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"Whiteness in American Television: Concepts of Race and Ethnicity in American Sitcoms using the example of *Malcolm in the Middle*"

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Vienna, 2016 ……Karoline Steindl……

Karoline Steindl

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1. Introduction

Television has become an important element in people's everyday lives. Accordingly, it should be of fundamental interest to cultural studies, as it is illustrated by Fiske and Hartley:

> […] it is television's familiarity, its centrality to our culture, that makes it so important, so fascinating, and so difficult to analyse. It is rather like the language we speak: taken for granted, but both complex and vital to an understanding of the way human beings have created their world. (3-4)

Historically, however, there has been a significant lack of study in this field of interest (Adelmann et al. 7) based on the formerly low prestige of television itself. Often regarded as merely an entertaining leisure activity belonging to commercial popular culture which does not involve any particular skills on the part of the viewers, scholars did not consider it worth studying (Abelman 9-16). Hartley, however, realizes that television "both shows and shapes contemporary life across the economic, political, social and cultural spectrum" which is why it is indeed essential to study and understand television and find out how "television truths" are communicated (1-3).

While there are approaches to television that regard it as a form of communication in contemporary society, as it has been suggested by Barker (*Global Television* 3), another approach might be more suitable for the purpose of this study. Fiske defines "television as the bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and […] culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society" (*Television Culture* 1). Since the aim of this study includes the analysis of meanings and codes, watching television and interpreting and understanding the meanings that are distributed on television can be seen as a process of decoding, as it has been explained by Stuart Hall. Although the power of the media should not be underestimated (hooks 3), it is important to understand television as an open text that does not exert power over an entirely passive audience (Fiske, *Television Culture* 64). In an attempt to appeal to a large and diverse audience, television programmes usually include a variety of different meanings (Spangler 14) while audiences are actively involved in the process of making sense of television and they can

choose which of the possible meanings are activated by them (Fiske, *Television Culture* 17). The simple fact that the audience deliberately decides when to watch which programmes prevents them from being solely passive. Additionally, watching, understanding, and enjoying television requires the skills of constructing meaning, reflecting on a programme and its ideologies, and forming an opinion in the same way (Abelman 22-24). However, the audience's activity in constructing meaning does not prevent them from reading a programme in favour of dominant ideologies (Barker, *Global Television* 147). For even if television offers a variety of different meanings, producers might try to control the audience's interpretations (Fiske, *Television Culture* 1) by the use of conventionalised codes and their connoted meanings (Fiske & Hartley 29-30). There is a variety of technologies and mechanisms that work to preserve the current social order and exert social power (Fiske, *Power Plays* 10-11) and television is certainly one of them.

Among the ideologies that are conveyed via television, those concerning whiteness belong to the most prominent ones. Race is one of the most crucial classifications of social power based on the fact that it – as opposed to age, family status, or religion – commonly remains unchanged (Fiske, *Power Plays* 251). Thus, whiteness and its representations on television shall be the central focus of this study. Within the study, however, whiteness does not only refer to a particular skin colour, but especially to the privileges and ideologies that are encoded in the concept of whiteness (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 9). Since it has been acknowledged that there is "a cultural tendency to view the experience of race more from the position of those victimized by it and not, until recently, those who benefit from it", whiteness has become a valuable subject of study (Babb, *The More Things C*hange 17). The importance of studying whiteness is mainly based on the ideologies that are inherent in its representations and the power that is exerted by the use of these ideologies (Barker, *Television* 108). In this context, power "is a systematic set of operations upon people which works to ensure the maintenance of the social order […] and ensure its smooth running". Ideologies, especially those regarding concepts like race, ethnicity, gender, or class, are among the technologies that are used to make power work. Exerting power over a society can only succeed when it is done in a

subtle way (Fiske, *Power Plays* 10-11; 229), which is a key characteristic of whiteness and its invisibility (Stokes 13). Consequently, it is essential to study whiteness and the ways by which its ideologies are conveyed, for example, on television. If whiteness is allowed to remain invisible, it is given the permission to distribute dominant ideologies regarding race. Although whiteness studies is not capable of ending racism (Stokes 192), it might emphasise the importance of reflecting on social norms and values. King identifies a form of racism called "dysconscious racism" which describes the acceptance of social norms and dominant ideologies without challenging them (128-129). Hence, whiteness studies is a crucial factor in drawing attention to certain ideologies and social realities.

Based on these facts, the aim of this study is to analyse how aspects of whiteness are represented in U.S. American sitcoms, using the example of *Malcolm in the Middle*. Accordingly, the study provides a theoretical background, focussing on whiteness and its relevance to television studies with a particular interest in the genre of sitcoms. The second part of the study concentrates on the analysis of various episodes of the television programme *Malcolm in the Middle*, especially with regard to the representations of whiteness. However, since race is highly interrelated with aspects such as class and gender, those elements have to be considered in addition to whiteness. Moreover, being of essential importance to whiteness and social class, the American Dream is among the concepts that shall be studied with regard to its representation in *Malcolm in the Middle.* Concerning whiteness, the study will solely focus on different representations of whiteness including stereotypical images and portrayals of whiteness rather than reflecting upon characteristics of people who might actually identify as white.

Regarding terminology, the use of a number of terms remains precarious. One of the problematic expressions is "ethnic minorities" which subtly implies an inferiority to an "ethnic majority" which is supposedly white (Fiske, *Media Matters* 46). Referring to non-whites as an ethnic minority also deprives them of their identification as American (Benshoff & Griffin 8). Lacking a better expression, Dyer's term "non-white" shall be used in this study although – being

a negation of “white” – it remains dubious, too. It shall be stated here that there is no homogenous group of non-white people, but illustrating the privileges of whites might require the reference to such a group (Dyer 11). Lastly, the term “audience” has often been criticized because it indicates a concept of the audience as a unified group of people sharing the same discourses, ideologies, and meanings. While Fiske suggests the term “viewers” in order to indicate the active involvement in producing meaning, both of the terms shall be used synonymously within this study (*Television Culture* 16-17). Nonetheless, the audience’s active contribution to their own construction of meaning shall be acknowledged. Lastly, the study will use the terms “American” or “America” in order to refer to the United States of America rather than the respective continent, as it is commonly done (Paul 11).

Additionally, studying literature on television and race reveals a variety of spelling versions for key concepts such as “white” or “race”. Authors like Fiske choose to capitalise the first letter of the word “black” but do not spell “white” with a capital. Since this kind of capitalisation, however, might support the idea of “white” as the norm, neither shall be capitalised within this study. Similarly, Frankenberg comments on the use of quotation marks for constructed concepts like “race” or “ethnicity” (*Mirage* 72). Although it is believed that this spelling version is useful in order to stress the constructedness of these concepts, for the sake of readability this study has to refrain from this spelling practice without questioning the constructed quality of those concepts.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Whiteness

The following chapter deals with the cultural construction of whiteness in the course of American history. As whiteness is a concept which was established to serve a particular purpose, that is the exercise and maintenance of power, the development of this construct shall be illustrated. Consequently, different aspects of whiteness shall be explained including its characteristics and key values and their usage as a justification for white power. The power of whiteness is also closely related to its understanding of race and ethnicity, which shall also be explained in this chapter. Since class is regarded as one of the most powerful tools in the exercise of white power, the interrelation between whiteness and class shall be analysed in another sub-chapter. Finally, a chapter on poor whites will additionally demonstrate how closely class is linked to white power, which is also an essential prerequisite to the analysis and understanding of television programmes like *Malcolm in the Middle.*

2.1.1. A history of whiteness

Whiteness is “an invented ideological construct” which was developed in the course of American history by combining different European nationalities and identities (Babb, *The More Things Change* 18). In the European Middle Ages, identification was mainly based on one’s place of origin while outward characteristics were not yet relevant. However, with the beginning of European exploration, national identities gained in importance which also began to be associated with a certain form of visual appearance. In the colonisation of America, various forms of discrimination, that is regarding religion, nation, or class, were used to set early colonisers apart from other peoples. However, the desire to gain land from Native Americans and exert power over black slaves brought about the need of other distinctions. Thus, civilised cultures were distinguished from savage ones and consequently, the concept of race started to emerge. However, nationalities continued to be an important concept after 1700 (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 16-21) and the idea of whiteness was only

formed in the first half of the 19th century (Roediger 13-14) when the western world, including Europe and the United States, established a strong tendency towards racial thinking (Horsman 139). At the same time, the term *slaves* ceased being used as a reference to white labourers, but from then on slavery was specifically associated with black skin colour (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 27). The development of the concept of whiteness might have been fostered by these white indentured labourers who wanted to stand aloof from slavery (Roediger 55).

Considering that religion was used as one of the earliest methods of discrimination, it continued to be important for the justification of whiteness. Hence, Christianity served to establish the concept of whiteness and white superiority, especially based on the Christian belief in a connection between body and soul. Although Christianity is obsessed with portrayals of the body of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, there is a second element in bodies which is not a physical one. This element might be regarded as spirit, mind or soul and is always considered superior to the body itself which is sometimes even viewed as corrupted and evil. With regard to race, the spiritual aspect was traditionally associated with whiteness while black people were regarded as reducible to the body and its physical elements (Dyer 14-18). Moreover, theological assertions were used to justify racism or racial prejudice. An example from the 19th century includes the re-interpretation of the biblical temptation of Eve. Theologians created a racialized reading of the same where the tempter was very often conceived as black and male. This interpretation has even lead to an approach where eating an apple was used as a metaphor signifying sexual intercourse (Stokes 83-95).

Furthermore, the colonisers drew upon their privileged heritage in order to justify their power and superiority. By the middle of the 19th century, people of Anglo-Saxon descent had asserted themselves as a superior race in the United States that was destined to stand above all other races. They believed to have been chosen in order to bring Christianity and good fortune to other countries – an assumption that originated in Puritan thinking and had been present since the 17th century. The term Anglo-Saxon is, however, problematic, for it wrongly

assumes the existence of such a people in England. Although there were indeed German settlers in England, one cannot speak of a homogenous Anglo-Saxon people, especially because England was also settled by Vikings and Normans. Nevertheless, the name “Anglo-Saxon” came to be used as an umbrella term for English-speaking peoples all over the world. Especially in the United States it was very often used in order to distinguish “white” people from blacks, Indians, Mexicans, or Asians and to indicate those white people’s European descent. Due to their name, American Anglo-Saxons also began to reason their superiority in their Teutonic or Aryan origin (Horsman 139-141).

Consequently, the construction of a common history and the belief in superior characteristics based on their Germanic heritage created the possibility for numerous European communities to be a part of the white race, despite their actual nationality, language or appearance. Although nationalist thinking was dominant for a long time, various European groups started to identify as white or part of the white race (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 37-41). The construction of whiteness as a form of national identity in America has led to a strong connection of whiteness and Americanness (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 31).

2.1.2. White power

Racial discourses were developed in the interest of creating a hierarchical order. Certain physical features or characteristics were allocated to different social groups in order to achieve this goal and set them apart from each other. Consequently, socially distinctive groups were believed to differ in “physical or phenotypical appearance, innate intelligence and other ‘natural’ dispositions” (Cottle, *Media Research* 4). Hence, the belief in such differences and the formation of a corresponding racial discourse served to justify white Americans’ superiority and their exploitation of “inferior” races (Horsman 143). Whiteness, however, is not solely to be considered as a racial category, but more importantly it is strongly connected to power. Fiske identifies three different techniques by which whiteness exerts its power: exnomination, normalisation, and universalisation, which often occur together. Exnomination refers to the phenomenon of whiteness’s not being named, which leads to the fact that

whiteness is seldom questioned and therefore remains unaffected by change. Furthermore, defining whiteness is a process that only happens with reference to “others” that are not white. This practice of “othering”, as it is called by Fiske, is used to avoid definition (*Media Matters* 42). Since whiteness was historically constructed by and for different ethnic groups, it always lacked a precise definition and had to rely on defining non-whiteness instead (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 42-43). Additionally, setting boundaries is an essential tool in the construction of categories and social distinctions (Wray 9). Normalisation refers to the fact that the colour white, being regarded as a neutral colour, is used to represent a group of people that can be considered as the social norm (Dyer 47). By the technique of universalisation, whiteness is frequently used to refer to humanity in general or, in other cases, it is used as synonymous for Americanness (Fiske, *Media Matters* 44). The very fact that whiteness has only recently been appreciated as an appropriate subject for study illustrates how it has always been taken for granted (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 15).

Furthermore, various other values and characteristics of whiteness have served its maintenance of power. Sexuality and the human body per se are crucial factors with regard to race (Dyer 20). Whiteness’s obsession with skin colour already indicates the importance of human bodies. Especially reproduction is a crucial factor since it is decisive in creating and upholding whiteness (Stokes 133; 16). While reproduction is the only way in which whiteness can be obtained, sexuality is actually not considered “pure white” as it opposes white people’s control over their bodies (Dyer 26-30). As a consequence, marriage can be seen as the instrument to save whiteness. Hence, whiteness is closely linked to heterosexuality and these concepts form a relationship in which each is used to justify the other (Stokes 20). Interracial relationships pose a threat to whiteness and have partly remained a taboo issue in the United States (Frankenberg, *White Women* 71). Despite the fact that women are the key to whiteness, they are deprived of white privileges, given their gender status (Stokes 7). Another characteristic that has always been used to uphold the superiority of whiteness is etiquette which also indicates the close connection of race and class (Babb, *Whiteness Visible* 160). “Etiquette is a mode of naturalizing social classifications, schemes, and hierarchies,” which explains

how the adherence to specific social rules implicates a certain lifestyle, hence class affiliation (Hartigan 18).

The colour white also incorporates a highly symbolic value. Firstly, “White is both a colour and, at once, not a colour,” which underlines its invisibility. Furthermore, the colour white is often used to signify something good, pure, clean, and unblemished (Dyer 45; 72). Thus, white frequently symbolises innocence, as in the traditional white wedding dress. Considering that the opposite of white is black, opposing properties might be associated with the colour black. Black often represents darkness and is usually negatively connoted, as in “Black magic” (T. Ross 263).

