for modern day children, who in their future will have to be able to answer to complex educational, professional and domestic challenges in order to survive in modern day society, which allows less and less gender-based stereotypical behavior.

The conflict between common expectations and social realities has been noted in FMS (Press 1991:28.) Thus, the effect of popular television in forming attitudes and expectations and serving up role models for both girls and boys is a growing concern. In a sense, television ignores and simplifies the many juxtapositions and difficult challenges in women's life today (Press 1991:27.) Andrea L. Press notes in her book *Women Watching Television* (1991) that “contradictions between women's roles in the family and at work, which feminist social scientists and commentators have increasingly noted, are at least glossed over, and often blatantly ignored” in television (Press 1991:6.) As Van Zoonen (1994) phrases it: “The media reflect society's dominant social values and symbolically denigrate women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles” (Van Zoonen 1994:17.) As a contrast, not only women suffer as a consequence; through enforcing traditional gender roles, men are kept from full fatherhood and an imbalance is created in the symbolic family in a way which leaves all family members without a full, satisfying role.

Kaplan mentions three stereotypical representations of motherhood in the popular culture: the angel; the over indulgent, self-satisfying mother; and the evil, possessive, angry mother (Kaplan 1992:48.) In this thesis, I will look at the mothers in

the Simpsons in the light of these motherhood stereotypes and see if the mothers in Springfield follow these popular representations or if the Simpsons offers alternative, more complex representations of motherhood. Before this, however, I will introduce the basic theory concerning pop culture, television and sitcom.

## 4. POPULAR CULTURE AND TELEVISION

Television is an essential part of popular culture. In this chapter I will deal with pop culture, concentrating on television. First I will examine the importance of pop culture as opposed to its traditionally low-prestige image. Secondly I will move into the concept of hegemony, which is an important term also in feminist media studies. The third issue I will examine is pop culture research and its most common points of view.

Pop culture is a broad area, best defined by its audience; pop culture is produced to attract a mass of common everyday people. It is a part – nowadays a rather significant part – of people’s free time, consumed to gain pleasure and to be entertained. (O’Shaughnessy 1990:88-89.) Popular culture first emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century England when mass production of literary works began; cheap, easily accessible forms of media were, for the first time, created for the masses (Lehtonen 1998:98.) As popular culture started to develop in the 1950s, it soon became a seemingly harmless and unimportant part of culture. Television has, right from its invention, been at the heart of popular culture; it is an ideal medium for attracting masses of audience, and its main purpose has been to entertain (O’Shaughnessy 1990:88.) From 1980s on, popular culture, television in particular, has been a subject of sociological and cultural research, which has moved popular culture closer to the prestige centre of culture (Hietala 1992:8.)

### 4.1 The Opium to the People

Research has shown that pop culture, television in particular, carries a heavier significance than their lack of prestige recognition indicates. What used to be seen as harmless entertainment produced “for the people by the people” is nowadays recognized as made “for the people by a small group who own and control the communications apparatus of the mass media” (O’Shaughnessy 1990:89.) This idea is central to the idea of *hegemony*, which means that the views of those in power are made into obvious parts – the “common sense” – of the world view and ideology. (Lehtonen 1998:23-24.) In other words, hegemony points to the subtle enforcement of existing power relations through media (this term was explained in greater detail in Chapter 3)

(e.g. Hietala 1997:36.) The concept of hegemony is, in addition to being central to feminist media studies, also a part of general pop culture and television research; it is a central research subject in revealing general power structures in the media. Pop culture is not merely entertainment, but can be seen as “gratifying people yet contributing to their enslavement” (O’Shaughnessy 1990:90.)

Pop culture, and television as a part of it, is an essential factor in passing on hegemonic views. However, a viewer is not completely passive in receiving hegemonic information; she or he is, first of all, in control of the intensity with which a program is watched. Secondly, the viewer filters it through his or her own *doxastic repertoire*, his or her belief system, a filter through which an individual observes the world, or in this case, a television broadcast. (Kytömäki 1997:69.) In order relate to a media message, e.g. television program, a viewer has to find both the characters and their circumstances somewhat believable and familiar (Kytömäki 1997:70,71,74.) Considering this, it is quite easy to understand the power of pop culture and “pop television” in the way the viewers’ – masses’ – point of view can be manipulated. Popular television shows, such as the Simpsons, are filled with humane, lovable characters who are realistically portrayed with faults and errors which are familiar to us all – they are easy to relate to.

The production of television programs, as well as popular culture in general, is heavily effected by economics. Consumerism and commercialism are closely attached to popular culture and television, thus, the economic point of view is central in the production of the pop culture media texts. This point of view shows that in order to attract the masses, a television show has to please the masses – in other words, it cannot include anything too radical or controversial, which would risk the support of the masses. (Dow 1996:xxi.) This has been a major interest of feminists; women’s subordinate representation in television, which exceeds the subordination in reality, could be a part of pleasing the patriarchal masses of viewers – both men and women – who want to see themselves mirrored in their favorite television shows. This is the “flip side” of hegemony; a view that suggests that not only do media producers want to enforce existing power structure through media representations, but the majority of the audience actually wish to receive such enforcement. This view is, however, a rather provocative one and it over-generalizes the audiences as well as shifts the responsibility

of enforcing hegemony and unequal representations from media producers to a very abstract place – a place where it is difficult to recognize or question hegemony, let alone change it. Bowes recognizes this:

Clearly, images of men and women in television situation comedies are meant to present viewers with types of characters that they can easily recognize and relate to. What they also do however is to retain traditional images of men and women in gender-related roles. Sitcom rarely challenges any of these traditions through the characters and the situations it uses.

(Bowes 1990:134.)

In other words, even if both producers and audience are content with stereotypical representations, it does not undo the inequality of these representations and the ideologies they pass on.

## **4.2 Sitcom**

Sitcom (from “Situation Comedy”) is one of the most popular forms of television entertainment. It is, originally, a part of American entertainment industry and a rather important part of television popular culture. In the following I will discuss sitcom as a genre and as well as its formula and history. The relevance of sitcom and its back ground to this thesis is that the Simpsons follows the sitcom formula and most of its basic characteristics. Additionally, the sitcom formula is an important tool in enforcing stereotypical representations, which are, focusing on the representation of motherhood, the main interest of this thesis.

### **4.2.1 The Formula**

In terms of airing, episode length and production, sitcom is a highly regulated genre. First of all, the length of each episode is limited to approximately half an hour. Secondly, each series contains a fixed number of episodes. Even the number of main characters follows a numeral pattern; in a typical sitcom, there are six to thirteen main characters. The narrative structure in sitcom is quite simple; there is a beginning and a middle, which produce a problem. This problem is, then, solved at the end and a

predictable outcome is reached. There are re-occurring themes in sitcoms, the basic situation, however, always remains the same (Bowes 1990:138). The finishing touch to a sitcom-format is that it is aired once a week, on a fixed evening, always at the same time (note that the airing time varies country-to-country and there are reruns of shows which do not follow the weekly pattern.) (Bowes 1990:128-129.)

The aim of sitcom – in terms of setting, characters and language – is realism (Bowes 1990:128). In fact, “normality” is one the main goals in producing a sitcom. In general this normality is produced through a nuclear family with married heterosexual parents who have children and regular income. (Bowes 1990:132.) Characters are easily recognizable and therefore rather stereotypical. Stereotypes are used, firstly, to create identities quickly and, secondly, to achieve a comic effect (Bowes 1990:134.)

Behind the comic layer one can see an underlying social ideology that is brought out and enforced by the use of stereotypes and, specifically, by using them in a comic way. This consequently narrows down the possibility of a different or a challenging point of view. In addition, the stereotypical comic representation of minorities, such as women or gay people, in the rather conventional sitcom frames easily reinforces stereotypes which can be negative. Therefore, minorities are made targets of humor rather than active subjects producing it. (Bowes 1990:129,134.) The usual setting of a situation comedy is home or a workplace, or a place with similar qualities. Common to all situation comedies is that the characters form a family or a family-like group and this group’s interaction is the main focus of the show. (Bowes 1990:131.)

The term *circulate narrative closure* describes one of situation comedy’s main characteristics; the fact that the location, characters, and their basic situation remains the same from one episode to the next. In other words, there is no progression in sitcom; each episode contains its own plot that is resolved within that one episode. Thus, characters’ actions do not usually have permanent results. (Bowes 1990:129.) Lisa, the Simpsons’ oldest daughter, describes the *circulate narrative closure* to her big brother, Bart, as follows:

Don't worry. It seems like every week something odd happens to the Simpsons. My advice is to ride it out, make an occasional smart-aleck quip and by next week we'll be back where we started, ready for another wacky adventure.

*(Homer Loves Flanders.)*

Sitcom's use of stereotypical characters together with *circulate narrative closure* are quite conservative and the question arises; can a sitcom be modern and untraditional in its rather strict format? The Simpsons can be recognized for their postmodern attitude in comments such as quoted above, where the series actually criticizes itself. However, on a very basic level, the use of *circulate narrative closure* presents us with at least one other problem in addition to the lack of progression and a limited point of view; it allows the genre to deal with certain issues only superficially, offering the viewer easy and fast solutions to sometimes complicated problems. (O'Shaughnessy 1990:98.) Thus, although the Simpsons directs its satire even towards itself, its main formula prevents it from truly attacking many social issues.

#### **4.2.2 Themes and History**

Entrapment has been a main theme of situation comedy from the very beginning. This entrapment has been namely social, made visible by class, social position, gender and/or marital status. Additionally, social unease has been an inspiration in situation comedy. In the 1960s this meant class and social mobility and in 1970s the changing gender roles and threat to family structures were the subjects of social tension. Nowadays social unease may be characterized in terms of race and inner-city tensions, politics or, as in the Simpsons, the unease of traditional values. The comic, yet common nature of sitcom allows the utilization of these themes that are rather difficult to be dealt with realistically, but in a less threatening way. (Bowes 1990:129.)

The history of situation comedy begins with radio soap operas which were brief shows aired on the radio that were used to advertise soap. The importance of relationships and the domestic setting were adapted to situation comedies to produce light entertainment for viewers. The first T.V. program categorized as situation comedy

was I Love Lucy in the 1950s. (Bowes 1990:130,Hietala 1992:82.) It aired for the first time on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1951 at 9.00 PM (Internet II.) Situation comedy soon became a rather popular genre and more and more new situation comedy shows appeared on the air. The success of the genre has continued over the years and each decade has brought new themes to situation comedies. In the following paragraphs, I shall introduce the main situation comedy themes and some of its history.

Like noted above, situation comedy got started on television with I Love Lucy in the 1950s (Bowes 1990:130,Hietala 1992:82). The first situation comedy decade was quite a traditional one, offering the viewer a good example of an organized household with a housewife and a working husband; a good nuclear family where everyone, at least eventually, knew their place. Problems that early situation comedy dealt with were simple and the main point was to strengthen the traditional notion of a family. (Hietala 1992:82.)

In the 1960s situation comedy, together with the whole decade, went a bit “crazy”. Drugs, rock’n roll and youth culture were introduced also in the world of situation comedies. American political and social situation was reflected in situation comedy; Vietnam War was a situation comedy issue, along with “incomplete” families as opposed to the former “full” nuclear sitcom-family. (Hietala 1992:82-84.) In a way, the idyllic mirage of a family life that the 1950s situation comedy represented was broken by reality that slowly started to creep even into the world of situation comedy.

After the 1960s, the next decade offered television viewers happy nostalgia. Shows such as Summer of ’68 and Happy Days gave the audience a chance to escape to the simple life of childhood that presented no significant problems or threats. However, nostalgia was only one theme in 1970s situation comedy; the decade also introduced television to realism and the conflicts between the new and the old generation through series such as All in the Family. All in the Family was, in fact, a ground breaking sitcom with its loud-mouth, bigoted father, Archie Bunker, and the “hippie” younger generation and introduced a new, realistic – even dislikable – family of “real people” (Internet III.) 1970s sitcom brought public new family forms, as well. For instance, the life of a single woman was presented in Mary Tyler Moore Show. (Hietala 1992:84-85.)



In the 1980s television producers began to pay closer attention to program profiling and audience segmentation. The family continued to be the main focus of the genre, but it became more and more versatile; the definition of family no longer necessarily included merely people related to one another. For example, Golden Girls and Kate and Allie made new family realities real also in sitcom; in Golden Girls the sitcom family was formed by four elderly women and in Kate and Allie two single women and their three children lived together as a family. An exception was the very popular Bill Cosby Show that represented the every day life of the very archetype of a sitcom nuclear family. However, i.e. Hietala (1992) argues that the radical thought of using an all-black family in a situation comedy needed to be balanced with over-all conservatism; sneaking a peek into “black family life” was, supposedly, enough radicalism for the viewers. (Hietala 1992:85-86.) In a way, thus, even Bill Cosby Show was radical in its time.

From the 1990s to the present day situation comedy has continued to slowly free itself from the traditional nuclear families as the center, following the rest of the society. A family of some kind still remains the main focus of situation comedy, however, and a new problem has been brought out as a theme in a conventional nuclear family. The crisis of man in a family and his gender role has been the object of growing interest in situation comedy. In shows such as Roseanne, Married...with Children, and the Simpsons, the father's and husband's changing role in the society and the family itself is one of the main points of focus and, thus, a new underlying theme in situation comedy. (Hietala 1992:88-89.)

The father's and husband's crisis has been noted in sitcom as the failure – or, imperfection – of the generalized traditional nuclear family. But where does this leave women; has the role of the mother and the wife changed together with her husband's, or has she simply been left alone in her old place as a mother of a nuclear family, now with a father who is incapable of carrying his load? In this thesis I will look at the representation of motherhood in a postmodern sitcom, the Simpsons, and see if the representations of motherhood questions stereotypes at all. Before that, however, I shall introduce the main line of the history of women in the television and sitcom.

### 4.2.3 Women in Television

In the pre-feminist era television (1950s) women were usually homemakers, defined by their husbands and children. They were depicted in domestic surroundings and they were not mature, individual or independent in modern definitions of the words. The first situation comedy, I Love Lucy, however, was an exception. It fought the common female characterization through its main character *Lucy* played by Lucille Ball, who was a rather feisty and strong, independent character, often trying to break out from her role as a housewife in one way or another (Internet II.) However, even in I Love Lucy, the *circulate narrative closure* always had her domesticated and humbled in the end. (Press 1991:29;Dow 1996:xvi.)

