

THE SIMPSONS AND THE SAVIOR TEACHER/DEFICIT PARENT IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract:

The savior teacher/ deficit parent narrative has become a public pedagogy in America, evidenced by the rise of Teach for America, and the threat of extreme neoliberal education reforms by the Trump administration. In this paper, I examine how the popular television show, *The Simpsons*, upholds and challenges familiar tropes of the savior teacher/ deficit parent narrative. Drawing on Michael Apple's theory of the enterprising individual as a trait of neoliberal education ideology, I analyze the ways in which the episode "Lisa's Substitute" strays from predictable narratives through a focus on parent/ child relationship vs. teacher/ student relationship. I conclude that while this episode highlights and satirizes tropes of the savior teacher/ deficit parent narrative, ultimately, the resolution does not challenge assumptions about working class parents as a barrier to their children's success or the missionary role of teacher saviors.

Introduction

From Jamie Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, & Menéndez, 1988) to Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson & Brukheimer, 1995), savior teachers remain familiar figures in popular texts about school. In the context of the neoliberal focus on teachers as a problem in need of reform, "the savior teacher" script remains popular in film and television, positioning this larger than life figure as an outsider coming in and singlehandedly changing students' lives. This paper focuses on the representation of the savior teacher in Matt Groening's cartoon television series *The Simpsons*. As the longest running animated comedy on television, now on its twenty-eighth season, *The Simpsons* has often focused its satirical attention on the education system; indeed, much has been written of the ways in which the show's satire successfully challenges or maintains hegemonic neoliberal education ideologies

(Kiedrowski, 2013)

. However, scholars have yet to examine how the show depicts the script of the savior teacher character in opposition to the deficit parent.

In this article, I focus in particular on episode thirty two, "Lisa's Substitute" (Vitti & Moore, 1991), in which a gifted substitute teacher enlightens his students with pedagogical practices that contrast with those of Lisa's 'real' teachers and cause conflict in her home life. I will consider this episode in the context of *The Simpsons'* intertextual satire to determine the preferred meaning (Hall, 1997) of the show's portrayal of teachers and parents. I argue that while *The Simpsons* may satirize the teacher savior/ deficit parent script, the episode ultimately upholds the narrative of outside teachers as saviors. In the conclusion, I discuss how this representation has real effects on the policy and practices of urban schools.

Methodology

Drawing on the fields of media and cultural studies, I offer a theoretical and semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1967; Hall 1997; Scholes, 1982) of one episode of *The Simpsons*. Semiotic analysis focuses on the sign systems in text and uses a three-pronged, dynamic process to make meaning of sign, object, and interpretation in context (Queiroz & Merrel, 2006). Stokes (2003) describes key concerns of semiotics as “how a producer of an image [or any text] makes it *mean* something, and how we, as readers, *get meaning out*” (p. 71, emphasis in original). As such, semiotic analysis enables an investigation of the ideological workings of text (Stokes, 2003) and the coded meanings produced across text, or intertextually

(Kumral, 2013)

. Analyzing “Lisa’s Substitute” semiotically allows a consideration of the producer’s intentions and viewer’s interpretations within the context of popular culture and urban education discourses, including the conventions of the teacher savior/ deficit parent script. Two questions guide my inquiry: What visual and verbal codes frame the representation of savior teachers and their antagonists—ineffective teachers and working-class parents—in *The Simpsons*? And how are comedy, parody, and satire employed to uphold or critique the ideologies of the savior teacher/ deficit parent script?

In Parton’s (2016) examination of revisionist teacher narratives she states that in order for narrative critiques to be recognizable they must “complete their revisions within a narrative framed by traditional teacher film conventions” by including the tropes (p. 153). In other words, in order to provide a critique of the teacher savior script and the underlying hegemonic neoliberal ideologies, creators must also repeat the very codes they hope to critique. Meskill (2007) attributes much of *The Simpsons*’ success to the ways the writers are able to produce a recognizable trope and then layer it with meanings for the audience to construct a new (perhaps revisionist) narrative. She describes *The Simpsons* as simultaneously presenting examples of “producerly texts—ones that viewers actively co-produce... and viewerly texts—ones...which ‘trigger routinized, well rehearsed narrative structures’” (Bruner, in Meskill, 2007, p. 44). Here, I will be paying close attention to *The Simpsons* as a viewerly text of the savior teacher/ urban school genre by identifying the common codes of the genre and analyzing if revisionist narratives are likely produced by viewers. Does *The Simpsons* succeed in satirizing the savior teacher/ deficit parent trope in “Lisa’s Substitute” or simply reproduce (and therefore elevate) recognizable tropes of the genre?

