

Ryan Schram

ANTH 2667: The Anthropology of Religion

2 March 2015

Learning from Lisa: Reflections on Research

Lisa Simpson [revised her essay](#) when she went to Washington (“Mr. Lisa Goes To Washington” [#8F01]). When she was done, she walked into the auditorium and said, “I would like to read a different essay, if I may.” Sufficed to say, it was all a little much for the editors of Reading Digest.¹

Lisa had the best essay by far, way better than “Lift High Your Lamp, Green Lady” and “USA A'OK.” She knew this even though she didn't win a prize. She wasn't just praised for participating, either. She concluded herself that she had succeeded. She saw the reaction she got from the audience when she delivered her key argument:

The city of Washington was built on a stagnant swamp some 200 years ago, and very little has changed. It stank then, and it stinks now. Only today, it is the fetid stench of corruption that hangs in the air. And who did I see taking a bribe but the "Honorable" Bob Arnold! Don't worry, Congressman, I'm sure you can buy all the votes you need with your dirty money! And this will be one nation, under the dollar, with liberty and justice for none. (#8F01)

OK, so the [thesis statement](#) could be clearer, and it could more directly answer a [why question](#), rather than just muckrake. Still, Lisa had a realization. When she saw the congressman take the money, she not only had new information, but [a problem](#). In a sense, her essay is a solution to that problem. So she knew that she had succeeded because, in the end, she saw that she herself was changed by this discovery. She couldn't see the world the same way again.

At the same time, the episode also ends on an ambiguous note when Lisa says “The system works!” For all its jokes, the story uncritically reaffirms a lot of conventional wisdom about

democracy (e.g. The American people are the “bosses” of the President, the FBI “works for Uncle Sam,” etc.). If Lisa has learned that the world isn't what she thought it was, we ultimately have to ask why Lisa concludes “I don't believe it! The system works!” I take this statement to indicate that she sees the government for what it is, not what she wants it to be.

Lisa the citizen?

In this respect, I differ from another claim about this episode made by Lauren Berlant (1993). Berlant describes a genre of texts she calls “pilgrimage-to-Washington narratives” (1993: 399). She suggests that these stories are instances of an American cultural myth, and as such, they not only represent Washington as a beacon of freedom, but they draw people into a particular way of seeing themselves which she calls “infantile citizenship” (ibid.). These myths produce this kind of citizen not merely by teaching one to think about American government in a certain way, but teaching one to see oneself as a person who is incapable of independence without government, and thus one who is dependent on the state as a parent. Thus the stories reinforce the cultural representation of the state by presenting it not only as the best form of government, but in fact as the only possible government. Berlant claims that Lisa is one such infantile citizen. Her discoveries lead her to reject her democratic piety, but in the end she accepts that there is a “system” and that is all she is allowed to hope for.

Berlant's main interest is the mythic character of American cultural representations of its government, which this episode both parodies and reiterates. Because she focuses on the content of civics lessons, she fails to see the various processes of learning with which Lisa engages these lessons, and how through these processes she comes to move beyond them. One of the most powerful themes of *The Simpsons* is an unrelenting critique of formal education and the traditional Western model of learning. It is in this context that we must read Lisa's trip to Washington. This trip, which begins with what is essentially a school project, ends with Lisa's intellectual transformation. While Lisa ultimately concludes that “the system works,” I read this as a statement from someone who now knows there are different ways to make the system work. Lisa begins by

choosing to write an essay for a Reading Digest contest, an extracurricular activity based her interests, but also, as it requires a “fiercely pro-American” position, is also haunted by the normative discourse of formal schooling (#8F01). In struggling with her first draft, she goes for a bike ride to a national park, and finds her inspiration. Her first version was a good effort, but probably relied too much on the sources available to her at her school. While cleverly employing an effective metaphor as its main claim, it failed to consider alternatives, let alone argue against these other possible claims.

When she finally discovers corruption first-hand, she faces a genuine intellectual problem. Berlant remarks that Lisa “tears up” her first essay and “substitutes” it with a fiery sermon (Berlant 1993: 399). I disagree. This is a cartoon and thus the story is necessarily told through visual shorthand. When Lisa tears up her draft, this is a visual code for an internal change in her character. She is revising her thinking, and she does this by tossing out her old writing and generating new prose. In practice, we do this all the time, but just because we dramatically crumple up a paper and shoot a free throw into the wastepaper basket, that does not mean that the ideas are simply forgotten. Rather we work on them and eventually they take a new form as part of a new draft. Berlant also remarks that Lisa turns to the “pedagogy” of the Lincoln Memorial in her crisis (405). Here too I think Berlant neglects the role of dialogue in the formation and improvement of an explanation. When Lisa cannot reach the hero Lincoln, she perfectly happy to talk to Thomas Jefferson, and earlier she sought to go to the Winnifred Beecher Howe Memorial (fictional, but still highly unpopular). Finally, she presents a new paper which exposes the corruption, but also puts forward a new thesis, a new conception of how the system works. (As Berlant notes, this comes to Lisa in a vision of Washington as a distorted “Schoolhouse Rock” parody where Orwellian walking pigs eat money.) Just because she recognizes that the congressman has been punished by the government, Lisa does not thereby revert to her former self. Berlant interprets Lisa's remark as a kind of humiliation which all subjects must internalize to become citizens. I believe that, placed in the larger parody of education which is so much a part of the *The Simpsons*, we can see that this

story is in fact a very genuine celebration of the scholar, the auto-didact and the freethinker.