Feminist television (1960-1980) brought women closer to the heart of TV. In shows like Hill Street Blues, Charlie's Angels and Mary Tyler Moore Show women were presented with careers and they had leading roles. However, even in these programs women were described as often being in need of the help from their male colleagues or companions, which strongly weakens their status as independent adults. (Press 1991:34-37;Dow 1996:xvi.) According to Gerbner (1978) this "victimization" of female characters strengthens the hegemony of women as the weaker sex; the more women are portrayed as victims, the more acceptable their victim-status becomes (Gerbner 1978:49.) However, in addition to giving women careers, feminist television brought themes such as women's sexual freedom and single motherhood on the air and showed women in male-dominated professions. Additionally, very strong female characters were introduced in shows such as Roseanne and Kate & Allie. (Dow 1996:xxiii.)

The Post-Feminist Era (the 1980s onwards) has brought women in the television back to domestic surroundings. Television women still have careers, but their importance cannot compete with that of family and children. FMS has seen television's Post-Feminist Era as undermining the Women's Movement; social problems, such as gender inequality, are dealt with only on an individual level. Additionally, in the Post-Feminist Era television shows, women are seen as a lonely minority in the work place; they bond to the work instead of other career women (e.g. in Cagney and Lacey, which introduced two female polices as main characters, as well as in Murphy Brown, which

highlighted the life of a single female journalist.) (Dow 1996:xxi.) One example of a Post-Feminist Era situation comedy is Bill Cosby Show which presents a family, whose mother is a successful lawyer, but who still has no visible work responsibilities or conflict between work and family life. This ideal picture of woman's life has been criticized by feminists and is an example of the use of hegemony in denying existing social problems of a minority groups. (Press 1991:6,38-45.)

The Simpsons is a postmodern, Post-Feminist sitcom. It represents few career women and puts quite strong emphasis on the traditional loving housewife-character. In the following chapter, I will introduce the main characters and setting of The Simpsons.

## 5. THE SIMPSONS

The Simpsons is one of the most influential pop culture phenomena of the 1990s. It is a television series based on a situation comedy formula, characterized by comedy satire and realism. All this combined with skillful writing and an unconventional style for situation comedy, its cartoon form and slashing wit have made The Simpsons an unforgettable, unique television show. Actually, the Simpsons is “the biggest hit in Fox’s history” (Fox is the television channel that first aired the Simpsons); the series’ success started from the very first full episode, *Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire*, which was number one among adults from 18-49 in America (Turner 2004:20.) The Simpsons follows the situation comedy format, but unlike other situation comedies, is a cartoon. This has been seen as an element that allows the viewer a certain distance from the otherwise quite realistic series; the Simpsons has, thus, acquired a rather satiric tone and is, at least seemingly, ironic towards the traditional values it represents as well as towards itself (e.g. see Lisa’s quote on p. 19)(Hietala 1992:89.)

### 5.1 History

The beginning of the Simpsons story dates back to 1987, when a 33-year-old cartoonist, Matt Groening, came up with a cartoon family, the Simpsons, to present in an interview for Fox. This all happened in the spur of a moment; Groening was supposed to make an animated series for the Tracy Ullman Show of his cartoon From Hell, but decided in the last minute to save his creative integrity from TV work by inventing a whole new idea for animation. This harshly-drawn cartoon called the Simpsons – in which characters were named after Groening’s own family members – aired in the Tracy Ullman Show the same year. Forty-eight such clips were broadcasted until on Sunday the 17<sup>th</sup> of December in 1989 the very first episode of the Simpsons – as its own series – was aired in the U.S.A. Quite remarkably, the Simpsons grew to be “a full-blown institution” in contemporary popular culture for more than ten years. (Turner 2004:16-21.)

## 5.2 Setting and the Main Characters

The heart of the Simpsons is the dysfunctional, somewhat realistically-portrayed family of five living in an all-American town called Springfield. The parents are Marge, who is the home-maker and the mother and Homer, who works as a nuclear technician in a local power plant. Homer and Marge are married and each other's old high school sweethearts. In addition, there are three children; Bart, Lisa and Maggie. Bart and Lisa are already in school whereas Maggie is still a baby, the family's youngest (yet, by no means the dumbest.) The Simpsons are a rather closely-knit family that is, at least on the surface, also a quite traditional one. The family has a heterosexual, married couple as care-takers and the nearly average number of children. Homer is the bread-winner of the family and Marge is a housewife; the parents represent the 1950s ideal division of labor in a nuclear family. The Simpsons family lives together in a small town called Springfield. They own a suburban two storey house with an all-American drive way and a backyard for barbeques, surrounded with other very similar houses; the setting for the Simpsons is a very conventional American middle-class neighborhood. The Simpsons are quite active in their community; Marge and Lisa are involved in charity work, Homer bowls and sits in the pub with his friends, and Bart takes part in the community life in his own mischievous but good-hearted way. The whole family (whenever Homer has no excuse) attends the weekly church service in the First Church of Springfield. In the following I will briefly introduce the Simpsons' family members.

### 5.2.1 Marge

Marge Simpson is a housewife, aged 34 years. She is the backbone of the family in every way; she takes care of the practical, physical and mental well-being of the whole family; she is the "Thread that holds Simpson family together" (Richmond 1997:10.) It is quite difficult to characterize Marge's individual persona since her presence in the show most often comes through her complimenting the other family members' actions. She has got the supporting role in the Simpsons in two ways; firstly, she rarely is the main character in an episode and, secondly, her actions or utterances

are often not individual statements but rather reactions to other characters' activities. Marge's is the frightening story of an intelligent young woman with a bright future, who gets "knocked up" by her high school sweetheart the first time she has sex. Even though she and Homer marry out of love, it does not change the fact that she is faced with a future as an unpaid housewife. Ironically, the unpaid work of housewives is, in fact, the reason why she led a women's liberation protest in her high school that earned her a detention where she met Homer:

- (Marge) I found out that to hire professionals to do all the jobs of a housewife, who incidentally is not married to a house, would cost \$48000 a year.
- Right on, sister!
- (Marge) The first step is to free ourselves from these male-imposed shackles!  
(7F12, *The Way We Was*.)

Marge is an active church-goer, but in addition to her religious activities, she has little interests outside home except for periodical hobby spurts, such as getting the lead in an amateur theater production, and an art course she attends in one episode – she has no continuous outings, as e.g. Homer's bowling or sitting around at Moe's. However, Marge seems to be, in general, quite happy with her life. Marge hardly ever shows anger, disappointment or rebel, even though her every day life is filled with unselfish sacrifices and endless household chores.

Marge is the centre of this thesis; she is, first of all, the central mother character of the Simpsons and the archetype of the generalized picture of motherhood present in the show.

### 5.2.2 Homer

Homer Simpson is the rather childish 36-year-old father and husband in the Simpsons family. In fact, if he did not have his "snuggles" with Marge, he would not be so different from the rest of her three children. He is not very bright; however he has managed to get a job as a safety inspector in a local power plant through impressing Mr. Burns, the owner, by promising to be "the perfect spineless employee" (*I Married Marge*; Richmond,75.) His character is presented with a glow of lovability despite his

overwhelming selfishness and lack of the ability to ever learn from his mistakes. In the end, usually after delving in self pity, Homer is always forgiven and placed back in his undeserved position as the head of the family. The parenting relationship of Homer and Marge represents a very rigid stereotype. The children's well-being is maintained by Marge, the mother, whereas Homer fulfills his fatherhood through very minimal effort towards his children. This division of every-day care is recognized in the motherhood theory: from a mother love is expected; from a father, on the other hand, love and expressing it is something extra (Kaplan 1992:197.)

Homer has leisure activities in addition to working: he enjoys bowling and drinking beer at Moe's, which is the gang's favorite pub; however, his favorite activity by far is to sit on the couch and watch TV. Homer also loves eating; pork chops and doughnuts are his favorites, not to forget beer, which he adores. As a result of his obsession with food and drink, Homer is overweight and suffers from health problems such as the heart attack he suffers in the episode *Homer's Triple Bypass*.

Despite his less favorable characteristics, Homer is emotionally very devoted to his wife and children; on several occasions he resists cheating on Marge with remarkable dignity (why these women throw themselves at him is a mystery) and although his everyday communication with the children is marked with either ignorance or aggression, he will, when needed, stretch to unknown lengths of fatherly love for his children (e.g. in episode *Lisa's Pony* Homer tries to earn Lisa's love, finally buying her a pony, or in *The Telltale Head* where Homers faces the raging mob with Bart after the boy has decapitated Jebediah Springfield's statue.) (Richmond 1997:10.)

### **5.2.3 Bart**

Bart Simpson is probably the most loved Simpsons character with his anti-authority wit and cheeky slogans such as "Eat my shorts." Bart is the ten-year-old first born of the family. He has a special bond with his caring mother, who calls him her "special little guy", and he is smart enough to play with his intelligence-challenged father. He is also rather warm towards his sisters, but can be – and most of the time, is – a true brat. In school he is in constant trouble with his own teacher, Mrs. Krabappel, and Principal Skinner. Bart is a rebel, but he is best friends with a "nerdy" (unpopular,

bookwormish) boy called Milhouse – thus, he has inherited some of the interest towards intellect, which is obvious in his sister, Lisa.

#### **5.2.4 Lisa**

Lisa Simpson is “the animated public face of the show’s creative team” with her advanced, modern views on feminism, environmental issues, religion and equality, just to name a few (Turner 2004:209.) Lisa is a smart, sensitive eight-year-old who gets straight A’s in school and is actively interested in studying. She is musical and loves to write poetry; jazz is close to her heart. In addition to all her intellectual and artistic tendencies, Lisa is also crazy about Malibu Stacy dolls and a Hollywood actor, Corey; thus, she is a mixture of rather mature/deep and childish/superficial attitudes. Lisa does not have many friends, and like her mother, stays home most of the time, concentrating on her own, individual projects.

#### **5.2.5 Maggie**

Maggie Simpson is a one-year-old baby who does not speak or walk properly and utters little anything significant in addition to her constant pacifier-sucking sounds. Ironically, her prematurely intelligent eyes and cognitively advanced actions make her quite her infantile father’s superior. Maggie’s quiet actions, which are often unnoticed by others, state her rather an independent character, although her close attachment to Marge is highlighted. In the episode *Homer Alone*, for example, Maggie, after being left home alone with her father, begins a brave journey to find her mother, alone, following any image that reminds her of her mother (*Homer Alone*.)

### **5.3 The Simpsons: Satire**

The Simpsons has the form of a traditional situation comedy. However, the creator of the series, Matt Groening, states in an interview in Los Angeles Times that his vision for the Simpsons was to create an anti-situation comedy (Turner 2004:21):



Sitcoms are about people who live together and say vicious, witty things to each other, which ends up sounding unlike any real character in life. On *the Simpsons* we want to have some of that, but we found it doesn't work if the characters anticipate their own cruelty. If they know in advance that they're going to do something mean or mean-spirited, it's no longer funny. But if they're out of control and a victim of their own impulses – so Homer impulsively strangles Bart – it becomes funny.

(Turner 2004:21-22)

What Groening considers “anti-sitcom”, however, is recognized also as a sitcom quality: “...much sitcom works across the boundary between normality and deviance... so that deviance becomes acceptable, and normality comic” (Bowes1990:133.) In certain terms, the Simpsons turned out to be the satirical form of sitcom Groening was aiming for; the “realistic” qualities of the characters are “natural” to the extreme; specifically those of Homer and Bart, the men of the family. However, the representation of women in the Simpsons, especially Marge’s character, strengthens rather than weakens the traditional sitcom attitudes. In traditional sitcoms, the father of the family is essential to the morality and the “back bone” of the social structure. In the Simpsons, Homer’s “out of control”-quality (which, in Groening’s view, makes the Simpsons an “anti-sitcom”) is achieved by further strengthening the mother myth of the traditional sitcom. As a consequence, Marge is not only responsible for household chores and child rearing as the mother in a traditional sitcom; she is also responsible for the discipline, morale, education and culture of the family. In other words, it is merely the strengthened, traditional mother role – making the sitcom mother a super-sitcom mother instead of an anti-sitcom mother – that allows the father of the family to be so “out of control” and to achieve the masculine comical effect.

The Simpsons are known for their unconventional approach to its subjects; it is said to have “reformulated the tone” of popular culture from 1980’s moralizing viewpoint to a criticizing point of view (Turner 2004:37-38.) The Simpsons’ creative team got, indeed, total creative freedom in producing the new series, which resulted in unique honesty and directness in handling political, social and cultural every-day issues (Turner 2004:21.) The Simpsons has been, however, rather traditional and uncritical in its approach to women and mothers in specifically. On the contrary to the otherwise critical and fresh attitude towards its subjects, women’s issues and motherhood are dealt with in a rather traditional, patriarchal way. One may explain such

a phenomenon by recognizing the satiric tone used in the Simpsons; that the problems of gender equality are, in fact, made an issue through exaggerating them to achieve a satiric goal. As Turner (2004) states: “satire... starts from a belief that the ideas and things it mocks – usually ideas and things invested with authority – are wrong, and that exposing this fact through satire will erode their authority and precipitate change...” (Turner 2004:257.) The Simpsons certainly has satiric qualities, and they are quite visible in the exaggerated maternal qualities Marge possesses. However, the satire in Marge’s life is hardly recognized in the series; Homer’s misbehavior and selfishness is targeted and overcome time and again, but Marge’s inequality in the family is treated as something quite necessary and basic – in a way, there seems to be nothing wrong with her character or the way she lives and is treated. Additionally, although a satirical effect is achieved through the exaggeration of Marge’s housewife-qualities, the constant expectations for her to be the loving and nurturing, trustworthy center of the family, however, highlights nothing but an overwhelming presence of the mother myth.

