

Of Theory and Praxis: *SpongeBob SquarePants* and Contemporary Constructions of the American Dream

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Abstract

*While *SpongeBob SquarePants* on the surface might appear to project a counter-cultural, rejection of tradition and authority figures, on the contrary, the text projects many elements that support the American cultural ideal of the American Dream. Thus, in our analysis of the television show, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, we set aside a strictly entertaining form of popular culture to demonstrate the show's ability to equip both children and adults for contemporary society. In this essay, we describe and analyze four episodes of the *SpongeBob SquarePants* television series to determine the recurring elements that reinforce a traditional American ideology. More specifically, generic criticism will be used as a framework to identify and explain how an "American Dream" ideology is perpetuated in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in order to teach, instruct, and guide behavior while appealing to two different audiences: children and adults.*

Keywords: *SpongeBob*, ideology, generic criticism, text, the American Dream

1. Reinventing and Perpetuating Ideologies through Media Constructs

The ideas, attitudes, memes, and images of popular culture have woven into every aspect of life – perpetuating certain ideologies for a variety of audiences. These ideologies that are conveyed, however, are not apolitical. As Hall (1995) discussed long ago, a primary function of media is the "production and transformation" of ideologies. Thus, as we consume various texts, we should be mindful of the underlying ideas and viewpoints that are contained in them.

One text that subtly constructs ideologies for audiences are cartoon shows. Researchers who have analyzed cartoons have focused on topics such as: moral transgressions (Bierwirth and Blumberg, 2010), cognitive development (Chan and McNeal, 2006; Hedges, 2011; Lillard and Peterson, 2011), and marketing (Hebden, King, and Kelly, 2011). While this list is not exhaustive, it does underscore the understated but complex meanings and messages that are contained in cartoons. Often times, these works and others contribute to a general sense that cartoons convey negative and problematic messages to viewers. However, texts are polysemic and alternate readings can lead to a greater understanding of different values and ideas. One show that illustrates the polysemic nature of a text is Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

SpongeBob SquarePants is a cartoon show available on the Nickelodeon television network. The cartoon has resulted in a variety of different children's apparel, toys, school gear, and DVDs. The main character, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, has become a figure immediately recognizable by both adults and children. He has gained significance as both a television star and a loveable friend. Since its official debut in the summer of 1999, *SpongeBob SquarePants* has had great success and there is no indication that the show will lose its popularity (Maustad, 2009; Strauss, 2009).

While on the surface *SpongeBob SquarePants* might appear to project a counter-cultural rejection of tradition and authority figures, on the contrary, the text projects many elements that support the American cultural ideal of the American Dream. Thus, in our analysis of the television show, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, we set aside a strictly entertaining form of popular culture to demonstrate the show's ability to equip both children and adults for contemporary society. In this essay, we describe and analyze four episodes of the *SpongeBob SquarePants* television series to determine the recurring elements that reinforce a traditional American ideology.

More specifically, generic criticism will be used as a framework to identify and explain how an “American Dream” ideology is perpetuated in order to teach, instruct, and guide behavior while appealing to two different audiences: children and adults.

2. *SpongeBob SquarePants: Four Episodes*

SpongeBob SquarePants was created in Burbank, California in 1999 by producer, Stephen Hillenberg (Whitney, 2002). The main character, SpongeBob SquarePants is voiced by Tom Kenny – who has used his quirky voice and contagious laugh to allow SpongeBob to stand out among American society’s vast lineup of cartoons. Still being created today, the television show has only taken one break in creating new episodes, and that was to produce a movie, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, in 2004.

Interestingly, the show’s producer, Stephen Hillenberg earned a degree in natural-resource planning and interpretation, and used this education to teach marine biology at the Orange County Marine Institute for three years (Strauss, 2002). Pursuing a master’s degree in the arts, Hillenberg had the suitable background for knowing how to create animated characters that can “live in a pineapple under the sea.” Hillenberg also explained that the show works due to the uncomplicated plots that focus on the interaction of the characters rather than on specific topics (Whitney, 2002).

The popularity of the show is illustrated best by the span of the viewing audience for *SpongeBob SquarePants* which ranges from age five to forty-nine (Strauss, 2002). Interestingly, of the series 56.1 million monthly viewers, 13.3 million of those viewers were nine to fourteen year-olds, and 18.6 million of those landed in the age category ranging from eighteen to forty-nine (Strauss, 2002).

