The Comedy of the American Dream
Valli Mullen

In the early 1950s, the American dream was the nation’s common heartbeat. Citizens longed for the “ideal” family; most hid their shortcomings. The nuclear family included a mother, father, two children and a pet, all residing in suburbia, USA. Fathers were the breadwinners, and mothers stayed home, cooked, and cared for the kids. Each family included a boy and a girl, the former who always parted his hair to the side and the latter who always wore pigtails. The nation was convinced that if one worked hard enough, he or she could earn enough money to support the family and have plenty of professional satisfaction. Everyone sat down to dinner together nightly, and discussed his/her day, and innocence abounded—even pregnancy was considered a racy subject. But during the last fifty years, Americans realized that their dream of a perfect life was unrealistic, as the film Pleasantville depicts. Comic entertainment, such as The Simpsons and American Beauty, followed suit—deposing the American dream became the most relevant form of humor in America.

In Pleasantville (1998), Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon play siblings who are trapped in a dysfunctional turn-of-the-millenium family. Maguire’s character deals with the situation by obsessively watching Pleasantville, a black-and-white rerun from the 1950s in which the American dream directed the script. Witherspoon’s character deals with her life by turning to a 1990s distraction: sex. The two are accidentally zapped into the television show by means of a magic remote. They are thrust into the roles of David and Mary Sue Parker, and they begin to make the most of their hiatus—Maguire blends into his role, while Witherspoon begins to teach all of the high school boys in Pleasantville the particulars of sex.

Through a record number of special effects, as the citizens of Pleasantville start to experiment with their sexuality, splashes of color appear, highlighting their bodies and their world.

The main comedy of the picture arises from the innocence of the characters clashing with the worldly realisms, and the color transformation of Pleasantville parallels the transition that American humor has taken over the past half-century. Despite the harsh realities of the Depression and World War II that led up to this age, an innocence was assumed during the 50s; today, no subject is too controversial for television. In fact, the main facet of American humor today is the shock between the ideology of the American dream as it supposedly existed earlier this century and the subsequent recognition of reality.

Historians and academics offer definitions which underlie today’s humor. In 1937, Walter Blair, whose 60-year study of humor focused on the nineteenth century development of the genre, stated that American humor was neither produced only in America nor contained characteristics privy only to Americans. He offered instead that American humor meant “humor which is American in that it has an emphatic ‘native quality’—a quality imparted by its subject matter and its technique” (92). H. R. Hawes, half a century earlier in 1882, had defined the technique of American humor as the three shocks of contrast: business and piety, Aboriginal and Yankee, and the bigness of American nature versus the smallness of Europe (81). Subject matters and techniques such as exaggeration and violence are important, but the shock of contrast remains the essential characteristic that defines American humor.

Louis Rubin, a renowned humor scholar, reasoned the shocks of contrast to a higher level. Rubin recorded in his essay, “The Great American Joke,” that the essence of American humor lies in the incongruity between
democracy and reality. Rubin says humor “arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting” (109-10). In the two decades following Rubin’s studies, democracy has best been demonstrated by the American dream, and the shocks that led to humor have accordingly expanded. The American dream was as unrealistic in 1950 as it is today, but citizens held fast to the ideology and denied reality. During the 90s, television programmers and filmmakers began to poke fun at Americans’ steadfast hold on the American dream, and it now prevails as the humor trend of the decade.

Halfway into the century, television programming proliferated, promoting the American dream. Sitcoms such as I Love Lucy, which aired on CBS from 1951-1961, portrayed a family atmosphere, mirroring “real life”—or what the public desired their lives to be like. Lucille Ball’s zany vaudeville reenactments popularized the show. Her real-life husband Desi Arnaz played her on-screen husband, Ricky Ricardo. The couple completed the first vision of their American dream during the second season by having a baby, and 44 million viewers watched the reenactment on television (Claro and Klam 120). United States audiences were waiting to embrace proof manufactured by Hollywood to assure themselves that the American dream was not unattainable.