#### **5.4 The Mother Myth in the Simpsons: More Relevant Characters**

In Springfield, tradition and traditional values are an important part of social life as well as social structure. Fathers work and mothers are home-makers, children attend the local school, and in the evening the whole family returns to the suburban home to sit down for a well prepared meal – prepared by the mother, naturally. There are no gay people in the show, let alone gay parents. From a feminist point of view the world portrayed in the Simpsons is quite a disappointing one – there are hardly any signs of the women’s movement and its accomplishments. First of all, there are very few women in the show, in general, and those few women are restricted to rather stern feminine roles. If single, the Simpson women are either children or quite sad and lonely spinsters craving for love and offspring. Secondly there are hardly any career women; those that are single are working “blue collar” jobs, as for instance Patty and Selma, Marge’s single twin sisters, or are portrayed as not having a particular job, as Ruth Powers, the Simpsons’ single mother neighbor. Bart’s and Lisa’s teachers are among the three “white collar” career woman portrayed in the first five seasons of the Simpsons, i.e. 103 episodes. It is notable, however, that teaching is one the areas of

academic career that has, traditionally, been accepted for women and is highly dominated by women. The third career woman is a PR worker for the company that produces Malibu Stacy dolls; in the episode *Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy* she is portrayed as working, happily, under constant sexual harassment. To further highlight the feminine area allowed to the Simpsons' women, this only "white collar" woman who is not a teacher, works for a company producing little girls' dolls.

In this chapter I will introduce yet a few more characters. These are the main female characters in the Simpsons; although this thesis concentrates on motherhood and its representation, looking at how single and childless women are portrayed is essential and indicates strongly the presence and power of the mother myth; a part of the motherhood institution is that single and childless women are represented in a somewhat negative light and their personalities made dislikable (dualism; Rich 1995:34.) Therefore, meet Patty and Selma, Ms. Krabappel, Tattoo Annie, Mindy Simmons, Lurleen Lumpkin, Mrs. Skinner, Maude Flanders and Ruth Powers.

Patty and Selma are twins in their early middle age. Childless and unmarried, they live together and are unconditionally loved by only their little sister, Marge. They both work as clerks at the Department of Motor Vehicles and share a love for MacGyver (both the TV-show and the lead actor.) The two are very similar with their over grown leg-hair and chain-smoking habit. However, Selma finds her biological clock ticking – she wants a male companion and children – whereas Patty is quite content with her single status, although she is quite attached to her twin sister and their life together.

Edna Krabappel is Bart's 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Springfield Elementary School, a divorced middle-aged single. She is portrayed as quite a desperate in her search for a man – she is seen hanging around in a bar with revealing clothes, drooling over almost any man and sending out a personal add to a newspaper match-making column (*Flaming Moe's; Bart the Lover.*) She joins the Simpsons single women who have the habit of smoking. There are a number of other single female characters in the Simpsons, such as the Country and Western singer Lurleen Lumpkin, nuclear plant worker Mindy Simmons, Princess Kashmir, and Tattoo Annie. What is in common for all these single women is that they are, first of all, looking for a relationship with a man – most often with Homer Simpson. Secondly, these single women each appear in one or

two episodes, and that pursuit of love is their main motive or the punch line for their existence in the show. As contrast, the numerous single men in the Simpsons, such as Homer's drinking friend Barney; Apu, the Quick-E-Mart owner; or Moe, the owner of the local bar, are permanent characters in the show and are not presented as having a similar craving for an opposite-sex-partner as the female singles.

Mrs. Skinner, Mrs. Bouvier, Maude Flanders and Ruth Powers are examples of the representation of motherhood in the Simpsons. Agnes Skinner is the aged mother of Seymour Skinner, the Principal of Springfield Elementary. She has a rather sick, possessive relationship with her son, who still lives with her. Mrs. Bouvier is Marge's elderly mother. Maude Flanders is a rather Marge-like representation of motherhood; she is married to Ned Flanders and they have two sons, Todd and Rod. The Flanders family is born-again Christian. Ruth Powers a divorced mother of one and the only single mother in the Simpsons. She and her daughter, Laura, are the Simpsons' neighbors, but Ruth appears in only three episodes (whereas the other neighboring family, the Flanders, appears in most episodes.) She is portrayed as a wild, disappointed, disillusioned woman – who, not surprisingly, smokes.

Barney, Moe and Apu are all single men and Homer's pub "buddies". Although these single men can be considered slightly pathetic, they seem to be quite happy with their lives and have no overpowering needs, in contrast with the female singles in the show, for commitment or starting a family. Mr. Burns, Homer's boss and the owner of the most of Springfield, and his assistant, Smithers, are also single men and important characters in the Simpsons.

Now, after introducing to you feminist motherhood and media studies, some of the media studies conducted on television and sitcom and, finally, the material for this thesis, the series the Simpsons itself, we will now move on to the core analysis.

## 6. THE ANGEL MOTHER

The Angel Mother (Kaplan 1992:48) begins the core analysis of this thesis. The analysis is in two chapters built around Kaplan's (1992) three stereotypical representations of motherhood in pop culture; the angel mother, the selfish mother and the angry, possessive mother (Kaplan 1992:48.) I have conducted my analysis around these stereotypes, going through the material in the first five seasons of the Simpsons and the mother characters represented in the show. It is quite striking that most of the mother characters actually fit Kaplan's stereotypes rather tidily. Some mothers, especially Marge, possess qualities from more than one stereotype, but it is striking that most characteristics that rebel against the "positive" motherhood representation, the angelic mother, are represented in the Simpsons as negative, rather destructive characteristics. The angelic mother is, additionally, the most common representation of motherhood in the Simpsons, and thus begins and largely dominates this analysis.

The Angel Mother is the heart of the mother myth. This idea was introduced in the Rousseauian Mother Discourse; through denying inappropriate education of women, they would be free to express their natural "free" instincts in motherhood and household chores (Kaplan 1992:20-21.) Rich describes the ideal as follows:

Unexamined assumptions: First, that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and mothers are the "causes" of each others' suffering.

(Rich 1995:22.)

On this basic ideology has been built the idea of traditionally female-dominated household work being inferior, secondary, and unpaid, specifically when compared to the work that men do in public sphere. Domesticated, unappreciated (in terms of social status and economic independence) motherhood has introduced economic, as well as social and physical restrictions to mothers. (Rich 1995:17,42.) This is evident in an opinion stated by Homer Simpsons to his son, Bart, in reference to Marge, who is scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees: "You gotta go to school, I

gotta go to work, the only one who has it easy is Marge” (*Bart Gets Famous.*) There is, however, another side to the Rousseauian Mother Discourse; idealization of motherhood. As a result, mothers are expected to possess inhumanely positive, loving and enduring – angelic – characteristics. A mother is supposed to be “the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House... cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse” – the emotional and moral “back bone” of the family, taking care of everyone’s physical and emotional well-being (Rich 1995:27.)

There are few women in the Simpsons and even fewer mothers. Among those mothers represented, the Angel Mother has a strong presence. Marge, first of all, sets a strong example of an Angel Mother. In fact, the second most-visible mother in the show, Maude Flanders, represents the very same ideal, which further strengthens the mother myth in the Simpsons; she is there to put her children to bed so that the father will not be bothered, and she protects her offspring from the evils of sugar with a strict diet (*Homer Loves Flanders.*) Even Bart’s nerd friend Milhouse’s mother fills her position as an Angel Mother as she assures her unpopular son – lying, for the sake of his happiness – that he is “cool” (*Burns’ Heir.*) Through this rather narrow representations of motherhood, the Simpsons uses the technique of restricted representation; “a range of possible different subjectivities” is ruled out by accenting the “true” one (King 1992,35.) Additionally, women, let alone mothers, are harshly under-represented (appendix 1.) There are very few alternatives to the ideal in Springfield.

### 6.1 Marge the Angel

In the Simpsons the Angel Mother is present throughout the first five seasons. This is explained by the nature of the leading lady, Marge Simpson, who is the perfect model of the altruistic care-taker, the mother myth. Here is how she describes her life to Herb, Homer’s long-lost brother:

- Well, I met Homer in high school. We got married and had three beautiful children.
- Wow, we have so much catching up to do.
- Actually, I just told you pretty much everything.

*(Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?)*

This is what has become of the young, striving student who studied French and mingled with the smart kids at school; having children has, in Marge's case, moved career, hobbies, or any personal ambitions outside family life, out of reach.

Marge highlights her content with housemother's every-day work by humming cheerfully as she does her daily chores (e.g. *Bart vs. Thanksgiving* – Marge empties a turkey in the kitchen, humming.) It is possible, that she just enjoys her chores that much; however, considering her intelligence and background, it is more likely that she is merely humming to entertain herself in the midst of the dull, endless housework. The creative satisfaction in her life is most often achieved during endless sessions of cooking. Although Marge has been a promising artist in her younger days, she seems quite satisfied with merely making smiley faces with Bart and Homer's breakfast beacon and eggs (*Separate Vocations*.) After being inspired by the Reading Digest Magazine (the Simpsons version of the Readers' Digest Magazine) to make tiny meat loaf men for dinner, Marge, in fact, states to Homer that the magazine has "spiced up their life" (*Separate Vocations, Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington*.) On one occasion when she has managed to get her family to help with cleaning, she encourages Bart cheerfully: "Oh, Bart. Cleaning doesn't have to be a chore. Here, work to the music" and turns on the radio (*Bart Gets an Elephant*.)

One of Marge's proudest moments is when she notes to her family that "A mother knows everything about her family," while effortlessly reciting Simpsons trivia starting from the family's blood types, number of teeth and shoe size (*Blood Feud*.) These examples show how Marge's life revolves around her family; her identity and joy springs from her role as a mother and a care taker. She is an embodiment of the mother myth, which "demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich,42.) One might argue that it is possible that Marge, or any mother trying to fulfill the Rousseauian ideal, does so simply out of pleasure; they are, in fact, fulfilling their own desire. However, it is questionable to consider it normal that an adult person should have an identity mostly dependent on pleasing other people and desires utterly separate from any notion of personal achievements. A mother can be an important part of her family and love her family, for that matter, greatly, but is it possible to be an independent adult while lacking any personal life apart from family life?

### 6.1.1 Marge and Her Children

Marge is probably in the highs of angelic motherhood when it comes to her children; she is full of the archetypical unconditional maternal love every mother is expected to feel. In one of the episodes, the people of Springfield decide to build a casino and Marge ends up building so severe a gambling addiction that she spends most of her time in the new casino. However, Marge's love for her children is strong enough to conquer her gambling addiction in a minute – some people need weeks of rehabilitation to do the same (*Springfield*.)

In a Thanksgiving episode Marge has the patience to let Bart assist her, even though it means assisting him:

- Can't I help you, Mom?
- Well, okay. Can you do the cranberry sauce?
- Yeah! Where is it?
- The can is in the cupboard on the bottom shelf.
- Here?
- No, no, the other shelf.
- Got it. Now what?
- Open the can.
- No problemo. Where's the can opener?
- It's in the second drawer from the right. No, no, no, the other one.
- Oh, got you. (Begins opening the can) It's broken, Mom. Mom, it's broken. (Sings) *Mom, it's broken, Mom, it's broken, Mom, it's broken, Mom, it's broken...*
- I don't think it's broken. Here, let me try. Here you go.
- (empties the can on a plate) Cranberry sauce á la Bart.
- Just stick it in the refrigerator when you're done, Bart. Bart? (Murmurs and puts the sauce in the fridge.)

*(Bart vs. Thanksgiving)*

Marge showers her children with endless approvals; she is the one to comfort others when they are sad or upset or have faith in her loved ones when they feel let down. When Homer gets the Simpsons illegal cable TV to watch wrestling with his friends and Lisa protests against it, Marge encourages her: "Well, don't give up. When you love somebody, you must have faith and in the end they will do the right thing" (*Homer vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment*.) Maggie is the centre of her mother's attention whenever she is not occupied with house work (which is rather seldom); she is seen playing hide and seek with her, endlessly trying to get her to speak (which is quite sad,



considering the sitcom format that makes it impossible for her to ever have a conversation with Maggie) (*Bart the Lover, Lisa's First Word.*) Bart, who so often gets into trouble, is constantly defended by his mother. She tells those who blame her “special little guy” that “he’s a good boy and he’s getting better. Sometimes even the best sheep stray and need to be hugged extra hard”; or “Well, I’m sure Bart doesn’t really mean to be bad” (*Bart the Genius, Itchy & Scratchy: the Movie.*) Even Homer, who could, quite easily, be considered Marge’s fourth child – which sets quite a fatherhood role model, specifically in comparison with Marge’s ideal motherhood representation – receives Marge’s full acceptance, although his persona, appearance and actions could rather easily be judged differently. For instance, when Homer’s hair disappeared after briefly flourishing with the help of an expensive scalp medicine called Dimoxinide, and he is feeling depressed, Marge holds him in bed, singing the song You Are So Beautiful to Me (*Simpson and Delilah.*) She, in addition, willingly explains Homer’s obese appearance by referring to his big bones (*Brush with Greatness.*)

In the episode *A Streetcar Named Marge*, she has the leading role in an amateur play, thus, she spends the evenings in rehearsals. She has to take Maggie to the rehearsals with her, although Homer is home, watching television. This is taken completely for granted in the episode; the parents are not even shown to have a conversation about it. Marge is, in other words, considered an inseparable part of Maggie. This, again, is an important aspect of the mother myth; the mother is seen as the “child’s environment,” the one ultimately responsible for the child’s well-being, health, clothes, behavior and development (Rich 1995:53.) This ideal is further developed, as Marge decides to put Maggie in a nursery while she is rehearsing. Again, the idea of Homer looking after her for those few evening hours is not even negotiated. The Springfield nursery is illustrated as a grim, overly disciplined place, with a cold “non-motherly” character as the head mistress. Here, which is “the only day care center in town that’s not currently under investigation by the state,” the children are left alone in barrack-like rooms and are not allowed pacifiers or bottles. Both Marge and Maggie are shown as quite sad having to be separate from each other, and Maggie ends up freeing herself heroically from the terrible place. (*A Streetcar Called Marge.*) Thus, at least in Springfield, it is, obviously, considered quite necessary for a mother to feel guilt for leaving her child in a stranger’s care. This is quite a statement against modern

motherhood and working mothers; a mother cannot have a career without trusting her children to be taken care of in day nurseries or kindergartens. According to the Simpsons, however, a toddler's place is at home, with his or her mother.

