

Animated Women

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My first urge with this response (and one that I will indulge) is to turn it into a love song to Lisa Simpson. Lisa is, after all, arguably television's most prominent feminist, a young woman who does not flinch from the mantle of "feminist," and yet who is depicted lovingly, the true hero of *The Simpsons* – the only character, creator Matt Groening notes, who is ever likely to leave the bumbling stupidity of Springfield. Much of the humor surrounding Lisa is transgressive of gender norms: yes, she covets the talking Malibu Stacy doll, but she is appalled to learn that it spews patriarchal junk such as "I wish they taught shopping in school," and she takes her complaints to the company. Long before Geena Davis, she was one of the nation's first female presidents, in a brief vision of the future. She is consistently the voice of reason and the conscience of the show, in direct contrast to many of her fellow sitcom "sisters" (cf. Cindy Brady). She is sensitive to and determined to rectify issues of racism, environmental destruction, governmental corruption, and the ills of consumer capitalism, while easily being the smartest person in Springfield. And, bless her, she is the only character to see her mother Marge's potential, often encouraging her to act on her own desires rather than submit yet again to Homer's or Bart's. ([To see a loving montage of Lisa the feminist, follow this link](#)). For her pains, though, she is often isolated, as the opening credits show, with the band teacher banishing her for daring to play a virtuoso sax solo during a middling school band performance. Older brother Bart terrorizes her, and teachers fear her superior intellect; despite an otherwise perfect complement of A grades, she gets a (low) B+ for "conduct." Few but a lone substitute teacher recognize her brilliance. Thus not only does *The Simpsons* show Lisa as a strong woman, but it also wrestles with the costs of intelligence and strength for women in a patriarchal society.

In analyzing Lisa's strengths, it is easy to conclude merely that the writers consistently lend her the weight of their combined intelligence, and that voice actor Yeardley Smith perfectly balances little girl and grown-up gusto. But her success is also aided by the fact that she is animated. In working at arm's length distance from reality, animation allows one to fill in gaps and personalize characters and themes, often better than does live action. This is one of the reasons behind Art Spiegelman's decision to pen his father's tale of surviving Auschwitz as a comic book with mice. Paradoxically, the greater visual distance from reality can allow a greater felt proximity. Importantly, this felt proximity may even allow for greater identification across gender lines (and, hence, even confusion of gender expectations). And finally, animation is an ideal vehicle for parody and for satire, given its ability to gesture at what is missing, to exaggerate presence and absence, to create a vibrant sphere for carnivalesque transgression, and consequently to "get things done."

Even beyond Lisa, *The Simpsons* has often done an admirable job at suggesting the frustrations that exist for women, as Marge in particular (but also Lisa's teacher, Ms. Hoover) is depicted as being trapped in her gender role. Marge is, after all, the perfect sitcom wife with real family problems, a situation that has led in various episodes to hair

loss, to her going crazy, to becoming addicted to gambling, and constantly to feeling unloved and un(der)appreciated by all but Lisa.

Echoes of Lisa and Marge can be seen elsewhere in the world of primetime animation. Peg Hill in *King of the Hill*, for instance, similarly flirts with feminism at times, yet finds considerable small-town, suburban strictures limiting her progress. Or more dynamically, *Beavis and Butthead* spinoff, *Daria*, offered a *My So-Called Life* for the animated set, with a fiercely intelligent yet largely ignored title character.

And yet despite the potential of animation to offer us strong women when live action falters, and to lodge a parodic-satiric critique of the limitations placed upon female characters on television, if I sing a lovesong for Lisa Simpsons, this is in part because she is still, twenty years on, all too rare. *Family Guy* regularly reduces women to objects of derision, and with my word limit almost over, I will simply link to [an excellent fanvid by the wonderfully gifted Luminosity that shows the limited lot of Lois Griffin](#). *South Park*, too, has “bitches,” yes, but not ones that “get things done.” Animation is far from being an enlightened zone for women or for female characters or actors, but I would love to discuss the potential that it has, and whether one sees this potential or its strategies elsewhere.