SpongeBob SquarePants is aired on Nickelodeon, which began running television programs in 1979, where it was and is still owned by Viacom. Nickelodeon has now been expanded into various audience-specific channels, including Nick, Nick Jr., and Nick at Nite. The audience-specific channels enable Nickelodeon to be very successful in appealing to multiple audiences.

We have chosen four episodes from the *SpongeBob SquarePants* television series to analyze. The episodes were more or less chosen at random; however, we decided to include two episodes that aired in 1999 (the year of the show’s debut) and two episodes that aired in 2011. The first episode is titled “Help Wanted” from 1999, and the second is titled “Tea at the Tree Dome” from 1999. The third and fourth episodes are from 2011 and are titled, “Sweet and Sour Squid” and “The Googly Artiste,” respectively.

The first episode, “Help Wanted” (Hillenberg, 1999) that will be analyzed features SpongeBob, Squidward, Patrick, and Mr. Krabs. SpongeBob wakes up in the morning in his usual happy, motivated demeanor. “Today is the day!” shouts SpongeBob as he is excited about applying for the long-coveted job of fry cook at “The Krusty Krab” where Mr. Krabs is the owner and Squidward, his neighbor, is already employed. As SpongeBob approaches The Krusty Krab – happily singing and dancing an “I’m ready!” song - Squidward notices the “Help Wanted” sign and quickly rushes in to make Mr. Krabs take it down “before it’s too late!” Squidward and Mr. Krabs decide they will give SpongeBob a task that, if he is successful, will result in him being hired as the new fry cook. While SpongeBob is busy trying to complete the seemingly impossible task of finding a turbo-charged spatula, The Krusty Krab is bombarded with starving anchovies. They rush the restaurant, and Squidward and Mr. Krabs are holding on for their lives, thinking the mob of anchovies will spark their end. To their great surprise, SpongeBob storms in – with turbo-charged spatula in hand – and produces enough krabby patties to satisfy the hungry mob of anchovies. The episode ends when Mr. Krabs gives SpongeBob an official nametag. SpongeBob could not be happier.

The second episode, “Tea at the TreeDome” (Hillenberg, 1999) features SpongeBob and best friend, Patrick, and introduces Sandy – a squirrel. SpongeBob and Sandy meet at Jellyfish Fields as Sandy courageously wrestles with a giant clam. SpongeBob saves her from the clam, just to get himself stuck inside. Sandy then leaps to his rescue and saves SpongeBob from the clam. The two decide that they have a lot in common – including karate – and they should be friends. To be agreeable with everything Sandy likes, SpongeBob unknowingly tells Sandy that he, too, loves air and can “never get enough of it!” Sandy invites SpongeBob over for tea the next day. SpongeBob asks Patrick what air is and he tells SpongeBob that it just sounds like something fancy and that he should always hold his pinky in the air – as high as he can: “They should call you SpongeBob FancyPants! Remember... when in doubt, pinky out!”

SpongeBob arrives at Sandy's for tea the next day, only to find that he cannot breathe inside the waterless tree dome where she lives. He quickly shrivels. Patrick tries to come in to save SpongeBob, but he, too, quickly shrivels. Right before things get too bad, Sandy realizes what is going on and gives both SpongeBob and Patrick water-filled helmets to wear while inside her house. The three drink tea together – with pinkies up.

The third episode analyzed, "Sweet and Sour Squid" (Hillenberg, 2011) features SpongeBob, Patrick, Squidward, Mr. Krabs, and Plankton. The show starts with SpongeBob waking up as his usual happy, whistling self – to an annoyed Squidward. Unable to convince SpongeBob and Mr. Krabs of his brilliant clarinet-playing, a frustrated Squidward storms out of The Krusty Krab. Plankton, the arch rival of Mr. Krabs, sees Squidward as an opportunity to acquire "the secret formula" for the famous Krabby Patty. At first, Squidward is unresponsive to Plankton's attempts, but when Plankton secretly puts earplugs in and is a willing recipient of Squidward's clarinet playing, Squidward decides to keep Plankton around. At the end of a long, clarinet-playing day, Plankton gets fed up and asks for the secret formula. Squidward tells him that, although he has worked there for twenty years, he has no idea what it is. Plankton gets very angry and steals Squidward's clarinet – only to be arrested by police for several clarinet-based noise violations.