One more feature that mirrors Marge's angel-like persona is her concern for her children's happiness, which is reflected in the way she hides the marital disagreements between herself and Homer from her children. In the episode *The War of the Simpsons* Homer has completely embarrassed Marge by getting horribly drunk in a party he was supposed to host. She is enraged, but takes Homer to the car to have the argument, so that the children would not have to hear it. (*The War of the Simpsons.*)

For Marge, it is not enough to be the perfect mother. In fact, she has to use her superior maternal/feminine instinct to direct and protect her husband's judgment as well as her own. In one episode, Marge, with her honesty, spoils Homer's insurance scam. Homer loses quite a sum of money, consequently, and is so angry that he starts thinking about leaving Marge. Marge's feminine instinct, however, warns her of the possibility, and she follows Homer and, eventually, wins him over. Marge's sense of responsibility for the happiness and unity of her family is, thus, so strong, that *she* has to stop Homer from leaving *her*. Additionally, she is expected to do this following this amazing feminine sixth sense, basically without any help – or communication – from her husband. (*Bart Gets Hit by a Car.*)

Marge is married to a man who often would rather be considered one of the children than a responsible father. For example, when Marge attempts to control how much the children eat candy on a Halloween night, Homer munches sweets happily with the kids – not exactly setting a good example (*Treehouse of Horror II.*) On another occasion, Marge walks in on Homer watching TV and completely ignoring Bart, who is pulling off the carpet in front of him:

- Why are you letting him do this?
- I don't know.
- Well, punish him!

(*Itchy & Scratchy: the Movie.*)

Thus, Marge has to make sure her children have a perfect father, too – or, to be realistic, some kind of a father. She has to push Homer to set an example or to take part in the raising the children. The division of labor and responsibility in Homer and Marge's

marriage is, in the end, what makes it possible for the Simpsons to notice the fatherhood crisis through Homer's childish character; the Angel Mother yields and works extra hard so that her beloved husband's crisis can be recognized. (Hietala 1992:88-89.)

There are, in fact, at least eleven occasions within the first five seasons of the Simpsons when Marge directs Homer rather literally on how and when to step up and be a father. One might argue that this puts Homer rather than Marge in bad light. What is important from the point of view of the mother myth is, however, that in the Simpsons it seems to be the mother's responsibility to remind the father of his role, and more importantly, this responsibility is not questioned by Marge or anyone else. These are examples of where hegemony – mother's responsibility for the well-being of the family – is passed on unquestioned. The humor, or satire, of these instances is not in Marge's behavior, which could be interpreted as resisting the hegemony, but rather in Homer's cluelessness. In other words, the hegemony concerning fatherhood may be questioned, but the hegemony of the mother myth continues.

The first occasion of the eleven where Marge directs Homer's fathering takes place as Bart sees Homer dancing with an exotic dancer called Princess Kashmir. Marge thinks Homer has set a very bad example to his son about respecting women, and makes him take Bart to hear him apologize to Princess Kashmir for the way he treated her. (*Homer's Night Out.*) It is ironic, that Marge is not in the least worried about the example of gender inequality that is represented in her own marriage. On a second occasion Marge directs Homer to "have a heart-to-heart talk" with his son about jumping over a gorge on his skate board (*Bart the Dare Devil.*) Lisa gets fatherly attention as well as Marge makes Homer take Lisa to a museum. Marge is concerned, because she has noticed Lisa's loyalty towards her father is failing and finding a new object in Mr. Bergstrom, Lisa's substitute teacher. Later, Marge makes Homer go and talk to Lisa, who is in her room, upset: "Homer, you're not allowed to have hurt feelings right now. There's a little girl upstairs who needs you. Her confidence in her father is shaken and no little girl can be happy unless she has faith in her daddy." (*Lisa's Substitute.*) Marge sees her responsibility, in other words, truly to extend over the entire family; Homer's failure as a father would be her failure as the Angel Mother.

### 6.1.2 Marge – the Angel in the House

Marge is an Angel in the House (Rich 1995:27.) She shows her everlasting love on a very practical level catering breakfast and dinner to the family, changing and feeding Maggie, and washing the laundry. She is, in fact, incredibly efficient; it takes her only about five seconds to change, clean, dress, feed and burp Maggie, which is enough to make any parent jealous (*Homer Alone.*) She is the responsible one; when the tire breaks in the middle of the desert, Marge walks to get another one (*Homer's Barbershop Quartet.*) Through her hard work she wants to make her family feel loved; she even makes her family members individual lunch sandwiches; “extra mustard for Bart, sliced diagonally, not lengthwise. Light mayo for Lisa, cut off the crust. Double bologna for Homer...” (*Homer Alone.*) This is how she puts it to Homer as she is cooking pork chops:

- A dash of rosemary, a smidgen of thyme, a pinch of marjoram...
- You know, Marge, you make the best pork chops in the world.
- Oh, Homer. They're nothing special. The extra ingredient is care. A sprinkle of chervil, half a teaspoon of turmeric and a whisper of MSG.

*(Itchy & Scratchy & Marge.)*

Being a domestic wonder comes with a price: spending quality time with her children often means, to Marge, taking care of their physical well-being while at it. For instance, in one episode Marge makes Homer spend some father-daughter time with Lisa the two of them watch football together; enjoy lazy leisure, in other words. Marge, on the other hand, spends her mother-son time shopping for clothes for Bart, which is a practical, necessary errand, but provides no actual bonding between the two. Marge's motherly love is, however, so strong, that sometimes it reaches the point of denial. For instance, in the above instance, Marge came home after shopping seemingly very satisfied. However, she has, first, embarrassed Bart at the store by revealing him to everybody in his shabby underwear, and, then, ignored Bart's plea about being bullied, leaving him in the car “modeling his new clothes to his friends” when he is, in fact, trying to avoid a beating. (*Lisa the Greek.*) In other words, she is sometimes so occupied in being the perfect mother that she fails to see what is going on in reality of

her children's life. Additionally, spending so much time doing domestic work, results in it becoming a part of Marge's personality. When Herb, Homer's rich brother, buys everyone in the Simpsons family a personal gift, Marge ends up with a new dryer and a washing machine. What makes this even more worrying is that Marge was exceedingly happy about her present – after all, what else could she possibly need? (*Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?.*)

Marge's practical love expands beyond family; she has caring, at least in the form of her famous marshmallow squares and a cup of something warm, for everybody. For example, after the Simpsons home has burned down as a result of Homer's hedonistic Sunday (Homer decided to form his own religion and stay home on Sundays instead of going to church) in the episode *Homer the Heretic*, Marge is seen in the burned kitchen, serving a cup of something warm to her family, as well as the firemen, Rev. Lovejoy and Ned Flanders. In another episode, when Mr. Burns tries to steal Maggie's teddy bear and is caught with Smithers in the Simpsons' kitchen after a failed attempt, Marge serves the couple a cup of hot cocoa without any further questions about their whereabouts (*Rosebud.*) As an even stronger exhibition of her love for humanity, Marge takes the children's bus driver Otto to live with them after he gets sacked from his job. Although Marge soon gets fed up with Otto's lifestyle, she restrains herself for quite a long time, holding the teachings of the Bible as well as her children's affections to Otto as higher priority than her own feelings. (*The Otto Show.*) In addition to Otto, she provides accommodation to Homer's "computer geek" college friends when they get kicked out of their dorm, as well as to Apu, the local Quick-E-Mart owner when he briefly loses his store and income (*Homer Goes to Colleg, Homer Loves Apu.*) Even Krusty the clown (Bart's TV hero) and Mr. Burns, Homer's boss, who is possibly the most hated and feared man in Springfield, are welcome to the Simpsons dinner table (*Like Father, Like Clown, Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish.*)

### 6.1.3 Marge – the Angel of Morality

Adrienne Rich describes the myth of the mothers' moral superiority:

As mothers women have been idealized and also exploited. To affirm women's intrinsic human value in the face of its continuing flagrant and insidious denial is no easy thing to do in steady, clear, unsentimental terms. For white middle-class women in particular, the mystique of woman's moral superiority (deriving from nineteenth-century ideals of middle-class female chastity and of the maternal) can lurk even where the pedestal has been kicked down.

(Rich 1995:xxiv)

The Simpsons is considered to be rather anarchistic; it is known to break conventions and show no automatic respect to power structures or cultural taboos. Therefore, one could call it a series in which the "pedestals" have been "kicked down" (Rich 1995:xxiv.) Rich's statement, however, proves to be quite revealing; motherhood has been represented as being morally superior in Marge's character. As a matter of fact, the only one morally superior to Marge is probably Ned Flanders; the rather feminine, Christian neighbor of the Simpsons. Despite of the similarities between Ned Flanders and Marge, there is an important difference; Ned is most often challenging himself moralistically whereas Marge sees it her duty to make sure everybody around her follows the same rightful path she has chosen.

In the family, Marge is certainly the moral authority. She is in constant battle to teach her family the righteous way of life. When Mr. Burns needs a blood transfer from Bart, who is the only one around with the rare blood type needed, Marge pressures him into doing "the right thing":

- (Bart) Hey! Wait a minute. I don't have to give blood. I have rights you know.
- (Homer) Yeah, the right to remain silent.
- (Marge) Bart, you must help those in need. It's the only decent thing to do.
- (Bart) D'oh!

*(Blood Feud.)*

Later, when Homer is upset about not receiving a proper reward for his son's blood, Marge reminds him about the moral responsibility – and receives quite a contemptuous response:

- (M) Homer, you don't do these things to be rewarded. You do them because a fellow human being needs a helping hand!
- (H) Marge, you're my wife and I love you very much, but you're living in a world of make-believe with flowers and bells and leprechauns and magic frogs with funny little hats.
- (B) Yeah, Mom, we got hosed.
- (H) Bart!
- (M) We got exactly what we wanted out of this. We gave an old man a second chance.  
(*Blood Feud.*)

Thus, Marge is fighting a never-ending moral battle with her husband and son. With Lisa, she has no concern; she is, in fact, from time to time a stronger moralist than her mother. In the episode *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment* Lisa not only attacks her father about the illegal cable he has had installed, but blames Marge for eating a few grapes without paying for them. The fact that Marge has managed to raise her daughter into her strong sense of morality and failing to do so with her son, is quite good proof of the inherited quality of the mother myth (more on this in the Chapter 6.3.4.)

Television and cartoon violence are the favorite objects of Marge's moral crusades. She begins with her own family, but moves on to more general judgment:

- Bart, how many hours a day do you watch TV?
- Six, seven if there's something good on.
- Don't you think you should get some fresh air and maybe some exercise?
- Yeah, but what are you gonna do.
- (H) Marge, TV gives so much and asks so little. It's a boy's best friend.
- That's the problem. Even as we speak millions of children are staring at the TV instead of getting some much needed exercise. Those children's' parents should be ashamed of themselves.

(*When Flanders Failed.*)

The taste for common moral well-being has given Marge a reputation in Springfield; after all, she is the woman who turned everybody's favorite cartoon, *Itchy and Scratchy*, from its blood-fuelled violence to sending a message of love and friendship, just to mention one example (*Itchy & Scratchy & Marge.*) Thus, when the townspeople are having a discussion about whether to open a casino in Springfield, people will not believe their ears, when Marge thinks it is a good idea (*Springfield.*) Another example of the morality expected from Marge is when she is expected to join the other white, middle class women (the morally superior ones – see Rich quote on p. 47) of

Springfield in their fight to ban a nude statue, David. She is publicly ridiculed after declining to ban David, which she considers quite a piece of art; in moral issues, the Angel Mother is not supposed to show individual thinking.

Marge's morality takes the form of stereotypical maternal concern in her two prologues of the Simpsons Halloween episodes, *Treehouse of Horror* and *Treehouse of Horror II*. These Halloween shows are filled with ghosts, murders and vampires – just the kind of occult figures Marge the Mother is supposed to be against – and her main message in these prologues is to warn children and parents about the evils that are to follow. According to Goodman, humor is a great way to break taboos; women, and specifically their stereotyped qualities, could be the makers of jokes instead of the objects of jokes and the punch lines. (Goodman 1992:286-289.) In the Simpsons, however, Marge and her stereotypically moralistic views are made the object of humor and her concerns are, additionally, made quite irrelevant. In her first prologue, Marge is beaming with motherly concern, but in the latter one she has already quite given up:

You know, Halloween is a strange holiday. Personally, I don't understand it. I don't know, kids worshiping ghosts, pretending to be devils... things on TV that are completely inappropriate for younger viewers. Things like the following half-hour. Nothing bothers my kids. But tonight's show, which I 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.

*(Treehouse of Horror.)*

Hello, everyone. Before last year's Halloween show I warned you not to let your children watch , but you did anyway... mm... Well, this year's episode is even worse. It's scarier, more violent and I think they snuck in some bad language, too. So, please tuck in your children and... mm... Well, if you didn't listen to me last time, you're not going to now. Enjoy the show.

*(Treehouse of Horror II.)*

Marge, with her motherly moralistic concern is made laughable, but the mother myth remains. In other words, it is recognized, and it is made a laughingstock, but the fact that it has not been removed or questioned leaves, in the end, Marge as the victim of the joke.

There are two episodes which could be, in a rather metaphorical sense, seen as criticism of the mother myth. First one of the two is *Streetcar Named Marge* in which Marge plays an oppressed Southern belle, Blanche, who loses her mind as a



result of a destructive relationship with a certain Stanley. Throughout the episode Blanche's desperation is compared to Marge's situation with Homer – e.g. the director wants Marge to find her inner rage towards Stanley, as Homer engages himself in a ridiculous fight with the vending machine – and in the end Homer states that he is, in fact, a little bit like Stanley, which Marge admits (*A Streetcar Named Marge.*) In another episode, *Marge in Chains*, the metaphor can be read starting from the title; the episode is about Marge getting arrested after she, exhausted from taking care of her ill family, accidentally steals a bottle of bourbon. Marge is released from jail for political and social reasons, after the community notices that life without her can have drastic consequences. (*Marge in Chains.*) Metaphorically speaking, the actual chains (the result of Marge breaking the law) are not as binding as Marge's social chains as a mother; her existence as an Angel Mother is more important than a crime she committed in her individual life. Thus, Marge's release to serve “the chains of motherhood” can be seen as a metaphor of the mother myth's importance as one of the main structures of patriarchal society.