Although all of these peculiar features of whiteness actually emphasise that race is a culturally constructed concept, it should also be regarded as “real” since it has a “real” influence on the world and on individuals and their identities. “Race, like gender, is ‘real’ in the sense that it has real, though changing, effects in the world and real, tangible, and complex impact on individuals’ sense of self, experiences, and life chances” (Frankenberg, *White Women* 11). Having affected our perception of the world, race actually exists as a socio-cultural factor which has to be considered as “real” (Bernardi 2). It also has to be understood that “whiteness changes over time and space” (Frankenberg, *White Women* 236). While early literary discourses tended to explicitly portray non-whites as evil, modern discourses have developed more subtle but equally powerful strategies to preserve dominant ideologies. Similarly, racial stereotypes might have changed, but have continued to be influential and effective.

2.1.3. Whiteness and ethnicity

Based on a lack of cultural awareness, Americans have often tried to explain the discrimination of non-white racial groups by pointing out cultural – not racial – distinctness (Lipsitz 379). This new approach of defining one’s ethnicity by one’s behaviour rather than one’s biological inheritance emerged in the 1920s (Frankenberg, *White Women* 13). An “ethnic group” generally experiences

similar beliefs, moral values, or traditions usually based on a common history or ancestry (Barker, *Television* 62). According to Michaels, nowadays racial identities have come to be replaced by cultural identities which are vaguer in comparison to the racial ones. Ethnicities or cultural identities, however, also pose a problem since speaking of a black or Native American culture requires a definition of who and what is black or Native American (40-43). Additionally, white people commonly use the terms “ethnicity” or “ethnic groups” to refer to non-whites while they do not seem to be an ethnic group themselves (Barker, *Television* 63). Interestingly enough, white ethnicity does not seem to exist; white identity is instead usually based on other cultural aspects like descent or religion and might consequently be British or Catholic (Dyer 4). Similarly, the concept of race is generally only applied to non-whites while white people do not regard their race as a part of their own identities (Neal Cleaver 157).

Along with the new concept of ethnicity, the idea of “assimilation” came up in the 1920s, describing the process of non-whites assimilating into white mainstream America (Frankenberg, *White Women* 13). Assimilation has also paved the way for a tri-racial U.S. American society. The formerly bi-racial social order with whites at the top and everybody else at the bottom has changed into a tri-racial one, where some members of non-white groups, especially Asian Americans, have succeeded in assimilating to the high standards of white people. The tri-racial system, which is currently evolving, includes a group of “honorary whites” including assimilated members of non-white groups. At the bottom there is a group designated the “collective black” with all the people who have not succeeded in reaching a lifestyle similar to that of the dominant white group (Bonilla-Silva 931-932). This group might also include lower-class whites or poor whites as they are often associated with non-white values and characteristics, and thus, denied certain privileges despite their skin colour.

2.1.4. Whiteness and class

“Race and class are often interrelated in complex ways that tend to defy a clear division” (Morris 100), which is why it is crucial also to study class in relation to

race. Both, class and race, are culturally constructed concepts based on a struggle for political or social power (Barker, *Television* 61). In this context, however, class is often regarded as a more objective category, since it can be measured how much money one earns. This is why race is so often shown and legitimated through the category of class (Roediger 7-8). Class, however, is not exclusively concerned with income or economic differences, but mostly about particular values, as it is explained in the following definition of class by John Fiske:

> Class is conceived as a scale of privilege that is primarily, but not exclusively, economic. One can also correlate economic position with cultural taste which includes people's preferences in reading, listening, viewing, eating, housing, clothing, vacationing, and so on. The prime functions of class are first to establish social distinctions and then to hierarchize them. (*Media Matters* 65)

Consequently, clothes, food, living environment and leisure time activities are strong indicators of social class (Fiske, *Media Matters* 65). Like race, class draws on certain characteristics used to identify a person as a member of a specific class. Etiquette, for example, has already been identified as one of these attributes, but also sexual restraint and "consumption practices" might be regarded as signifiers of class (Hartigan 18-20).

The American society has always defined itself as classless due to the fact that American history has repeatedly tried to emphasise a strong consensus among American citizens rather than pointing out differences regarding class, ethnicity, race, and gender (Campbell & Kean 3). The idea of America as a classless society has consequently led to the belief that anybody is able to build a successful life "in accordance with his [sic] natural abilities" (Sieper 149). People often refuse to accept that there are class-related differences which is why they like to focus on culture or ethnicity instead (Michaels 6).

In correspondence with the various signifiers of class, whiteness usually implies middle-class (Morris 101), which is also the class most U.S. American citizens identify with (Kendall 2). Working-class whites usually refuse to identify as a class and rather regard themselves as middle-class. One of the possible

reasons might be that working-class men and women clearly want to set themselves apart from lower-class people including unemployed, homeless, and criminals (Fiske, *Power Plays* 37). Accordingly, the term “white trash” is very often employed by lower-class whites who refer to those even lower than themselves (Hartigan 116).

2.1.5. Poor whites

While whiteness includes privileges and a certain power, poor whites are usually associated with quite the contrary. Historically, poor whites were considered as sinful, demoralised, and degenerate (Hartigan2; 38) and they were believed to be a great threat to the accepted social order (Wray 2). Thus, although identified as white, people labelled “white trash” are excluded from any white privileges and are often subject to discrimination and prejudice (Hartigan 59; 158). Despite the discrimination they have to face, though, it must not be forgotten that their racial identification as white might still put them in a privileged position in comparison to non-whites (Pitcher 448).

Since economic differences have always been racialized, “white trash” does indeed refer to racial determiners rather than merely signifying class. In 19th century literature, Irish immigrants were often referred to as “poor whites” relating their status to race rather than class (Hartigan 39). Before the Civil War, Irish were not identified as white people and rather associated with black stereotypes such as sexuality, barbarism, and laziness (Roediger 133-134). While the fact that poverty was usually dominated by black people might be one of the reasons for the racialisation of class, more substantiated reasons include fear and dissociation. By allowing poverty a racial background, whites were able to provide an excuse for poverty based on poor people’s supposedly innate behaviour rather than admitting the existence of economic differences. In spite of middle-class fear of the “underclass”, there has always been a fascination with the lives of the poor, noticeable in the success of current reality television shows. This interest in the lives of the lower classes is based on the assumption that their lives represent true reality while middle and upper-class lives are shaped by insincere rules and etiquette (Hartigan40; 51).

Historically, the term “white trash” emerged in the South where poor whites were a side effect of slavery (Hartigan 67): Slavery had caused the development of a group of white people that were not able to find work but could not afford any slaves either (Wray 34). They were given a special racial status which stigmatised them as “fundamentally lacking crucial moral characteristics” (Hartigan 67). In the 1850s and 1860s, the term became common in the North, where synonyms like “poor whites”, “mean whites”, “clayeaters”, and “bobtails” were also used (Hartigan 61). As opposed to the South, many Northerners believed that economic and social factors were responsible for the development of poor whites. In the South, however, there was a strong belief that the poor whites’ situation largely depended on their “natural” character and innate behaviour rather than on economics (Hartigan 70-72). There were even writers who allocated particular physical features to the group of poor whites as it is illustrated by the following quote:

> Lank, lean, angular, and bony, with flaming red, or flaxen, or sandy, carroty-colored hair, sallow complexion, awkward manners, and a natural stupidity or dullness of intellect that almost surpasses belief; they present in the main a very pitiable sight to the truly benevolent, as well as a ludicrous one to those who are mirthfully disposed. (Hundley qtd. in Hartigan 72)

Although there were many different terms synonymously describing poor whites, “trash” was able to become prevalent since it most strongly embodied the fear or the danger that is imposed on the white race (Hartigan 99): The very term “white trash” includes an antithesis. While “white” is normally used as a synonym to pure and clean, “trash” refers to the very opposite (Wray 2). Hence, the term “white trash” was used to describe the fear of pollution of the white race and it clearly carries an assessment of poor white people’s behaviours and attitudes (Hartigan 106-113).

Being regarded as racially different, poor white people were often identified as inferior idiots, based on their mental deficiencies. The most common term in the 19th century was “feebleminded”. The poor people’s lack of intelligence was also associated with a lack of moral, especially concerning sexuality (Wray 83-85). Sexuality is one of the main characteristics of poor whites and it is the one

attribute that explicitly defines their class (Hartigan 81). Usually, poor whites were also regarded as sexually threatening or dangerous (Hartigan 136) since the white race has always been afraid of “bad breeding” and its consequences on race and class (Hartigan 103).

While it was mostly assumed that poor whites were biologically different, others thought that disease was the reason for their alleged degeneracy (Wray 96-97). Different theories and approaches emerged, many of which were concerned with the dirty environment in which these people had to live (Wray 114). It was even suggested that the disease was caused by the flies that bred in the unsanitary outhouses of the poor whites and that the disease was caused by parts of human faeces spread on the food by those flies (Wray 124). The idea of a disease as the reason for the poor white’s situation refuted their close association with and sometimes even inferiority to black people and other non-whites (Wray 119). Poor whites were often directly liked to blacks and Native Americans and they were often believed to share the same character traits (Wray 21-22).

The very existence of expressions like "white trash” serves the purpose of supporting dominant ideologies since it is suggested that poor whites are not the norm. Rather, the term “white trash” refers to a marginal group of extremely uneducated and threatening white people who do not live up to the standards of whiteness in general. Members of this marginal group are additionally often linked to racism and sexism, suggesting that such attitudes are usually not found in the majority of whites (Hartigan 118).

2.2. Whiteness on television

2.2.1. Representations of whiteness in the media

Historically, race was always presented in a very stereotypical way. In 18th century literature, black people were portrayed as evil, while white ones were often depicted as honest, moral, and pure. Visual aspects were also used to

create a sense of connection between white people simply by describing them as better-looking than others (Babb, *The More Things Change* 22-23).

In accordance with these representations, the hero and heroine in a programme are often portrayed as middle-class, white Americans (Fiske, *Television Culture* 9). It has been assumed that all viewers – regardless of their racial or ethnic identities – are able to relate to white characters and their story lines (Benshoff & Griffin 54). In contrast to that, the villain might show markers of "non-Americanness" in terms of appearance or language (Fiske, *Television Culture* 9). Furthermore, villains are often significantly older than heroes (Fiske & Hartley 9). On television, black people have often been presented in a passive rather than an active role. They do not act or fight for themselves, but usually need others to act or speak up for them. Typically, this role is taken by white people (Barker, *Television* 75). Whenever actions are regarded to be negative or even criminal, though, non-whites indeed appear as the agents (Van Dijk 40). Similarly, black people were often represented as lazy, reluctant to work, or criminal, which set them apart from the representations of white people (Barker, *Television* 76).

In compliance with dominant ideologies, white women as well as black men are often shown fighting for a white man's affection. On television, especially black men are often depicted as yearning for a white man's devotion. They are usually represented as lacking something important which is why they are in need of the white man's friendship (hooks 84). Black men are not only unable to get along on their own, they are also jealous of white men; but in order to achieve what the white men have, black men have to accept their subordinate role (Denzin 61). Such stereotypical scenarios have led to a traditional pattern in many movies dealing with black and white friendship. The story line usually evolves around two main characters with different skin colours who do not get along in the beginning, but somehow resolve their problems in the end and become friends (Malanowski).

In early film and television, the white male body was restricted from being shown on television. The only genres where white male bodies were

represented were boxing films and colonial adventure films, like Tarzan. Depictions of the white male body were a problem because clothes usually signify wealth and going without clothes might lead to a loss of status. Furthermore, an unimpressive white body might pose a threat to the superiority of the white race due to its imperfection. Bodybuilding as an expression of white masculinity, though, might be used to justify white dominance (Dyer 146-148).

White women are often represented in an angelic fashion which is similar to depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her child (Dyer 126-127). Recently, white women have often been shown as “global mothers” as the images of women rescuing and adopting unprivileged children have increased. Such “global mothers”, like Angelina Jolie, are often represented as “angelic figures emanating compassion, love, and healing”. Also the camera angle is used to influence the audience’s perception of those white women. While we always look down on the unprivileged children, the white women at their sides are usually shown from a low shot perspective. The fact that these “global mothers” tend to appear very beautiful suggests a close relation of beauty and reproduction (Shome 108-109). Glorified representations of white women also use lighting from above, which suggests their perfection. Symbolically, light from above is also related to the North which signifies pure whiteness. Additionally, idealised women are often blonde or wear white clothes, which makes them appear even brighter (Dyer 118-124). Although the angelic portrayal of women has lost some of its significance, it is still commonly used in films and television. Examples include the moment when a man sees his great love for the first time (Dyer 131).

Interestingly enough, there are also colour variations when it comes to the representations of whiteness. Traditionally, paintings depict white women exorbitantly white while the men appear darker. Similarly, the white working-class was always portrayed darker than the middle-class or aristocracy (Dyer 57). Hence, poor whites are represented in a completely different way by the media, rather similar to the representations of non-whites. A family that is labelled “white trash” is most often shown with regard to the law. The family either has to deal with the police as the enforcer of the law, or the family

encounters organisations that work as agents of the law, such as welfare authorities (Wilson 388). They are often seen as disgraced and despicable people who “threaten the stability and the future of the white race at large” (Hartigan 60). Consequently, the representations of poor-whites and non-whites have often been very similar regarding their behaviour, language and lifestyle (Hartigan 115). Both are stereotypically characterised as dirty, lazy, and lacking moral values (Wray 26). Additionally, the media often shows poor whites in the context of drug abuse, alcoholism, unemployment, and violence (Macdonald 196).

2.2.2. White power on television

Although globalisation has basically made television available to a vast majority of people all over the world, it is usually the economically privileged countries that are able to distribute their meanings and ideologies globally. While a majority of the most popular shows is produced in the United States of America, it is rather difficult for an African or Asian company to distribute their programmes globally (Hartley 62). Hence, it is mostly U.S. American television that shapes and defines contemporary cultures all over the world (Abelman 33). If the media influences its audience in forming ideas about race, gender, and society, those who are in control of the media – that is still white people – usually influence the common discourses in a society (Denzin 2). For a long time, white people have been dominant in the production of films and they still are. Their privilege to decide whether to make films solely featuring white people or including non-whites is usually not questioned. All-white casts are usually regarded as reflecting the producer’s environment (hooks 69). However, white producers often cast a number of black characters to prevent themselves from being accused of racism (hooks 74).