The final episode analyzed, "The Googly Artiste" (Hillenberg, 2011) features SpongeBob, Patrick, Squidward, and Mr. Krabs. While Squidward is preparing for art critic "Frederick T. Nitpick" to evaluate his latest sculpture, SpongeBob and Patrick are busy making their own artwork – baskets, crocheted wallets, and other childish crafts. After the art critic arrives and tells Squidward that his sculpture is inadequate (while confiscating his sophisticated artist's beret), the critic's attention turns to SpongeBob and Patrick. Mr. Nitpick is fascinated by Patrick's googly-eyed rock (a rock with about 15 googly eyes glued on it), offers to buy the art for five hundred dollars, and rewards Patrick with Squidward's beret. Squidward and SpongeBob go to work, only to have their day interrupted by Patrick – who has decided that his new inspiration is to put his googly eyes on Krabby Patties. Mr. Krabs seizes the money-making opportunity and puts a sign outside: "Now selling fine art patties." Patrick names Squidward his apprentice, and tells him that if he works very hard he, too, could be an artist. Squidward is not amused.

3. Generic Criticism: Recruiting Situations as Rhetorical Strategy

Generic criticism is a rhetorical method that is based upon the assumption that recurring situations create analogous needs and expectations for audiences. As a result, the recurring situations evoke specific rhetorical responses. Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (1978) was instrumental in initiating generic criticism as a rhetorical method when he made the following assertions:

- there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself,
- there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type,
- the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide a critic with information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation (p. 133-134).

In other words, there are not an infinite number of rhetorical situations, nor are there infinite responses to those situations. Because of this, commonalities found throughout various texts can establish a genre and, in turn, form a rhetorical tradition. It is this tradition – found intertwined throughout texts of the particular genre – that meet expectations of audience members and illustrate the ways in which a particular genre is important, relevant, and influential (Jamieson, 1973; Campbell, 1973).

Campbell and Jamieson (1978) define a genre as:

a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, in isolation, appear in other discourses. What is distinctive about the acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms together in constellation (p. 20)

When generic criticism is applied to a text, it allows the critic to determine its rhetorical strategies that can be generalized beyond the specific text. When we are subjected to a text in a particular genre, there are certain elements that are expected to be present and commonalities that are shared. When these expectations are met a genre exists. The role of the critic in generic criticism is to identify, define, and describe these commonalities that form the genre. The elements' recurrence throughout the text is vital to the success of the genre and the approval of the audience.

The generic critic attempts to identify these commonalities through three distinct types of characteristics. First, there are *situational requirements* that need to be met. These are elements that need to be present in order for the genre to exist. The requirements that are present often call for particular responses in audience members. Situational requirements precede the genre, but their importance lies in creating the conditions that warrant particular responses to construct the genre.

Next, there are *substantive and stylistic characteristics* found within the genre (Campbell and Jamieson, 1978). These make up the rhetorical features that respond to or are representative of the situational requirements. That is, these elements will attempt to uncover the meaning found within the rhetorical situation. These characteristics make up the content and style of the artifact(s) and attempt to answer “what” is communicated and “how” it is communicated.

The final element being investigated by the generic critic is the *organizing principle*. This is the root term or overarching label that is applied to the identified genre. All texts within the genre would agree that the organizing principle – or umbrella concept – is relevant and representative of both text and genre. Because a genre is composed of fused elements that create core expectations, the organizing principle illustrates this “constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 20). In other words, the elements that are recurring throughout the text take on an overarching dynamic – which can be vital to understanding and defining the genre. By naming and describing this organizing principle, the significance of the rhetoric emerges. It takes these elements – the situational requirements, the substantive and stylistic characteristics, and the organizing principle – to ultimately characterize the specific text as being a part of the unique genre.

The elements of generic criticism enable the critic to focus upon how recurring rhetorical situations influence the rhetoric of a text and determine its effectiveness. Through our analysis, we will show how the generic elements found in *SpongeBob SquarePants* recreate the American Dream that appeals to both children and adults.