## 6.2 Reaching For the Ideal – Symptoms

“When a woman loves a man it doesn't matter that a crocodile bit off his face” is quite a good example of the stamina with which Marge lives to fulfill the demand for unconditional love of the mother myth (*Bart the Lover.*) She is bound to her husband and family with a very responsible, unquestioning love. Homer is known to forget important dates and on one of those occasions, Marge's birthday, he hurries to get her a last-minute present. Selfishly he decides to invest in a bowling ball with holes carved to fit his own fingers and marked with his own name; he is certain that Marge will not use the ball. Marge gets angry and decides to pick up bowling out of spite towards Homer. She unknowingly uses a sharp metaphor to describe her situation in life when meeting Jacques, a French womanizer and her possible future lover at the Springfield bowling alley:

- (J) It is nice to meet you... (Looks at the bowling ball) Homer.
- (M) No, no. Homer is my ball's name. I'm Marge.

*(Life on the Fast Lane.)*

Homer is not a bad person and he loves his family dearly, but he is quite far from being the ideal partner. In the above passage Marge actually means her bowling ball, which has the name Homer carved on it, when she refers to “Homer the ball”, but in reality, Homer is the ball that has bound her to the kind of life she leads; she has married this lazy, below mediocre man and bound herself to him for the rest of her life through this marriage and the children they share. Consequently, one can quite fairly say that one of the main reasons why Marge as the mother of the family has to live up to such a high standard – aim for the perfection of the mother myth – is the quite poor partner she has in Homer. She loves Homer and with such endurance that this love must be “real”. Thus, Marge stays with her “ball” despite the few moments of enlightenment when she realizes the inequality of their relationship (e.g. *Some Enchanted Evening, The War of the Simpsons.*)

Love might be the reason why Marge is seen in the pursuit of the morally, physically, emotionally and psychologically ideal mother myth. When a goal is seen as realistic but it is, realistically, unreachable, those pursuing it are bound to fail. In other words, love as a motivator cannot be an excuse for inequality and hardship; trying to achieve the mother myth is quite like fighting against windmills – there are no winners. On the couch, Homer may think it is great to be lazy day after day, but the mother myth is, in fact, keeping him from a fulfilling, wholesome fatherhood. It would take Homer's own willpower and initiative to be a full functioning part of the family and the equal parent he could be, but the Angel Mother in Marge keeps everything under such tight control that there really is no room – or immediate need – for Homer to grow as a father. On the other hand, the children are affected by the mother myth, as well. One may think that they, in fact, have a great opportunity to grow, when someone is as devoted to their well-being as their Angel Mother. The children are, on the contrary, being over-protected (see Chapter 6.2.2.) while an unconstructive, unequal representation of parenting is slowly imposed on them (see Chapter 6.3.) The one who

is most effected by the mother myth – at least immediately – however, is the mother herself.

Marge describes her situation as follows: “You know, I spend all day alone with Maggie and sometimes it’s like I don’t even exist.” (*Streetcar Called Marge*.) A mother, according to the mother myth, is supposed to “complement” her husband and “focus” on her children; her identity is to be built on her role as a mother; “a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity.” (Kaplan 1992:20-21; Rich 1995:22.) Self-expression is rather important to a human being; however, the mother myth dictates how a mother should feel (Rich 1995:39.) Lack of self-expression, together with loneliness and powerlessness of mothers’ socially and culturally-pressured domestication are only few of the problems mothers are faced with; the attempt to live up to the mother myth lays an incredible responsibility on mothers’ shoulders, who, as “the child’s environment”, are held responsible for every aspect of her children’s welfare (Rich 1995:53.) This is a burden mothers cannot escape or, many times, truly share in their parenting relationship: “Her own anger becomes illegitimate, since her job is to provide him with the compassion and comfort he needs at home in order to return daily to the factory or the mine pit” (Rich 1995:54.) In other words, a mother’s duty is to protect the father from the burden of raising children or her own feelings of hardship. It is no wonder Rich states that:

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. It cannot be compared with slavery of sweated labor because the emotional bonds between a woman and her children make her vulnerable in ways which the forced laborer does not know; he can hate and fear his boss or master, loathe the toil; dream of revolt or of becoming a boss; the woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not “loving”; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. This “powerless responsibility” as one group of women has termed it... is a heavier burden even than providing a living—which so many mother have done, and do, simultaneously with mothering—because it is recognized in some quarters, at least, that economic forces, political oppression, lie behind poverty and unemployment; but the mother’s very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has “failed” her children.

(Rich 1995:52.)

Surely a mother would love her children even without the pressure of the mother myth; surely she would love and support her husband if she received love and support from

him. It seems that the only result of the mother myth is inequality; that the mother is expected to serve all.

### 6.2.1 Guilt

“The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (Rich 1995:223.) Maternal guilt is often present in the Simpsons. When Marge has feelings for Jacques, it is seen as guilt, not towards Homer, but towards her children. She makes them special lunches and cuddles them extra hard. (*Life on the Fast Lane*.) When Bart has been (wrongly) found to be a genius, Marge feels guilt for not recognizing this in her son:

- (M) Bart, I feel so bad for going so many years without... what's that word... when you encourage something to grow?
- (L) Nurturing.
- (M) Nurturing your brilliant brain. So I got opera tickets tonight. Get dressed, starts at 8.

*(Bart the Genius.)*

When Marge is rallying against cartoon violence and is, therefore, forced to spend some time away from home, she feels guilty for not cooking her family proper dinners. Homer's response is quite vivid – also in terms of highlighting the mother myth and a mother's worth: “D’oh! Twenty million women and I had to marry Jane Fonda” (*Itchy & Scratchy & Marge*.) These examples show how the mother myth is reflected in Marge's reality; she feels guilty every time she wanders away from fulfilling the myth. In the episode where Marge almost has an affair with Jacques, she is guilty of straying away from fully committing herself to the children; she is jeopardizing the nuclear family which is the ultimate growing place of patriarchy and the mother myth she follows. (Rich 1995:54,60.) Secondly, when she thinks she has not nurtured Bart's genius-qualities, Marge has failed her child, which is unforgivable considering that she is “the child's environment;” all that the child really has (Rich 1995:53.) Finally, the activist Marge feels guilt for not fulfilling her goal as the practical care taker, as the “Angel of the House” (Rich 1995:27.)

In addition to feeling guilty about her actions, Marge feels guilty about her persona. In the episode *Bart's Inner Child* she realizes she nags too much:

- Kids, tell me the truth. Am I no fun? Do I just nag all the time?
  - Well... Uh... (Some memories of Marge's nagging follow)
  - (H) See, Marge.
  - I didn't realize people saw me that way.
  - Are you mad?
  - No, I'm fine. I'm going to my sisters' now. (M rushes off)
- (Bart's Inner Child.)*

After this conversation Marge feels terrible. She does not even consider why she nags so much – that, perhaps, she could share her duties, wind down and have a life herself, she probably would not have to nag about things. On the contrary, Marge feels guilty about nagging, and tries to change herself through a self-help video tape. (*Bart's Inner Child.*) Once again, the myth takes control of Marge; if she does not fulfill the ideal, perfect mold, she tries to change for the better.

### 6.2.2 Guardian Angels

Guilt – or rather avoiding it – is quite a strong motivation in being a good mother. In mother myth, the mother is held responsible for every aspect of her child's life; this creates fear and worry; how can she protect her offspring? Marge shows the tendency to over-protectiveness, for instance, in a scene where she takes Maggie swimming. In quite a shallow baby pool Marge gets frightened by Maggie wondering to the “deep” end (deep enough to reach Maggie's knees): “No, Maggie! Stay in the shallow end!” (*Brush with Greatness.*) The most obvious sign of Marge's over-protectiveness is, however, her constant interest in the Fretful Mother Magazine; it is the first thing she reads after giving birth to Lisa, and it makes her instantly worry about the possible sibling rivalry between Bart and the new baby (*Lisa's First Word.*) The same magazine makes her worry about Maggie's development: “According to Fretful Mother Magazine if Maggie does not talk by the age one we should consider a corrective tongue extender.” (*Lisa's First Word.*) This magazine that educates mothers in Springfield is the representative of the Rousseauian idea of educating young mothers

to their role and, thus, a tool of the mother myth (Kaplan 1992:21.) Rousseau's spirit lives on even in the Simpsons.

In addition to baby Maggie, Lisa, Bart and even Homer get a regular taste of Marge's protectiveness. Bart actually lives two weeks as a nerd after the over-protective Marge takes him to see several doctors and he is diagnosed to need glasses, salve for his scalp, and orthopedic shoes. Marge's worry is, however, quite easily cured; after the two weeks that the doctors ordered, Marge happily removes Bart's nerdy "accessories" – the danger for Bart's health (whatever it was) is over now that the Angel mother has fulfilled the doctor's orders. (*The Last Temptation of Homer.*) On another occasion, Marge forbids Bart from going to see an alien movie: "I know what those movies are like. Killing innocent people, eating human flesh. You'll just get a lot of bad ideas" (*The Telltale Head.*) Lisa is saved from a jazz musician called Bleeding Gums Murphy by the fretful Marge when the two are enjoying a midnight jam:

- Lisa, get away from that jazz man!  
 - But, Mom, can I stay a bit longer?  
 - Come on. We were worried about you. (To Bleeding Gums) Nothing personal, I just fear the unfamiliar.

(*Moaning Lisa.*)

Marge's protectiveness reaches Homer, her "fourth child", as well. When he has decided to become an astronaut, Marge describes her feelings as follows:

You know, Homer, when I found out about this, I went through a wide range of emotions. First, I was nervous, then anxious, then wary, then apprehensive, then kind of sleepy, then worried and then concerned. But now I realize that being a spaceman is something you have to do.

(*Deep Space Homer.*)

Marge is not the only protective mother in the Simpsons. In the episode called *Homer, Defined*, she meets another lioness; Mrs. Milhouse, Bart's best friend's mother. Mrs. Milhouse has forbidden her son to see Bart, whom she thinks is a bad influence on her son. Marge feels sorry for Bart who misses his friend and decides to go and talk to Mrs. Milhouse. Thus, the two mothers meet in a rather civilized manner at Milhouse's, but both "stick to their guns" – i.e. stand up for their boys.

- Marge, I'm sorry, but I think it would be better if Milhouse didn't see your son.
- Look, I know Bart can be a handful, but I also know what he's like inside. He's got a spark. It's not a bad thing. Of course, it makes him do bad things.
- Well, Marge, the other day Milhouse told me my meatloaf sucks. He must have gotten that from your little boy, because they certainly don't say that word on TV.
- Well, I can't defend everything he does. But let's face it. All Bart and Milhouse have is each other. They're too young for girls. They're a popular target for bullies. And in the Christmas pageant, they're always sheep. Please, please, let them be friends.
- I'll think about it, Marge.

*(Homer, Defined.)*

Milhouse and Bart remain friends after this conversation, but it is another example of how these Angel Mothers take care of their family member's lives – there is no business that is not the mother's business (unless it is “real” business!) Milhouse's mom may have been over-protective about her son, but it was only “for his own good.”

### 6.2.3 Fallen Angels

Marge Simpson fights sadness with a hot bath, her husband's possible death with gingersnaps, and uncomfortable situations with strawberry ice cream (*Moaning Lisa, Deep Space Homer, Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy.*) Denial is a strong tool in coping with one's disappointments; Marge considers her dream of becoming a female astronaut fulfilled in modern women astronauts, although that still leaves her as a housewife (*Separate Vocations.*) Eventually the Angel Mother is faced with the reality of her imperfect situation. Sadly, many mothers find the result of this awakening to be mental and/or physical break down (Rich 1995:53.)

Marge has one quite drastic nervous break-down in the episode *Homer Alone*. After a long day filled with unappreciated chores she snaps while driving over a bridge with Maggie, stops the car in the middle of the bridge and refuses to budge. (*Homer Alone.*) Marge's situation, however, does not change, and as episodes go on she is seen behaving quite irrationally every now and then. Marge no longer uses anger as an outlet to her frustration; instead, Marge is seen disappearing into the world of hallucination.

In the episode *Marge in Chains* Marge is taking care of her family, Grampa Simpson included, who is suffering with the Osaka Flu. While shopping for groceries and medicine in Apu's Quick-E-Mart, Marge is so tired that she hallucinates

about her family members demanding her services. She is so preoccupied with tiredness that she accidentally steals a bottle of bourbon and is, consequently, jailed. (*Marge in Chains*.) Another example of Marge's hallucinatory world is a bizarre moment in the beginning of the episode *Homer Loves Flanders*. Marge stands in the kitchen, alone. She takes a sip of water and the walls start melting. Marge chuckles: "Ooh, the walls are melting again" and as sitar music plays on the back ground, a turkey flies out of the oven, stating "Personally, I think I'm overdone." (*Homer Loves Flanders*.)

Marge's hallucinations, the later one in particular, can be seen as recognition of her impossible demands; the turkey's statement about being overdone could be stating Marge's own feelings about her role. Marge's situation, however, stays in its mold; recognizing the impossible demands imposed on her does not change their existence, nor does it challenge them. One bizarre moment does not change the fact that Marge, for the rest of the episode, fulfills her Angel role through taking care of, loving and supporting the rest of the family.

### 6.3 Matrophobia

The patriarchal ideology, together with mother myth, is passed on from generation to the next through the institution of heterosexual nuclear family and, quite centrally, mothers. Women have "turned" on one another to gain the little power they can through male approval; through strengthening and enforcing the mother myth. (Rich 1995:57-58,61.) There are several occasions in the Simpsons where a mother is shown passing on the "knowledge" of womanhood and motherhood to their daughters, starting from a situation already quoted above, where Marge makes smiley faces of the men's breakfast beacon and eggs to show her how creative homemaking can be (*Separate Vocations*.) On another occasion, Marge tells Lisa the secret of keeping men happy:

- Why isn't Dad ever interested in anything I do?
- Well, do you ever take an interest in anything he does?
- No. Well, we used to have burping contests, but I outgrew it.