Literature and other texts have long been used to justify and uphold the concept of whiteness (Stokes 1). They provide the means to decode racial images, a way to view racial problems and establish race categories. Thus they do not only supply ideas about race, but also provide meanings that are used to define, adapt, or even invert our ideas of race (Hall 105). Denzin speaks of a cinematic

racism which pretends to fight for the end of racism, while actually subtly strengthening white supremacy and promoting assimilation to mainstream ideals corresponding with those generally associated with whiteness (60).

Different studies confirm that women as well as non-whites have been underrepresented on television (Spangler 7). Whenever non-whites do appear on television, they are often represented in stereotypical ways (Cottle, *Media Research* 7). By 1997 there were still hardly any programmes other than sitcoms or entertainment variety with a black cast (Gray 119). In many programmes, non-whites are shown as outsiders who are not integrated in their community or neighbourhood (K. Ross 140), which is also true for representations of poor whites.

Due to the discrimination of non-whites, especially in the beginning of film and television, camera and lighting were developed to meet the needs of white people (Dyer 90). One of the earliest problems film-makers had to face was how to portray white people “properly white” and how to make blonde hair look blonde enough. With the introduction of colour television, new problems of that kind emerged (Dyer 102). The fact that camera and lighting were made to work for the depiction of white people has led to the belief that film is indeed a kind of media most suitable for whites. “Photography and cinema, as media of light, lend themselves to privileging white people” (Dyer 83-90). Especially in films, lighting has always been used to emphasise the individual. Since non-whites were not regarded as independent individuals but rather as passive beings, though, movie lighting has often discriminated non-whites (Dyer 102).

Additionally, television producers try to construct a privileged position for the audience by picturing viewers as white, male, and middle-class U.S. Americans. When the viewers decide to accept this position, they are able to make sense of the text easily, but they also support and validate dominant ideologies (Fiske, *Television culture* 25).

2.2.3. Race and class on television

On television, dominant ideologies regarding whiteness can only work if they remain invisible. Consequently, one of the strategies that is used to keep whiteness invisible is the recoding of whiteness into other discourses or other axes of power (Fiske, *Media Matters* 45). “Whiteness works best – in fact, it works only – when it attaches itself to other abstractions, becoming yet another visible strand in a larger web of unseen yet powerful cultural forces” (Stokes 13). Fiske describes sexuality, economics, and maturity as the most prominent discourses that are used to inconspicuously express the power of race (*Media Matters* 45).

Most frequently, however, racial differences are recoded into the social axis of class or economic differences (Fiske, *Media Matters* 45). On television, race boundaries are often blurred including “white posing as black” and the other way around. Gubar has coined the term “racechange” as a reference to this practice (5).

Sexualisation is one of the means by which racial differences can be expressed on the media, as it can be seen in various representations of hyper-sexualised black males and females on television. Fiske regards the sexualisation of black females as an excuse for their being abused by white men in the course of history (*Media Matters* 45). While white female bodies usually have to be protected, black females are often seen as extremely sensual. Black male bodies are also sexualised, but seen as a sexual threat or object of desire, while white male bodies usually remain invisible (Stokes 133). The fact that white females are denied any desire and white males are often portrayed as protectors of female sexuality leads to the anxiety of black rape of white women (Stokes 148). White women who deliberately get involved with coloured men are usually presented as having low ethical standards and a loose sexuality. In some cases, the focus is on the children arising from such a relationship and their rejection by society (Frankenberg, *White Women* 77). Representations of interracial relationships on television are very rare whenever white people are

involved. As opposed to that, relationships between members of different non-white groups are usually not tabooed (Cole).

The media might also have the ability to influence the audience's understanding of class. Showing wealthy people in a positive way might promote the idea that their wealth is legitimate while representing poor people in a negative way might lead to the conclusion that they are to blame for their situation (Kendall 11). Wealthy villains, for example, are often portrayed as arrogant and mean while rich heroes become friends with poor people (Michaels 103). The media also fosters the audience's sense of belonging to the middle-class by making it comfortable to identify with their representations of middle-class (Kendall 2). Since the lower-classes are neglected and the upper-class is often incorporated into the middle-class, the media create a kind of middle-class everybody can belong to. "The Middle Class Is Us" describes how the media tries to show a very superficial middle-class sharing the same problems regarding job, money, health, and safety. In addition to these representations, the middle-class is sometimes also shown as a victim continuously harmed by greedy workers, criminal minorities, and the poor people who rely on welfare and tax money. In contrast to that victimisation, representations of the working-class blame members for their own situation (Mantsios 455-456). There is, however, a variety of ways in which the working-class might be represented on television. While there are programmes that represent the working-class as greedy, threatening, and sometimes criminal, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have also lead to a heroic portrayal of the working-class. The kind of framing most commonly used in sitcoms is caricature framing, which usually makes fun of the working-class and depicts representatives as inferior to other members of society. This kind of framing is often related to representations of white trash, as seen in the television programme *Roseanne*. Since the beginning of the new millennium, there have also been depictions of the working-class as strong and underrated due to the economic crisis (Kendall 130-147).

On the media, the poor usually remain invisible except for being mentioned in statistics. If the poor are spoken of they are usually portrayed as trouble which

the society has to face (Kendall 82). Stereotypical representations are those of poor drug addicts or selfish beggars (Mantsios 452).

Additionally, in media representations, boundaries between the working-class and the working poor are often blurred (Kendall 124). Hence, members of the working-class are often shown as having a poor background, being vulgar, and loathing their jobs. Additionally, they are commonly depicted as messy and uneducated and are often made fun of. Sometimes they are characterized as racist. Due to a lack of classification, there is also another approach which portrays working-class families as lower middle-class. Thus, contemporary working-class jobs also include “routine white-collar jobs” (Kendall 122-123).

2.3. Sitcoms

2.3.1. Traditional sitcoms

While cinema often features dramatic scenes about love and action, traditional sitcoms usually deal with “normal” people and their daily routines. The representation of an alleged reality is one of the key characteristics of television and, in particular, of sitcoms (Lorand 15). Portraying dialogues and activities that are similar to the audience’s reality is partly also responsible for the success of the genre since the simulation of reality provides the best opportunity of identification on the part of the viewers. The more realistic a sitcom is, the easier it becomes for viewers to identify with one of the characters (Billensteiner 259). In this context, “realistic” means that the sitcom constructs a representation of reality that most viewers can easily identify with:

> [Realism] reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable. It does this primarily by ensuring that all links and relationships between its elements are clear and logical, that the narrative follows the basic laws of cause and effect, and that every element is there for the purpose of helping to make sense: nothing is extraneous or accidental. (Fiske, *Television Culture* 24).

Such an effortlessly understandable representation of reality usually focussed on family life. Especially after World War II, when television became

increasingly popular, the significance of the idyllic middle-class American family grew, which is the key interest of most sitcoms. The most dominant image that was transported on television was the one of the happy housewives who wanted to keep their husbands satisfied (Spangler 25-28). At the top of such early sitcom families was usually a “knowing, correct, and superior” father who supported traditional gender stereotypes. Those families encouraged the myth of the happy family where characters did not change or develop, but they would stay the same every week (Henry 265).

While most sitcoms centred on middle-class families, older people and people in typical lower-class jobs were usually underrepresented on television, which they continue to be in recent sitcoms. Correspondingly, there are certain professions that are clearly over-represented in traditional sitcoms, such as jobs concerned with law or medicine (Fiske & Hartley 9-10). Typically dealing with middle-class scenarios and families, most sitcom families were traditionally white and shared a belief in white values and ideologies.

Although sitcoms focussing on working-class families were first introduced in the 1970s, the Reagan era in the 1980s led to a return to the conventional middle-class setting. With *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne,* and *Married . . . With Children*, the working-class scenario was re-introduced in the 1990s. What was special and modern about them was that they also dealt with real-life problems, including difficulties of the traditional family. They attempted to criticise the traditional nuclear family by portraying the very same instead of representing the changing family structures (Henry 265-266). With the emergence of working-class sitcoms, that is a sitcom featuring working-class characters, the image of the traditionally wise sitcom father changed towards a foolish one. Particularly in working-class scenarios, the father is often made fun of (Scharrer 23-27) and shown as a buffoon: childish, irresponsible, and unreasonable. Examples of such working-class husbands are portrayed in sitcoms like *The Simpsons*, *King of Queens*, *The Flintstones*, and many others. While the husband is shown as likable and kind-hearted, he is not significantly respected by others. Frequently, these husbands are shown at the sides of more sensible women (Butsch 507).

Typically, the characters in a sitcom do not change and the story line usually does not exceed more than one episode (Fiske, *Teleision Clture* 150). The plot of a sitcom episode, which commonly lasts around 25 minutes (Byrne & Powell 50), does not involve a time span longer than a few days or a week (Smith 98). When it comes to sitcom characters, they often are and need to be stereotypical in order to create recognition within a short time frame (Casey et al. 43). However authors sometimes try to twist social stereotypes in order to create funny situations or awaken the audience's interest (Byrne & Powell 30).

2.3.2. Recent sitcoms

Although sitcom characters and stories traditionally follow a set plan, they have also been changing from generation to generation (Roman 134). Thus, there are a variety of different characteristics of a sitcom, but not all of those will be found in any sitcom (Fiske, *Television Culture* 111). Still, many of the most popular sitcoms world-wide actually follow the traditional format (Mills 142).

The very term "sitcom" might not be appropriate to describe the current characteristics of the genre. While the humour in early sitcoms derived from funny situations and the unfortunate reactions of the main character, sitcoms nowadays rather rely on narrative humour. Thus, Abelman suggests the term "domcom" or "domestic comedy" which describes a sitcom focussing on characters rather than situations (316-324). Adequately, Byrne & Powell also suggest that strong and believable characters are the most important elements in a sitcom (26-27). The humour in a so-called domestic comedies is also based on the characters and their relationships to each other, which often makes it more realistic than the one in sitcoms. Furthermore, domcoms might feature several separate story lines revolving around different characters. The "families" in domestic comedies might also be a group of friends or colleagues, but typical family roles are usually allocated to the characters in any sitcom (Abelman 326-327). Considering the literal meaning of "sitcom" or "situation comedy", the name might indeed not be suitable to describe current programmes. Nevertheless, "sitcom" will be used as an umbrella term for the whole genre in this study.

As opposed to early sitcoms which mainly focussed on families and the domestic area, recent sitcoms often deal with a group of friends in their 20s or 30s and their relationships (Byrne & Powell 7-8). Accordingly, sitcoms mainly aim at an audience between 18 and 30 (Byrne & Powell 23). Despite the characteristics that have changed, sitcoms usually still focus on the daily life of middle-class people and involve a variety of eminently stereotypical characters (Faulstich 52-53). One of the characteristics that has slightly changed is the representation of sitcom fathers. Although they are not represented as foolish as working-class fathers, they have also ceased to be portrayed as super-dads (Butsch 508). Additionally, there has been a change in the use of canned laughter, which is now often rejected in recent sitcoms. Canned laughter presupposes the existence of an audience as a group who have “a collective understanding of what is and isn’t funny”. Abandoning canned laughter, hence, suggests that there is a variety of ways in which the audiences might respond and it is a way for modern sitcoms to set themselves apart from the traditional format (Mills 81-105). Moreover, sitcoms are nowadays rarely shot in the presence of a studio audience which has affected the general style of sitcoms, for example, by allowing a greater variety of sets (Mills 6).

As social change occurs, television has to change. Although television cannot be regarded as the cause of social change, it has to be part of it and it might have the ability to promote or decelerate a certain social development (Fiske, *Television Culture* 45). While sitcoms always featured stereotypes, they have become twisted in many modern programmes (Byrne & Powell 30). Especially due to these stereotypes, sitcoms are highly ideological and they use humour and comic effects in relation to ideologies (Klima 192). Laughing about stereotypes in sitcoms also contributes to the multiplicity of its readings. The audience might laugh because they identify a situation as a stereotypical representation or because they identify it as a possible reality.

2.3.3. Sitcoms and whiteness

Since the target audience of many sitcoms has traditionally been the family, it has always been highly political (Fiske, *Media Matters* 114). The family is

regarded as one of the institutions where ideologies are learned, distributed and passed on from generation to generation (Benshoff & Griffin 12). Consequently, the families displayed on television – who pretend to be a representation of real-life families – are a crucial factor in creating discourses about families, class, and race.

Considering that the focus of sitcoms has traditionally been on middle-class families and their values and beliefs, they can – to a certain extent – be regarded as a traditionally "white" genre. The values and ideas that are stereotypically associated with middle-class families are an important aspect of American identity. Hence, middle-class families are usually portrayed in a relatively positive way. They either live the perfect middle-class life or they struggle to achieve such a lifestyle but are unable to afford it. Problems of the middle-class are commonly portrayed as being caused by other classes (Kendall 167).

Nevertheless, sitcoms were also among the first genres to introduce black cast (Gray 119) even if programmes like *The Cosby Show* were often criticised as being too conservative (Fiske, *Media Matters* 114-115). In many ways, *The Cosby Show*, for example, features a stereotypical middle-class family who maintains middle-class values and only differs from the white "norm" by their skin colour (Barker, *Television* 80).

On television, the middle-class is often defined by their goals rather than their income. Typical goals include "home ownership, a car, college education for their children, health and retirement security, and occasional family vacations". Besides, middle-class identification is based on key values like "the belief that people are responsible for their own success or failure and that individual ability and hard work are the keys to success" (Kendall 175-176). Early middle-class sitcoms also include values about the process of creating and being a good family. After the wedding, the couple is supposed to wait before they get children. The parents should be interested in their children and their work and be involved in community work. The father is usually portrayed as wearing a suit

when going to work and wearing a sweater at home while the children are generally respectful and repent their mistakes (Kendall 180-181).

2.3.4. Sitcom analysis

A single sitcom may include opposing ideologies. Hence it might be interpreted as traditional and conservative, while at the same time, other readers might read it as liberal and progressive (Morreale xix). Since the central aim of television is an economic one, it is pressured to produce programmes that are liked and watched by different audiences (Barker, *Television* 159). In order to guarantee the greatest popularity, there are certain gaps in any programme that allow an alternative reading depending on the social situation of the reader (Fiske, *Television Culture* 64).