To analyze *The Simpsons* necessitates an understanding of how it talks to other texts, as well as societal and political ideologies. Given that “no single program is as important in creating the televisual space for the satire TV boom as *The Simpsons*” (Henry, 2012, p. 6), it is necessary here to distinguish between parody and satire. Henry (2012) defines parody as “a playful imitation or humorous reworking of another text for comic effect, and it is usually used to pay tribute to the original or poke fun at it...” which he distinguishes from satire because, “unlike parody, (satire) is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its attention” (p. 9). Accordingly, a parody does not in itself challenge the teacher savior narrative, while satire does. In an interview, Matt Groening (Doherty, 1999), the creator of *The Simpsons*, stated his satirical aims,

...it’s not enough to be aware that most of television is bad and stupid and pernicious... what I want to do is point out the way TV is unconsciously structured in a way to keep us all distracted.... What I’m trying to do in the guise of light entertainment... is nudge people, jostle them, wake them up to some of the ways we’re being manipulated and exploited.

And in my amusing way I try to hit on some of the unspoken rules of our culture...

In my reading of "Lisa's Substitute," I identify key areas where tropes of the savior teacher are present, and then examine how the verbal and visual codes work to challenge or reify tropes primarily through the use of satire. I focus particularly on three scenes that depict distinct traits of this genre. The first is the seduction between Mrs. Krabappel and Mr. Bergstrom, which I identify as an example of the juxtaposition of the ineffective teacher needed to establish the 'good teacher' in the teacher savior discourse. I examine the gendered representations present as well as the intertextual satire embedded in this scene. The second scene takes place when Homer reluctantly takes Lisa to the museum, where they run into an enthusiastic Mr. Bergstrom. This scene is an at-times painful depiction of the conflict presented through the savior teacher and working-class parent trope, ripe with stereotypes of the working-class deficit parent. Last, I examine the episode's concluding scene in which Lisa confronts her father, calling him a "baboon," and then later watches him pretend to be a monkey.

***The Simpsons* in Historical Perspective: Neoliberalism and the Urban School/Teacher Savior Genre**

"Viewers looking for a sanguine or sanitized perspective on American education may well be disappointed or offended (by *The Simpsons*)" (Kantor et al. 2001, p.185)

The Simpsons is arguably one of the most famous TV shows of all time, and has become an icon of American popular culture (Gray, 2006; Henry, 2012). Because *The Simpsons* is a skilled satire that exposes hypocrisy, ineptitude, and the potential dangers of ideologies present in the American culture wars (Henry, 2012), its contribution to American educational debates and representations of urban schooling is worthy of investigation. Neoliberalism, a term Lisa Duggan describes in an interview as "a set of pro-corporate, pro-business policies that were put into place by a pro-corporate social movement" (Smiley, 2004), greatly impacts American educational policies and practices. In "The Simpsons as a Satirical Portrayal of Neoliberal Influence on Public Education," Kiedrowski (2013) uses Apple's (2001a) four characteristics of neoliberal education—privatization, marketization, performativity, and the enterprising individual—to examine the show's portrayal of neoliberalism's effect on public education. The characteristic of the enterprising individual is of particular interest to this study of the savior teacher. The idea that one individual can fix a broken school by rescuing students is cultivated by a free market capitalism ideology, where "individualism thrives and the collective is shunned" (Simmie, 2012, p. 489). This emphasis on the power of one (savior) individual also works to mask and leave undisrupted the institutionalized systems of power and oppression that created such educational inequities. Hence, how such a popular show perpetuates or challenges the teacher savior script has significant implications on the public perception of neoliberal education policies and practices, particularly in urban settings that such reforms often target (Klaf & Kwan, 2010).