- Well, if you want to get closer to him, maybe you should bridge the gap. I do it all the time. I pretend I'm interested in looking at power tools, going to those silly car-chase movies and things I'll tell you about when you're older. Do you understand?
- I think so.

*(Lisa the Greek.)*

This is a great example of how womanly blame is passed on – it is Lisa's, the child's, fault that her father pays no attention to her. Marge advises her to please her father and pretend interest in his doings, and that way she can win her father's love. Marge also, quite discreetly, expresses that sexual favors are in place to keep a marriage together.

There is, however, some resisting reading (i.e. resisting the hegemony) on the inherited motherhood in the Simpsons. In the episode *Moaning Lisa* Lisa is going through a premature (she is only eight years old) existential crisis which results in her feeling quite sad and depressed. At night Marge dreams of her own mother's advice to her: "Wait, Margie. Before you go out that door, let's put our happy face on because people know how good a mom you have by the size of your smile." Little Marge, sadly, puts on a fake smile. Marge, however, follows her mother's example:

- Now, Lisa, listen to me. This is important. I want you to smile today.
- But I don't feel like smiling.
- Well, it doesn't matter how you feel inside, you know? It's what shows up on the surface that counts. That's what my mom taught me. Take all your bad feelings and push them down, all the way down, past your knees until you're almost walking on them. And then you'll fit in, and you'll be invited to parties and boys will like you and happiness will follow. (Lisa smiles) Oh, come on, you can do better than that! (Lisa puts a bitter grin on) That's my girl!

*(Moaning Lisa.)*

After saying this, Marge watches Lisa walk into the school yard with her fake smile. Boys on the yard bully her and her music teacher gives her verbal abuse. Marge gets an angry outburst, snatches Lisa back in the car and says: "Lisa, I apologize to you. I was wrong. I take it all back. Always be yourself. If you wanna be sad, honey, be sad. We'll ride it out with you. And when you get finished feeling sad we'll still be there. From now on, let me do the smiling for both of us." (*Moaning Lisa.*) In this incident, Marge resists the mother myth encoded in her and teaches her daughter to be herself. Marge,

however, fails to free herself; the mother myth dictates how a mother should feel, leaving no room for own expression of thought (Rich 1995:39.)

*Matrophobia* is a term which means the fear of becoming one's mother (Rich 1995:235.) For a daughter, "the mother stands for the victim" within herself, "the unfree woman, the martyr" (Rich 1995:236.) Through matrophobia, a daughter, therefore, resists the mother myth imposed on her by her own mother; she sees, maybe unconsciously, what mother myth means, and refuses to follow that myth in her own life. Rich (1995) further describes *matrophobia*:

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, "whatever comes." A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, who passes on her own affliction.  
(Rich 1995:243.)

Marge shows a trace of matrophobia in the scene quoted above, where she refuses to teach her daughter to hide her true feelings behind a fake smile. Lisa, however, is the truly "matrophobic" daughter in the Simpsons; not least because of her Angelic Mother.

In the episode *Separate Vocations* Lisa and Bart take a test in school, which reveals the most likely careers they are to have in the future. Lisa, the bright student, is doomed by the test to the future as a housewife, whereas Bart, the "black sheep" of the family is faced with a career as a policeman. Lisa's reaction to the test result leaves no doubt about her feelings: "A home maker! I might as well be dead!" She asks her mother: "What's good about having to be stuck in the house behind the stove?" Marge tries to assure her that being a housewife is creative and enjoyable, but Lisa dreams about becoming a jazz musician. It is quite remarkable that Lisa's dream is to play jazz instead of having an academic career; she is, after all, a remarkably bright student. This is a rather strong metaphor; art means freedom of expression, music is art and jazz is the freest style of music. Lisa, thus, takes her *matrophobia* to the extreme; she wishes not only to keep from becoming the ideal her mother tries to achieve, she wants to be as far from its restricting expression as possible.

In this chapter I have talked about the ideal of the mother myth and the most common representation of motherhood in the Simpsons. Marge's role as the Angel

Mother has been illustrated through many examples and I have also touched on the negative aspects of the Angel Mother and the pursuit for the ideal. The following chapter will be on the negative motherhood representations, using, again, Kaplan's (1992) categorization of the stereotypical representations of motherhood. Meet the Selfish Mother and the Angry, Possessive Mother (Kaplan 1992:48.)

## 7. NEGATIVE MOTHER REPRESENTATIONS

Throughout history, millions of women have become mothers “accidentally,” without planning or preparing, some at a very young age; young women’s possibilities in life have time and again vanished when pressured into the archetypical role of motherhood (Rich 1995:13.) Some have fought the myth and followed their own passion, others have remained and tried to combine the mother myth with a career, which often results in constant guilt; to a mother, selfishness is not allowed. Marge is a woman who became pregnant the very first time she slept with a man; she is, thus, a suitable example of forced motherhood. Marge’s reality after having sex is being a mother and wife, a care-taker of a family.

Kaplan mentions two alternative stereotypes in addition to the ideal mother myth that have been common in pop culture; the over-indulgent mother and the possessive, destructive, all-devouring mother; the “angel” and the evil “witch.” (Kaplan 1992:48,182.) The three stereotypical “media mothers” are, as Kaplan states, “generalized fantasies – fantasies that have ideological implications, or that serve specific cultural interests” (Kaplan 1992:182.) Kaplan also claims that the old polarization of motherhood (angel/witch) has been “only occasionally” present in pop culture after the 1970s (Kaplan 1992:183.) The 1990s Simpsons, however, is quite filled with mother characters fitting in either one of these extremes. In the following chapter I will look at the “darker side” – or, the “non-Angelic” side – of motherhood represented in the Simpsons. These representations, although opposite to the mother myth, cannot be read as “resisting” representations of motherhood. On the contrary; these extreme representations – mere “flip sides” – strengthen the moral superiority of the Angel Mother, adding to the shine of its halo.

### 7.1 The Selfish Mother

The Selfish Mother is one of the three stereotypical motherhood representations Kaplan mentions (Kaplan 1992:48.) There are very few occasions in the first five seasons of the Simpsons where Marge behaves selfishly. Even she, however, has some imperfect moments. When she is being selfish, it is not anything serious; she

wants to spend some time with her husband, or have her hair done – most of the time it seems like Marge’s selfish moments are there to either give a slight human quality to the otherwise angelic mother or in order to, briefly, shock the viewer.

The first instance when Marge is selfish takes place in the first season episode *There’s No Disgrace Like Home*; the Simpsons attend Mr. Burns’ annual employee party and, encouraged (or, rather, discouraged) by her family’s ill behavior, leaves Maggie with other babies, unsupervised, in the nursery and gets drunk on punch with another housewife (*There’s No Disgrace Like Home.*) On another occasion, a group of parents, Marge and Homer included, are shown to pop champagne bottles and rejoicing as the children head off to a summer camp (*Kamp Krusty.*) The next moment of pure selfishness – or laziness – takes place in the third season episode *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington*. The situation is rather understandable considering Marge’s reaction; Lisa wishes for company to join her for an early morning trip to the Winifred Beecher Howe Memorial and Marge quite happily stays in the warm hotel bed and continues sleeping (*Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington.*) This brief moment is significant, though, because normally Marge the Angel would have jumped at the opportunity to spend time with her daughter and, better yet, educate her. In a way, the viewer is tempted to smirk and “forgive” Marge’s sudden selfishness; Homer’s similar reaction to Lisa’s request, on the other hand, receives little attention since it is a rather predictable one. The third time Marge flashes a moment of selfishness is in fifth season, when Bart has found Mr. Burns’ long lost teddy bear, Bobo, and the Simpsons family tries to think of what to do with his attempts to get the bear back:

- (M) I’m sure he’ll offer us a fair reward... and then we’ll make him double it!
- (everybody) Huh?
- (M) Why can’t I be greedy once in a while?

*(Rosebud.)*

Marge’s sudden greed does not only take the viewer by surprise, the Simpsons family’s reaction shows awe as well; this is not how our Marge is supposed to be! Again, ever since realizing that his family is in possession of Mr. Burns’ teddy, Homer has been plotting to get as big a reward from him as possible. Yet, it is Marge’s instance of greed

that smudges her image of a perfect mother and creates an impression of pure surprise in the viewer as well as her own family. (*Rosebud.*)

In addition to a few short instances where Marge shows her selfish side, there are three episodes in which Marge's character behaves in an "un-Marge" way. This is quite a late development in the Simpsons; two of the three episodes are in the fifth season. First of the three is an episode called *Homer Alone*. In this episode Marge wakes up to the burden of her work load and decides that she needs a vacation.

- (M) I need to unwind.
- (H) I know you do, Marge. But come on. You know what our vacations are like. Those three monsters in the back seat. "Are we almost there? Are we there yet?" And let's face it, I'm no day at the beach either. "Marge, can I have another sandwich? Marge, can I have another sandwich?"
- (M) No, I need a vacation by myself.
- (H) What?! You mean we're getting a divorce? Marge, I can change!
- (M) No, Homie, no. I still love you. A lot of couples take separate vacations.
- (H) Well, okay. But you have to swear you're coming back.
- (M) I swear.

(*Homer Alone.*)

Marge leaves the children and Homer and spends a relaxing vacation in Rancho Relaxo. Bart and Lisa stay with Patty and Selma, and Maggie who refuses to go to her aunts, stays home with Homer. Marge has a lovely time in Rancho Relaxo as she fulfills her every desire (e.g. tequila, a huge sundae and a hot bath.) (*Homer Alone.*)

The second example of Marge's selfish behavior takes place as Homer fails to show up for a ballet-date that Marge had organized and she takes Ruth Powers, the single mother living next door to the Simpsons. The women enjoy their time together and decide to go out on the following night, too. Rich's study (1992) of the mother myth states that female bonding, as well as mother's excursions outside her "natural" domestic surroundings, is a threat to the patriarchal system. In other words, a mother's friendship with another woman leaves an absence in a patriarchal family and awakens a dread for separation in a "patriarchally programmed" husband. (Rich 1995:34;213.) This can be seen in Homer's reaction as Marge leaves to spend her night out with Ruth:

- (H) How can you do this, Marge? How can you desert your children?
- (L) Have a blast, Mom!
- (B) Rock the Casbah!
- (H) Man's best friend, indeed.

...

- (H) I can't believe your mother went out to have fun without me.
- (L) Don't worry. You'll feel better once we put your hair up in curls and give you a makeover, Homina.
- (B) Oh, that would be delightful!
- (H) Quiet, boy! There's nothing to feel ashamed of here. Women have a right to a night out. Right, Lisa?
- (L) Sure, Dad. (Imitates a whip lashing)
- (H) That's it, I'm calling my buddies. Marge is not the only one who can have a girls' night out!

*(Marge on the Lamb.)*

Kent Brockman, the local TV-presenter, however, utters the words that highlight the episode's satiric tone. At this point Marge and Ruth are running from the police because the car Ruth drives turns out to be stolen from her ex-husband. Brockman's words illustrate that the women's crime has not as much to do with a stolen car as with leaving their families:

At the risk of editorializing, these women are guilty and must be dealt with in a hash and brutal fashion. Their behavior could incite other women, leading to anarchy of biblical proportions.

*(Marge on the Lamb.)*

This utterance is one of the indications that this episode is about female bonding and the patriarchal system's fear for it; this is, in fact, one of the few moments when the Simpsons satire is aimed at patriarchal attitudes. There is a close resemblance between the episode *Marge on the Lamb* and a 1990s movie Thelma and Louise which, with its feminist point of view was considered quite a controversial movie when it was first released. Thelma and Louise was a unique road movie with female main characters and a story of the escape and change of an oppressed housewife. In the episode *Marge on the Lamb*, Marge stays with her female friend instead of returning home to her family, and the men Springfield are the objects of laughter. In this sense *Marge on the Lamb* is quite a unique episode and, in my opinion, the only one where the satiric tone about

motherhood and its responsibilities together with male control over women is taken to the point where it sends a powerful message against oppression. (*Marge on the Lamb.*)

The third episode featuring Marge's selfish side is *Springfield*. In this episode the people of Springfield decide to build a casino and Marge ends up developing a gambling addiction. Marge's addiction makes her almost completely ignore the needs of her family. She, for instance, takes Maggie with her to the casino where Barney, Homer's alcoholic friend finds the baby roaming around and returns her to Marge, who is deeply concentrated on gambling. When Maggie is returned, Marge places her back on the floor and continues with her business. As Marge is away from home, Homer is forced to take a stronger role as a father; this ends up with Homer and the children building a fort in the living room to defend themselves from "the bogeyman." Although Marge is represented as having quite a strong addiction, she gets over it the minute Homer confronts her about breaking a promise she made to Lisa:

- (H) You broke a promise to your child.
  - (M) What?
  - (B) You promised Lisa to help her with her costume. You made her cry. Then I cried. Then Maggie laughed. She's such a little trooper.
  - (M) Lisa's costume! Homer, I didn't realize. I'm so sorry.
- (*Springfield.*)

Thus, once again, Marge's ideal motherhood wins over the human side; she walks out of the casino and forgets about gambling.

Of the three episodes introduced above that show Marge as a central, selfish – humane – character, two include some sort of a "guilt trip." The first episode, *Homer Alone*, in which Marge decides to take some time off for herself, the family falls apart while she is gone. All the other members of the family are quite miserable, both physically and mentally. The physical consequence of Marge's absence is obvious: Bart and Lisa cannot eat or sleep properly at Patty and Selma's, whereas the Simpsons home is a complete mess under Homer and Barney's supervision. Mental strain, on the other hand, shows as utter unhappiness of all the family members (excluding Marge, of course); Maggie runs away from home in search of her mother, Homer cannot handle domestic responsibilities and Bart and Lisa cling desperately to their father who visits them at Patty and Selma's. When Marge decides to return home, the whole family pack



themselves to sleep in the parents' double bed – everyone wants to be near Marge, to make sure she will never go away again. In the episode *Springfield*, the Simpsons home turns out a total mess with TV dinners and chaotic nights defending the family from the bogeyman, without the sensible practical mother of the house. In other words, it is not Marge's gambling – which is, in fact, a serious addiction – that is seen as a problem, but rather the time she spends away from home, away from taking care of her family. Her role as the Angel Mother is not broken as much through a bad habit she has developed, which could be destructive to herself, but rather through her absence from home. In this sense the third Marge-episode, *Marge on the Lamb*, is quite unique; Marge is represented as leaving her family and it is made to seem quite acceptable. Additionally, this is the only episode which does not show Marge returning back to her usual role, and, thus, breaks the *circulate narrative closure*; she is, in fact, allowed a brief moment of freedom from the oppressive situation comedy format. (*Homer Alone, Springfield, Marge on the Lamb.*)

The strong feminist movement of the 1960s and the 1970s has filled the postmodern representation of motherhood with anxiety and uncertainty. (Kaplan 1992:181,200.) Kaplan states, that this anxiety is starting to be “comforted” by the media; motherhood is being represented in a more positive light. However, she continues:

What representations still cannot produce is images of sexual women, who are also mothers, and who, in addition, have fulfilling careers. ‘Sex, Work and Motherhood’ is evidently too threatening a combination on a series of levels.