Even in a post-Lucy, post-Kennedy, post-Vietnam era during which the media experimented with increasing freedom and liberties, the American dream still persisted in sitcom form. Happy Days aired on ABC from 1974-84. Set in the 1950s, the show documented the family life of Richie, the all-American high school boy with his hair parted on the side and slicked down, a varsity sweater, and trivial girl problems. His family sat down to dinner together every night, and most of the comedy in the show came from Richie’s blunders—or from his smooth friend Fonzie’s triumphs. Happy Days was the last sitcom in which the American dream drove the script. As the 1990s rang in, realism began to take over in another form—cartoons.

The Simpsons was the first sitcom to entertain audiences by presenting the American dream and then shocking them with the recognition of reality. The half-hour cartoon started running in 1990 on Fox, featuring an irreverent yellow family. The family, closely modeled after that of creator Matt Groening, is American in composition: father Homer, mother Marge, 10-year-old Bart, 8-year-old Lisa, and 2-year-old Maggie. They reside in Springfield, a suburban city in one of the 48 continental states.

The Simpsons deal with issues similar to those of other sitcoms: school, work, home life, jealousies, mistakes, blunders. But they also shock the viewer by addressing issues that the average American sitcom and the American dream prohibited in discussion: homosexuality, politics, and violence. The Simpsons startle America because they are animated with blue or spiky hair and because they use swearwords. Cartoons were traditionally for children, but The Simpsons deals with and presents issues that are too mature for children. Adults, though, are forced to laugh in agitation—and perhaps even discomfort—as Bart swears or Homer forces his son to sit in front of a billboard bearing scantily-clad women smoking cigarettes to assure himself that Bart is not homosexual.

Bart and Lisa both defy the early American ideal that children are seen and not heard. During the early 90s, Bart, whose name is an anagram for “Brat,” was the poster boy for elementary school troublemakers. His rap sheet in Principal Skinner’s office is a mile long, and he is often the instigator of chaos in Springfield, such as the teachers’ strike or the trouble that leads to the children’s curfew. Bart’s most popular sayings—such as “Don’t have a cow, man”—are overshadowed when he irreverently says, “What the hell, Homer?” to his father. But still, American audiences have to laugh at Bart: his hair isn’t slicked over and he’s far from well-mannered, but his departure from the expectations arouses interest and comedy.

Lisa, although in second grade, seems to have a higher IQ than than her ever-bumbling father. When Bart causes the teachers’ strike, she calms herself by watching videos of the school building and reading text books in her “Emergency Strike Kit.” Throughout that particular episode, she chokes up when she can remember only two syno-
nym and pleads with her mother, "Grade me, evaluate and rank me!" Lisa does not believe in Santa Claus, God or eating meat. Such disturbing, and perhaps even unpatriotic, actions from an eight-year-old girl disillusion viewers. Americans expect any pig-tailed sprite to entertain adults with cute conversation, not to sabotage her father's cookout in effort to suspend cruelty to pigs. Homer's job at the nuclear power plant, working under 102-year-old tycoon Monty Burns is more blue-collar than one would suspect. Homer sleeps on the job only slightly more often than he eats doughnuts, which is at least once an episode. He is careless and has caused two reactor meltdowns, which the citizens of Springfield were lucky to survive. Viewers who lived during the 1950s through the first atomic bombs and the Cuban Missile Crisis would not take kindly to Homer's negligence in working with nuclear energy. Audiences today, though, guffaw at such situations that make them squeamish, such as during the opening theme sequence when Homer plucks a glowing nuclear substance off his shirt and chucks it out his car window.