4. *SpongeBob SquarePants: Reconstructing the American Dream*

This generic criticism of *SpongeBob SquarePants* will proceed by identifying the recurring features of the genre: the situational requirements, substantive characteristics, stylistic characteristics, and organizing principle. The organizing principle expands upon the ideology that is perpetuated in the text—the American Dream.

4.1 Situational Requirements

In order for *SpongeBob SquarePants* to exist, there needs to be specific elements that comprise the situational similarities across the investigated texts. There are certain recurring situational elements that must be present within the show in order for it to be part of the *SpongeBob SquarePants* genre, and that may influence similar rhetoric. These elements include:

- *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the television show
- audience member(s)
- writers and script
- television network
- understanding of the English language and American society

Of these situational requirements, the understanding of the English language and American culture might be the most critical. The writers and audience must have a firm understanding of the English language and of American society in order to totally comprehend the ideology that underscores the text. As audiences follow the storylines and interactions of the characters they are not simply being entertained but witnessing a critique on contemporary American society. There are intentional and important references, innuendos, and societal issues being presented in *SpongeBob SquarePants* that audiences are subtly receiving. These messages are further explored in the remainder of this analysis.

4.2 Substantive Elements

The substantive elements that emerge within a genre are the elements that focus on content. They are revealed as the commonalities across the four texts that make up the genre’s substance. In our investigation, we found that most of these substantive similarities appear within the personas of the characters themselves.

Although every character is not present in every episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the characters' position and personalities are critically maintained throughout each episode.

SpongeBob SquarePants: The Naive and Happy Optimist

In each text, SpongeBob starts the episode with the happiest, most hopeful attitude. His unbearably ridiculous laugh radiates from him in every happy moment he encounters. Whenever there is a problem presented to a secondary character, he reassures the other with concrete optimism. The other characters respond to his happiness – and loud laughter – in different ways; however, he maintains his undying optimism. Whenever another character is experiencing a hardship, SpongeBob takes pride in helping and doing anything possible to ease their situation. He prides himself on being punctual, helpful, and a model citizen of Bikini Bottom.

In reviewing the episodes it is clear that SpongeBob's excitement permeates throughout. There is much significance placed on SpongeBob's personality, especially as he confronts the other, very different, characters. A few specific examples of SpongeBob's optimism from the four selected episodes are:

- “Help Wanted” – SpongeBob wakes up to his obnoxiously loud alarm clock and immediately jumps up into song and dance—ready for a new day.
- “Tea at the TreeDome” – In hopes of gaining the attention of Sandy and not letting Patrick down, he risks shriveling up into a water-less sponge.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – When Squidward's clarinet gets smashed by a vehicle, SpongeBob offers a silver lining: “Phew! He almost got your clarinet!”
- “The Googly Artiste” – When Patrick gets frustrated with his lack of artistic ability, SpongeBob keeps encouraging him until Patrick realizes his potential.

Patrick Star: The Flawed, Loyal Friend

SpongeBob can always count on the loyalty of his best friend, Patrick. Whatever the day brings for SpongeBob, he can rely on Patrick's constant support. Patrick is an interesting character who does not possess the intellect or maturity to make wise decisions. He is also easily persuaded, making him very gullible and vulnerable to others' wrongdoings. He does not comprehend much of what the other characters say and, if he does, he usually interprets the information in a much different way. Because of this, Patrick tends to get lucky a lot. His immature ordeals may turn to successes, but these accomplishments are very much on the surface and not easily understood by the others – except his best friend, SpongeBob.

Patrick may not appear in every episode, but when he does one can count on him being the loyal friend, the one who gets lucky with seemingly unintelligent ideas, and the one who is greatly infused with immaturity. An important and consistent secondary character, Patrick is a valuable character in the *SpongeBob SquarePants* genre. A couple of examples from the four selected episodes are:

- “Help Wanted” – When SpongeBob loses confidence as he approaches The Krusty Krab, Patrick turns him around and gives him the confidence to apply for the job. Patrick encourages him through words and actions that he is good enough for the job.
- “Tea at the TreeDome” – When SpongeBob has an important question after first meeting Sandy, he runs full-speed to Patrick's house – where he can always count on the advice of his best friend. Although his advice is not exactly correct for the situation, Patrick is the first and only stop when SpongeBob needs companionship, confidence, and answers.
- “Tea at the TreeDome” – Patrick tells SpongeBob that “air” is just something fancy and that, if he keeps his pinky in the air, he will be fancy and will be able to handle any air that comes his way. Patrick sticks right there with SpongeBob as he takes on air for the first time. The two end up going through the hardship hand-in-hand.
- “The Googly Artiste” – Patrick and SpongeBob work together to realize their dreams. SpongeBob works hard to fry up many krabby patties, while Patrick uses the patties as the new platform for his artwork. The two make a lot of money by combining their efforts and remaining loyal to the other's passion, combining art and patties. Although Patrick could have found others who would want to contribute to his work, he remains loyal to SpongeBob and finds an avenue where they can both thrive.

It is important to note that Patrick, the flawed but loyal friend, is loved and supported by SpongeBob despite his shortcomings. Even though Patrick can often be seen as severely lacking in intelligence, empathy, and common sense, SpongeBob does not fault him nor leave his side. Despite Patrick's failings and flaws, the unlikely duo remain side by side, and SpongeBob and Patrick continue to see each other's value as a friend and as a fellow contributor of society. This value and outlook on friendships and societal bonds is an important piece of the show that both children and adults can identify with.

Squidward Tentacles: The Refined and Miserable Egotist

Without fail, SpongeBob is always at the root of Squidward's problems. SpongeBob's undying happiness and optimism trigger a miserable side to Squidward's cultured, well-educated life. Squidward – an unknown artist, musician, and cultured citizen – prides himself on living an immaculate, classy lifestyle. Although mostly monotone, his speech is intelligent and well put together. This, however, produces problems. When his neighbors are SpongeBob and Patrick, his twenty-year career as a cashier at a popular fast food restaurant and his cultured lifestyle is constantly threatened. Although SpongeBob and Patrick outwardly appreciate Squidward and want to be his friend, the two threaten Squidward's ideal status.

Throughout each episode, Squidward is an extremely self-confident character. He sees potential in himself that the other characters cannot realize; however, a critic or observer of these texts would see this very clearly. Although he is a character with opposing qualities, he is an important part of the other characters' lives. SpongeBob and Squidward may have moments of cohesion, but these moments are very few and very brief. No matter what the episode brings, Squidward returns to his miserable, overly confident world – a world that will never translate to real society in Bikini Bottom. A few examples of Squidward's characteristics in these texts are:

- “Help Wanted”– Squidward runs into The Krusty Krab to tell Mr. Krabs that he cannot hire SpongeBob (because Squidward is miserable around him), while SpongeBob is trying to pursue his lifelong dream.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Squidward does not understand why anyone else cannot see how brilliant he is at playing the clarinet.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Squidward is against the idea of having any accompaniment from Plankton; that is, until Plankton is a willing listener to his exquisite clarinet playing.
- “The Googly Artiste” – Squidward expects the art critic to find his sculpture as brilliant as he finds it, and immediately turns against SpongeBob and Patrick when the critic finds Patrick's artwork much better.

Mr. Eugene Krabs: The Money-Hungry Superior

Mr. Krabs, founder and manager of The Krusty Krab burger joint, has a one-track mind. He only likes ideas that make him money, and any suggestions that will cost him financially are thrown out immediately. This need to produce more wealth carries into his relationships with others. He is more than willing to use and capitalize on any other character – even in undesirable ways – if it means that a profit will be produced. Because some of the other characters, like SpongeBob and Patrick, are vulnerable and gullible, they make easy targets for Mr. Krabs. For Mr. Krabs, any way that he can benefit financially from others is a successful business endeavor.

Mr. Krabs' financial focus is a recurring theme in the *SpongeBob SquarePants* genre. He simply uses different means for the same financial end. Unfortunately, the other characters are not safe around Mr. Krabs, for they could be used at any minute for his benefit. Being so financially-driven, Mr. Krabs is a successful and admired superior for SpongeBob and others. He is an important character, and one whose qualities will prove common across all artifacts.

- “Help Wanted”– Mr. Krabs is not satisfied with SpongeBob as a fry cook for his restaurant until SpongeBob's turbo-spatula brings him a large financial profit.
- “Help Wanted” – Mr. Krabs leaves Squidward and SpongeBob to clean the destroyed restaurant while he resigns to his office to count his day's profit.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Mr. Krabs becomes furious with Squidward when his clarinet playing rids his restaurant of paying customers.
- “The Googly Artiste” – Mr. Krabs demands that Patrick and his artwork vacate his restaurant—that is, until he sees the money that Patrick makes and decides to cash in.