The urban school genre popularized by films like the 1955 *Blackboard Jungle* (Berman & Brooks), which was notably released one year after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, continues to gain considerable traction alongside the rise of neoliberal education reform. The plot of *Blackboard Jungle* has been repeated at least eight times between 1987 and 2007 alone (Yosso & García, 2010). This genre, depicting a White teacher determined to teach remedial, delinquent, and often violent students of color who are victims of their urban setting (apathetic teachers, authoritative administrators, and ignorant parents) (Yosso & García, 2010), also reflects neoliberal ideologies of the 'enterprising individual' in Apple's (2001a) definition.

Satirizing these urban teacher savior films, *The Simpsons* writers tackle the teacher savior script in episode thirty-two. This episode focuses on the Simpsons' daughter, Lisa, who meets her savior teacher Mr. Bergstrom, a substitute who fills in when her actual teacher contracts psychosomatic Lyme disease. Lisa quickly falls in love with this heroic figure; Bergstrom dresses as a cowboy shooting blanks, cries when he reads the class *Charlotte's Web*, praises each student for their unique, however meaningless, talents, and teaches her "that life is worth living" (Vitti & Moore, 1991). Her father, Homer Simpson, pales in comparison and several scenes depict their deteriorating relationship. Eventually, Bergstrom leaves for his next assignment, and the father-daughter relationship is restored through a pep talk and a playful interaction in the family home.

The savior teacher narrative has many recognizable tropes that *The Simpsons*' writers exploit in their satire. These tropes are an example of the writers' use of codes, or cultural knowledge used to create specific meanings (Stokes, 2002), which in this case is ideological critique. Often, the savior teacher is glorified as a champion who is in conflict with other teachers, administrators, families, and societal expectations (Parton, 2016) and, as an enterprising individual, despite these barriers transforms their urban students' lives. Frequently, these teachers make notable personal sacrifices for their students, such as Ms. Johnson in *Freedom Writers* (DeVito et.al. 2007) or Mr. Dadier in *Blackboard Jungle* (Berman & Brooks, 1955), and break the rules to create curriculum that speaks directly to their students (Parton, 2016), such as Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson, et al., 1995) or Mr. Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, & Menéndez, 1988). Usually, the teacher savior appears within the urban school genre as a missionary White, middle class teacher who saves poor students of color in urban environments, offering them the mobility to leave their circumstances and communities behind and enter the White, middle class world through education (Yosso & García 2010). Furthermore, scripts often position the savior in conflict with the students' working-class and/or racialized families, who are frequently coded as disinterested, or even a barrier to their children's education (see Yosso & García, 2010). Frequent negative stereotypes within the depictions of students' deficit families create an oppositional binary (Hall, 1997) that positions the White teacher as the students' hero. It is the savior's mission to create opportunities as families will not or cannot. This depiction of the family as a deficit or hindrance to the success of the student is taken up by the scriptwriters of "Lisa's Substitute."

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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I turn first to the representations of the "bad teacher" in juxtaposition to the "good teacher" as an example of the use of satire to critique the teacher savior script.

Constructing 'good' and 'bad' teachers. Oppositional binaries of good/bad characters are common in popular media (Grant, 2002) because, according to Hall (1997), meaning is constructed through the establishment of difference. In order to construct the (reductionist) "good" teacher, they are distinguished from the "other" or "bad teacher." In this episode, the writers quickly code the current faculty of Springfield Elementary in contrast to the outsider substitute in order to establish that he is the "good" teacher. Principal Skinner is ineffective and out of touch (teaching the children untrue or irrelevant facts when forced to teach for mere

moments), and the two classroom teachers are portrayed as the traditional spinster (Lisa assumes Ms. Hoover has been “dumped again” when she’s sent home for psychosomatic Lyme disease, and Ms. Krabappel’s disdain for Bart during class elections is palpable). In contrast, Mr. Bergman dresses up in costumes, makes each child feel special, and creates learning opportunities out of recess time. Each of these instances “talks to” (Gray, 2006) the signifiers of “bad teachers” in teacher savior scripts, augmented to such an extent as to satirize this view of the profession in neoliberal ideology. One example of this juxtaposition is when Lisa overhears Ms. Krabappel hitting on Mr. Bergman. She’s smoking in the teacher’s lounge, telling him about her unfaithful ex-husband. Mr. Bergman (played by Dustin Hoffman) nervously replies,

MB: This profession can put a strain on a marriage

MK: Since he’s been gone I’ve been looking for a substitute to teach me a lesson I sorely need.