(Kaplan 1992:183)

The Simpsons partly contradicts this statement; Marge is portrayed as a sexually very active woman – she is often seen as flirtatious with her husband, and many of their “bed talks” end with the suggestive dimming of the lights and giggles (e.g. *Bart's Friend Falls in Love.*) However, Marge still does not have a career, which makes Kaplan's statement quite a valid one when it comes to the Simpsons. In fact, there are no permanently working mothers in the show. The sexual revolution, on the other hand, in terms of equal physical joy and female sexual appetite are allowed to the Simpsons' mothers, at least to Marge.

In the episode *Some Enchanted Evening* Homer has organized a night out alone with Marge after she has publicly complained about her husband on the radio. On their date, Marge is rather flirty, dresses up in a sexy night gown for Homer and afterwards the happy couple is shown, satisfied, laying on their hotel room bed. (*Some Enchanted Evening.*) Marge is, additionally, sexually quite active and initiative:

- (M) Homie, put down your magazine for a minute.
- (H) Huh?
- (M) I thought you might wanna snuggle.

(*Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington.*)

Marge is, again, shown in sexy underwear, when she emerges as Homer's surprise partner at the end of the episode *Homer's Last Temptation*. Again, Homer and Marge are portrayed as having a frisky sex life when Lisa and Bart are sent off to a summer camp (*Kamp Krusty.*) These examples show Marge's physicality; she is, in this sense, portrayed as a human, flesh and blood, who has needs and desires as a contrast to her otherwise altruistic housewife characteristics. It is unlikely that she would only perform sexually to please Homer; on various occasions her giggles and seductions suggest that she is, in fact, a sexual person.

Marge's sexuality is not restricted to the Simpsons bedroom alone. She has quite constant fantasies about Lee Majors, a professional golf player:

- Hello, Marge. I'm Lee Majors. Will you come away with me?
- Mmm... Sure.
- (Majors and Marge fly to the sky together.)

(*Burns' Heir.*)

Her loyalties are to her husband, though; even when given a chance to cheat – which is quite rare (once in the first five seasons compared to Homer's three) – she does not even kiss her pursuer (unlike Homer, who cannot resist.) Her husband is her only true sexual partner; she does not even think about straying away from her marriage. Thus, even though some pop cultural mother myths are broken in Marge's sexually active housewife character, she remains, also sexually, the Angel; she has only one partner, her husband, the father of her children, who is the only man she has ever been with and

the only man she will ever be with. Yet again, the Simpsons have not dared to make her a sexually active career woman and a mother, which would actually break some television myths; Marge's pleasure, psychological, social and physical, comes from her family.

### 7.1.1 Ruth Powers

Ruth Powers is the single mother neighbor of the Simpsons. She is one of the few alternatives to Marge's angelic motherhood (which, despite temporary moments of selfishness, remains in unison with the mother myth.) Ruth moves next door of the Simpsons in the fourth season episode called *New Kid on the Block* with her daughter, Laura. Ruth is a divorced, disillusioned lady, who is rarely seen in the same picture with her daughter. However, she has some motherly concern for the upbringing of Laura; the girl mentions herself of the "painfully strict" upbringing she has gotten, and later on in another episode Ruth says that "I should get home to my daughter before that naked talk show comes on" (*New Kid on the Block, Marge on the Lamb.*) Ruth, however, does not have a strong motherly identity, at least not when compared to the "super mom" Marge. She is, in fact, quite free and quite wild.

Ruth rebels against the mother myth in many ways. She is seen, as I already mentioned, mostly without her child. Additionally, she is the only mother who is seen spending time at Moe's (*New Kid on the Block.*) In the episode *Marge on the Lamb* Ruth makes friends with Marge and, instantly, lures her into her free adult world. This discussion takes place after Marge and Ruth have been to the ballet together:

- (M) Well, thank you for a lovely time.
- (R) You're not going home already, are you?
- (M) It's almost 9.30!
- (R) (laughs) Yeah, right, we'd better turn in... Oh, you were serious.  
(*Marge on the Lamb.*)

Marge and Ruth end up having a cup of coffee together and decide to go out the next night. Ruth turns up in a stolen car and takes Marge straight to a bar.

Ruth could be said to be a man-hater. When she shows Marge her gun she said she would never shoot a human being, but indicates that if she had the chance,

she would shoot her ex-husband, whom, according to Ruth, did nothing but “eat, sleep and drink beer.” Additionally, Laura’s father has “been stiffing me on child support for the last four months.” (*Marge on the Lamb*.) Despite the fact that Ruth’s ex-husband has taken her “faith in mankind,” she is, still, in need of a man. When she first meets Homer, she asks him to set her up with one of his friends (*New Kid on the Block*.) Later on, as she is having cup of coffee with Marge, Ruth tells Marge that she envies their marriage. In other words, Ruth is a single mother and she is quite unhappy. As she states herself: “That’s it, I give up. A single mother can’t win in a man’s world.” (*Marge on the Lamb*)

As seen, Ruth Powers is the alternative to the angelic mother of a nuclear family. She is single, she is a mother and she is quite free and wild – however, she is not happy or strong, thus, not a very attractive representation of motherhood. Although independent, Ruth still wants a man in her life; when she first meets Homer she asks him to set her up with one of his friends. In addition, Ruth, as the alternative mother, is presented quite late in the Simpsons history: she first emerges in the fourth season. She appears rather rarely in the show: in the first 103 episodes, she appears in three episodes and actually speaks in two. In other words, Ruth, as an alternative representation of motherhood, is rather under-represented; as are other alternatives, which I will concentrate on in the following passage.

## 7.2 The Angry Possessive Mother

The mother myth excludes female anger, which threatens the very nature of the Angel Mother; “Mother love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional” (Rich,46.) Kaplan, on the other hand, names the angry, evil mother as one of the stereotypical representations of motherhood in popular culture (Kaplan,48.) This is hardly contradictory, for what better enhances a myth than its evil opposite? In the Simpsons there is some maternal anger. In Marge’s character, as well as among the other angel mothers, the anger is quite subtle and it, most of the time, quite enhances the mother myth; it is used to protect the maternal ideal from outside threats and the family itself from corruption. The older generation of mothers in the Simpsons, Mrs. Bouvier, Marge’s mother and Mrs. Skinner, Principal Skinner’s mother, take the concept of an

angry possessive mother to new heights. However, let us first have a look at our leading lady's anger.

### 7.2.1 Marge

Marge is a serene, friendly, loving person. She gets angry rather seldom and when she does, it is mostly directed at Homer, who has failed to support her as the father of her children or to be a considerate husband. As an Angel Mother, Marge hardly ever loses her temper with the children, but, on the other hand, if she feels them threatened or treated unjustly, she turns into a lioness and reaches frightening fury to protect her cubs. In addition to anger towards Homer (which, considering his normal behavior, is more than understandable) and anything threatening her family idyll, Marge loses her temper at moral injustice; cartoon violence, for instance (*Itchy & Scratchy & Marge*, *When Flanders Failed*, *Krusty Gets Busted*.)

The first distinct moment of anger from Marge is in the first season episode called *There's No Disgrace Like Home*. The Simpsons family is having anger management therapy, in which every family member is able to give electric shocks to one another as a direct feed back to their behavior. Marge is set off by her will to control the other family members' actions; she cannot tolerate them teasing one another with the shocks. Thus, she starts giving others electric shocks to make them stop their outrageous behavior. (*There's No Disgrace Like Home*.)

Homer is, many times, the object of Marge's anger; or, rather, Homer's sabotage against Marge's ideal family life. Although Marge lets out real anger in these situations, it still does not jeopardize her angelic persona; Marge feels anger for good reasons. Attending church services is a constant battle ground to the Simpsons parents. Marge would like the whole family to attend a weekly service, whereas Homer would rather spend his Sundays in leisure activities. In the first season episode *The Telltale Head*, Marge lets her frustration out: "Why should I feel like a traffic cop every Sunday morning? I'm just trying to get a little goodness into the family" (*The Telltale Head*.) Later in the same episode Marge gets furious with Homer, who listens to a football game through headphones during church service. Later on, in fourth season, there is a whole episode about this battle: *Homer the Heretic*. In addition to church attendance,

Marge gets angry with Homer for being a bad father (*Itchy & Scratchy & Marge*, *Lisa the Gree*, *Saturdays of Thunder*), for irresponsible spending (*Bart's Dog Gets an F*, *Lisa's Pony*), and for immoral behavior (*Homer's Night Out*.)

Marge knows anger when it comes to the unity and safety of her family. This almost sacred wrath is felt by anyone in Springfield, who fails to serve in Marge's attempt to be a perfect mother. Not even the afterlife is safe from Marge's anger when her family is under threat. In the Halloween episode *Treehouse of Horror* the Simpsons have bought a haunted house. Marge attacks a ghost that threatens to kill the intruders:

- Shush! Shut up! Quit trying to push us around! Stop saying those horrible things and show some manners!

...

(The ghost tells Lisa to leave him alone.)

- (M) Don't talk to her like that!

- (G) Hey, listen, lady...

- (M) Oh, don't call me lady. My name is Marge Simpson and this is my family and we're not going anywhere. We're all going to have to live together, so you better get used to it. Please.

(*Treehouse of Horror*.)

Marge is also fierce, e.g. with Flash (a professional baseball player) for not signing Bart's baseball (*Dancin' Homer*); Mr. Burns for yelling at Lisa and insulting Homer about his weight (*Brush With Greatness*); Sideshow Bob for threatening to kill Bart (*Cape Feare*); and Krusty for letting Bart down (*Like Father, Like Clown*.)

If Marge is ever angry with her children, it is because they have failed to see the importance of family unity. Bart gets his mother wound up by, for instance, breaking the Thanksgiving centerpiece Lisa had made and, thus, "spoiling Thanksgiving" or for hurting his father's back (*Bart vs. Thanksgiving*, *Crepes of Wrath*.) The children feel Marge's anger if they fight too much or, as in the episode *Stark Raving Dad*, if they contribute to their father's bad mental health in such ways that he ends up in a "crazy house" (*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*, *Stark Raving Dad*.)

Marge is a human being, and sometimes, especially when it comes to her husband, she breaks the "angel code" and gets angry for "selfish" reasons; every now and then Homer winds her up just for being so inconsiderate. In fact, Marge's only possibility of an affair is started when she gets angry at Homer in the first season episode called *Life on the Fast Lane*. Homer, first, forgets about Marge's birthday and,

then, gives her a bowling ball for a present – a ball which is, clearly, meant for him. Marge gets furious, and decides to keep the ball and pick up bowling. On the bowling alley she meets Jacques, the bowling teacher and a womanizer. The anger Marge feels towards Homer helps her to agree on a date with Jacques – but, in the end, her love and loyalty win over and she returns to her family and her husband. (*Life on the Fast Lane.*) The following times this Angel Mother lets her façade down and seriously gets angry with her husband are when he, first, embarrasses her by getting too drunk at a party they throw and, second, starts to manage a beautiful single country-western singer, Lurleen Lumpkin (*The War of the Simpsons, Colonel Homer.*)

So far, Marge's anger has been about her family unity and her marriage. She does, however, lose her temper twice for the hardship of her role as a mother. The first incident happens in the episode *Homer Alone* when she struggles with aggression six times before breaking down. First, she frowns over a lamp that Homer and Bart have dropped and she is supposed to clean up. Second, she lashes out at her family, who are all demand things from her at the same time. Third, she snaps at Homer for “whining”. Fourth and fifth, she is grouchy at Bart and Lisa for missing their school bus and, then, fighting in the car. Sixth, her self-control utterly gives up as Maggie spills her milk all over the car as they are driving. After all this, by the seventh incident, when a bus driver walks up to her and tells her to move her car, she violently growls at the man. These incidents do not, clearly, make her angry just because of their immediate, concrete consequences, but rather because of the lack of appreciation and respect towards Marge, the altruistic housewife, these events show. (*Homer Alone.*) The second episode in which Marge gets angry in order to stand up for herself is *Bart Gets an Elephant*. The episode starts with a nice weekend morning in the Simpsons kitchen. Marge is cooking breakfast, which is then munched down by others, who are all planning a day of leisure. When they attempt to leave, Marge stops them, angry, and makes them stay and help her clean up the house. (*Bart Gets an Elephant.*)

Although there are two episodes where Marge's anger rises from the disappointment with her life, most of the time her anger relates to the purpose of her angelic motherhood. Marge is truly vicious only once in the first five seasons of the Simpsons; this happens in *Treehouse of Horror IV*. The whole Simpsons family is trying to defend itself from vampires, whose leader is Mr. Burns. Once they get the

leader killed (an act which is supposed to kill also the other vampires) it turns out that the Simpsons, apart from Lisa, are still vampires. The true leader was, after all, Marge. When Lisa states her horror of the matter, Marge quite coldly responds: “Well, I do have a life outside this house, you know” (*Treehouse of Horror IV.*) This is, in my opinion, the only time Marge behaves in an evil way – in a way that intentionally hurts her family and scares her child. However, the Simpsons Halloween episodes are known for the absurd, unrealistic characters and events; the real Marge would not show such utter cool.