Sheldon Plankton: The Persistent Pursuer of Control

Plankton is the villain of the *SpongeBob SquarePants* genre. As the owner of a much less successful restaurant, The Chum Bucket, he is an enemy and business competitor of Mr. Krabs. Interestingly, other characters will be found associating with him, but Plankton knows no allies. Like Mr. Krabs, Plankton is constantly trying to manipulate the other characters to somehow acquire the coveted “secret krabby patty recipe” and eventually take over the world. He has a need for control – of the secret recipe, and of others – but he is too small and weak to achieve these ends without the help of others. He has failed many times to turn others against Mr. Krabs and steal the recipe. Plankton has a need to control the restaurant business, the other characters, and even his wife, Karen, who is actually a computer – who he could potentially unplug at any moment. Another important element to this character is his inability to win. Even when his plans seem like they cannot fail, Plankton ends up getting the short end of every adventure.

Plankton will be seen by any observer as the villain of the genre, and the ally-less antagonist seeking ultimate power. The significance of this element is apparent, as most stories possess an enemy of some sort. Absence of this character would leave the television series lacking a crucial element in the character lineup. Plankton’s characteristics can be seen in these examples:

- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Plankton lies to Squidward about his brilliant clarinet skills just to be able to acquire valuable information.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Plankton ends up taking the heat for Squidward’s constant noise violations, even though Plankton only tried to steal the clarinet so that he could no longer play it.

Sandy Cheeks: The Scientific and Tough Texan

Sandy, the only consistent female character in the series, is a land squirrel living under water. Because she still needs to breathe air, she lives in a “tree dome” where she can live and breathe-in air without threat from the surrounding water. Sandy is from Texas, as her southern accent implies. Furthermore, Sandy is a martial artist, using her karate skills as evidence that she is tougher than the other characters – despite the small bikini that she wears. Along with being a tough southern lady, she is also very intelligent. She attends various scientifically-based conventions, bringing back sophisticated technology for the others to misunderstand.

Although Sandy is not considered a “main” character, her presence is valued and significant. She acts as protector of SpongeBob and other “weaker” characters, and any audience member would agree that her style remains consistent among the episodes. No matter what crazy adventures happen during the episode, Sandy begins and ends as a smart, tough lady and a true protector for her friends. Two examples are:

- “Tea at the TreeDome” – Sandy uses intense toughness to battle a giant clam, release herself from its grasp, then returns to save SpongeBob from the same clam.
- “Tea at the TreeDome” – Sandy assures her friends that, if they ever need anything – such as water to breathe, to never hesitate to ask.

4.3 Stylistic Elements

There are recurring stylistic elements found within each episode that the audience can expect to find every time. First, is the music that has become all-too-familiar to the audience. The most recognizable music is the *SpongeBob SquarePants* theme song:

Are you ready kids? “Aye Aye Captain,”
I can’t hear you, “Aye Aye Captain,”
Ohh... Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?
SpongeBob SquarePants!

The *SpongeBob SquarePants* theme song is upbeat, repetitive, and alerts the reader of the quirky attitude behind the television show. The theme song, as well as other music found intertwined throughout the episodes, are quirky and catchy and add to the humor of the genre. Another stylistic element is the colorful, catchy title sequence that occurs in the beginning of the episode for the audience to read. These titles are always creative and sometimes, with the slight changing of a word or two, are humorous adaptations of familiar phrases in American society. Once the title has been presented for a suitable amount of time, the episode begins.

The format of *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a third stylistic element. The cartoon itself is designed in a traditional, 2D “flat” style – as opposed to the 3D, *Pixar* style in which many cartoons today are designed. This element is important as it appeals to the traditional cartoons that older audiences grew up with and, at the same time, offers a traditional style that differs greatly from the other cartoons of this generation.

