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Semantic Analysis of Heroism in the series “the Simpsons Animation”

Abstract

This study explores the representation of heroism in The Simpsons through a visual semantic and semiotic lens. Utilizing Barthes' theory of myth and connotation (1977) alongside Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (2006), the analysis investigates how heroism is constructed and critiqued through visual elements such as composition, gaze, color, and symbolic imagery. Selected scenes from key episodes illustrate how characters like Bart, Lisa, and Homer embody both heroic and anti-heroic traits, challenging traditional portrayals of heroism.

The show employs satire, irony, and parody to deconstruct cultural myths, positioning flawed individuals as accidental heroes. By examining visual and narrative strategies, this study reveals how The Simpsons redefines heroism as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon shaped by ideology, media influence, and audience perception, offering a critical commentary on contemporary cultural values and representations of heroism in animated television.

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المستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تمثيل البطولة في مسلسل "عائلة سيمبسون" من خلال منظور دلالي بصري ودلالي. باعتماد نظرية الميثاق والدلالة لرولان بارت (1977)، إلى جانب قواعد التصميم البصري لكريس وفان ليون (2006)، تُحلّل الدراسة كيف يتم بناء مفهوم البطولة ونقده من خلال العناصر البصرية مثل التركيب البصري، والنظرة، والألوان، والصور الرمزية. وتُبرز مشاهد مختارة من حلقات رئيسية كيف يجسد شخصيات مثل بارت وليزا وهومر صفات بطولية وصفات معادية للبطولة في آن واحد، مما يتحدى التمثيلات التقليدية للبطل. ويستخدم المسلسل السخرية والتناقض والسخرية المفرطة (البارودي) لتقويض المفاهيم الثقافية السائدة، مقدّمًا أفرادًا معيّنين كأبطال عرضيين. ومن خلال تحليل الاستراتيجيات البصرية والسردية، تُظهر هذه الدراسة كيف يعيد "عائلة سيمبسون" تعريف البطولة كظاهرة ديناميكية ومتغيرة، تُبنى اجتماعيًا وتتأثر بالأيديولوجيا، وتأثير وسائل الإعلام، وإدراك الجمهور، مما يوفر تعليقًا نقديًا على القيم الثقافية المعاصرة وتمثيلات البطولة في التلفزيون المتحرك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دلالة، تحليل دلالي، عائلة سيمبسون، نظرية بارت (1977)، قواعد التصميم البصري لكريس وفان ليون (2006)

1. Introduction

1.1 Semantic Analysis of Heroism in *The Simpsons*

Since its premiere in 1989, *The Simpsons* has become one of the most recognizable animated television series in the world. But, in addition to being a spoof of American family life, the program is also a source of humor interwoven with complex cultural, political, and social commentary (Gray, 2006). Amidst its bright, technicolor world of Springfield, heroism can be found in unusual forms – from the courageous actions of imperfect individuals to the heroic moral stances conveyed through parody and satire. The focus of this analysis is the visual and semantic coding of heroism in *The Simpsons*, relying on the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes (1972) and the visual “grammar” proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) within the field of social semiotics.

1.2 Significance of Studying Heroism in Animation

Heroism also becomes derives from a complex cultural notion that is often linked to power, and moral conviction. Conventional depictions of “heroism” in the West, whether from classic myth or modern film, operate on master narratives and absolute roles (Campbell, 2008). The Simpsons and other animated shows, but tend to complicate or undermine these types. The series skewers hegemonic cultural values with alternative and ironic constructions of heroism in need of finely tuned analytical instruments to de-code. In addition, Salman, M. A. et al (2025) explain the hero like Mister, who might be a metaphor for Mr. America, has given up on residing here, while the metaphorical American hero saves the globe. The study of representation, including the representation of heroism in particular, has been useful for scholars as a means of gaining insight into changing cultural values, the power of parody, and audience interpretation and negotiation of heroic subject positions (Mittell, 2004).

1.3 The Simpsons as a Cultural Text

The Simpsons functions as a multimodal text that communicates meaning through language, images, sound, and narrative. Visual imagery is especially central to its storytelling. The show's animation style, the using of color, character design will contribute to its meaning-making. The family members themselves—Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie—often play roles that invert or parody conventional heroic tropes. For instance, Homer is both an antihero and an everyman, while Lisa's moral clarity and intellectualism often cast her in heroic terms despite her youth and gender (Gray, 2006).

In media analysis, animation presents unique semiotic challenges. Unlike live-action, where actors and environments provide realism, animated shows are intentionally stylized and exaggerated. As such, the meanings encoded in *The Simpsons* are heavily reliant on cultural codes, visual metaphors, and signs that

must be interpreted contextually (Wells, 2002). It makes semiotic and social semiotic analysis ideal for uncovering how heroism is signified within the series.

According to Hasan (2025) said that the power of discourse in constructing wartime realities and mobilizing support, highlighting the essential role of critical media literacy in interpreting political narratives.