MB: *(Is viewed through Mrs. Krabappel’s arched leg)* Mrs. Krabappel you’re trying to seduce me.

MK:*(laughs)* Well?

MB: *(In a low, sigh)* I’m sorry Mrs. K, you’re very nice but it’s the children I love.

LS: *(Wearing Mr. Bergstrom’s cowboy hat, a dreamy look on her face, clasps her hands together, sighs)* Oh!

There are many signifying practices in this short exchange. First is a parodist nod to *The Graduate* (Truman & Nicholas, 1967) in which Dustin Hoffman makes the same accusation to Ms. Robinson. The viewer sees Mr. Bergstrom through Ms. Krabappel’s seductively arched leg, a visual symbol that directly references the iconic movie poster from the 1976 film. Second, this scene effectively establishes Ms. Krabappel as the gendered and (de)sexualized miserly spinster so often portrayed as antagonist in school films (Parton, 2016). Through reference to the scandal in Hoffman’s notorious film and the “bad girl” acts of smoking and sitting on desks, the scene positions Ms. Krabappel’s (female) sexuality as immoral and in contrast to the morally superior Mr. Bergstrom who remains asexual (pure) through his declaration of platonic love for “the children.” Her desperation for a man, and her rejection of her role as teacher/mother, is intended to further call her morals into question. Moreover, the creators set this scene in the teachers’ lounge—a place of mystery for all those outside the association of teachers, further solidifying Mrs. Krabappel’s act as scandalous. Through his refusal of Mrs. Krabappel’s advances, Mr. Bergstrom further embodies the savior teacher as a teacher who cares so much for his students that he sacrifices everything for them, while positioning Ms. Krabappel as uncommitted or uncaring towards her pupils

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Challenging the teacher savior narrative through satire. Are *The Simpsons* writers critiquing what Apple (2001b) describes as “the constant attention given in the media and in public pronouncements to ‘incompetent’ teachers who are overpaid and have short workdays and long holidays...” (c.f. Keidrowski, p. 208), or simply establishing Mr. Bergstrom as a worthy childhood crush for Lisa? I argue that this is a satirical challenge to the narrative of incompetent versus savior teacher. In this oppositional binary

Springfield Elementary faculty are constructed as the "bad teachers", clear signifiers of this trope, and also sites of social or moral comedy (referring to Henry's definition). Bergstrom's proclamation that his commitment to students necessitates chastity moves the idea of the sacrificial savior teacher (and therefore enterprising individual) to the absurd, effectively satirizing this characteristic. Furthermore, by parodying *The Graduate* (Truman & Nichols, 1967) the writers firmly establish this interaction as a site of entertainment, not a scene upholding a heroic figure. This is reinforced later when Mr. Bergstrom leaves and Lisa runs alongside the train as Dustin Hoffman ran alongside the bus in *The Graduate*. Again, intertextual satire is used to point out the absurdity of the lionization of the savior teacher character; messages about portrayals of the larger than life "bad teacher" and "good teacher" are recognizable and simultaneously unbelievable.

Night at the Museum

Next I turn to the depiction of the trope of working-class (and often racialized) parents as a barrier to the savior teacher's mission, rendered through Homer, Lisa, and Mr. Bergstrom meeting at the Springfield Natural History Museum. This scene clearly establishes Homer as the deficit parent in the teacher savior script; however, unlike other films in this genre, the negative effects of this dynamic on family relationships are portrayed, thus challenging the script.

Establishing the teacher savior/deficit parent dichotomy. At the beginning of this scene Homer makes fun of the 'suggested donation' box as Mr. Bergstrom arrives. Lisa, ecstatic to see her teacher crush outside of school, immediately pulls away from Homer to greet her hero teacher. Homer excitedly tries to educate the substitute about not needing to pay, and he responds, "And this must be your father," much to Lisa's embarrassment. The tension grows as they walk through the museum together:

MB: Actually Mr. Simpson, they do know a great deal about the process of mummification, first they pull the brain out through the nose with an iron hook, then they stuff the insides with sawdust and onions.