SpongeBob SquarePants also possesses important nonverbal, stylistic characteristics that can be expected by audience members. These include SpongeBob’s loud and hilarious laugh and his and other characters’ abilities to change form and mold into different things. These stylistic elements add to the humor of the cartoon and the cartoon’s ability to make light of the stresses that the characters encounter in their everyday lives. Another stylistic element presented in *SpongeBob* are the homes in which the characters reside - the pineapple that SpongeBob lives in, the rock that Patrick lives under, and the ancient stone face that Squidward lives in. The physical structure of the homes that the characters live in is reflective of their personalities and their position in society. This further illustrates the societal value that diverse personalities must coexist in the same neighborhoods and towns.

As for the structure of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, there is a clear and simple problem-solution pattern for the episodes. Characters start their days with their corresponding substantive and stylistic characteristics intact. Problems, obstacles, or adventures develop that have different mental and physical demands on the characters. Their demeanors may change to adapt to problems that arise, but the elements remain consistent and return to take on audience expectations once the solution to the problem(s) has been met. SpongeBob begins and ends his day satisfied with life, and the other characters begin and end with their individual, unique personalities.

4.4 Organizing Principle

The organizing principle of a genre is the overarching element that can encompass all recurring elements found within that genre. For *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the organizing principle centers upon the underlying ideology of the American Dream that provides meaning for the inhabitants of “Bikini Bottom,” the place where the characters share their living space, working space, and personalities. Bikini Bottom represents all the ideals of the American Dream – the grand experiment that is a reflection of American society – its people, its places, and the ongoing challenge of living in harmony among conflicting issues and values.

Thus, this reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants* understands Bikini Bottom not as a counter-cultural text but a series that highlights and perpetuates the ideals of the American Dream. It is a text that embraces diversity, that promotes living in harmony, that attempts to manage conflict, and values friendship.

Bikini Bottom: An American Dream in an Underwater World

Bikini Bottom, the place where these and other characters reside, is an important and entertaining representation of society. The characters are diverse and must learn to interact and get along with each other despite these differences. There are places of employment where the characters work, schools where the characters may learn, and neighborhoods where characters must coexist without too much destruction. The happenings in Bikini Bottom are representations of American society, and these connections are often outwardly and humorously portrayed by the creators of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The city has a seemingly stable economy, an educational system, a law enforcement system, a government system, and many citizens that join together to create a diverse living environment.

Home to all of the characters, Bikini Bottom also comes equipped with mail carriers, traffic lights, carnivals, prominent figures, rallies, debates, and other qualities found in real, American society. Without a doubt, Bikini Bottom is a representation of society. However, it is the extent in which the viewer can understand American society that determines whether the references, allusions, and plays on words can be fully understood and valued. Many examples can be seen throughout the episodes that were analyzed such as:

- “Help Wanted” – “Barg’n Mart” – the place for all your needs.
- “Tea at the TreeDome” – When SpongeBob and Squidward shrivel from lack of water to breathe, an image of an actual sponge and dried starfish are shown.
- “Sweet and Sour Squid” – Citizens of Bikini Bottom have complained about noise violations and law enforcement seizes the villain.

- “The Googly Artiste” – Actual visual representations of *Starry Night* and *The Thinker* are shown; Society is alarmed that there is a “next big thing” (words of the art critic) and all citizens come rushing to purchase the expensive item.

A clever part of *SpongeBob SquarePants* is how it not only promotes the ideals of the American Dream but also its challenges. Both children and adults are presented with the ongoing conflicts that accompany living in a diverse society. Within the happenings of Bikini Bottom, younger audience members are given a sophisticated understanding of life. Conflicts and tensions are presented that reflect those that occur in today’s society. The humorous characters, especially SpongeBob, offer and teach of optimism and humor in the face of the trials and tribulations that one may encounter. The various characters offer different responses to the situations they experience through their various personalities. For example, SpongeBob often responds to hardships through humility and optimism, while Mr. Krabs responds by feeling defeated and looking for someone to solve his problems for him. Squidward looks to each day as a redundant representation of the day before, while Patrick perceives each day as an adventure. Regardless of the characters’ personalities, Bikini Bottom envelops all and offers children an important representation of the people and issues that they may also encounter.

For adults, many of the personalities represented in *SpongeBob SquarePants* may be compared to people we know or have met in life and the ongoing challenge to manage these relationships. We have all met a happy-go-lucky SpongeBob personality, and we have all met a self-centered Mr. Krabs or Plankton. We have all, at some point, had the loyal friend, the neighbor whom we just do not see eye-to-eye, and the friend who we love, but have nothing in common with. Adults are also able to relate to the different ideas represented – such as hoping to get hired for that new job – and adults can find humor in the ways in which the characters respond to these familiar situations. *SpongeBob SquarePants* is able to make light of a world in which adults know well, and adults are able to see the humor and the meaning behind every day experiences.