1.4 Theoretical Underpinnings

The present study relies on two of these theories, Barthes' traditional semiotics and Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics. Roland Barthes distinguished between two meanings, images and texts: denotation, the literal or explicit meaning, and connotation, the socio-cultural or emotional associations of the sign (Barthes 1972). A character may stand with chest out and head held high which may simply represent a posture but can also signify self-confidence, bravery, or arrogance. Heroism, within this model, is not an inherent characteristic but rather a symbolic, semiotic sign communicated via visual cues.

Social semiotics, which was developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, following closely on Barthes' concepts, goes on to incorporate considerations of design, context, and interaction into the process of making meaning. These are their "Grammar of Visual Design", in which they describe how composition, gaze, angle, modality, and salience influence the meaning viewers derive from images. These principles are especially helpful in reviewing still frames of *The Simpsons*, as they provide a way to methodically unravel the visual grammar through which heroics are constructed. For example, eye-level angles, direct address and frontal presentation can all function to enhance a character's effect of agency or moral authority.

Both semiotic theories treat meaning as dynamic and contingent upon cultural context, audience, and medium. Therefore, analyzing *The Simpsons*

through these lenses helps reveal how heroism is constructed, challenged, and reinterpreted across episodes and within particular frames.

1.5 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to perform a semantic and visual semiotic analysis of heroism as depicted in selected images from *The Simpsons*. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How is heroism visually constructed through composition, color, positioning, and expression in selected images from *The Simpsons*?
2. In what ways does the show use satire or inversion to challenge traditional notions of heroism?
3. How do cultural signs and codes interact with character representation to convey heroic or anti-heroic traits?

1.6. Limitation

The limitation of this study performs a semantic and visual semiotic analysis of heroism as depicted in selected images from *the Simpsons* S02E08: "Bart the Daredevil", the Simpsons S05E02: "Cape Feare", the Simpsons S07E05: "Lisa the Vegetarian", and the Simpsons S08E14: "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show". This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounding in the semiotic analysis and social semiotic theory examine how heroism is constructed, deconstructed, or parodied in the animated series *The Simpsons*. The approach combines **Barthes' theory of myth and connotation** (1972) with **Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design** (2006), focusing on selected visual scenes and frames where heroic behaviors, symbols, and ideologies are expressed.

1.7 Importance of Visual-Only Analysis

Unlike many studies that incorporate dialogue, plot, or character development through script analysis, this research focuses solely on images. This decision is rooted in the understanding that visual elements carry autonomous

semiotic weight, especially in animation, where exaggerated expressions, symbolic color schemes, and spatial relationships convey significant meaning (Forceville, 1999). By isolating the visual layer, the study aims to foreground how heroism can be constructed and perceived independently of verbal narrative. It also allows the findings to be transferable across languages and cultural contexts where the same visual scenes are broadcast.

Furthermore, using still images highlights the function of composition and framing in constructing power, agency, and moral positioning. These elements are beneficial for analyzing characters like Lisa Simpson, who—despite being a child—is often positioned heroically through visual elevation, central placement, or salience in color contrast. According to Hasan, A. L. A. M (2025), discourse plays a significant role, and it has a lot of methods delving into the tools that help us unlock the secrets of how language is organized.”

1.8 Structure of the Study

Following this introduction, the next section will present the theoretical framework in more detail, elaborating on semiotic and social semiotic principles relevant to visual analysis. The methodology chapter will then describe the process of image selection, coding categories, and analytical tools employed. It is followed by an in-depth analysis of selected images, categorized by themes such as "heroic sacrifice," "everyday courage," and "subversive heroism." The final sections will discuss findings, implications for media representation studies, and potential avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework: Semantic and Social Semiotic Analysis of Heroism in *The Simpsons*

2.1. Semiotic Foundations: Barthes and Mythologies

According to Roland Barthes (1972), it was the first to suggest that media texts are “myths” produced by contemporary cultures. He distinguishes between two

levels of meaning in his semiotic theory: denotation, or “literal” meaning, and connotation, or “associated” or cultural meaning. Homer, Bart, and Lisa from *The Simpsons* may even be mythic characters, constructed symbols representing, or parodying, the prevailing ideologies, including heroic ideologies, of the status quo. Heroism in *The Simpsons* is frequently presented in the form of an inverted myth. For example, Homer, a constant figure of incompetence, occasionally is cast as an accidental hero through happenstance or luck. This inversion satirizes the American Dream and the myth of the “self-made man,” revealing how contemporary heroism can be reconfigured through irony and parody—tools to Barthes’ second-order signification (Barthes, 1972).

In Barthes’ framework, heroism can be “mythologized” through:

- **Iconography:** Heroic costumes, poses, or emblems (e.g., Homer in a superhero outfit).
- **Narrative structure:** Classical hero’s journey arcs mocked or reappropriated.
- **Cultural codes:** Gender roles, moral binaries, and American exceptionalism are often exaggerated.