Lisa the scholar

In another episode several years later, Lisa sets about researching the town's founder, Jedediah Springfield, in preparation for Springfield's anniversary ("Lisa the Iconoclast" 1996 [#3F13]). After a visit to the Springfield Historical Society, she finds evidence that Jedediah Springfield is actually Hans Sprungfeld. She concludes from this that the origin of Springfield is not what she learned in school. Rather than a city on a hill, it was a den of pirates. When she consults with historian Hollis Hurlbut², he rejects her argument out of hand, and her evidence. Teacher and student, guru and disciple, mentor and mentee are all very rewarding relationships. But they are defined by a tension that cannot be removed. So, Lisa has to break away, and keep going on her own. She knows what she is saying makes sense. The pieces fit.

Finally she wins over Hurlbut, not with her own logic, but when her persistent critique forces him to admit his own irrational commitment to an illusion. At the end of the episode, Lisa ultimately chooses not to publish her work and destroy this illusion altogether. She says, "The myth of Jedediah Springfield has value too" as a cultural symbol. I accept this more than "The system works!" It is more honest about the relationship of knowledge to reality. She doesn't say that she will deny what she knows, of course. More importantly, though, is that the conclusion she reached changed her, and so it doesn't matter whether people know what she knows, or agree with her, or tell her she is right. Again, the value of her research was to bring her to a point where she cannot ever see the world the same way again.

You don't win friends with salad

Lisa is a vexing figure. When the teachers at her school go on strike, she teaches herself, but this teaching consists of reproducing the atrocious intellectual conditions of Springfield Elementary: "Is that gum? Is that gum?" ("The PTA Disbands" 1995 [#2F19]) "[Very good, Denise.](#)" (Mehan 1979: 285). Later she panics and Marge can only mollify her by writing an A on a piece of paper. I

prefer to think of her when she learns, publicly, that she is failing gym: “Gym? That's the stupidest thing I ever heard!” (“Lisa on Ice” 1994 [#2F05]).

Her relationship to knowledge is often troubling. We see her smarmily correcting adults. (“It's not foilage, Mom. It's foliage.” in “Burns, Baby Burns” 1996 [#4F05]) At times she obsesses over her cultural capital, showing off her knowledge of fine art and literature. She pleads with Stephen Jay Gould to support her position on some matter (“Lisa The Skeptic” 1997 [#5F05]). Sometimes, she's just prop for Bart, offering a pop psych koan (“Bart's Inner Child” 1993 [#1F05]), or silently providing a rocket for a message (“This Little Wiggy” 1998 [#5F13]). Other times, though, she shows her friends tide pools (“Summer of 4 Ft. 2” 1996 [#3F22]), and she sneaks into a museum of archaeology (“Lost Our Lisa” 1998 [#5F17]). Those moments, and her research³, are my favorites. This is where she models true education.

Berlant's perspective is that of a cultural critic. She places Lisa in the context of an American mythos. While I am anthropologist, and thus interested in this kind of cultural critique, I approach *The Simpsons*, and especially Lisa, as an educator. So it is from this position that I conclude that Lisa models what I consider to be key virtues of the educated person. [Lisa and Aristotle would have a lot to talk about](#). In some ways, I think Berlant and I would probably agree in the end that, as a bearer of these classical virtues of liberal education, Lisa's lessons are particularly relevant for the contemporary late-capitalist era. Today we are inundated with myths that teach us that, as Margaret Thatcher used to say, “There Is No Alternative” to the contemporary order. More now than ever, we need someone who shows us how to ask, “How do you know?” (“The Boy Who Knew Too Much” 1994 [#1F19]).

References

- “Bart's Inner Child.” *The Simpsons*. Fox Broadcasting Company, 11 Nov. 1993. Television.
- Berlant, Lauren. 1993. “The Theory of Infantile Citizenship.” *Public Culture* 5 (3): 395–410. doi:10.1215/08992363-5-3-395.
- “Burns, Baby Burns.” *The Simpsons*. Fox Broadcasting Company, 16 Nov. 1996. Television.

“Lisa on Ice.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 13 Nov. 1994. Television.

“Lisa's Substitute.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 25 Apr. 1991. Television.

“Lisa the Iconoclast.” The Simpsons. N.p., 25 Jan. 2015. Television.

“Lisa the Skeptic.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 23 Nov. 1997. Television.

“Lost Our Lisa.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 10 May 1998. Television.

“Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 26 Sept. 1991. Television.

“Summer of 4 Ft. 2.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 19 May 1996. Television.

“The Boy Who Knew Too Much.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 5 May 1994. Television.

“The PTA Disbands.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 16 Apr. 1995. Television.

“This Little Wiggy.” The Simpsons. Fox Broadcasting Company, 22 Mar. 1998. Television.

-
- 1 I actually like to think of Lisa speaking to the Optimist Society, a vaguely Ronald Reaganesque US organization which holds public speaking competitions for children. I went to a regional final in Fargo, North Dakota while riots broke out in Los Angeles in response to the Rodney King verdict, and, perhaps inspired by Lisa, changed my essay. It didn't go over so well, but heh heh, that's kind of like winning anyways.
 - 2 Hurlbut is played by Donald Sutherland in perhaps one of the finest roles of his career.
 - 3 And her early support to end apartheid in South Africa, as well. In early episodes, scene's in Lisa's room featured a prominent "End Apartheid Now" poster in the background (e.g. "Lisa's Substitute" (1991 [#7F19]), "Flaming Moe's" (1991 [#8F08])).