Finally, *SpongeBob SquarePants* values friendship. As mentioned earlier, the duo of SpongeBob and Patrick is an important one. SpongeBob and Patrick are best friends – although they may sometimes quarrel within an episode. They have gained an appreciation for one another, and SpongeBob’s appreciation for Patrick – despite his shortcomings – is an important lesson to be learned for both children and adults. Even the most unlikely of pairs can thrive and work together in society. SpongeBob always remains in Patrick’s defense, even though Patrick is usually the one to get himself into the troubles of his life. The show gives value to friendship and communities working together – a notion that both children and adults can learn from and identify with. We can learn from the characters by recognizing the values being portrayed in the episodes. An alternative reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, reveals it is not just a cartoon, but a cartoon that is preparing a wide variety of audiences for the happenings of contemporary society (Maurstad, 2009).

Although the *SpongeBob SquarePants* series is a cartoon television show on Nickelodeon – which indicates a more adolescent audience – the show provides humor and meaning for both children and adults. The storylines and plots being portrayed for the viewers are reflective of contemporary times in American society. Children can find humor in the characters’ personalities and the stories that happen to them throughout their day; however, children are also introduced to real-life issues that they may, too, encounter. Because of this, adults can also find humor and interest in the cartoon. After all, it is the adults who can make the connections between real American societal issues with those presented in a humorous light in Bikini Bottom.

Bikini Bottom is a humorous reflection of American society, and is the organizing principle that holds the *SpongeBob SquarePants* genre together. Audience members know what to expect when they watch an episode of the cartoon – they know that it will highlight real circumstances in our society, downplay the stressful situations, and bind together the unlikely characters that can also be found in our own lives. The show equips both children and adults to deal with life. *SpongeBob SquarePants* and the society of Bikini Bottom goes beyond entertainment to form an ideology of the American Dream in order to prepare children and adults for the realities of our own society.

5. Conclusion: Theory and Praxis

SpongeBob might be the character who lives in a pineapple under the sea, but his interactions with the diverse inhabitants have implications far beyond Bikini Bottom. A generic criticism of *SpongeBob SquarePants* illustrates that the text reconstructs an ideology of the American Dream that instructs, teaches, and reaffirms values that are identifiable to both children and adults.

This ideology is significant for children who have learned to love the cartoon for its innocence and humor, while also significant for adults who can appreciate the light-heartedness of stressful situations and be able to identify the imbedded representations of real life. When all expectations are met, the show finds success, relevance, and value by perpetuating a familiar and easily understood ideology.

However, it is from generic criticism that we come to understand the underlying ideology of the American Dream that appeals to both child and adult. This analysis illustrates what Campbell (1973) argued long ago – that the power of generic criticism is not its emphasis on classification, but how the approach provides a greater understanding of a text. In reconstructing the American Dream, children do have to learn the protocol – the ways in which we must behave in society. Children are able to learn these values from parents and teachers; however, now – more than ever – the media plays an influential role in educating young minds. The episodes of *SpongeBob SquarePants* offer real-life happenings and real-life characters in which children must learn to interact with in their own lives. Children will meet the *SpongeBob SquarePants* characters in their lives – in human form, of course – and they will need to use the knowledge they have acquired to know how to interact with them and face the challenges that the characters also encounter. *SpongeBob SquarePants* offers an imaginary, humorous alternative to the world in which we live. Children are able to learn acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in society, while adults are able to reflect on their own experiences through the adventures of the characters of Bikini Bottom.

Interrogating the American Dream ideology in *SpongeBob SquarePants* provides a critical critique that leads to emancipation for both children and adults (McKerrow, 1989). This generic criticism of *SpongeBob SquarePants* accomplishes this by empowering the audience to recognize contemporary ideologies in order to regain agency. As a result, *SpongeBob SquarePants* will remain a place for unique characters to interact, a place where societal values can be conveyed to children, and a place where adults can reflect upon societal happenings, in the effort to enact the American Dream.

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