L: Ew gross! *(Lisa is positioned between the two men, both holding her hand)*

S: Ooooh pretty creepy. Still I'd rather have him chasing me than a Wolfman!"

LS: Oh lord" *(L shakes head, covers with hands walks away hand in hand with MB, sad music plays as close up of H left alone, MB looks back concerned. Next MB and H are eating at the Age of Heroes Sandwich Shop while Lisa overhears their conversation from the Childarium)*

MB: Mr. Simpson, I'm going to be presumptuous. Lisa seems to feel she has no strong male role model.

H: *(with food in his mouth)* She said that?

MB: Well, no she didn't say that but-

H: -But you can tell right? She looks around and sees everyone else's dad with a good education, youthful looks, and a clean credit record and thinks why me what did I do to deserve this fat old piece of *-(collapses and cries on table)*

MB: -Mr. Simpson, you've got to be a bigger man, there is a wonderful girl's future at stake.

H: Well if she's wonderful than give her an A (*pounds table*)

MB: I am giving her an A! (*Getting angry*)

H: Great but don't tell her it was a favor to me tell her she earned it

MB: Mr. Simpson she did earn it (*angry*)

H: You are smooth I'll give you that (*walks up to Lisa to play with the static machine and impress her with his hair, she walks away*)

In "talking to" the urban school genre where being working-class and/or racialized is associated with devaluing education or ignorance, Homer's working-class identity is signified and positioned as an inherent deficiency in comparison to Mr. Bergstrom. Immediately, middle class values of knowledge are elevated: Homer's knowledge of managing money is not valued, but embarrassing for Lisa, while Mr. Bergstrom displays a wealth of "factual" knowledge about obscure topics like mummies. The substitute lectures both Lisa and her father, elevating his knowledge, and there are even juxtapositions of their status through their food choices (salad and milk for Bergstrom versus a large sandwich and soda for Homer) in subtle ways meant to visually encode who is making educated or sophisticated choices. Homer, as the working-class, infantilized deficit parent, is further coded through his through language—Mr. Bergstrom describes a complicated procedure and Homer responds, "oooh pretty creepy"—as well as behavior—when Mr. Bergstrom tries to have a "man to man" conversation about Lisa needing a male role model, Homer names his own insufficiencies, cries, and then is combative & confused.

This scene includes strong imagery of how such parent-teacher dichotomies are evident to children and detrimental to family relationships. Homer describes *himself* as the deficit parent due to his lack of education, appearance and financial status, naming these intended class identifiers as negative. This conversation, although between cartoon characters, is a believable expression of a working-class parent internalizing messages about their inherent deficiencies. The writers use visual conventions of body language to signal the effects of this dynamic further. At the beginning of this scene, Lisa and Homer walk into the museum hand in hand, but when Lisa sees Mr. Bergstrom she immediately drops her father's hand and runs to the substitute. While being lectured about dinosaurs, the Simpsons are hand in hand again and facing Bergstrom—additionally alluding to Homer as "one of the kids" rather than Mr. Bergstrom's peer. However, when the savior refutes something Homer says about mummies, the viewer sees the three characters from the back, both men holding Lisa's hands as she stands literally and metaphorically between them. When Homer makes a childish comment about the mummy information, Lisa, embarrassed, covers her face in her hands, mutters "oh lord" about her father, and walks away, hand in hand with her male role model, Mr. Bergstrom. The implied transfer of who is parenting is clear. This is the first of two times in this scene Lisa walks away from Homer, and both times the camera rests on Homer's dejected face while iconic sad *Simpsons* music plays in the background. This imagery alludes to Lisa's predicament: in order to ascend to her middle class goals through education, she must leave her family behind.