### 7.2.2 The Mean Old Witches

There are two mother characters that fill Kaplan’s stereotype of an evil possessive mother (Kaplan,48.) Both mothers are old women who treat their offspring quite unfairly. It is quite interesting that the two truly mean mothers are of old age, and appear rather rarely in the program; though they exist, they do not challenge the mother myth. The idyll represented in the fertile, blooming mothers is, additionally, quite a contrast to the wrinkly, mean, old mothers in terms of polarity; youth and mother myth is seen as positive, whereas old age and opposition to the mother myth is seen as negative. Therefore, it seems that the function of the evil mothers is to make the mother myth look better; in comparison to these wrinkled bitter ladies, the young angelic Marge is a very desirable mother figure.

Mrs. Bouvier, Marge’s mother, is first introduced in the episode *The Way We Was* where Marge and Homer’s younger days are reminisced about. For a young American girl, her first prom night is a subject of nervousness and excitement. When Marge is getting ready for her first prom, Mrs. Bouvier gives her rather harsh advice:

- (Mrs. B) If you pinch your cheeks, they’ll glow. A little more. Try to break some capillaries.
- (M) Can’t we just use rouge for this?
- (Mrs. B) Ladies pinch. Whores use rouge.

*(The Way We Was.)*



Mrs. Bouvier does not use this fragile moment to bond with her daughter and share her excitement; as a contrast, she uses it to compare her daughter (indirectly) to a whore. On another occasion, already cited earlier, Mrs. Bouvier pressures Marge into hiding her true feelings behind a fake smile (*Moaning Lisa.*) Both these examples present a possessive mother who is obsessed with holding up a façade of a happy family over reality which hides a rather grimmer – perhaps even loveless – reality. They also present a mother who pays little attention to her daughter’s feelings or the possibility that she might get hurt by something the mother says; in Marge’s case, an inconsiderate role model has created an overly considerate offspring. Mrs. Bouvier both violates and strengthens the mother myth in these examples; she encourages her daughter to hide her feelings for the good of the facade, but simultaneously fails to show motherly, unconditional love.

Mrs. Bouvier is shown in two more episodes; *Bart vs. Thanksgiving* and *Lady Bouvier’s Lover*. Surprisingly, in the latter episode, she is, suddenly, quite a likable character. In the first episode, Mrs. Bouvier, however, behaves in the manner familiar to us. She has been invited to the Simpsons to spend Thanksgiving with the family. Marge is happy to see her:

- (M) Mom! You made it! How are you?
- (Mrs. B) I have laryngitis and it hurts to talk, so I’ll just say one thing: You never do anything right.

*(Bart vs. Thanksgiving.)*

She remains silent throughout the episode, except at the dinner table when she speaks again: “At the risk of losing my voice let me just say one more thing: I’m sorry I came” (*Bart vs. Thanksgiving.*) It seems like the witch mother’s mission in life is to make her children feel miserable; she is the very opposite of the mother myth’s all-loving ideal. However, as noted already above, the negative spirit of this representation that differs from the mother myth does not challenge it in any way. On the contrary, the comedy of Mrs. Bouvier’s character is in that it provokes the mother myth in the audience; how can she be so awful to her own daughter!

Mrs. Skinner is another frightening old lady in the Simpsons. The home she shares with her son Seymour resembles the spooky house of Alfred Hitchcock’s movie Psycho and her personality resonates with the terrifyingly possessive alter-ego of

a mother from the same movie. Mrs. Skinner is, in fact, seen only once in the 103 first episodes of the Simpsons – her possessive image, however, is built through several references made to her by other characters. First reference is made by Ms. Krabappel, Bart’s teacher, when Bart explores the possibility of romance between her and Mrs. Skinner’s son, Principal Skinner. Ms. Krabappel states, quite bitterly, that Mrs. Skinner will not let her son “out to play.” (*Bart the Lover.*) Similar quote comes from Principal Skinner, who is one morning driving the school bus: “Hello, Simpson. I’m riding the bus because my Mother hid my car keys to punish me for talking to a woman on the phone. She was right to do it” (*Treehouse of Horror IV.*) Seymour’s evil mother is not only possessive; she seems to hold some evil power over her son’ mind:

Listen to you mother, Lisa. I owe everything I have to  
my mother’s watchful eye... and swift hand... Oh, there’s mother now,  
watching me. What’s that, mother? Well, they have a right to be here. It’s  
school business. I... Mother, that sailor suit doesn’t fit anymore!

*(Brother From the Same Planet.)*

When Mrs. Skinner is, finally, seen in flesh and blood as she lets Bart in to see her son in the episode *Sweet Seymour Skinner’s Baadasssss Song* she turns out to be a tiny old lady. Although her son is a big man, she still wants to control his every action:

- Oh, you must be Seymour’s friend. He’s up in his room. Don’t touch the wall paper.  
...  
- Seymour, your friend Bart is here.  
- I know, Mother.  
- Seymour, do you want me to tell you when it’s 7.30?  
- No, Mother.

*(Sweet Seymour Skinner’s Baadasssss Song.)*

Although Mrs. Skinner behaves oddly, the truly destructive effect of her possessiveness can be seen in her son’s behavior (starting with the fact that this middle aged principal still lives with his mother.) Above in the quotation we see Principal Skinner having a lively conversation with his possessive mother inside his head (*Sweet Seymour Skinner’s Baadasssss Song.*) Later on, Seymour is seen severely beating up a mother doll in a self-help seminar (*Bart’s Inner Child.*) In case this is not enough to express the odd relationship between this particular mother and her son, there is one

more incident where Principal Skinner, a grown man, uses his mother's authority to get out of an uncomfortable situation with Ms. Krabappel at the school parking lot:

- (Pr. S) Blast it, woman, you parked too close. Move your car.
- (Ms. K) I'm in two lines. You got a problem, go to your mama.
- (Pr. S) Oh, don't worry. She'll hear about this!

*(The Last Temptation of Homer.)*

In the previous two chapters I have tried to analyze the representations of mothers in the Simpsons. I have found an extensive mother myth representation in the Angel Mother, which is accompanied, but not challenged by the Selfish and the Angry Mother. In the following chapter I shall conclude my analysis of the presence of mother myth in the Simpsons.

## 8. CONCLUSION

- (B) Thanks for sticking up for me, Mom.
- (M) What makes you think I did?
- (B) Who else would?

*(Homer, Defined.)*

In this thesis I have looked at the Simpsons from the point of view of the mother myth, trying to have open eyes and to question some of the very basic notions of motherhood represented in the show. Much of this analysis has been directed at Marge and her angelic character, noticing that as a representation of a mother she is quite oppressed and lacks the independence normally attached to adulthood. I would like to, however, state that my aim is not to attack mothers or the love they have for their families; I, as a mother, understand that love and its basic, natural character. What I criticize through this thesis is not that natural state, but the cultural structure that has twisted maternal love into a demand of perfection and unselfishness that has turned into accepted – and expected – limitation of mothers. Additionally the mother myth has changed the way those women who are not mothers are viewed quite negatively in the Western Culture (e.g. Rich 1995:34.)

Nikunen (1997) claims that extensive femininity – exaggeration – sheds light on the gender power structures and their artificiality and thus “undoes” the traditional representation (Nikunen 1997:216.) From this point of view, the strong presence of the mother myth in the Simpsons could, in fact, be a tool that reveals the inequality in it. I oppose this idea, however, at least when it comes to exaggerated motherhood; I see the mother myth as a crucial part of the hegemony that is imposed in our culture which effects thousands of women every day and imposes impossible demands on their daily life. In other words, it is a rather central part of our cultural inheritance which should be recognized and changed so that mothers, as well as fathers, could express and develop the truly natural – individual – parenthood and love in their families. The kind of exaggeration Nikunen mentions, or the satire in the Simpsons which has been used to explain Marge’s extreme maternal characteristics, cannot, therefore, be used to attack the mother myth. The hegemony has to be broken and given alternatives to instead of powering it by enforcing existing stereotypes.

The Simpsons has quite clear traces of the mother myth, both on a very practical level as well as in the basic “casting” of characters in the show. Mothers are polarized into two opposite stereotypes of motherhood, and the central mother character, Marge, is quite monotonic in her expression of angelic motherhood – the mother myth. Even Marge’s negative feelings strengthen the mother myth. In the two episodes, *Marge in Chains* and *A Streetcar Named Marge*, as I earlier mentioned, a resisting metaphor can be found. To find this alternative representation, however, requires quite deep interpretation. One has to be aware of the hegemony and knowingly analyze the episodes in its light; the hints can be easily forgotten in the shadow entertainment.

The most effective tool of mother myth in the Simpsons is, in the end, its sitcom format. This format, even if it does briefly allow the mother myth to be broken or questioned, makes any change succumb at the end of each episode; as the new episode begins, the roles are back to “normal”. Thus, even though the Simpsons offers some shaky alternatives to the traditional mother myth, in its basic setting mothers are stereotypical and the *circulate narrative closure* assures that they remain “in their place.”

The only feature I found that constantly resists mother myth in the Simpsons is the sexual activity of Marge’s character. Even this feature is, however, used to serve the nuclear family and its unity; Marge expresses her sexuality in her marriage and uses it to maintain her relationship, as happens, for instance, in episode *The Last Temptation of Homer*, where Marge is shown in sexy underwear in a hotel room, unknowingly rewarding her husband for not cheating on her with another woman (*The Last Temptation of Homer*.)

There is some pattern in the way Marge’s character changes, when comparing her character in the first season with the Marge of the fourth and fifth season. As the show progresses, there are more implications of Marge getting “fed up” with her role as the perfect mother. Additionally, the negative polarizations of motherhood, Mrs. Bouvier and especially Mrs. Skinner are introduced in later seasons. It is possible, that in the seasons following the material used in this research, the basic picture of motherhood in *the Simpsons* could slowly change. This, however, is a subject for a whole new study. Additionally, it would be interesting to map the linear

development of the representation of motherhood through different characters in the Simpsons from season to season. I am, however, quite confident in stating that within the first five seasons, the mother myth holds quite a strong position in the representation of motherhood in the series.

To finish this thesis I would like to bring out the father myth that goes silently hand in hand with the mother myth. As a note to the future, both myths should be changed to allow a full, equal experience of parenthood to the parents as well as to the children growing up in a nuclear family. As Rich (1995) points out:

In learning to give care to children, men would have to cease being children; the privileges of fatherhood could not be toyed with, as they now are, without an equal share in the full experience of nurture... This means, among other things, that we cease praising and being grateful to the fathers of our children when they take some partial share in their care and nurture. (No woman is considered "special" because she carries out her responsibilities as a parent; not to do so is considered a social crime.

(Rich 1995:216)

Kaplan, also, recognized the fact that fatherhood, even in contemporary culture, is chosen, motherhood is demanded (Kaplan 1992:197.) However, the father myth holds its own restrictions; fathers are expected to be the bread winners in the traditional notion of parenthood which often leads them away from the true notion of fatherhood (e.g. Fiske 1990:89.) In other words, the recognition of the mother myth is not important to women only, but it has an effect on everybody in the society, men and fathers included. In this sense, feminist research and motherhood research, in specific, is not only about women's oppression and women's liberation, but every human being's liberation from unnecessary, restrictive, stereotypical social structures.

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THERE'S NO DISGRACE LIKE HOME

BART THE GENERAL

MOANING LISA

THE CALL OF THE SIMPSONS

THE TELLTALE HEAD

LIFE ON THE FAST LANE

HOMER'S NIGHT OUT

THE CREPES OF WRATH

KRUSTY GETS BUSTED

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING

The Complete 2<sup>nd</sup> Season

BART GETS AN F

SIMPSON AND DELILAH

TREEHOUSE OF HORROR

TWO CARS IN EVERY GARAGE AND THREE EYES ON EVERY FISH

DANCIN' HOMER

DEAD PUTTING SOCIETY

BART VS. THANKSGIVING

BART THE DAREDEVIL

ITCHY &amp; SCRATCHY &amp; MARGE

BART GETS HIT BY A CAR

ONE FISH, TWO FISH, BLOWFISH, BLUE FISH

THE WAY WE WAS

HOMER VS. LISA VS. THE 8<sup>TH</sup> COMMANDMENT  
PRINCIPAL CHARMING  
O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU  
BART'S DOG GETS AN F  
OLD MONEY  
BRUSH WITH GREATNESS  
LISA'S SUBSTITUTE  
THE WAR OF THE SIMPSONS  
THREE MEN AND A COMIC BOOK  
BLOOD FEUD

The Complete 3<sup>rd</sup> Season

STARK RAVING DAD  
MR. LISA GOES TO WASHINGTON  
WHEN FLANDERS FAILED  
BART THE MURDERER  
HOMER DEFINED  
LIKE FATHER, LIKE CLOWN  
TREEHOUSE OF HORROR II  
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FLAMING MOE'S  
BURNS VERKAUFEN DER KRAFTWERK  
I MARRIED MARGE  
RADIO BART  
LISA THE GREEK  
HOMER ALONE  
BART THE LOVER  
HOMER AT THE BAT  
SEPARATE VOCATIONS  
DOG OF DEATH  
COLONEL HOMER



BLACK WIDOWER  
THE OTTO SHOW  
BART'S FRIEND FALLS IN LOVE  
BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE TWO DIMES?

The Complete 4<sup>th</sup> Season

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HOMER THE HERETIC  
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MARGE GETS A JOB  
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MR. PLOW  
LISA'S FIRST WORD  
HOMER'S TRIPLE BYPASS  
MARGE VS. THE MONORAIL  
SELMA'S CHOICE  
BROTHER FROM THE SAME PLANET  
I LOVE LISA  
DUFFLESS  
LAST EXIT TO SPRINGFIELD  
SO IT'S COME TO THIS: A SIMPSONS CLIP SHOW  
THE FRONT  
WHACKING DAY  
MARGE IN CHAINS  
KRUSTY GETS KANCELLED

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CAPE FEARE

HOMER GOES TO COLLEGE

ROSEBUD

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MARGE ON THE LAM

BART'S INNER CHILD

BOY-SCOUTZ 'N THE HOOD

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HOMER THE VIGILANTE

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HOMER AND APU

LISA VS. MALIBU STACY

DEEP SPACE HOMER

HOMER LOVES FLANDERS

BART GETS AN ELEPHANT

BURN'S HEIR

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Appendix 1

**The Percentage of Female and Male Characters with Dialogue, Seasons 1-4**