This need to appeal to a large group of people can be seen as the reason for change in television (Barker, *Television* 159). Typical elements of sitcoms often encourage the polysemy of meanings that are transmitted. Irony, metaphor, jokes, exaggeration, and contradiction are some of the stylistic devices that open sitcoms to a variety of readings. Although one of the meanings might be preferred by the producers and it may be more easily activated than others, the construction of meaning is within the power of the audience (Fiske, *Television Culture* 85-93). Which meanings are activated is influenced by the viewer's age, gender, class or other background factors such as time and place of viewing a programme (Barker, *Television* 110).

3. Analysis: *Malcolm in the Middle*

The following part of the study provides an analysis of the television programme *Malcolm in the Middle*, which was created by Linwood Boomer and distributed from 2000-2006 by 20th Century Fox Television (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212671/). There are seven seasons and 151 episodes, each of which lasts approximately 22 minutes. Generally, the series is about Malcolm's supposedly middle-class family, as it is already suggested by the programme's title, and the family members' daily lives, problems, and relationships.

First, different methods regarding the analysis of television programmes and their advantages shall be outlined in order to illustrate and explain the choice of the appropriate method. Based on the chosen method, aims and limitations of the study shall be described, which is followed by a brief introduction of the main characters in the sitcom and its characteristics regarding format. Subsequently, different readings of whiteness shall be applied to explain how whiteness is generally represented in this specific television programme before the close analysis of four different episodes will provide a more profound insight into the programme and its representation of whiteness. The selection of episodes was based on an analysis of whether they are suitable for revealing how whiteness is represented within the programme. Furthermore, it was tried to include episodes from a variety of seasons in order to investigate if representations of whiteness change in the course of the programme's seven different seasons. In the conclusion, the results of the close analysis will be outlined and interpreted with regard to the research questions and the theoretical background.

3.1. Method

In general, television analysis is trying to realise and reveal structures and typical characteristics of television or its programmes and make those insights accessible to others. It has to be said, though, that some parts will remain inexplicable or unpredictable. Still, the insights that are provided by analysis

might be used to gain power over television while upholding the opportunity to enjoy it (Hickethier 28-29).

A critical analysis of television ought to recognise television programmes as the product of corporations and institutions that is influenced by financial matters, marketing, and conventional guidelines. As a result, television always aims at a large and diverse audience in order to make greatest possible profit (Abelman 32). Thus, a single programme may indeed encourage dominant ideologies regarding race and ethnicity while at the same time it may be interpreted in a contrary way, as it has been confirmed by current studies (Cottle, *Media Research* 11). Consequently, the polysemy of meanings poses a problem for television analysis for analysis cannot predict which meanings are most frequently activated by the viewers. It cannot be assumed that the audiences constantly deconstruct the images and ideologies presented on television, nor can studies expect audiences to accept dominant ideologies all the time. They rather seek to make meaning of what they see depending on their current context of watching in order to be able to enjoy a specific programme (Fiske & Hartley 6). There have been a number of audience-centred quantitative studies which aspired to reveal how a certain programme is de facto understood and interpreted by different audiences.

For the close analysis of *Malcolm in the Middle*, however, a hermeneutic method is used, focussing on the meaning of the text and how it might be understood by its viewers; hence, it shall try to detect and present a variety of polysemic meanings. Interpreting a programme in this fashion requires the analyser to be aware of the fact that the subject position of the analyser can and will always influence the results of the study. Hence, the analyser has to be aware of his or her presuppositions, the context of viewing, and personal interests. Meeting those requirements, hermeneutic analysis can succeed in providing valid insights (Hickethier 31-33). More precisely, the study will provide an ideological textual analysis which is supposed to disclose how the programme might serve the interests of the dominant ideology, oppose them, or convey polysemic meaning. Each reading or analysis of a text, though, can only show a small fraction of possible readings (Kellner 13).

Furthermore, it has to be emphasised that this study is not interested in revealing information on authorial intent. Firstly, it is not possible to exactly reconstruct what the authors intended to do (Barker, *Global Television* 115) since they do not always consciously add specific ideologies and messages but are mainly interested in creating an entertaining programme (Benshoff & Griffin 16). Secondly, even if the authorial intention was revealed, it could not disclose which meanings might be activated by the audience (Barker, *Global Television* 115).

Although meaning is generally often linked to content, form may carry just as much meaning and ideology. Moreover, it might even be more effective, since it is often perceived subconsciously (Fiske, *Television Culture* 23). Although analysing the content of a programme may achieve crucial insights, it cannot provide information on the audience's perception. An analysis of form, on the other hand, might to a certain extent indeed indicate possible interpretations since many conventionalised codes might be perceived in a similar way by a number of members of a culture (Fiske & Hartley 21). Thus, the close analysis of episodes shall include aspects of both, content and form and identify some of the conventionalised codes.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, this study is focussed on representations; it does not give any information on the "real" behaviour of white or non-white people. Furthermore it has to be said that although whiteness is the general focus of this study, especially class and gender are so highly related to race that they cannot be fully neglected. Although it is not the purpose of this study to oppose whiteness to blackness, many of the analysed scenes and story lines inevitably illustrate how white people are represented in relation to non-whites. Describing parallels and differences between those representations will therefore necessarily form a crucial part of the analysis.

Simply speaking, the aim of this study is to show how whiteness is represented in *Malcolm in the Middle*. Precisely, the close analysis is trying to reveal which codes regarding whiteness are conveyed and how they might be perceived by the audience. As it has been mentioned in the introduction, the programme's

representation of the American Dream with regard to whiteness and class will also be of crucial interest. However, despite the fact that the study will try to offer a variety of interpretations and meanings, it will not be able to predict all possible understandings of the programme. It also has to be stated here that a single programme cannot be representative of a whole genre, just like a number of episodes cannot be regarded as a model of all other episodes (Mills 3). Hence, other episodes than the ones presented in the close analysis might evoke different readings by the viewers.

3.2. Main characters

3.2.1. The parents

Matching the stereotypical representations of working-class families rather than those of middle-class families, the gender roles in Malcolm's family are often shown to be inverted. The mother, Lois, usually takes the decisions, while the father, Hal, mostly obeys. The fact that Hal is a rather passive character is already indicated in the first episode "Pilot" (01/01)[1], when Hal is hardly given any speaking time. Furthermore, Lois's workplace at the supermarket is frequently shown, while Hal is barely seen working. This suggests twisted gender roles as traditionally only the husband's workplace was shown on television while women were mostly depicted in the house (Spangler 36).

Hal is portrayed as a lazy man who despises his job as a system manager. Hence, the representation of Hal varies from what is generally perceived as a "real man" who

> […] works hard, puts food on the table and an SUV in the driveway, shows some interest in his children's welfare, and exhibits a somewhat restrained set of sexual practices within state-sanctioned heterosexual marriage (Dines, *White Man's Burden* 367).

[1] When referring to a specific episode, the title of the episode shall be given in inverted commas, including information on the season and episode number in brackets.

Hal's failure to provide a middle-class standard for his family and the hyper-sexualisation of his character rather identify him with black stereotypes (Dines 367).

While Lois is clearly authoritative and enjoys bossing about and punishing the boys, Hal is often portrayed as siding with his children or even behaving like one of them (Kendall 188). One day, he even takes them to a stock car race instead of school ("Stock Car Races" 01/10). Hal often acts irresponsibly and he loves destruction. In "Shame" (01/04), Dewey and Hal destroy different things from the house using a wood chipper. In "The Bots and the Bees" (01/14), the audience is told about Hal's rebellious past when he was fighting, drinking, and motorcycling until Lois made him stop. When Lois visits Francis in the same episode, Hal starts smoking, listening to rock music and building a killer robot shooting bees at other people. He is shown howling like a dog, dancing on the table wearing pants and a T-shirt on his head, and tearing the telephone from the wall because he does not want to go to work. Thus, the audience is shown that he is not able to live on his own, is unable to make decisions, and cannot cope with stressful situations. Hal's love for destruction is even compared to a drug addiction in the episode "Stupid girl" (04/04) when he becomes addicted to destroying objects with a steam roller.

As opposed to Lois, Hal is very concerned with his looks and his body. He is often seen being shaven by Lois or looking into the bathroom mirror examining his body. Lois, on the other hand, does not like to dress up or wear extravagant makeup. In the episode "Lois' Makeover" (03/10), Lois is asked to wear more makeup at work, but she is not comfortable with her looks when doing so.

In the episode "Family reunion" (04/03), the audience finds out that Hal's family is actually rich but due to their contempt for Lois they do not see his family often. Thus, their love for each other is somehow responsible for their economic situation. When Hal's father dies in the episode "Hal grieves" (07/14), the family learns that he had lost all his money before.

The parents are often portrayed as being selfish rather than the stereotypically caring and good-hearted sitcom parents. In “Therapy” (02/08), Hal gets three éclairs from a bakery but instead of giving them to the children, he and Lois quickly eat them. In the episode “Malcolm’s money” (07/10), Malcolm is given a scholarship, but the letter is opened by Hal and Lois, who steal the money. In the end, however, they feel guilty and sell things in order to give some money to Malcolm. While they are sometimes portrayed as being mean to and indifferent about their children, their love for each other is immeasurable and passionate. Interestingly, Hal and Lois are one couple among few television parents whose love and desire for each other is actually depicted in the show (Glouberman, “Home Alone 4” 01/03). In accordance with dominant ideology, their sexuality might be identified as the reason for their lack of success and failure to achieve a middle-class standard of living. Alternatively, their sexuality might also be interpreted in a subversive way considering how it is continuously exaggerated and, hence, often at the core of the programme’s jokes. Consequently, Hal and Lois’s hyper-sexualisation might be interpreted as a mockery of U.S. American puritanism.

Different aspects of form also vary from the traditional representation of sitcom parents. As opposed to the “soft, shadowless lighting [which] is commonly used on television sitcoms” (Nulph), hard light is often used in depictions of Hal and Lois. Hence, lighting is used to set Hal and Lois apart from other sitcom parent. Reading the sitcom in a way affirmative of dominant ideologies might relate the hard light to Hal and Lois’s imperfection and their failure to achieve true whiteness. In a subversive reading, though, the lighting might be understood as more natural and, consequently, Hal and Lois might be conceived as more realistic than other sitcom parents. Their clothes might bring about a similar effect. As opposed to other sitcom mothers, Lois is never dressed up and usually wears simple clothes both at home and at work.

3.2.2. Malcolm

Malcolm is the most reasonable character in the family and he is often responsible for finding solutions to different problems. Due to his high

intelligence, he is part of a class where only gifted children are taught, which is also called the Krelboyne class. Malcolm's intellect also generates a special position in the family. While he is the one the others usually rely on when they need an idea or solution to a problem, he also often feels like an outsider being so different from the other members of the family. Hence, *Malcolm in the Middle* to a certain extent features a "fish out of water" plot, where one of the characters does not fit in (Byrne & Powell 7).

Besides his special position in the family, his relationship to the audience is also remarkable. By addressing the audience directly, he becomes the character most viewers are likely to identify with. Interestingly, he is the only person in the family who is not so frequently associated with non-white stereotypes, but he is an aspiring upstart who might be able to succeed in accomplishing a middle-class standard of living and pursuing and achieving the American Dream.

Hence, Malcolm is characterised as the only "truly" white person in the programme. He is more sensible and sensitive than his brothers and he is frequently ashamed of his parents and brothers and their vulgar behaviour and blames them for his life being harder in comparison to the lives of his friends. Malcolm is also the only one in the family who cares about other people's opinions and wants to be accepted by others. He continuously complains about things and often feels as if life was unfair, as it is also suggested by the programme's theme music. Being constantly dissatisfied with life, sarcasm is one of the distinct features that define Malcolm's character and language.

Malcolm's whiteness is also encouraged by different elements of form. While a hard light is often used for the other characters, Malcolm is sometimes shown in a soft light which matches traditional sitcom lighting and makes him more likeable. Soft lighting also makes him look "bright and cheery" (http://www.videomaker.com/article/c13/9150-video-lighting), which is one of the strategies used to emphasize his whiteness, especially in comparison to the other members of his family. Additionally, Malcolm is often filmed in an extreme close-up which establishes a stronger link between Malcolm and the audience.

3.2.3. Malcolm's brothers

The eldest of four sons, Francis, is portrayed as a mischievous troublemaker who likes to provoke his parents. Different flashbacks reveal his reckless and disobedient behaviour which is the reason why he was sent to military school. Although Francis is often shown to be ill-behaved, he is adored by his brothers and at some point the audience might even pity him because of his being oppressed by Lois. He is constantly seen to make his life more difficult than it actually is (Masterson, "Stock Car Races" 01/10). After escaping from military school, he works in Alaska where he marries a Native American woman with whom he moves to a ranch in season 4. Francis's attending military school is particularly interesting considering that military recruiting is sometimes regarded as a means of social mobility. Lutz confirms that "as family income increases, the likelihood of service decreases" (179). Hence, the family's low status is again emphasised, especially since Malcolm's other brother, Reese, also joins the army for a short time in season 5.

Similar to Francis's bad boy image, Reese is usually portrayed as a bully who is aggressive and violent even if violent actions are never shown, but only hinted at. Reese often fails to be successful at school and he is not popular, but feared by others. With Reese, the stereotypical "white trash" representations are most frequently used, for example, when his bad manners or poor hygiene are shown. In the episode "Motivational Speaker" (06/19), Reese makes friends with a pack of dogs, and eventually, becomes like one of them, emphasising his animalistic character traits.

The youngest brother, Dewey, is often overlooked and ignored by his parents who do not pay enough attention to him. In the episode "Reese joins the army – Part 1" (05/22), Dewey goes to a music competition on his own and wins it, but nobody even realises that he was gone. Especially the episode "Morp" (07/21) shows how Dewey has always been treated less favourably than the others. There are no childhood photos of him and when Lois and Hal cannot have sexual intercourse because Dewey is in the house, they just send him away at night. In the beginning, Dewey is often seen deluding himself and envisioning a

better life for him and his family. However in later seasons, Dewey has come to accept that he is being treated unfairly by his family and that his family is discriminated against by others.