Challenges and reifications. Based on this analysis, this scene both challenges and reinforces the traditional teacher savior versus deficit parent script. Many of the moments in which Homer is presented as the deficit parent are *comedic* moments when his deficiencies make him fall short of the heroic Mr. Bergstrom (through dialogue, infantilization, construction of knowledge) and

relationship to middle class commonplaces like certain food, donations, and museums. Homer is the butt of the joke. While the contrast is highlighted, it is not satirized here, and therefore reifies the familiar teacher savior/deficit parent dichotomy. Based on these portrayals, I read the preferred meaning (Hall, 1997) of this scene as warranting Lisa's embarrassment; Homer is not the role model she needs, and we feel bad for Homer because we see his insufficiencies as inescapable. I believe this is also connected to Lisa's class ambivalence. While a member of the Simpsons family, Lisa is a familial and Springfield outsider because of her desire for education, characteristics that signal a higher class. She clearly 'passes' in school settings in ways that her brother and father do not. Kantor et al. (2001) describe Lisa as "the ideal student- brilliant, talented, academically motivated, and socially conscious.... But she is thwarted by circumstances, unappreciated and unchallenged by her teachers, and often ridiculed by her classmates" (p. 188). The above scene shows that she already surpasses her father in book smarts, securing a father figure (and teacher) who appreciates her for her outlier qualities. The idea that gifted youth in underserved communities can transcend their 'circumstances' (and likewise their families) if given the opportunity through education (imparted by a savior teacher) is a common convention of the genre, and the devastating effects this can have on families and communities is not often questioned.

While the show upholds stereotypes, this scene also challenges the teacher savior versus deficit parent trope. By satirizing the nuclear family sitcoms of the 1950's (Cantor, 1999), it is the 'realness' of the Simpsons family that has endeared the show to many for decades, and which allows viewers of "Lisa's Substitute" a familial perspective on the damaging effects of the teacher savior/ deficit parent narrative. While Lisa may have eyes only for the substitute, the viewer does not. Our hearts rest with Homer, as the scene focuses on his dejected, abandoned cartoon body (accompanied by the same forlorn music used in every sad scene) not once, but twice in his only interaction with Mr. Bergstrom. We also see that Lisa, who learns that "there is a place where my intelligence will be an asset not a liability" (Vitti & Moore, 1991), is also affected by this dynamic. She is a little girl, literally caught between her own father and her role model. Some of the emotional pain and cognitive dissonance a real child in this situation would likely experience is conveyed to the viewer in this scene as well because we know and care about the coherence of the however dysfunctional Simpsons family, thus pointing out how this savior's influence may negatively impact a student. This exceptional moment connotes how the neoliberal focus on the individual (student) inevitably impacts the collective family and/or community negatively. The fact that Bergstrom (as most missionaries) leaves is a further nod to the script, and points out that the very family relationship that is threatened lasts longer than the promises of a savior teacher. This is not a viewpoint commonly found in teacher savior scripts, especially about urban schools. This episode advocates for the allegiance to the family and in turn provides a rare challenge to the teacher savior script.

Monkey Trouble?

In this conclusion of the episode, the effects of the teacher savior versus deficit parent dynamic come to a head between Lisa and Homer, offering further critique of the teacher savior script. However, the resolution disappointingly reifies the narrative.

Teacher savior/deficit parent impacts on family. The scene begins at the dinner table when Lisa blows up at Homer, saying, "You sir, are a baboon."

He gasps, “Me?”

“Yes you! Baboon! Baboon! BABOON!”

Marge sends Homer to attempt to cheer Lisa up, with no success. He sits on her dollhouse and breaks it. He tries his pep talk again, “You’ll have lots of special people in your life, Lisa. There’s probably someplace where they all get together and the food is real good and guys like me are serving drink. Ah well, maybe I can’t explain all this, but at least I can fix your dollhouse for ya’. At least I’m good at monkey work, you know what I mean...” He then dances around the room like an ape.

This works, Lisa apologizes, and they hug. Homer then goes to Bart, who is upset at having lost the election. But Homer points out that it’s a good thing he didn’t win, as the class president has to do extra work and doesn’t get to do anything fun or get paid. Bart is cheered up, saying, “Thanks, monkey man!” (Vitti & Moore, 1991).