By applying Barthes’ semiotics, *The Simpsons* emerges not as a simple parody, but as a layered critique of heroic myths embedded in modern Western culture.

2.2. Social Semiotics and the Grammar of Visual Design

Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Grammar of Visual Design*, 2006, provides a helpful framework for examining this further. Social semiotics takes a socially contextualized and power- and context- and audience-influenced view of meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen state that visual communication “has a grammar, like language” which is organized according to principles such as:

Narrative representation: The visual depiction of actions, events and processes.

Representational conceptual: Depicting concepts such as “courage” or “sacrifice”.

Modality: The extent to which images are realistic or stylized.

Framing: The arrangement of characters and objects in space that conveys meaning.

Visual grammar plays a key role in the construction or deconstruction of heroism within *The Simpsons*. Characters are positioned within frames to show dominance (heroic postures), unity (group heroic effort), or marginality (failed or reluctant heroes). For example:

- In scenes where Lisa stands alone against a crowd, her placement in the image foreground emphasizes moral heroism.
- When Homer unintentionally saves the day, the modality and angle (e.g., low angle, heroic lighting) imitate heroic aesthetics found in comics and films, even if the narrative undermines this visually.

Visual elements often parody conventions seen in American action films, superhero comics, and wartime propaganda—visual genres with a well-established heroic code. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this interplay between form and meaning enables critical readings of *The Simpsons'* messages.

2. 3. Intermodality and Multimodality

Multimodal discourse analysis, an extension of social semiotics, is also relevant. It considers how meaning is conveyed across various modes—visuals, language, music, and gesture (Jewitt, 2009). Heroism in *The Simpsons* is rarely isolated to dialogue; it emerges from the synergy of:

- **Facial expressions and gestures** (non-verbal cues of fear, pride, or arrogance),
- **Musical scores** (epic orchestration or ironic soundtracks),
- **Color schemes** (bright palettes for idealism; darker tones for failure),

- **Framing and editing** (close-ups on the “hero”).

For instance, when Lisa takes a stand for a moral cause, the visual layout, orchestration, and dialogue combine to elevate her actions beyond childhood stubbornness, aligning her with the archetype of the moral crusader.

It aligns with Bateman’s (2014) argument that visual meaning is not stable in isolation; instead, meaning materializes from the interaction between semiotic systems. In *The Simpsons*, heroism is thus a *composite narrative* shaped by visual irony, audio cues, and cultural references.

2. 4. Heroism as a Social Code

The framework also draws from the idea that **heroism is a cultural and social code**, constructed through dominant ideologies and reified in media. As Kress (2010) explains, modes are not neutral; they reflect histories of use and social values. *The Simpsons* critiques this by offering counter-hegemonic portrayals of heroism.

Examples include:

- **Marge Simpson**, whose endurance and sacrifice often go unnoticed, highlights how maternal heroism is culturally underappreciated.
- **Bart**, who represents a trickster-hero archetype—clever and defiant but socially disruptive.
- **Secondary characters** like Ned Flanders represent a moral, religious heroism that is both lauded and mocked.

The visual and narrative construction of these characters interrogates how gender, class, and morality intersect with heroism in American society. Thus, the framework integrates **critical discourse analysis** within a semiotic reading.

2.5. Barthes vs. Kress & van Leeuwen: Complementary Perspectives

Barthes’ model emphasizes ideological critique through symbolic association (myth), Kress and van Leeuwen offer a **grammar of how these**

associations are visually encoded. Barthes focuses on *what* a sign means culturally; Kress & van Leeuwen explore *how* that meaning is constructed visually.

Aspect	Barthes	Kress & van Leeuwen
Focus	Myth, ideology, connotation	Visual grammar, structure, power
Level	Abstract, symbolic	Concrete, spatial, compositional
Ideal for	Cultural critique	Visual representation, layout

In studying heroism in *The Simpsons*, both approaches are necessary:

- **Barthes** decodes how *The Simpsons* plays with cultural myths of masculinity, war, individualism.
- **Kress & van Leeuwen** uncover how these myths are realized (or satirized) through composition, angle, and framing.

2.6. Application in Scene Analysis

To operationalize this framework, selected scenes are analyzed using a coding matrix:

Visual Feature	Description	Heroic Function
Actor gaze (demand/offer)	Direct or averted	Engages or distances audience from hero
Framing (close-up vs. long shot)	Degree of intimacy or social distance	Highlights moral/emotional stakes
Vectors and lines	Direction of movement or gaze	Guides viewer's focus to hero/action
Modality (realism)	Bright/dark tones, abstraction	Affects credibility of heroism

Example: In a scene where Homer accidentally stops a robbery, the visual grammar mimics heroic tropes—low angle, triumphant music—yet the narrative context deflates it. This irony is central to *The Simpsons*' critique of performative heroism.