In the fourth season, another boy, called Jamie, is born, but he remains a toddler for rest of the episodes. It is, however, indicated that he might be even more mischievous than the other boys.

None of the boys are particularly popular at school. When Reese stops being a bully for some time in the episode “The Bully”, Malcolm finds out that others only tolerated his arrogance because they were afraid of Reese. While Malcolm is popular with the gifted children from the Krelboyne class, he fails to make friends with “normal” children. There are frequent indications of the unpopularity of the boys at school and in the neighbourhood, indicating their social status and inappropriate behaviour.

3.2.4. The grandparents

Lois’s parents, Victor and Ida, are represented as the villains in the programme. In correspondence with conventionalised codes, the villains are shown as particularly non-American (Fiske & Hartley 9), having an Eastern European origin and accent. Furthermore, Victor and Ida live in Canada, which also prevents them from being recognised as American. Additionally, their age is a signifier of their wickedness given the fact that villains are often older than heroes (Fiske & Hartley 9). Their age is also vividly illustrated by mise-en-scène. Victor and Ida are often dressed in brown or green clothes and usually wear hats, which is commonly associated with old people.

When Victor and Ida firstly appear in the episode “The Grandparents” (02/15), Ida is seen drinking, smoking, coughing, and trying to get Malcolm to drink and hit others. They are portrayed as being mean, selfish and despicable. Sound also reveals them to be particularly wicked and intimidating, since their first appearance is accompanied by complete silence. Similarly, Ida’s appearance in the episode “Victor’s Other Family” (05/20) is accompanied by a sound in a

minor key and followed by an extreme close-up of Ida's face. As opposed to the extreme close-ups of Malcolm which are supposed to create intimacy, the extreme close-up of Ida seems intimidating. In the same episode, it is revealed that Victor is actually not Lois's father and that Ida is not sure about the identity of Lois's real father suggesting her low moral standards. Victor, too, is depicted as being unfaithful, having a second wife and family.

Emphasising Ida and Victor's hideousness, their racial identification as non-white is clearly stressed by their accent and behaviour. Consequently, some of Lois's stereotypically non-white character traits might be regarded as innate behaviour. Hence, this non-white heritage might offer an additional explanation of the family's situation.

3.2.5. The Kenarbans

Malcolm's family is continuously brought face to face with his black school mate Stevie's family, the Kenarbans, who are portrayed as the exact opposite of Malcolm's family. When Malcolm visits his friend Stevie in the first episode "Pilot" (01/01), the audience sees a shot of the Kenarabans' house. As opposed to shots of Malcolm's house, the front yard is neat and perfectly trimmed; there is beautifully green grass, a garden gnome and a sign saying "Kasa Kenarban". This first picture of their house already suggests the general image of the family that is presented in the following episodes.

Kitty and Abe Kenarban are over-protective and everything in their house is extremely tidy and neat. Hence, they are portrayed as the opposite of Hal and Lois. While Kitty and Abe are caring, loving, and do everything in order to protect Stevie, Hal and Lois are often shown as selfish or indifferent. Different aspects of form also set Kitty and Abe apart from Hal and Lois. First, Kitty is always dressed up as it is seen in the episode "Sleepover" (01/06) where she wears a pearl necklace, a pearl bracelet and earrings at home. Abe, too, is dressed nicely wearing a sweater vest clearly showing a branding of an expensive label. They are filmed from a low-angle perspective which encourages the viewers to identify them as the "perfect" parents. Additionally,

this image of Kitty and Abe is accompanied by Tony Orlando's song "Candida". Orlando sings about a good life and a promising future which might be intended as a contrast to Malcolm's family.

However, in accordance with the programme's tendency to ambiguous scenarios, there are also drawbacks to Kitty's and Abe's relationship and parenting. Viewers might quickly regard them as "bad" parents due to their over-protectiveness and their reluctance towards allowing Stevie or themselves to have fun.

Similarly, they fail to be represented as the "perfect" family as they appear to be arrogant when they look down on Malcolm's family. When the families share a houseboat in the episode "Houseboat" (03/01), Abe is angry that Malcolm's family prevented him from going to Hawaii:

> Abe: "I could be sitting in a suite in Hawaii right now"
> Kitty: "You know these people can't afford that"
> Abe: "Well, pardon me for going to college and earning a decent living. Should I drive a crappy car because they do?"

The image of their idyllic family life is further damaged when Kitty leaves Abe and Stevie in the fifth season and starts going to parties and having her fling. Although Stevie's family is mostly not shown as a stereotypical black family, the break-up of Abe and Kitty's marriage is striking. According to Fiske, television usually features more black single-parent families than white ones (*Media Matters* 105). Abe tells Hal that they did not have an active sexual life as opposed to the one of Hal and Lois, which is especially interesting since non-whites are usually more sexualised than whites. The friendship between Hal and Abe changes in after Kitty has left the family in the episode "Goodbye Kitty" (05/03) and Hal is trying to take care of Abe and be a substitute wife for him.

In spite of initial difficulties between the families, Hal and Abe become close friends. Such friendships between white and black men were used in 1980s and 1990s films in order to appeal to various ethnic groups (Benshoff & Griffin 88). Hence, the friendship between Hal and Abe might derive from that filmic

tradition. Nevertheless, regarding Hal and Abe stereotypes often seem to be twisted, for example with regard to sexuality, sports, and class.

Similar to the opposing characters of Stevie's and Malcolm's parents, the two boys are often shown in juxtaposition with each other. Like Abe and Hal, they might be identified as "colourblind buddies", a term used by Jamie Malanowski, with Stevie longing for Malcolm's affection. There are frequent comparisons made between Malcolm and Stevie, especially pointing out their differences. Besides their skin colour and their significantly contrasting families, one of the most striking differences between Malcolm and Stevie is the fact that Stevie uses a wheelchair. Stereotypical representations of black people tend to depict them as physical beings by illustrating their athletic talents and success (Benshoff & Griffin 56). Stevie's wheelchair and his inability to speak properly, however, put him into a very passive position, which is also stereotypically used in representations of black people (Barker, *Television* 75). Being in the Krelboyne class together with Malcolm, Stevie is also depicted as extremely intelligent. Stevie's intelligence and lack of physical power is an interesting twist of stereotypes considering the fact that black people are often represented in a positive way merely because of their athletic success. After all, non-whites are often represented "as primarily physical rather than mental beings" (Barker, *Television* 81).

In general, the family's close friendship to black people might also suggest their low status. Except for Craig, who is Lois's overweight and neurotic colleague, the family's only friends are the Kenarbans and Abe's other black friends while the other white people in the neighbourhood despise the family. Since both are discriminated against – on the basis of class or race – they might get along well with each other and partly share similar experiences and values.

3.3. Whiteness in *Malcolm in the Middle*

As it has been mentioned above, there are various ways in which whiteness may be represented on television. This section of the paper will study which representational techniques are generally used in the portrayal of Malcolm's

family and analyse why these techniques identify the family as white or non-white. Class will be the crucial factor in the representation of the family's identification as white or non-white.

At a very superficial level, Malcolm's family seems to be represented as a stereotypical white middle-class family. They are a traditional nuclear family consisting of a married couple with children who live in a house with a garden in a suburban area. Their father, Hal, goes to work every day and in the evenings they often have dinner together as a family. At a second glance, though, it can be observed how the family's whiteness is continuously challenged by the frequent use of images and codes stereotypically associated with the representations of non-whites or poor whites. Thus, the interpretation of the family's status and class leads to two completely different readings of the television show, both of which shall be described and analysed hereinafter.

However, it has to be mentioned that both of these readings are extreme and none of them might actually occur on its own. A combination of one of these readings and another possible reading might be more likely to appear. Some readers might even combine fragments of opposing readings.

3.3.1. "White trash" reading

The first reading identifies Malcolm's family as poor or even "white trash" by relating them to stereotypes associated with non-whites. One of the most prominent examples that identifies Malcolm's family as non-white or "white trash" is their implied violent behaviour. Throughout the programme, a variety of violent actions are indicated even if they are not actually shown. Especially Reese is portrayed as a bully who loves to beat up other children at school. While Reese never has a bad conscience, Malcolm feels very bad after finding out that the boy he had beaten was only seven years old, which is seen in the episode "Shame" (01/04). When his parents and brothers only laugh about it, Malcolm tells the audience "There's something seriously wrong with our family". Later in the same episode, Hal beats up the boy's elder brother who is only a teenager. He is also shown fighting with a co-worker in "Convention" (02/06),

but he stops when Lois offers him sexual intercourse instead. Other people are also seen to suspect domestic violence in Malcolm's family, including Malcolm's teacher Caroline as it is seen in the episode "Home Alone 4" (01/03). Similarly, a social worker suspects Lois of having punched Reese in the episode "If Boys Were Girls" (04/10).

This very behaviour often also implies the family's disdain of the law which is another indicator of their social status. In the course of the seven seasons every family member is associated with police action. In the episode "Long Drive" (04/11), for example, Reese is followed home by the police and when Hal looks out of the window he already knows the officer's name and which kind of coffee he likes. Thus, the family's frequent encounters with agents of law enforcement is illustrated. Both Lois and Hal are arrested at some point of the television series and also the children are frequently contacted and looked for by the police.

Similarly, Hal and Lois's sexuality is a persistent indicator of their social status. Whenever they are home alone, they usually have sexual intercourse, as shown in the teaser or cold open to the episode "High School Play" (02/09) when Hal gets naked as soon as he learns that the children are not at home. Hal and Lois are sometimes also shown to behave sexually inappropriately in public. In "Home Alone 4" (01/03), for example, they attend a wedding and start kissing intensely. After the wedding, the bride and groom want to get into their limousine, but find Hal and Lois in it who immediately close the door, indicating that they are having sexual intercourse. They even have sexual intercourse in their children's school's utility room in the episode "Humilithon" (04/02). In "Sleepover" (01/06), Malcolm and Stevie see Hal leaving a video shop for adults. As opposed to traditional sitcoms, the white male body is frequently portrayed in *Malcolm in the Middle*, for example when Hal wants to seduce Lois or when she shaves his body. Their active sexual life is also responsible for their unusually high number of children as compared with the American average. In 2013, statistics showed that American women would give birth to 1,87 children (Howe). While there are only four children in the beginning, a fifth is born within the fourth season and the very last episode suggests that Lois

might be pregnant again. Lois's mother frequently indicates that she would not have so many children if it was not for her sexual desire. The following dialogue from the episode "Poker" (03/08) especially illustrates hyper-sexualisation. In the beginning of the scene, Hal does not want to have sexual intercourse because he is troubled by Abe's friends looking down on him:

> Hal: "No, I'm not in the mood"
> Lois: "You're always in the mood"
> Hal: "Not every single night of my life"
> Lois: "Yes, you are"
> Hal: "I'm not like some kind of machine"
> Lois: "Yes, you are"
> Hal: "You can't just snap your fingers…"
> Lois: "Yes, I can. I always have"

Although this example especially emphasises Lois's hyper-sexualisation, their dialogue also suggests that Hal usually readily agrees on having sexual intercourse. Various other scenes in the programme also identify him as the seducer and initiator of sexual intercourse.

Furthermore, they are sometimes seen drinking alcohol, for example, when Hal smuggles rum into a waterpark using a lotion bottle in the episode "Waterpark" (01/16). Hal also gets drunk during a ceremony where Stevie is given a teen courtesy award in the episode "Kitty's Back" (06/05). The family's eldest son, Francis, admits to having been an alcoholic in the episode "No Motorcycles" (06/16), although it is later revealed that he just identified with the history and characteristics of alcoholics but did not actually drink himself.

At some points, the family is even compared to beasts or animals. In the very first episode "Pilot" (01/01), for example, Hal is shown to have a very hairy body, a stereotypically animalistic characteristic (Dyer 155). The audience sees how Hal is shaven by Lois while the boys are having breakfast next to them. In another episode called "The Grandparents" (02/15), the boys are even shown eating pancakes with hairs inside. On the table, there is a bowl where they put all the hairs. Even Lois once calls Hal "more beast than man" referring to his sexuality in the episode "Flashback" (02/25). Another scene in "Shame" (01/04) compares the family's behaviour to the one of apes. When Malcolm observes

his family arguing with some neighbours, he pictures them moving and talking like apes. He is embarrassed by his family's behaviour but finds himself scratching his armpit in an ape-like movement. Hence, the viewer is also encouraged to believe in the inheritance of such an animalistic behaviour. Although Malcolm is more intelligent and reasonable than the other characters of his family, he cannot help behaving like an animal. In the episode "Billboard" (06/10), Lois explains that her family would not be different from apes if there was not an outlet store offering cheap clothes they can afford.

Furthermore, there are frequent references to messiness and sometimes even dirt. One of the most prominent images is the one of the family's front yard which is completely unkempt and unattended and often shown in comparison to other front yards in the neighbourhood. There are also references to uncleanliness in the house, for example, when the audience is shown the food, trash, and dust under the sofa in "Red Dress" (01/02). In "Malcolm Babysits" (01/05), Malcolm's house is infested by bugs due to the candy wrappers and half-eaten cereal boxes. During extermination, the family has to stay in a trailer borrowed from Lois's colleague Craig.

The family's messiness is implicitly linked to the idea that dirt might be the cause for a poor white family's lacking intellect and morale and, consequently, status. In the early 20th century, some people believed that the hookworm was responsible for the degeneracy of poor whites, which basically affiliates their social status to their dirty and unsanitary living environment (Wray 96-97). Examples where a relation to this idea might be indicated include a subplot in the episode "Tutoring Reese" (02/19), when Dewey makes friends with a fly, an animal formerly held responsible for the so-called hookworm-disease which was believed to cause poor whites' degeneracy (Wray 96-97). Bugs and germs are also referred to in other episodes, for example, when Lois eats a bug in "Krelboyne Girl" (02/12).

As in many other sitcoms, joint family dinners or other meals are frequently the centre of communication in the family. In *Malcolm in the Middle*, however, food is one of the crucial factors indicating the family's poverty, for example, when

the boys fight for food at breakfast or dinner. The audience is often given the impression that there is a shortage of food. In “Lois’ Makeover” (03/10), Lois cooks something she calls “Leftover Parfait” which consists of different kind of food she found when cleaning the fridge. Malcolm tells the audience that they have “Leftover Parfait” every week. The centrality of food as an indicator of class is also pointed out by a fridge camera which allows a perspective from inside the fridge. This fridge camera is, for example, used when Hal and Reese are trying to find the source of a bad smell in the fridge (“Hal Grieves”, 07/14).