In her frustration, Lisa gives voice to the barrier that has been created between her and her father—he is of lower status and can never understand her. The effects this has on the favored Simpsons family challenges the teacher savior/ deficit parent script because it is meant to be distressing to the viewer, augmented by the commonplace setting of the dinner table. While much of the episode falls into the tropes of connoting deficit working-class parents as “background figures to emphasize the savior qualities of individual teachers” (Grant, 2002, p.87), here the writers foreground the family, depicting the interpersonal damage such hierarchies can instill. Lisa calling her father a baboon, which Homer describes as “the stupidest, ugliest, smelliest ape of them all!” (Vitti & Moore, 1991) speaks directly to what Grant describes as the frequent Hollywood “portrayal of parents of inner-city children as almost subhuman” (2002, p. 89). In trying to repair their relationship, Homer acknowledges the growing barrier between them, telling Lisa that one day ‘people like him’ will be serving ‘people like her.’ The author’s choice of language here connotes further critique of neoliberalism, which values productivity over human connection and implies that individuals’ lack of (material) success is due to their own poor performance. Following this ideology, then, it is Homer’s fault he cannot be a good (read: middle class) father for his daughter who will inevitably surpass him in status. Homer (and therefore the author) here is also pointing out that Lisa ascending her class position will mean leaving her family behind. While this is encouraged in the urban school genre, “Lisa’s Substitute” brings a unique perspective to the effects this would have on a family.

Upholding the deficit parent narrative. It is the resolution, however, that upholds much of what is criticized about the teacher savior/ deficit parent script. Homer pretends to be a baboon to repair his relationship with his daughter, effectively accepting the deficit attribute constructed throughout the episode. He accepts that while he cannot be a role model for his daughter, he can make her laugh and can fix things. Their resolution implies that Lisa can love him, but she’ll never respect him how she respected the intellectually and morally superior Mr. Bergstrom. What Homer can provide for her is entertainment and labor, while her savior teacher provides education and possibility (common stereotypes about the working-class verses higher class). This reading of “Lisa’s Substitute” is identified in recent scholarship as Kantor et al. state, “Lisa clearly stands the best chance of transcending her circumstances, and succeeding.... Of her teachers, only Mr. Bergstrom seems to appreciate Lisa’s potential, as he tells her that intelligence is an asset” (2001, p. 193).

It is implied that because of his working-class status, Homer cannot do any better for his family. After making fun of himself to his daughter to cheer her up, Homer comforts a distraught Bart by encouraging him to aim for low achievement and minimal effort, reinforcing negative depictions of white working-class masculinity and parents as a barrier to their children's success. The episode ends with Homer congratulating himself, "holy moly, talk about parenting!" and telling Marge he's on "the biggest roll of (his) life" (Vitti & Moore, 1991). The conclusion of this episode clearly reinforces the characterization of working-class parents as deficient and their children in need of an outside teacher savior in order to overcome their situation, although in different ways for Lisa and Bart. Lisa, the viewer understands, has the hope of transcending her class status *despite* her family. Bart, however, as the infamous troublemaker, is already a product of his circumstance. His relationship with his father was not challenged, because, as a representation of the white working-class child without mobility, he has the only role model he needs, a sub-human, entertaining, laborer. This is foreshadowed earlier in the episode when the class cheers Bart's prank on with a chorus of monkey noises that mirror Homer's later imitation to cheer up Lisa. Creator and writer Matt Groening's (1998) infamous statement proves the parent blaming is intentional, "If you don't want your kids to be like Bart Simpson, don't act like Homer Simpson" (para 7).

An examination of well-known *Simpsons* fan pages also adds to the argument that the episode reinforces the teacher savior narrative

[MM2]

Mike Amatto, who has reviewed 444 episodes on his *blog Me Blog Write Good* (2011), sums up what many devout fans have to say,

Bergstrom represents the kind of father (Lisa) wishes she had, a man who would enrich her, make her think and feel new things, and foster a love of learning. However, fate is a cruel mistress, and Lisa is stuck with a shaven ape who for the greater part pays no min

[MM3]

d to (his) daughter's life.... Homer may not be the father Lisa truly deserves, but he still loves her and supports her. Plus I don't think Mr. Bergstrom would hoot like a monkey and make Lisa laugh like Homer does.

