

*The Simpsons*, being one of the longest-running shows of all time, has been on the air for around 30 years. These 30 years have been some of the most influential in various gay rights and LGBTQ+ movements as well. I chose to align some of the Simpsons episodes that most prominently featured either LGBTQ+ themes or characters with some of the major shifts in pop culture or legislature relating to LGBTQ+ rights. Just basically, this revealed that many of the episodes that featured themes of gay rights or gay characters broadly matched public opinion as it seemed to have shifted in regards to these movements. The show is invested as commentating on current political climates and events, although it does seem to broadly fall on more leftist ideologies on many social issues than not. However, looking at the way LGBTQ+ themes and characters often show up, *The Simpsons* isn't quite as liberally-minded as it might think that it is.

Many of the major episodes of the Simpsons that treat LGBTQ+ themes as more than a passing joke broadly align with shifts in popular opinion of gay rights. For example, *There's Something About Marrying* was released in 2005, which comes on the heels of Massachusetts legalizing same-sex marriage a year earlier. The episode is also cited to be inspired by the 2004 San Francisco same-sex weddings. The San Francisco weddings took place between February 12 and March 11, 2004, when the mayor of San Francisco ordered the clerk to give marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The marriage licenses were all voided from this time, but continued the debate about gay marriage in American society. *There's Something About Marrying* follows from this debate, but unlike other episodes that clearly have an opinion about the topic at hand, this episode doesn't.

The Simpsons episode specifically doesn't promote any particular side on the issue of gay marriage, instead choosing to "offend you whether you're gay or straight" (Pinsky). After Springfield legalizes same-sex marriage as a tourism tactic, Homer starts to marry couples after Reverend Lovejoy refuses. Marge is initially proud of Homer for being so accepting, although he is clearly doing it for the money. Homer's reasons for supporting same-sex marriage do not spring from the goodness of his heart, but his pocket instead. Marge appears, then, to be the voice of equality, but when her sister Patty reveals that she is marrying a woman, Marge too hesitates in showing her support. Throughout the episode, both sides of the gay marriage debate are satirized to an extreme degree, with various interviews of ultra-conservative spokespeople being mocked on television interviews on Springfield's news, but also having the "pro gay-marriage," side be satirized as well. Homer starts to marry people to other objects or things, a play off of the argument that allowing same-sex marriage will open the doors to all sorts of blasphemous marriage. At one point, Homer even marries Reverend Lovejoy to his bible. Homer also advertises through a sign on his front lawn that he will "marry anything to anything else. Diaper fee for chimp brides" (Pinsky). Marge too, shows her hesitation by almost not attending (or approving) the wedding of her sister, just because she is a lesbian. The episode satirizes not just the opposition to same-sex marriage, but those who fought for those equal rights.

However, like pointed out previously, *The Simpsons* is a relatively liberal show, especially for airing on a broadly conservative network like Fox. More underlying than any mocking of LGBTQ+ people is mocking of homophobia or discrimination. Homer's consistent objection and fear of straying outside of his masculinity, and into the realm of

feminized characteristics, is clearly so overdone that it should not be taken seriously. For example, in a season 3 episode, “Lisa’s Pony,” after Homer angers Lisa, he tries to spend time with her to make up for it, but after being made fun of by Bart and Milhouse, he decides to simply buy her a pony and be done. Marge tries to talk him out of it, but he just says, “Marge, if I spend any more time doing these girl things, I’m going to, you know, go fruity. No, you were right the first time with the quick fix idea.” The audience is clearly meant to read Homer’s concerns that he will go “fruity,” as absurd, and gently mocks Homer’s fear of becoming gay. The show has other small digs at homophobia fairly often, like Ned Flanders happily saying that he attended a “walk for the cure. Of homosexuality!” The way these jokes are delivered are meant to be seen as ludicrous, and is indicative of *The Simpsons* more liberal views towards homosexuality. Yet, the show often finds it hard to translate this smaller digs into larger looks at the issues, which would entail clearly supporting or not supporting some side to a debate.