Besides their lack of healthy and fresh food, there are numerous other scenes which explicitly suggest the family’s poverty. When Lois is fired in “Lois vs. Evil” (01/09), the family cannot afford enough food and they only eat rice and macaroni. A girl Malcolm fancies organises a welfare project collecting food and clothes for Malcolm’s family. In “Waterpark” (01/16), Malcolm and Reese behave badly while Hal and Lois are trying to relax and spend time together. When Lois calls them out on their behaviour, she indicates that they do not have much money: “Do you think we’re wealthy? Wealthy people drive fancy cars. They buy fresh pasta. Do we do any of those things? No! Wealthy people can afford to have their vacations ruined. No big deal. They just pick up and they go again”. Thus, Lois refers to the fact that they are not able to afford a proper family vacation. In “Hal’s Christmas Gift” (06/06), the family is not able to afford Christmas presents for each other, so they agree on giving home-made presents only.

The family also seems to have an insufficient health care, which is a common problem poor people in the United States face (Michaels 119). In “Lois vs. Evil” (01/09), Hal has to go to the hospital because of a food intoxication and they have to pay between around 4000$, which makes Lois beg her boss to get her job back. In the episode “Health Insurance” (07/02), Hal finds out that the family’s health insurance has expired two months ago and he spends the weekend trying to make the house safer in order to avoid any injuries. It is also implied that the family visits the hospital quite frequently when the nurse already knows who they are in the episode “Home Alone 4” (01/03).

While an American middle-class family is usually portrayed as getting involved in community work and participate in neighbourhood activities (Kendall 181), Malcolm's family is despised by their neighbours. In some scenes, it is even suggested that the neighbours, especially the children, are scared of Malcolm and his brothers. In "Pilot" (01/01), a mother is seen hurrying to lead their two daughters past Malcolm's house while we hear Malcolm's family shouting inside. When Malcolm's house is shown in this episode, the neighbouring houses are seen to be for sale in order to illustrate the neighbourhood's dislike of the family (Holland, "Pilot" 01/01). The neighbours also regularly complain about the noise from Malcolm's family, e.g. in "Red Dress" (01/02).

As opposed to a portrayal of lower middle-class families where other people are made responsible for their situation, Malcolm's family is often held responsible for their own situation. Hal, for example, despises his job, definitely lacks ambition, and is sometimes also represented as lazy. In "Reese Joins the Army: Part 2" (05/22), Malcolm finds out that Hal has not worked on a Friday for 15 years. Ironically, this saves him from going to prison.

Summarising, these characteristics identify Malcolm's family as a white trash family who has failed to achieve the American Dream due to their lack of drive and ambition. Their non-white character qualities – that is their aggressive behaviour and rudeness, hyper-sexualisation, and laziness – prevent them from being able to afford a middle-class standard of living. Hence, a white-trash reading of the sitcom serves dominant ideologies by blaming poor whites for their socio-economically deprived position. Since Michael Glouberman, one of the producers, clearly refers to the family as a white trash family, a white-trash reading might be regarded as the preferred reading of the television programme ("Krelboyne Picknick", 01/08).

3.3.2. Middle-class reading

An alternative kind of reading might identify Malcolm's family as a "wannabe" middle-class family who fails to live a middle-class life due to external influences. The very title of the programme might be an indication of their

purported middle-class status, even though a superficial interpretation of the title will probably link it to Malcolm's position in the family. Malcom is, however, also the key to the middle-class reading. As an intelligent and aspiring upstart, he might be able to succeed in achieving a middle-class standard of living for his family.

Lois very explicitly blames the government for the family's socioeconomic situation in the very last episode "Graduation" (07/22), when it is revealed that Lois wants Malcolm to become president one day. She believes that – coming from a lower-class family himself – Malcolm will be one of the first presidents who can change something for these families. Thus, it is again implied that Malcolm's family cannot be blamed for their situation, but is shown as a victim of external factors and social inequalities.

Although the members of the family are ill-mannered, reckless, and aggressive, they are often portrayed as morally superior to other families in the television series, especially families belonging to the upper middle-class. In "Malcolm Babysits" (01/05), for example, Malcolm works for an allegedly perfect family, but in the end, Malcolm finds out that he has been under surveillance while babysitting and it is revealed that the wife has an affair with another female. Similarly, the episode "New Neighbours" (02/13) deals with a seemingly perfect middle-class family who turns out to be mean, racist, and unfaithful.

Moreover, Malcolm's family seems to be portrayed as an intact family as opposed to families in other working-class sitcoms (Fiske, *Media Matters* 115). Although the parents might be rude and immature, the members of the family do care about each other. Similarly, although Hal and Lois are significantly sexualised, their intercourse takes place within the safety of marriage, hence, contributing to the preservation of whiteness.

Especially with regard to Lois, a middle-class reading of the television show might be encouraged since she is often seen being treated unfairly. At the store where she works, for example, better jobs are usually given to those who flatter their boss or provide information about co-workers instead of the most qualified

employees. In the episode “Health insurance” (07/02), an employee who provides information about a secret union meeting is promoted. In “Lois’ Makeover” (03/10), Lois is even offered a promotion if she agrees to wear more makeup at work. When she is taken for a prostitute, however, she decides to be herself again. She is frequently seen defying orders in pursuance of her moral principles. Thus, Lois’s high principles are sometimes responsible for her lack of success at work. Similarly, Lois is being treated unfairly by a police officer after she refuses to give him a discount at the store, as it can be seen in episode “Traffic ticket” (02/16). When he accuses her of a traffic offence, Lois wants to stand up for her rights regardless of the costs. Again, her strong belief in herself and in her principles seem to pose a danger for Lois.

In the episode “Mini-bike” (02/22), Hal finds out that Francis, too, often gets into trouble when taking a stand for others. Lois’s and Francis’s ambition to stand up for other people and uphold their principles and morale does not only explain why they are sometimes being treated unfairly, but it is also a feature that is stereotypically identified as “American”. According to Roswitha Sieper, Americans generally believe that it is their responsibility to fight for the rights of others in order to create a better world (149). Considering the strong link between Americanness and whiteness, Lois’s and Francis’s feeling of responsibility for others might identify with white stereotypes. Secondly, their desire to stand up for others might also refer to the concept of white guilt. Considering that the creation of whiteness and white power has led to the preference or discrimination of different racial groups, white people might feel responsible for the injustice and accountable for fighting it, hence develop a feeling of “white guilt” (Fiske, *Media Matters* 50).

Additionally, there are scenes which indicate that the family is needed in order to make it possible for their neighbours to live together peacefully. In the episode “Block Party” (05/08) the neighbours stop hating Hal and Lois and their family and start arguing and fighting each other instead. Similarly, the children at Malcolm’s school start quarrelling when Reese stops being a bully in the episode “The Bully” (02/10).

There are also elements that identify Malcolm's family as a "normal" family which might lead to a higher possibility of reader identification and encourage middle-class reading. Firstly, the family's last name is deliberately hidden from the audience within most of the episodes, which might indicate that Malcolm's family could be any U.S. American family. In "Graduation" (07/22), for example, Malcolm's last name cannot be heard due to some noise from the microphone. In the very first episode, however, their last name, "Wilkerson", is revealed by Francis's name tag (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212671/faq). Similarly, the viewers do not know where Malcolm's family lives, which makes it easy for viewers from different areas to identify with the family. Additionally, withholding information on the family's location encourages their being identified as a "normal" family by suggesting that they could live basically anywhere.

Form, especially editing, sometimes also contributes to the preference of the middle-class reading, since many violent scenes are only hinted at or deliberately cut out. Instead of portraying Lois's destroying the office of an army officer and threatening the U.S. army, the audience is only told about this event when Hal talks about it at home ("Reese comes home", 06/01). Similarly, it is not revealed what Reese did to be kicked out in the episode "Reese's Apartment" (05/15). Although everybody is clearly upset about his actions, as it is seen by the reactions of various characters, the viewer can neither know nor guess what he actually did.

In general, the middle-class reading of *Malcolm in the Middle* might lead to a higher possibility of audience identification with the family, but – similar to the "white trash" reading – it might still serve dominant ideologies about whiteness. Blaming others for the family's failure to live up to a stereotypical middle-class standard indicates the power and importance of the American middle-class. Furthermore, such a reading indicates that Malcolm's family is racially entitled to a middle-class life and is excluded from these privileges by corrupt authorities and members of other classes.

Taking all these examples into consideration, the family is very often represented in a contradictory and ambiguous way which is illustrated by the

following example: The episode “Halloween approximately” (02/02) shows how Hal’s middle-class dream of a safe neighbourhood is threatened by a blue sports car frequently passing by his house at a very high speed. When the neighbours and the police refuse to help him, Hal and Lois – although originally not intended – steal the car, have sexual intercourse in it, and push it into a lake. This particular scene simultaneously serves both of the readings that have been introduced. While Hal and his family might be perceived as victims whose middle-class lives are threatened by a member of the upper-class, they might also be recognised as rampant and sexually excessive criminals. The ambiguity of scenes like this one allows the viewer to adopt a variety of different readings, which might have led to the great success of the programme.

Consequently, the possible readings of the programme are diverse and neither of the previously described readings might be adopted by viewers in an unaltered way. While viewers are not likely to identify the family solely as vicious and detestable as suggested by the “white trash” reading, most of the viewers will also refuse to see them as socially and economically disadvantaged good people. As it has been mentioned before, the most frequently applied readings of the television show will probably include a combination of various readings. However, the existence of these two opposing readings certainly makes sure that *Malcolm in the Middle* can appeal to a significantly large audience.

3.4. Format

Even though *Malcolm in the Middle* can be classified as a sitcom, there are various aspects that do not correspond to the traditional format of sitcoms. Generally, the programme can be described as a domestic comedy dealing with a family, the family members’ daily lives and their relationships. Matching the characteristics of sitcoms, the episodes last around 22 minutes and the story lines are usually resolved within one episode. While the characters grow older and consequently evolve, their fundamental character traits remain unchanged.

Especially form considerably differs from conventional sitcoms. For a start, *Malcolm in the Middle* is shot by only one camera, which is typically used for films rather than television (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Malcolm_in_the_Middle), which makes the programme seem more realistic than other sitcoms. Special features of the show also include funny camera angles and positions and quick cuts and camera movements. These aspects are used to make the programme more vigorous and lively (Boomer, “Stock Car Races” 01/10). An example includes the previously mentioned fridge camera where the food and kitchen table are sometimes filmed from inside the fridge. According to Frankie Muniz, the television programme is “more technical” than other sitcoms and more similar to films regarding technology (“Home Alone 4” 01/03). Furthermore, all of the scenes were shot in real locations rather than a studio setting, creating the impression of reality.

As it has become common in recent sitcoms, the producers decided to abandon the laugh track in the interest of creating a more realistic scenario (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Malcolm_in_the_Middle). In order to substitute the missing laugh track, however, there is a strong focus on music, a characteristic feature typically used in films rather than television series. The music is used to make scenes more vigorous and add a funny quality (Boomer, “Pilot” 01/01). Besides music, different sound effects are frequently used in order to emphasise the actions going on or add a comic element to a scene. Sound effects are also used in between different scenes. Whenever a scene ends or a location is changed, there is a throwing sound effect, which is for example also used when a ball is quickly passing by, and the viewer gets the impression that the new scene moves into the picture from the left at high speed.

Regarding lighting, many of the scenes – especially those shot in the house – avoid particularly bright lighting. This is a technique which might be used to avoid the impression of artificial light and make the scenes appear more natural (Bordwell & Thompson 6). Thus, the realism of the programme is increased, which makes it more attractive to its audiences (Fiske & Hartley 128).

While all of these elements might be used to serve realism and make the show even more realistic and natural, Malcolm's addressing the audience is prone to reminding the viewer of the fact that it is a constructed television programme after all, but might lead to a stronger identification on the part of the viewers. Malcolm's talking to the audience, however, does not really destroy the audience's passion in the show but creates a greater connection between Malcolm and the viewer and might, hence, lead to a greater level of intimacy and possibility of identification. Consequently, Malcolm's talking to the audience involves the viewers in the plot and makes them a part of the family (Holland, "Pilot" 01/01). However, the general atmosphere of the plot that is going on must not be destroyed by addressing the audience (Boomer, "Pilot" 01/01). It has been found out that there is a greater effect of his speaking to the audience when Malcolm significantly turns away from the scene actually going on (Holland, "Francis Escapes" 01/07). Whenever that occurs, the other actors usually focus on something else so that Malcolm is able to talk to the audience without being observed (Boomer, "Francis Escapes" 01/07).

In *Malcolm in the Middle,* lighting, camera perspective, and sound are often used to deliberately delude the audience. Sound, for example, does not always seem to be appropriate for the action taking place on screen. One of the best examples is a scene from the episode "Hal's Christmas Gift" (06/06) where Lois intentionally runs into another woman's car at the parking area of a store. They start crashing each other's cars while the audience is hearing the song "A Marshmallow World" by Johnny Martis. Deluding the audience and opposing their expectations often forms the basis of the programme's jokes. In the episode "Dewey's opera" (06/11), for example, Stevie has an accident with a street luge. In the next shot, the viewer sees a huge pile of leaves in front of a house and expects Stevie to land in there. In contrast to the audience's expectations, however, Stevie crashes into a tree behind the pile of leaves. The audience is not only deluded, but information is often withheld on purpose, for example, when Jamie's sex is not revealed in the first few episodes after his birth. Whenever Hal and Lois talk about Jamie's sex, the crucial word is usually drown out by some noise.

When analysing a sitcom or any other television programme, its theme music should not be neglected given that it influences the audience's perception of the show by creating a particular atmosphere (Byrne & Powell 25). The theme music accompanying the opening titles to *Malcolm in the Middle* features the song "Boss of Me" by They Might Be Giants, which was especially written for the show (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Malcolm_In_The_Middle). The chorus is constituted of the line "You're not the boss of me now" which might refer to Lois as the head of the family who is trying to control all the other family members and their actions. However, regarding the fact that the family's misfortune or social status is sometimes also linked to an unfair treatment of working-class families, the theme music might also be interpreted as referring to their attempt to escape from the lifestyle that has been allocated to them.