Thus, according to Ammato, Lisa's 'fate' is to be 'stuck' with a deficit father that is inherently less than she deserves and can only offer her love and comedic relief, unlike the savior teacher who could have offered her intellectual possibility. This interpretation suggests that at end of the episode viewers can be left with savior teacher/ deficit narratives firmly in place.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined how *The Simpsons* upholds and challenges the problematic tropes of the savior teacher/ deficit parent narrative common in the savior teacher and urban school genre. I considered all three scenes in the context of the savior

teacher trope, identifying ways in which they stray from the predictable visual and verbal codes and conventions through a focus on parent/child relationship versus teacher/student relationship, as well as the preferred meaning (Hall 1997) from this ending. I conclude that while this episode highlights and satirizes tropes of the savior teacher/ deficit parent narrative, ultimately, the resolution does not challenge assumptions about working-class parents as a barrier to their children's success or the role of teacher saviors.

Teacher savior tropes popularize the shifting of the blame to individual teachers who are painted in contrast to the success of (enterprising) hero teachers. Through the use of satire, the first scene in "Lisa's Substitute" establishes the outsider as the savior teacher by juxtaposing him with the immoral Ms. Krabappel, firmly grounding this episode as intertextually "talking to" the savior teacher and urban school genres. Homer is coded as the deficit working-class parent in opposition to Mr. Bergstrom, and though these latter scenes approach challenging the script, ultimately it is upheld. While "Lisa's Substitute" provides its own comedic and at times satirical portrayal of the savior teacher in opposition to the deficit parent narrative, the ending ultimately reifies this script and with it stereotypes of working-class parents as well as "good" and "bad" teachers.

As Cantor (1999) affirms, "...when *The Simpsons* satirizes something, it acknowledges its importance" (p. 742). By perpetuating the recognizable script, "Lisa's Substitute" contributes to a larger body of media that has established the public pedagogy of the savior teacher and deficit parent common in urban education discourses (Applegate, 2016; Grant, 2002; Klaf & Kwan, 2010). Garcia (2015) asserts that such media has played a major role in successfully shaping, reinforcing, and normalizing the neoliberal agenda for education by constructing these discourses as "the contemporary reality of education" (p. 5) and that comedy has worked as a more palatable introduction for viewers. Establishing deficit working-class and/ or racialized families as well as bad teachers as a public education problem in need of reform has made way for the concept of enterprising savior individuals in policy and practice. Indeed, the (young, White, educated) teacher who is brought into urban schools as a glorified hero to uplift disenfranchised students despite families, ineffective co-workers, deplorable conditions, and personal sacrifices described in the introduction has already been on the U.S. public payroll for decades in the form of Teach for America (TFA) (Lahann & Reagan, 2011).

TFA founder Wendy Kopp widely cites "A Nation at Risk; The Imperative for Education Reform" (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)—a governmental report commissioned during the Reagan administration which proposed the "crisis" of American schooling and introduced neoliberal solutions—as her inspiration to create a system which recruits young "talented" people to dedicate two years to a struggling (often urban) school to counter veteran "bad teachers" (Gautreaux, 2015). "A Nation at Risk" was published in 1983 (Gautreaux, 2015) and TFA was launched in 1989 (Teach For America, Inc., 2016). As stated earlier, the plotline of savior teacher has been repeated *at least* 8 times in major motion pictures between 1987 and 2007 alone (Yosso & García, 2010), and "Lisa's Substitute" aired in 1991. Because it exists intertextually and is situated within a context of repeating the problematic narrative of teacher saviors and deficit parents, "Lisa's Substitute" contributes to the normalizing of neoliberal education reforms that Garcia (2015) refers to above.

The ability to think critically and independently make meaning of media is a necessary first step in resisting the normalization of neoliberal policies and practices such as the perpetuation of savior teachers in urban schools. In "Breaking into the Movies:

Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film” Henry Giroux (2011) encourages educators to teach these critical skills to students. He quotes James Snead (1994) stating, “... now, more than ever, we need, not just to 'see,' but to 'see through' what we see on the screen” (p. 690). We all must be vigilant in interrogating what we consider ‘normal’ by applying a critical lens to the familiar scripts and images that are repeated in popular culture.

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[i]

The theme song from this 1996 cowboy film plays as the heroic substitute enters the classroom for the first time.

[ii]

Applegate (2016) associated this trope with underlying values of the good teacher as missionary-like in their self-sacrifice, and ultimately, that they leave at the end of their mission

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