As Homer admits to a judge after having his children taken away by the county, he is "probably the last guy who should be a father," to which his bumbling, slothly idiocy attests. The most shattering fact of all is that Homer does indeed achieve his wildest dreams without having to work towards them. He becomes an astronaut, navigates a Navy nuclear sub, meets the President, becomes a world-famous artist, tackles and captures James Bond, and performs with the rock group Smashing Pumpkins (by taking cannonballs to the stomach as a warm-up act). Although viewers are endeared by his trips to the top, Homer's adventures defy the American adage that hard work will pay off. The fact that he is thrust into pay-off situations without the preparation for them is even more appealing to the sense of humor. Americans have enjoyed Homer's antics for ten seasons, and the animated sitcom opened the door for other media, such as the motion picture industry, to confront the questionable lucidity of the American dream.

*American Beauty* is a dark, insipid look at the final year of recently-murdered Lester Burnham, played by Kevin Spacey. The film, which premiered in September 1999, is already being touted as the best movie of the year. Burnham seems to live the American dream—he has a well-paying job at a magazine, a beautiful wife and daughter, and a large house in suburbia. But Burnham's narration reveals that he is trapped in a marriage that is not satisfying and a job that is going nowhere. He has not spoken to his daughter in months, and he is mousy and forgettable. As he tells his wife's colleague at a party, "It's okay. I wouldn't remember me, either."

Burnham's wife, Carolyn, played by Annette Bening, is obsessed with success. She listens to self-help tapes and refuses to let herself cry. Her couch is not merely a couch; it is a couch covered with $4,000 Italian silk. Bening's character represents the ultimate foil of the 90s woman and pokes fun at the American dream housewife when she lights candles at dinner and forces the dysfunctional family to listen to Marvin Gaye.

The movie starts to gel when Lester Burnham sees his daughter Jane's best friend Angela, the sultry blond cheerleader. His lust for her reminds him of his teenage days, and he laments that he never fancied his life would turn out so pathetically. After Lester decides to take charge of his future, he enthusiastically tells his daughter about how he quit his job and blackmailed his boss for $60,000 that day. The scene works comically because Burnham doesn't care that he is breaking all normal laws of adulthood. Carolyn's hysterical ranting adds to his dry, newfound confidence. Lester begins smoking pot, which he buys from his next-door-neighbor, secures a job flipping burgers at Mr. Smiley's, and starts lifting weights to impress his daughter's best friend. Jane complains that she needs a father who is responsible, a role-model; Lester takes some of his blackmail money and buys his dream car: a 1970 Firebird.

In perhaps one of the funniest scenes in the movie, Carolyn storms into the living room where Lester is lounging in sweatpants, demanding to know whose red car is in the driveway. Lester jubilantly replies, "Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird. The car I always wanted and now I have it. I rule!" As Lester reverts further into adolescence, he cares less about his rebellion. He wants only to regress into the time when his dreams were still ahead of him and he had not miserably failed to live up to his and society's expectations. The subject matter
of the movie is quite graphic compared to works of half a century earlier, but the shock of watching Lester shatter the American dream is today's comedy at its pinnacle. Fifty years ago, Lester Burnham's downward spiral would have been viewed as obscene and detestable; today, audiences laugh at the harsh fact that they and Lester never fulfilled their dreams.

During the 1990s, Americans have come to admit that the American dream is not fully attainable. Though they knew as much in the 50s, they forged ahead, pretending that mom and dad weren't fighting at home, pretending that Billy and Susie were really watching drive-in movies. Half a century later, the assassination of a president, the impeachment of another, the disillusion of war, and the eruption of the information age have forced Americans to resurvey their goals and face the truth. Perhaps American humor relies on the shock between the American dream and the recognition of reality because we must laugh at what would otherwise reduce us to tears. Recognizing that life offers only one chance can be fracturing. Humans despise thinking that they can't always secure what they want, even with hard work. Americans therefore compensate by supporting the creation of shows like The Simpsons and films like American Beauty. Such entertainment allows Americans the opportunity to relieve the stress of their pressures and unattainable dreams by laughing at the incongruous realities. Americans are willing to laugh at their mistakes—and never too stubborn to redefine the limits of comedy.

Works Cited