Interestingly, the opening titles do not only feature scenes from *Malcolm in the Middle,* but there are elements from other television shows or films emphasising the importance of television in the programme itself. Trying to represent a typical American home, television is also depicted as a central element in family life (Barker, *Television* 165). Hence, Malcolm's family is also often represented watching television or discussing different programmes. The programme's opening starts with an image of the boys watching television stressing the central role of television in their lives. Furthermore, the video clips set the tone for the programme featuring aggressive or violent scenes and introduce us to the characters. An image of a monster, which is identified as the Kraken from *Clash of Titans* (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Opening_Sequences), is followed by a shot of Lois looking angry and shouting something, supporting the viewers' perception of Lois as the family's tyrant and a control freak. When Francis's character appears in the openings, this image is twice preceded by an anime character suggesting his immaturity since it might remind the viewer of characters from a children's programme. Moreover, the last image of Francis shows him standing in front of a burning car, thus also stressing his destructive behaviour. There are also various analogies between video clips featuring fights and scenes where the boys are seen fighting each other. The very last video

clip shows a boxing match where one of the boxers accidentally knocks the referee unconscious (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Opening_Sequences). This video clip might be related to the role of authority in the television series and the general message of the song. While authorities are generally ridiculed and made fun of in comedies (Faulstich 53), this is particularly true for *Malcolm in the Middle.*

Another characteristic that is typical of the programme is the cold open which is shown before the theme music in most of the episodes. An episode usually starts with a short but funny scene that is not related to the story line of the episode and often features scenes when characters from the show destroy something or hurt themselves. There are only few episodes which do not include a cold open, in particular those which are a sequel to a previous episode (http://malcolminthemiddle.wikia.com/wiki/Malcolm_in_the_Middle).

3.5. Close analysis of four episodes

In the following chapter, four different episodes of *Malcolm in the Middle* shall be analysed closely, with a particular focus on representations of the family's whiteness. In order to ensure the quality of the results of the close analysis, the most suitable episodes have been chosen, that is those episodes which include most references to race or whiteness.

3.5.1. "Dinner Out" (02/04)

The episode "Dinner Out" is separated into two different plots, the main plot revolving around Malcolm's family having dinner at a nice restaurant together with Stevie's family and a subplot taking place at Marlin Academy, where Francis is having a party with local girls. Particularly the confrontation of Malcolm's and Stevie's families is vital for understanding how racial stereotypes are represented in the programme, which is the reason for the close analysis of this particular episode.

In the cold open to the episode, Malcolm and Reese are playing baseball in the house. Both of them are shown in an extreme close-up suggesting tension. When Malcolm throws the ball, it is shown flying towards the camera while the camera also seems to be moving. Reese hits the ball and destroys a family portrait on a shelf. Dewey, who is not allowed to play with them, is lying on the floor, knees bent, representing the home base. When they cannot agree on a winner, they have to throw the ball again and destroy a vase with flowers. Again, they cannot agree and have to redo, but the scene is cut before they start. This scene serves as an example of how middle-class values are continuously deconstructed within the television programme. Reese and Malcolm do not only ignore their brother and reject his desire to be a part of their game, they also destroy a family portrait which might serve as a metaphor for their messed-up family life. Although such an accident might also have happened in a traditional sitcom family, the children would usually have to face severe consequences and in the end regret their actions.

The episode “Dinner Out” starts with a shot of Malcolm and Stevie who are sitting in Stevie’s room. His room seems to be very neat and in the background there are pictures of planets which emphasise Stevie’s high level of intelligence. Malcolm and Stevie are playing *Super Mario Kart* which is a computer game for children. Stevie is wearing a yellow shirt with a branding that looks similar to the branding used by Tommy Hilfiger. His wearing brand-name clothing also accentuates his status, especially as compared to Malcolm’s. When Malcolm tells the audience that he used to play the game when he was four, Stevie is focussed on the video game. Since Stevie’s attention is directed at the video game, it is possible for Malcolm to talk to the audience. When Stevie wins, he says “End of the rainbow – I win the gold”, which is another indication of the childish nature of his video game, highlighting his overprotected childhood. Similarly, Stevie suggests a fishing game when Malcolm asks for a more violent one.

Racial issues are subtly addressed in this scene by the reversal of racial stereotypes. While stereotypical representations of non-whites often include discourses of poverty, violence, and a lack of education, Stevie is represented

as the very opposite of these stereotypes. Different elements of the mise-en-scène – that is the decoration in his room, his clothes, and his inability to walk and speak properly – suggest that he is intelligent, rich, and weak rather than powerful. As opposed to the representation of Stevie, Malcolm longs for violence in the video games and is apparently wearing cheaper clothes. Although he is as intelligent as Stevie, other members of his family are known to be uneducated.

As will be illustrated later, this representation of Stevie, however, is a contrast to the image that is displayed at the end of the episode. A similar transformation takes place concerning Stevie's mother, Kitty. In the beginning, she is shown bringing snacks for Stevie and Malcolm. On her tray there are two cups of apple sauce, a cinnamon shaker, two napkins and spoons, and a huge dispenser of disinfectant. Her over-protective behaviour is stressed by various factors in this representation. Firstly, she cares for the boys by providing them with snacks rather than making them get their own snacks from the kitchen. Secondly, the kind of snack she offers is a very healthy apple sauce as opposed to other commonly offered snacks like crisps or popcorn. Thirdly, both of the boys have to stretch out their hands and Kitty puts some of the disinfectant onto their hands. They seem to be familiar with the procedure, since they immediately know what to do. Although Malcolm does as he is told, he does not seem to appreciate Kitty's overprotectiveness since he looks annoyed when she disinfects his hands and answers sarcastically when Kitty says, "And I've got some cinnamon if you guys are feeling a little crazy".

As opposed to Kitty, Lois is represented in a completely different way. When Malcolm takes the apple sauce, he hears some honking and immediately gets up, knowing that it is Lois waiting for him. Thus, Lois is represented in two ways here. Firstly, she is the opposite of Kitty, because she does not even get in to pick up her son, but just shouts at him from the car. Secondly, Lois's power is emphasised by the fact that she terrifies Malcolm although not even actually present in the scene. Even Kitty seems to feel uncomfortable with Lois's shouting and honking, so she wants Malcolm to leave in order not to make Lois angry. When Malcolm packs his bag, the audience is shown a glimpse of the

Kenarbans' garden in the background which is very nicely tended, especially compared to Malcolm's family's garden.

Another general difference between Kitty and Lois is only hinted at, but still striking. While Lois works at a store, Kitty seems to be a housewife living up to the traditional role of sitcom wives (Spangler 25). This does not only indicate the economic differences between the families, but also sets the Wilkerson family apart from the image of a stereotypically ideal nuclear family.

The next scene shows one of the family dinners in Malcolm's house. The boys are eating French fries and Lois is putting fried food onto the table. French fries and fried meat might also serve as a contrast to the healthy food Malcolm previously got at Stevie's house, especially since it later turns out that Stevie's dad, Abe, is not allowed to eat butter at home. In the background, the telephone rings and Lois leaves to answer it. Reese takes Malcolm's fork and drops it, but when Malcolm wants to pick it up, Reese forms a circle with his hand and then punches him. Malcolm explains to the audience that they are playing the circle game in which you can hit people when they see a circle you form with your hands. While he is talking to the camera, Reese is eating French fries and his attention is directed at his plate. The game, whose sole purpose is to be able to hit other people, might also indicate the boys' often implied violence and aggression.

When the camera zooms out, Lois is seen coming back to the table. She tells the family that Kitty Kenarban invited them to have dinner together. Malcolm thinks the Kenarbans are boring, but Lois rather calls them well-mannered which is why the boys should better follow their example. When Lois wonders why they have not been invited by anybody for such a long time, Hal stands up and holds up some French fries. He plays a game with the boys where they pretend to be hungry seals and move and bark like seals being fed. They are trying to catch some of the fries with their mouths. Their table manners, consequently, also set them apart from Stevie's family. Although we do not see Stevie's family eat, Lois indicates that they are well-mannered and the use of disinfectant before meals suggests that they might be very clean in general.

The first scene in the restaurant shows Hal and his family waiting for the Kenarbans. Both Hal and Lois are dressed up, Hal wearing a tie and a jacket and Lois wearing a nice dress and carrying a purse. Malcolm and Reese seem to be bored while Dewey is filmed through the fish tank, pointing at the fish he wants to eat. Classic piano music is heard in the background suggesting that the restaurant is quite elegant. Lois is enthusiastic about their visit to such a nice restaurant which is illustrated by her pointing out the sign saying “Please wait to be seated”. Thus, the audience is told that they do not go to such restaurants often, which is indicated when Lois says to Hal, “Isn’t this nice? No pirate themes, no ball pits filled with screaming children”.

Malcolm and Reese still play the circle game and when Malcolm hits Reese, Lois immediately hits Malcolm’s back part of the head. Lois wants them to behave because they are spending the evening with a well-behaved family. That she hits Malcolm when she actually wants Malcolm not to hit Reese might suggest the origin of the boys’ often violent and aggressive behaviour. Additionally, Lois’s aggressive behaviour might be a significantly attenuated form of domestic violence stereotypically associated with non-white families. Thus, it might serve as another indicator of their non-white status and behaviour. When being told off, Malcolm and Reese just nod their heads and then Dewey is seen standing between them with wet arms which imply that he might have put them into the fish tank.

Shortly before the Kenarbans arrive, Hal tells Lois about his plan to put an end to dinner by pretending a fever, but she refuses because she wants to have a nice evening. However, as soon as Abe and Hal have shaken hands, Hal mentions that he might get ill. Abe apologises for being late and explains that somebody parked in the handicapped parking spot. At that, Hal clears his throat and says he has to get something out of the car, suggesting that he is the one parking in the handicapped parking spot.

The next shot shows some money on the restaurant table and Dewey, who takes the money and puts it into his breast pocket. Lois is taking away the boys’

knives and candles and tells them how to behave in a nice restaurant. When Dewey is trying to remove a piece of chewing gum stuck under the table, Lois tells him not to do so. Consequently, Dewey lets go of the gum. The assumption that he might eat chewing gum from under the table again illustrates their lack of hygiene. When Lois has finished her warnings, she tells Stevie that he looks really nice in order to make sure the audience knows that she did not address Stevie when talking about the boys' behaviour. When Lois has gone, Malcolm and Reese continue playing the circle game. Stevie wants to join in and starts playing with Reese despite Malcolm's objections. However, Stevie is playing really badly, so that he is hit by Reese continuously.

The parents' table is different from the children's table in that there is an uncomfortable silence except for the quiet piano music in the background. Hal is trying to fake an elevated temperature, but Lois does not play along. When the waiter arrives and offers drinks, Hal tries to order before Lois interferes and orders diet soda for him instead. Consequently, the audience is made to believe that Hal would actually like an alcoholic drink. When Kitty is told that there is no ice tea, Lois decides to speak up for her and tells the waiter to make some. However, Kitty quickly orders hot tea in order not to trouble or upset anybody. Lois's speaking up for Kitty might be interpreted as her feeling responsible for Kitty. Other episodes similarly show how Lois is continuously trying to speak up for people who she thinks cannot voice their opinions on their own. Additionally, Lois is frequently represented as a control freak who is trying to take control over other people's lives. This behaviour is one of the characteristics that clearly identify Lois as white since she feels the need to take charge of other people and use her racially privileged position to stand up for others.

When the waiter has left, the unpleasant silence continues, so Hal pretends that he has to use the restroom. Having gone a few metres, he turns back to the table and gestures, indicating that Abe should meet him at the bar. Thereupon, Abe pretends to have to use the restroom too and Kitty and Lois are left at the table staring and smiling at each other quietly. Although nearly nothing is said at all, Lois is the only one who utters a few words while Kitty just smiles and nods.

In another shot at the table, Kitty seems to be very nervous, ripping her napkin into very small pieces. She is smiling all the time. Lois is also smiling and both of them seem to feel highly uncomfortable. When Lois wants to look for Hal at the bar, Kitty prevents her from leaving the table by suggesting that they should get to know each other. The waiter arrives and hands Kitty some cranberry juice, although she ordered tea. While Kitty just thanks the waiter, Lois is upset and tells him that she actually wanted tea. Again, Lois feels the need to speak up for Kitty in order to prevent her from being treated unfairly. Kitty, however, does not want an argument and settles with the cranberry juice. Although the programme features a number of reversed stereotypes regarding race, Kitty's passivity and inability to take action as opposed to Lois's feeling of responsibility are quite stereotypical representations of their respective racial identities.

The situation between Kitty and Lois is still tense when Lois tries to talk about good movies. Kitty mentions a French movie title which Lois does not know, again illustrating their different levels of education, but then they find out that they both like Kurt Russell and start a conversation. They seem to get along quite well, which is also suggested by their laughter heard in the background while Dewey is filmed. However, when Lois finds out that Kitty just wanted to check out Malcolm's family, she is upset and tries to argue with her. Lois starts to shout at Kitty, but she keeps smiling and nodding insecurely and tires to change the topic. Soon Lois finds out that it is impossible to argue with Kitty since she is constantly suppressing her feelings and her anger. Lois stares at her unbelievingly and tries to prove Kitty's inability to get emotional by licking her finger and touching Kitty's ear. Although Kitty flinches, she quickly regains her composure and smiles at Lois again.

Thus, Lois tries to convince Kitty that she has to yell sometimes in order to make others understand her. Although Kitty seems to be doubtful in the beginning due to Stevie's illness, she is later seen shouting at Stevie when he beats up Reese. In the beginning, Lois actually rushes towards the scene and is prepared to start shouting, but Kitty pushes herself in front of Lois and takes care of it. While Kitty is yelling, Lois is slightly smiling in the background, thinking that she helped Kitty to gain power. In the course of the shouting, Kitty

seems to get more and more aggressive, pushing Lois aside again, so that she can also shout at the waiter who did not bring her tea. Being in full flow, she also starts shouting at Lois and Abe.