Notably absent from all the *Simpsons* representations of LGBTQ+ characters or themes are anyone who isn’t lesbian or gay. A Google search for LGBT Simpsons characters can bring you to a [list of characters](#) who, through a mention or joke, can be assumed to be bisexual or transgender. These characters may exist, but are never given the same sort of attention that gay or lesbian characters are given. Smithers (albeit recently) was given an entire episode devoted to his sexuality, as was Patty’s coming out a large plot point of that episode. If the trend that the timeline shows is true, that *The Simpsons* only starts to closely address LGBTQ+ issues once the issue moves into the mainstream. After the general public tide of opinion shifts in favor of a certain debate or issue (like gay marriage) then it becomes more likely that it will be tackled in an episode

of *The Simpsons*. As debates about people who are transgender just are beginning to come into ongoing debates about LGBTQ+ legislature, and in society more broadly, it becomes more likely that *The Simpsons* may one day create an episode that tackles the issue.

The show also falls into a common trope of desexualizing its gay and lesbian characters. In the episodes that are considered to be the characters “coming out” episodes for Smithers and Patty, neither of them end in any sort of sexualized relationship. Patty’s fiancé ends up being a man, so naturally she chooses not to marry him. Yet this still desexualizes Patty, as she leaves without a spouse, or any sort of meaningful relationship.

Smithers is the same way, in the episode that was hyped to be his coming out episode, “The Burns Cage.” Smithers never actually uses the word “gay” to describe himself, nor does he make a point to identify his sexuality in any meaningful way. Instead, he tries to tell Mr. Burns that he loves him, but is deliberately interrupted and dismissed by Burns. The writer of the episode, Rob LeZebnik, in an interview to the *New York Post*, said that they “didn’t really want to have that big moment of ‘I’m out,’ you know? Instead, just have it be a big embrace- like everyone knows it” ([Leszkiewicz](#)). In theory, this approach is a progressive method to introducing a character’s sexuality into a show. Yet, if said character has been the punch line to many gay jokes over 27 years, and his sexuality is nearly always treated with dismissal by both the show and it’s staff (up until 2007 the writers and show runners refused to identify Burns as homosexual, and instead insisted he was “Burns-sexual”(MTV)), this approach feels like too little, too late. Leszkiewicz, in her article “The Smithers question: why do we keep retrofitting progressive narratives in pop culture?” addresses Smithers coming out by saying this:

Instead of a coming out, this feels more like a subtle act of retroactive continuity: The Simpsons' writers struggle to make a cartoon born out of the late Eighties and early Nineties tessellate with contemporary social politics. It becomes especially notable in a cartoon where tone, technology and cultural references continue to evolve with time, but characters never age a day. *Oh, you thought we were all weird about the Smithers thing, because of the euphemisms and wilful denial? Nope, we're actually all aware and cool with it and always have been! Perhaps it is YOU who is the homophobe!* ([Leszkiewicz](#))

Firmly addressing Smithers' sexuality is a step in the right direction, but still leaves something to be desired for representations of LGBTQ+ characters in the Simpsons. Also, by the end of the episodes, Smithers and Burns reunite, and agree to go back to their prior relationship: Burns still treats Smithers with disdain, and Smithers will continue to pine hopelessly after him forever. Smithers still won't have a meaningful homosexual relationship, and *The Simpsons* is able to preach acceptance, while still keeping the relationships it wants to accept at a distance.

To dismiss *The Simpsons* as a show that fails to be progressive in regards to sexual orientation would be wrong, as it does try to represent different sexualities respectfully. To also disregard the entire premise of a show like *The Simpsons*, which aims to gently mock all sides of culture and society, would be remiss. With all of this knowledge, still *The Simpsons* falls slightly behind. If *The Simpsons* wants to be as progressive as a show that it believes it is, it needs to do more than just follow trends of acceptance, and treat the characters that are represented with respect to their orientations.