

The dominant representation I found among family-based texts was that the only good parents are stay-at-home mothers, who are a crucial part of a family. The representation that only stay-at-home mothers make good parents means that fathers and working mothers are portrayed negatively in family sitcoms. Fathers are shown to be immature and inefficient in caring for their children compared to the mothers who have to pick up after their mistakes. TV dads such as Phil Dunphy and Jay Pritchett in *Modern Family* and Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* are shown to try and get along with their kids by acting younger than they are and therefore coming across as immature, or in Jay's case just giving bad advice. ①

Rarely are working mothers shown in family sitcoms despite their growing prevalence in America and around the world. However, when they are such as in the 2013 programme *Mom*, they are shown to be stressed and selfish, unable to connect with their children on an emotional level. Stay-at-home mothers, such as Marge Simpson and Claire Dunphy are represented as smart and sensible carers for the whole family, disciplining the children correctly and doing most if not all of the housework. They cater to the family's needs while perpetuating the traditional American dream, however out-dated in modern society. In these media texts the features of dialogue & action help to create the representation that stay-at-home mothers are the only good parents and therefore crucial for a normal family. In *The Simpson's Movie*, there is a scene in which the daughter Lisa tells her mother Marge about a boy she met. Marge responds, while cleaning the house, with thoughtful advice: "Oh honey, that's great. But the very best thing is that he listens to you." In contrast, the father Homer dares his son Bart to do dangerous tasks for entertainment. "I dare you to... climb the TV antenna!" he says, before shaking it vigorously while Bart is on it. When Bart completes a dare to skateboard naked in public at Homer's request, the town police apprehend him. Despite it being Homer's fault, he pleads, "It was all his idea! He's out of control, I tell you! I'm at my wits end." This shows in the film shows the dissimilarities between stay-at-home mothers and fathers, by depicting Marge as the practical and worrying primary guardian for the children, and Homer as a childish father constantly getting into absurd shenanigans. Marge tries to connect with the children by listening to them while Homer carelessly puts them in danger out of his own stupidity. ② ③

In episode 4: The incident of *Modern Family*, Jay is talking with his eldest son Mitchell about his younger stepson, Manny. "Manny set a kid's bike on fire," Jay says, to which Mitchell questions. Jay explains that, "I might have told him to get even with some kids... not my best parenting moment." Mitchell replies, "Not your worst." This represents fathers are giving useless and ridiculous advice. The fact that Gloria was out dealing with Manny while Jay was sitting in as pa was clarified in the scene, reinforcing that fathers are ineffective and don't know how to deal with children while stay-at-home mothers do all the work. This dialogue shows how Mitchell feels towards his father and views him in some aspects as a bad parent. We often see Jay giving poor advice to Manny or not being supportive of Manny's decisions in other episodes so this underlines his poor parenting skills, reinforcing the message that fathers are mostly useless without a stay-at-home mother present. ④

In the pilot episode of *Mom*, Christy confronts her own mother with, 'There is hardly a day I can remember that I didn't come home to an empty house... while other mothers were cooking dinner, you were cooking meth!' Christy's mother answers, "otherwise known as working!" This dialogue exchange preserves the assumption that children want to have mothers at home all the time and that working mothers are lesser than their housebound counterparts. This is clearly exaggerated example of working mothers being bad mothers for comic effect but it does reflect that Christy's mother is inefficient and has neglected her daughter in the past. In Episode 2: *A Pee Stick* and *An Asian Raccoon*, Christy breaks down and cries after seeing her now pregnant daughter Violet putting her younger brother Roscoe

to bed. Christy tells her, “You’re a better mother than I am” and violet answers with, “I know.” This shows that Violet has been consistently unimpressed with Christy’s behaviour as a parent and reinforces the message that stay-at-home mothers are essential for a family, leaving working mothers with this negative stereotype.

In the pilot episode of Mom, Christy works and comes home late to find her rebellious daughter Violet’s boyfriend climbing out of her bedroom window. This highlights her inability to control her children, being too busy to monitor their behaviour. It is revealed that Christy is maintaining an affair with her married boss. This creates resentment from her eldest daughter Violet who doesn’t forgive Christy for her past that included alcoholism and promiscuity. Baxter fathers Roscoe, Christy’s youngest child. Baxter is another example of a dad being represented negatively in the media. He doesn’t pay child support, lives in a caravan and buys and sells marijuana. He only spends two hours a week with Roscoe, and their time together usually consists of playing inappropriate video games. **These actions by Christy and Baxter reinforce the representation that only stay-at-home mothers are good parents, and therefore all other kinds of parents are useless...**

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The effect of this representation that stay-at-home mothers are crucial within a family on society is that viewers of these media texts may become used to it and believe that it’s true. The message, while inaccurate in describing modern society’s viewpoint on the issue, can also be considered sexist. The U.S.A, where these texts are created and indeed where most family-based sitcoms are created, tends to rely on the stereotype of nuclear families (a married man and woman with children) as the social norm. However a study referenced in the New York Times article “the Changing American Family’ shows that only 23.5% of households in America constitute to this traditional family structure. According to Gary Langer of ABC News, 64.4% of mothers with children under 18 are now out into the workforce (information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). These statistics shows that the typical representation of a family in most family sitcoms is not accurate and that actually a minority of mothers stay at home in America. Therefore, the assumption that dads are stupid and working mothers neglect a connection with their children is imposed on consumers of media texts despite its incorrectness. Negative stereotypes can arise from these depictions of fathers and mothers in the workforce. The representation of fathers as dumbfounded idiots is sexist towards men, and the idea that working mothers are inefficient and are better off at home is sexist towards women.

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According to Diana Lavery of the Population Reference Bureau, “today, stay-at-home mothers are more likely to be younger and less-educated than their working-mum counterparts, and to also have significant lower household incomes.” This contradicts the positive representation of stay-at-home mothers such as the older Marge Simpson and Claire Dunphy in the Simpsons and Modern Family respectively, and also contradicts the negative portrayal of young, working mother Christy in Mom. The consequence of this is that many media consumers now believe incorrect stereotypes about working mothers vs stay-at-home mothers and this cycle of false information is perpetuated through public opinion, leading to even more unrealistic TV shows on the topic. Working mothers and fathers in the audience of these texts may recognize the message and feel offended by it. I think that these consequences affect the audience by misleading them about the reality of society and dynamics of families because the texts show that only a certain kind of family (one containing a stay-at-home mother) can succeed. The traditional American family being comprised of a stay-at-home mother, a working father and their children represents something that has been drilled into society for decades from most cultures and core community values, and how this is still reflected in media texts today. The simple concept of father=breadwinner and mother=caregiver remains successful for modern family TV shows. The characteristics associated with these roles are exaggerated for more comedy, more entertainment and therefore more revenue, and so commercial considerations are also a significant consequence of this representation.

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