2. 7. Gender and Postmodern Irony

- The postmodern irony in *The Simpsons* supports Judith Butler's (1990) notion of performativity: identities, including that of the "hero," are not innate but repeatedly enacted. Characters like Lisa and Marge complicate traditional gender roles in heroic storytelling.

- Social semiotics helps decode these representations:
- The choice to enclose Lisa is alone and focused. With intense eye contact, it positions her as a **moral agent**.
- Conversely, **Homer's comic overconfidence** is exaggerated through scale and proportion, ridiculing male-centric heroism.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in the semiotic analysis and social semiotic theory to examine how heroism is constructed, deconstructed, or parodied in the animated series *The Simpsons*. The approach combines **Barthes' theory of myth and connotation** (1972) with **Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design** (2006), focusing on selected visual scenes and frames where heroic behaviors, symbols, and ideologies are expressed.

3.1 Research Design

The research is structured as a **case study** of *The Simpsons*, analyzing specific images from selected episodes that prominently feature heroic narratives, actions, or parodies of heroism. The design is **descriptive and analytical**, enabling an in-depth decoding of visual and cultural signs that contribute to the production of heroic meaning. The methodology recognizes that meaning in animated texts is **multimodal**, created through the interplay of image, gesture, sound, and dialogue.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through purposive sampling of visual scenes from *The Simpsons* episodes across multiple seasons. The sampling criteria included:

- Visual frames where characters are positioned as heroes, saviors, or moral agents.
- Scenes that visually mimic, exaggerate, or parody heroic imagery.

- Inclusion of both primary (e.g., Homer, Bart, Lisa) and secondary characters (e.g., Marge, Ned Flanders) to explore gender and moral diversity in representations.

Still images (screenshots) were extracted from high-resolution digital versions of the episodes. Three main images were selected for in-depth analysis (provided above), each representing a different modality of heroism (e.g., satirical, moral, accidental).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

- Two main theoretical instruments guide the analysis:
- **Barthes' Semiotic Model**
- **Denotation:** Describing what is literally seen in the image.
- **Connotation:** Interpreting the symbolic, ideological, or cultural associations.
- **Myth:** Understanding how heroism is naturalized, subverted, or ironized within the image.
- **Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design.**
- Each image was analyzed through the following visual parameters:
- **Narrative structure:** Is the hero engaged in action? What kind?
- **Framing:** How are characters spatially organized? Is the hero isolated or framed with others?
- **Gaze:** Does the character look directly at the viewer (demand) or away (offer)?
- **Modality:** How realistic or exaggerated is the visual presentation?
- **Angle and distance:** What power relations are suggested through camera angle and proximity?

4. Data analysis

4.1 Analysis of The Simpsons S02E08: "Bart the Daredevil"

Denotation: Literal Visual Content

This episode covers Bart's obsession with daredevil stunts after he begins to watch a television show starring a character named "Cliff Clavin". The connotative content shows Bart trying to do dangerous things such as skateboard down very steep hills or jumping stunts. These actions are visually represented by active camera angles, hyperbolic facial expressions, and objects such as skateboards, ramps, and cliffs. Much of the action takes place in the safety of the home and in the thrill-seeking spaces of the outdoors, again comparatively pitting domesticity against Bart's danger-laden escapades.

In one notable scene Bart stands poised to leap from the edge of a cliff, dressed in a homemade superhero costume. This image literally depicts "taking a risk" in that Bart is physically prepared to attempt a bold stunt, as well as thematically presents an image of youthful exuberance engaged in risk-taking behavior.

Connotation: Implied Cultural and Ideological Meanings

The second, or connotative, level uncovers further cultural and ideological meaning contained in the images under analysis. Bart's fascination with daredevilry represents the pull of heroism, of recognition – all things to which adolescents are drawn. His behavior is indicative of social forces, namely the media's influence on youth. Bart's television show is a direct agent of influence, an example of popular culture influencing identity and action.

Bart's appearance in a homemade superhero get-up also underscores the irony of desire. He tries to imitate Cliff Clavin's bravado. Still, he is not skilled or careful enough to do so, furthering the separation between heroic fantasy and everyday life. In comparing the two, this critique of media images of unrealistic, idealistic heroes points to the fact that children absorb and accept these ideals without knowledge of the consequences.

On top of that, the reactions of other characters, such as Marge's concern and Homer's indifference, convey contrasting risk-averse parenting attitudes. Marge's worry is conservative and protective; Homer's disinterest is liberal and laissez-faire. The contradictory parenting philosophies also create tension within the family, yet are indicative of macro societal discourses on parenting styles and authority figures teaching children what behaviors are acceptable and which are undesirable.

Myth: Naturalized Social Ideologies

Mythically speaking, the result of this episode further cements the connection between heroism and desirability – along with risk – as “natural”. Bart's staged stunt images support the myth of the heroic happy-ending, lone, odds-defying hero-figure and the launching process. But, the series attempts to deconstruct this myth by producing consequences within the narrative of irresponsible behavior, including bodily injury and social humiliation. This critique contains a feminism that draws out the “nasty underside” of this idealized concept of the hero.

This episode also examines the myth of innocent versus reckless childhood. Bart's activities swing between playful experimentation and edgy defiance, embodying adult concerns over youth culture and the growing up process in general. Bart's visual depictions of failure, whether he has fallen off a ramp or is being saved by firefighters, reinforces the message that heroism has a price and encourages viewers to rethink the celebration of risk-taking behavior.

Visual Grammar Analysis

According to **Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006)** semiotic framework, it was among other modes of visual signification:

1. **Salience:** Bart is the most salient figure within the skateboarding sequence; the crucial objects of the skateboard, cliff, and firefighter truck emphasize Bart's

centrality to the narrative. Bart's costume is bright, and his stunts are highlighted by dramatic lighting; his actions are visually foregrounded.

2. **Gaze:** The gazes of characters indicate their emotional states and relationships. For instance, Bart's bravado is apparent in his direct, confident gaze into the camera prior to jumping. On the other hand, Marge's concerned looks towards Bart emphasize her instinct to protect.

3. **Framing:** The wide shots used to capture Bart's stunt work highlight the scope of his risks, while close-ups on his face convey emotional information. The framing of Bart with the cityscape and firetruck in the background gives a dramatic and consequential feeling to the scene.

4. **Vectors:** Lines of movement – Bart's trajectory on his skateboard, or Bart's jump/vector– direct the eye and imply action. These vectors highlight the action of the scene and the force of Bart's daredevilry.

5. **Layout:** The position of characters and objects in a panel conveys thematic meaning. For example, Bart's position at the top of a cliff while his family stands at the bottom signifies his disconnection from traditional norms.

Heroic Behaviors, Symbols, and Ideologies

- **Heroic Behaviors:** Bart's stunts signify his effort to imitate heroic characteristics such as bravery and autonomy. Though these are noble traits, ultimately, unprepared and frivolous disregard for safety destroys both of these characteristics, making them acts of foolishness.

- **Symbols:** The skateboard, helmet, and firefighter truck are objects that symbolize Bart's pursuit of adventure and the outcome of his actions. The firefighter truck, especially, is symbolic of the facilitating hand of power and the actual consequences of Bart's actions.

- **Ideologies:** The episode contains a critique of heroism and reinforces the idea that aspiring to the ideals portrayed in media can be dangerous when one does not

take into account one's own limitations and society's norms. It also raises issues about the appropriate balance between encouraging uniqueness and ensuring safety, mirroring current concerns over childhood autonomy and parental responsibility.

4.2 Analysis of The Simpsons S05E02: "Cape Feare" Using a Semiotic Approach

Denotation: Literal Visual Content

Plot In "Cape Feare", Bart Simpson develops a fear of Sideshow Bob and the family needlessly enters the Witness Relocation Program. Denotative content includes: Bart as a tough guy, wearing sunglasses, showing off his muscles and being confrontational. There's Bart posed cockily in front of the mirror, imitating the hero of the film; standing up to other kids at school; and, finally, standing up to Nelson Muntz, whom the same movie has also emboldened.

One prominent scene shows Bart standing in a darkened room, dressed in a leather jacket and sunglasses, holding a toy gun. This image captures the literal action—Bart's attempt to embody the tough-guy archetype—and highlights his fascination with the film's themes of revenge and intimidation.

Connotation: Implied Cultural and Ideological Meanings

The denotative level is the apparent ideological or cultural meaning embedded in such images. Bart's obsession with Cape Fear is symptomatic of media's effect on youth, particularly violent movies' ability to alter perceptions of heroism and masculinity. By adopting the tough-guy persona, but he downplays social expectations of power, control and the absence of fear, all of which are idealized in popular culture.

Bart's attempted tough-guy behavior also serves to highlight the ironic quality of his behavior. While he mimics the hero of the film, his physical weakness and moral vacuity show the juxtaposition between the fantasy of heroism

and the reality of it. This contrast mocks the media's unrealistic portrayal of heroes by suggesting that children can embrace these values without the morality behind them.

Plus, other character's reactions to Bart, such as Lisa's skepticism and Marge's concern, convey alternative attitudes towards Bart's behavior. The logic of Lisa is opposite to the impetuosity of Bart, who employs entirely different methodologies of resolving issues. Marge's distress over Bart's behavior echoes the public anxiety about the impact of violent television programming on children.

Myth: Social Ideologies Naturalized

From a mythic perspective, the episode reinforces the notion that heroism is seductive, but amoral. Bart's struggle to become a tough guy also literalizes the myth of the individual hero who beats the odds to achieve glory. The series works to dispel this myth, but, as the reckless heroism of Bart is illustrated with the results of this kind of behavior, such as miscommunications with friends and conflict with authority. This deconstruction challenges the notion that there is something idyllic about heroism; it reveals the dark underbelly of the heroic.

Childhood innocence versus recklessness is another theme explored in this episode. Bart's actions are ambiguous between innocent play and dangerous rebellion, which mirrors cultural anxieties over youth culture and the pressures of growing up. The visual framing of Bart's failures, being outsmarted by Lisa or humiliated by Nelson, submits that heroism is expensive and urges the audience to reconsider the glorification of risky behavior.

Visual Grammar Analysis

Meaning is constructed through the following visual components according to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory:

1. **Salience:** The salient objects of Bart's sunglasses, leather jacket, and toy gun draw attention to his centrality within the frame. The bright colors and hyperbolic postures also serve to foreground his actions, to give them emphasis.
2. **Gaze:** The gazes of characters reveal their feelings and relations with one another. For example, Bart's confident gaze into the camera while flexing his muscles indicates his bravado. Conversely, Lisa's skeptical look at Bart reinforces her critical attitude.
3. **Framing:** Extreme close-ups of Bart's poses exaggerate his perception of himself as a tough guy, while extreme long shots contextualize the absurdity of his poses. The placement of Bart against the backdrop of a living room or classroom brings a sense of irony to his pose, juxtaposing his aspirations and reality.
4. **Vectors:** Movement lines, like Bart's placement or the gesture direction, direct the viewer's gaze and imply action. The use of vectors contributes to the motion of the scene and the energy of Bart's attempts to be menacing.
5. **Composition:** The arrangement of characters and objects also has thematic importance. For example, Bart is dressed in a leather jacket and sunglasses in front of such props, which represent his desire to appear tough. While Lisa has been placed awkwardly in the background, quietly observing, this place symbolizes the sensible and the wise.

Heroic Acts, Symbols, and Ideologies

- **Heroic Actions:** Bart's attempted replication of the tough-guy persona is mimicking heroic actions such as confidence and assertiveness. Yet he lacks the real strength and moral foundation necessary to give them weight; therefore, they are acts.
- **Signs:** Bart's sunglasses, leather jacket, and toy gun are signs of his desire to attain machismo and power. In fact, even the film *Cape Fear* itself serves as a

metonymic force, representing both the fundamental lures and dangers of ideals delivered through media.

- **Ideologies:** In this episode there is an implicit satire of the ideology of unlimited heroism and the dangers of attempting to imitate media- promoted ideals without consideration for one's own limitations or moral factors in general. It also calls into question the balance between individualization and social normativity, and reflects lingering debates over autonomy and parental control in childhood.

4.3 Analysis of The Simpsons S07E05: "Lisa the Vegetarian" Using a Semiotic Approach

Denotation: Literal Visual Content

In this episode Lisa Simpson turns vegetarian after educating herself about animal rights and the environmental impact of meat consumption. The denotative content contains scenes in which Lisa is evangelizing her new lifestyle, debating the values of vegetarianism, and encountering situations that provide tension for her dietary choice. Among the notable images are Lisa brandishing vegetarianism signs or pamphlets, confidently addressing her peers, and attending school events where she participates in and advocates for her beliefs.

One particularly vivid scene has Lisa addressing a school assembly as she stands behind the podium holding a "Go Veggie" sign. The "actual" deed in this image is Lisa's public promotion of vegetarianism, and thus her binding to her cause. In another scene Lisa eats a salad while Homer, Marge and Bart consume meat.

Connotation: Implied Cultural and Ideological Meanings

The deeper connotative level reveals the cultural and ideological meanings lurking within these images. In going vegetarian, Lisa has been made to signify intelligence, morality, and the subversion of the status quo. In fact, her vegetarianism is related to broader concerns with environmentalism, ethics of

consumption, and personal autonomy. The use of her character in the series' critique of the status quo, in this instance the normalisation of meat-eating, is telling.

The images of Lisa in action capture her active body posture, hand gestures, and props such as signs and pamphlets which convey her passion and sense of focus. But Homer's skepticism, or Bart's indifference, point to another theme: that of the resistance to progress/change, and cultural habits too rooted to be moved. These diverse answers speak to the separation of individual belief and collective behavior, and of broader social dilemmas of diet, ethics and ritual.

Again, juxtaposing Lisa's vegetarian meals with her family's meaty ones reinforces the isolation either of eating vegetarian or of taking a minority position. The comparison continues to imply that being outside of normality even within the family leads to severed connections.

Myth: Naturalized Social Ideologies

Mythically, this episode justifies the logical assumption that individuals are capable of moral choices and often struggle against their culture. Lisa's vegetarianism is thus an act of resistance against the ideology of meat eating, which is naturalized and taken for granted. This myth is dismantled by the fact that Lisa struggles to articulate her own ideals, suggesting that challenging an entrenched cultural norm is a laborious process that requires more strength than an earnest activist possesses.

This episode also addresses the "no one doing anything" and the hero myth of the individual. Lisa's effort to educate others around vegetarianism positions her as a single activist, ideal of moral responsibility. But she does not have the support of her peers or her family members to do this and it is the lack of this type of support that emphasizes the difficulty of creating real change and forces the

audience to examine their own role within the enforcement or contesting of social mores.

Visual Grammar Analysis

According to the meaning-making theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the following visual elements convey meaning:

1. **Salience:** The important details such as Lisa's signs ("Go Veggie!") and Lisa's vegetarian meals foreground Lisa's position as the focal character in the narrative. The bright colors and bold lettering of her signs draw attention to her message.
2. **Gaze:** The gazes of characters convey feeling and connection. For example, Lisa looking directly at the camera, or into the eyes of her audience, is an indication of her belief and determination. On the other hand, Homers doubting look at her expresses disapprobation of her counsel.
3. **Harsh lighting:** The two shot close-up frames of Lisa during her speeches or arguments amplify her intensity and strength while medium and long shot frames capture the responses of those around her. Visuals of Lisa in front of and apart from her family or classmates help convey her dual identity as a leader and individualist.
4. **Vectors:** "Lines of movement", such as Lisa's gesturing when she speaks, or her positioning at the head of the table during mealtimes, lead the viewer's eye and indicate movement. These vectors provide movement to the scene and power to her activism.
5. **Framing:** Where objects and characters are visually placed within a shot help to convey themes. Lisa's positioning at the school assembly podium for example, magnifies her role as spokesperson while Lisa's position alone at the dinner table signifies her difference from her family.

Heroic Behaviors, Symbols, and Ideologies

1. **Heroic Acts:** Lisa's vegetarian advocacy is one of courage and earnestness. She is a perfect example of a risk taker, a person who expresses her opinions openly and in the eyes of negativity, persistent in what she believes, integrity and leadership to name but a few.
2. **Symbols:** Items such as Lisa's placards, leaflets and vegetarian meals are symbols of her dedication to her cause. The juxtaposition of her salad with her family's meat meals throws the symbolic difference between her beliefs and what is expected of her by society into even greater relief.
3. **Ideology:** The episode also does a criticism on the ideology of eating meat by default and all the ethical and environmental impacts that it brings. It also examines the balance between personal freedom and social compliance in a context that mirrors wider social discussions about individual responsibility and social shift.

4.4 Analysis of The Simpsons S08E14: "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" Using a Semiotic Approach

Denotation: Literal Visual Content

In this episode, the violent cartoon Itchy & Scratchy has lost popularity, so the network decides to introduce a new character named Poochie, whom Homer voices. Literally, the episode is a meta-television episode complete with scenes of television production meetings, animation studios, and focus groups. Other defining images are Homer's overenthusiastic reaction to his becoming Poochie, the animation of Poochie's adventures, and the audience's divided opinions on Poochie.

In one scene, for instance, Homer is seen in a recording booth with headphones on, yelling into a microphone as animated footage of Poochie plays on a screen behind him. This image literally conveys the behind-the-scenes process of

voice acting, while also symbolizing the absurdity of corporate-driven entertainment.

Connotation: Implied Cultural and Ideological Meanings

On the connotative level, the episode satirizes the commercialization of entertainment and the compromise of creative integrity in mainstream media. Poochie's addition is not driven by artistic value but by the findings of a focus group, representing how audience reception can translate into inauthentic, market-driven choices. The hyperbolic character design of Poochie—electric orange fur, jumbo sunglasses, and an imposed “cool” attitude—visually connotes the artificiality of characters developed for mass appeal instead of artistic substance.

Homer's eagerness to supply Poochie's voice represents the glamour of celebrity status and people's willingness to participate in creative structures focused more on profit than on art. His transformation from a blue-collar father to a temporary celebrity depicts the mesmerizing nature of media celebrity, in addition to the often-fleeting nature of public attention.

The cartoon portions of Itchy & Scratchy are very different from Poochie's appearances. Where the original cartoon is frenetic and anarchic, Poochie's scenes are stilted and forced, representing the intrusion of corporate interference into organic storytelling. This juxtaposition satirizes the homogenization of children's television and the watering down of edgy content for mass appeal.

Myth: Naturalized Social Ideologies

From a mythic standpoint, the episode systematically dismantles the notion of the audience as the paramount judge of quality within the realm of entertainment. The program critiques the assumption that widespread appeal necessarily corresponds to artistic merit, revealing how media creators frequently cater to the lowest common denominator to preserve viewership. This ingrained belief—that the opinions of audiences are the principal consideration—may result

in the development of characters and storylines that are either inauthentic or even detrimental.

Another myth that is deconstructed is the myth of creative control in the media. The episode defies the belief that artists have control over their work by revealing how executives and marketers alter content for profit. Poochie is not a creation of artistic vision but of market research, playing into the myth that commercial success tends to trump artistic vision.

The episode also broaches the myth of television as a mirror of reality. By satirizing the behind-the-scenes operation of a cartoon show, The Simpsons reveals the contractedness of media and encourages audiences to be critical of how they receive and perceive television programming.

Visual Grammar Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

Applying Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design, the visual elements below are involved in the meaning construction:

1. **Salience:** Wherever Poochie appears, his exaggerated design and flashy color palette (shining orange, neon green) draw attention, highlighting his constructedness. He clearly stands out in the Itchy & Scratchy world, projecting his disruptive function.
2. **Gaze:** The show's characters frequently gaze directly into the camera, particularly in focus group scenes, promoting a sense of audience participation. In doing so, this technique encourages viewers to consider their own implication in influencing media trends.
3. **Framing:** The episode often places the animated realm of Itchy & Scratchy alongside the authentic studio setting. These differing frames highlight the separation between imaginative production and corporate impact.
4. **Vectors:** The fast and wild movements of Itchy and Scratchy in animated sequences provide a sharp contrast with the stiff and awkward movement of

Poochie. The visual vectors enhance the idea that Poochie disrupts the natural rhythm of the cartoon.

5. **Composition:** During the recording booth scene, Homer is positioned in the foreground, and the cartoon Poochie is in the background. The composition visually connects the real-world character of Homer with the fictional one, emphasizing the absurdity of their relationship.

Heroic Behaviors, Symbols, and Ideologies

- **Heroic Behaviors:** There are no conventional heroes in this episode. Rather, Homer's fleeting moment of celebrity status is depicted as misguided and ultimately unsatisfying, satirizing the quest for media fame as a means of validation.

- **Symbols:** Poochie is the major symbol in the episode, representing the commercialization of entertainment and the death of artistic integrity. The focus group room represents the power of the audience in the creation of media content, while the animation studio represents the struggle between creative expression and commerce.

- **Ideologies:** The episode satirizes consumerist media production, asking if popularity should be the driving force for artistic choice. It also debunks the myth of television as a harmless form of entertainment, revealing the corporate apparatus underlying its production.

5. Discussion: Theoretical Framework for the Semantic Analysis of Heroism in The Simpsons

The Simpsons provides an interesting case study for the explorative examination of heroism through the lens of semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen and Barthes' semiotic theory does the heavy lifting here. The semiotic theory provides an avenue through which one could explore the implications of visual and ideological constructions of heroism well within the bounds of

animation. The distinction between denotation and connotation which is the literal of an image and the cultural significances attached to said image thanks to Barthes (1977) is important to consider. In *The Simpsons*, Homer's chaotic attempt at 'saving' the town could suggest a chaotic episode, but the underlying meaning is the myth that regardless of one's perceived competence, everyone has the opportunity of being a hero.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual design grammar also adds depth to this analysis through its exploration of how meaning is constructed through visual aspects of salience, gaze, framing, and composition. When, for instance, Bart or Lisa are centered with direct gaze to the viewer, they are visually framed as heroes, despite the flawed or misguided nature of their actions. The strategic deployment of such visual grammar satirizes conventional representations of heroism through the presentation of characters that subvert idealized norms—yet remain admirable within the moral universe of the show.

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate how *The Simpsons* builds and deconstructs the myth of the hero. Through the use of irony, exaggeration, and parody, the series lays bare the contradictions between cultural ideals and everyday realities. Heroism is never shown to be an essentialized quality, but rather a socially constructed and often problematic phenomenon. Through its unique visual code and narrative structure, *The Simpsons* reworks heroism as a malleable concept, contingent on setting, perception, and ideology—rendering it a compelling prism through which to analyze contemporary media and cultural values.

6. Conclusion

The semantic analysis of heroism in *The Simpsons* illustrates how the program reworks conventional representations of heroism through a synthesis of visual design, narrative structure, and ideological critique. Based on Barthes' semiotic

theory and Kress & van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design, this research has illustrated that heroism in the show is not an idealized or stable characteristic, but a contextualized and often ironic construct informed by perception, cultural codes, and surroundings. Characters like Bart, Lisa, and Homer routinely project both heroic and anti-heroic traits, complicating the distinction between noble intention and farce. Their visual placement, expressions, and interactions are framed carefully to foreground this tension, underscoring the program's satirical engagement with media, identity, and social values.

By hyperbolic gesture, ironic juxtaposition, and parody, *The Simpsons* questions prevailing myths of heroism, laying bare the contradictions between cultural ideals and the realities of everyday life. The show satirises the commodification of heroism, the influence of media representations, and the tendency to heroicise compromised individuals as moral exemplars. Ultimately, *The Simpsons* presents heroism as a socially constructed phenomenon—one that is constantly negotiated, reinterpreted, and subverted. This analysis underlines the effectiveness of visual narrative in communicating ideological meaning and reaffirms the show's role as a critical prism through which we can view contemporary notions of heroism.

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