The next shot is another example of how the audience is frequently misled by the television show. There is a table with nearly empty dessert plates, crumpled-up napkins and some tip money in the middle of the table. The audience's presumable assumption that dinner is already over is, however, immediately destroyed by Dewey taking away the money from the table which is actually a stranger's table rather than their own. Later, Dewey is also seen sitting under the dessert trolley, grabbing and eating pieces from the trolley. His mouth and shirt are full of food remains and stains. Thereby, the boys' ill manners and inappropriate behaviour is once again illustrated.

At the same time, Reese and Stevie are still playing the circle game while Malcolm is watching disapprovingly. Finally, Stevie gives up and leaves the table, wiping away some tears. When Reese wants to apologise, he looks into the fish tank and sees Stevie's hand forming a circle. He had just pretended to give up but is now grinning broadly which is revealed when the camera tilts and shows Stevie's face. Reese gapes and cannot believe that Stevie tricked him, but he still does not think that Stevie's punch would hurt. His expectations are disappointed when Stevie uses his wheelchair to haul off and Reese is knocked over by Stevie's punch. He falls over a serving trolley and lies on the floor, covered by salad and vegetables. Stevie pretends to want to help him, but forms a circle again and starts beating up Reese. There is rock music in the background undermining the violence and wildness of the action. Malcolm remains passive, but is happy to see some justice.

In the meantime, Hal and Abe are seen at the bar drinking Martinis. Whenever they chink glasses, Stevie is shown in the background between Hal and Abe in the same position where their glasses met before. His wheelchair is moving backwards because of Reese's stroke. Stevie touches his shoulder emphasising his pain. While Hal admits that they had to sneak away in order to get a drink, Abe pretends to be the boss in the house. He is, however, quickly

debunked by Hal who pretends to see Kitty. In the course of their conversation it turns out that Abe is not allowed to eat butter at home. He also tells Hal that he was raised by his grandmother and four spinster aunts. Thinking of his past and his being suppressed by his wife makes him so angry that he decides to eat some pieces of butter which are offered. Although Abe might be in a privileged position regarding class, this scene identifies him as an oppressed black man who is subdued by his wife.

When Malcolm's family leaves the restaurant, Reese is tending his bruised shoulder and Dewey is counting the money he stole from the tables, his shirt full of food stains. In the background, Kitty is still heard shouting at Abe. Hal's slightly confused walk suggests that he is drunk. Malcolm stops next to the fish tank to talk to the audience. He summarises the evening by stating, "Wow – interesting dinner. Stevie beat the crap out of Reese, his dad got drunk and his mum has gotten totally psycho. Oh my God – we're contagious!" Thus, he suggests that this is his impression of his family.

The subplot concerning Francis and his friends at the military school is introduced by military drum beats and an image of cadets standing in a circle. In the background there are flags of the U.S.A. and Alabama. Commandant Spangler, the head of the academy, is walking around in the circle and telling the students that he will be visited by his mother which is why he does not want to be disturbed by any trouble they cause. When he passes by Francis, he stops and directly addresses him for a while, suggesting that he is the usual suspect when it comes to troublemakers at the academy. As soon as Spangler has left, this suspicion is confirmed by Francis's decision that they should have a party. Although his friends are sceptical and appear to be slightly scared, they also seem to be interested when he mentions the presence of girls.

The next scene shows some girls standing in front of a gate. They are filmed from behind and there is a jaw harp in the background. The whole scene seems very strange as the girls are not talking to each other but only staring past the gate. The jaw harp even intensifies the awkwardness of the scene. Thereafter, their faces are filmed in close-up shots from left to right. Most of them are

gaping and one is chewing gum. The last girl in the row is playing the jaw harp, which adds a funny element to the scene. As Francis is marching towards the gate, the jaw harp is getting quieter and the girls start talking. While he is walking towards them, he is loosening his tie. Interestingly, the girls' faces are not lighted, while Francis's face is, although the shadow of the gate is seen in his face. The texture of this scene is a twist of filming conventions. Firstly, women are often represented "as an object of the masculine gaze and a producer of the voyeuristic power/pleasure" (Fiske, *Television Culture* 226), while this scene depicts Francis being stared at by numerous girls. The girls' gaze, which might suggest sexual desire, also indicates information on their morale and, consequently, status. Also lighting might be used in order to illustrate the girls' dubious dispositions.

Francis wants to invite the girls to a party and they are very excited about it. So Francis points at the girls he would like to invite. Curiously, the faces of the chosen girls are not seen clearly. The only girl that is shown clearly is the one who complains about Francis's degrading selection procedure. Her speaking up, however, prevents her from being invited to the party.

Back at Marlin Academy, girls are dancing to the song "Cotton Eye Joe" by Rednex. The song indicates the redneck origin of the girls which is further supported by their clothing and behaviour. While the girls are dancing and singing, the boys are staring at the girls. Francis's tie is loose and some of the buttons of his shirt are open, while all the other boys are wearing their uniforms properly. One of the girls chews tobacco, while another one opens a bottle of beer with her teeth. Francis's comrade Finley worries that they might be too loud so Francis asks them to be quieter. In the background, there is a spitting sound effect and Finley's shirt is covered by a brown substance which is the chewing tobacco of one of the girls. The girl shouts that she has now marked him and the others cheer.

The next scene at Marlin Academy shows the girls who are still singing and dancing. They are listening to the song "The Bad Touch" by The Bloodhound Gang. The song includes a number of sexual references supposedly hinting at

the girls' lower-class status. The radio is on the table and everything is full of popcorn. There is a breaking glass sound effect suggesting that the girls have destroyed something. Francis and the other boys are still just standing there and staring at the girls. Another cadet worries that they might be too loud, so Francis removes the CD-player, but they still sing along. There are more breaking glass sound effects in the background suggesting the mess and destruction the girls cause. Francis has to admit, "Hey – I promised you girls, not quality girls".

Further Southern American stereotypes come up when one of the girls is dancing with a gun in her hand and another girl is wearing a cowboy hat. They continue to make a mess, for example, when two of them knock over a vending machine and dance on it. Next to the knocked over vending machine, one of the girls is waving the Alabama flag.

With the girls causing so much destruction and trouble, Francis wants to ask for Spangler's help. Another cadet, Horton, however decides to put an end to their mess himself. While he walks towards the girls, the audience is only shown Francis and his friends watching the scene. However, the sound effects in the scene suggest what is happening to Horton. When he walks towards the girls, they cheer and there is a ripping cloth sound effect accompanied by cat fight sound effects. Horton is then seen being carried away by the girls while he is only wearing pants and an open shirt. When they are out of sight, there is another ripping cloth sound effect and Francis is hit by the cadet's pants and, recognising what he is carrying, quickly lets go of them. Underlining the precarious situation, this scene is not ended by a throwing ball sound effect, but by a door slamming sound effect.

In the next shot of Marlin Academy, the cadets are seen running out of a room, shouting. One of them is using a fire extinguisher. Some girls in the room scream, but they are not shown. The boys run to Spangler's room where Francis knocks on the door and the others line up behind him. They seem to be completely powerless as opposed to the girls. Spangler – who they believe to be talking to his mother – tells them to go away because he is spending time

with his aunt. Francis tells him about the party but only when he mentions the presence of local girls, Spangler opens the door. He is wearing a red dressing gown and there is some lipstick in his face suggesting that it is neither his mother nor his aunt visiting. He is very upset about the local girls and asks if they have killed anyone yet. Although nobody has been killed, one of the cadets explains that he saw a girl eat a raw chicken. From Spangler's room, a tantalising female voice confirms previous suspicions about his visitor. Although Finley's uniform is full of tobacco, Francis is still the only one who is not wearing his uniform properly. Spangler compares the girls to an oil fire which cannot be stopped but has to wear off in time, which reminds Francis of the oil fire set by one of the girls.

The final scene shot at Marlin Academy closely resembles stereotypical war scenes. There is destruction and dust everywhere, broken and crushed things are lying on the floor, and the pictures are crooked. Francis and Spangler are seen from behind, entering the room and looking at the destruction. Francis is carrying a handkerchief which he puts over his mouth in order not to breathe in the smoke. Leaning on a pillar in the room, Horton is sitting on the floor and crying. The audience is made to believe that he is still naked, although their view is blocked by his knees. His talk about the previous night also resembles the experiences of veterans, when he mentions that he saw terrible things, but does not explain what they are. Finally, he also states that he might be engaged.

In sum, the close analysis of this episode reveals the ambiguous racial status of Malcolm's family. While racial stereotypes are often reversed and Malcolm's family is frequently associated with stereotypically associated with non-whites such as poverty, violence, and rudeness, other characteristics clearly identify them as white. Their general behaviour and doubtful racial status, however, definitely prevent them from being identified as a traditional middle-class family. The sub-plot regarding Francis's party at Marlin Academy, however, sets Malcolm's family apart from other people who might be labelled "white trash". The girls at Francis's party are very clearly marked as "rednecks" and considering the destruction and emotional damage they cause, they might even

be more strongly associated with lower-class behaviour than Malcolm's family. Hence, the two different story lines in this episode allow opposing readings.

3.5.2. "New Neighbours" (02/13)

In another episode of the second season, "New Neighbours", Malcolm's family is also confronted with a new family. However, as opposed to the previous episode, both families are white.

The episode starts with the boys watching television. When Lois is hoovering the floor, the audience gets another glimpse of the family's living room which is full of toys lying on the table and the floor. Newspapers on the table in the background and a crooked lamp shade show how messy their home is. These early shots of the family's house are crucial for the rest of the episode's plot.

In general, the episode "New Neighbours" deals with an allegedly perfect family moving in next door. When Hal notices a moving van in front of the house next door, the whole family runs to the windows. Hal, Dewey, and Reese are filmed through the window as the watch the new family moving in, just like Malcolm and Lois who watch them through another window. Without having ever actually seen the neighbours, the audience's expectations about the family are formed when Hal mentions some of their belongings. When he notices an espresso maker and a leather couch he immediately assumes they might be rich. His comments about their belongings also identifies them as part of the middle-class consumer society. Based on the kind of neighbourhood they live in, however, Lois disagrees with Hal regarding their wealth.

A funny element is added when Malcolm tells the audience that the owners of the house have changed frequently for no apparent reason. An explanation is given immediately in a flashback that is introduced by a buzzing sound effect. The flashback shows how the family has continuously caused trouble for their neighbours. Reese and Malcolm are seen watching their neighbour trying to extinguish the fire of a burning bag in front of his door, another man is hit by Reese's baseball bat when he is practicing, and a woman's dog is seen being

killed by Hal's car. The flashback ends with a close-up of Malcolm who assumes that the house must be haunted. This scene illustrates how the family's perception of themselves is often distorted. Although they are sometimes aware of their social status, they also seem to believe that their racial identity marks them as white, and consequently, middle-class. Consistent with the images from the flashback, the other neighbours' aversion towards Malcolm's family is once again illustrated when Hal suggests they should visit the new neighbours soon in order to prevent the other people in the street from talking badly about them.

Subsequently, the Wilkersons rush to visit the neighbouring family. The song "We are Monkeys" by Travis introduces a scene shot in the neighbours' garden where Reese and a girl are playing with a ball in the pool, Malcolm, Dewey and a boy are sitting at the pool, Lois and a woman are talking sitting at a table and Hal and a man are standing next to the barbecue. Their garden and home seem to be the implementation of a perfect middle-class life. The image is only destroyed by the song chosen for the scene which might be interpreted in two different ways at that point. Firstly, the song might be directed at Malcolm's family who should recognise that they are not a perfect family now that they see what a real middle-class family is like. Secondly, the song might refer to the neighbouring family suggesting that they are not so perfect after all. In fact, however, the song might refer to the families' self-perceptions. Both families want to believe in their middle-class status and in the reality of their stereotypical suburban family life while the song is used to remind both of them of the constructed nature of that myth.

In the course of the episode, each of the members of Malcolm's family is brought face to face with a member of the neighbouring family. Malcolm and his counterpart, Josh, seem to get along quite well in the beginning. Similarly, Hal and the husband, Mike, quickly become friends when Mike shows how to flip burgers best. Lois's counterpart is Tina, the mother of the other family. Already Tina's appearance is quite different from Lois's. While Lois does not really care a lot about her appearance as long as she is clean, Tina has perfect red nails, she wears earrings, makeup, and a golden bracelet and her hair is styled nicely.

Apart from the appearance, food is also another important factor in setting the two women apart from each other. While the first shot of Tina and Lois shows some fresh food like salad and tomatoes in the background, the dinner Lois serves in a later scene is noticeably different. Throughout the episode, Tina is more easily identified as a housewife since there are no references to her job which additionally identifies her as the perfect middle-class wife. The Wilkersons failure to afford Lois's being a housewife prevents them from being identified as a traditional middle-class family.

Soon, however, various indicators reveal that the neighbours' allegedly perfect life is actually a sham, for example, when Tina asks Lois for a doctor who would give her a prescription without asking questions. Josh is shown to be a liar when he claims that Malcolm spit on his burger or tells Dewey that one of their garden gnomes ate a child in their previous hometown which he claims to be the reason why they had to move. Although he refuses to believe Josh in the beginning, thinking that the gnome looks rather friendly, the gnome becomes Dewey's counterpart in the story. Later, Josh also claims that Malcolm frequently stares at his mother's cleavage. Tina is wearing a deep plunging shirt. When Lois and Tina look at Malcolm aghast, he tries to explain, but is interrupted by Reese's screaming.

Reese's counterpart, Emily, seems to be an innocent little girl with blond hair and big eyes. However, when Reese is sitting at the pool and eating crisps, Emily is staring at him, but instead of taking some of the crisps Reese is offering her, Emily bites his arm and laughs. Reese forms a fist, but recognises he cannot hit a little girl. So he remains helpless. He is lying on the floor and clasping a stick while Emily is biting his leg. Lois wants to help Reese and places her hand on Emily's nose. Hence, both Malcolm and Reese are shown as powerless as opposed to their socio-economically advantaged counterparts.

At that point, the feud between the two families starts. Tina is angry at Lois because she does not want her to touch her daughter, but Lois says she felt the need to intervene indicating that Tina is not a good mother. Thus, Tina forbids her children to see Lois's children again. Although Lois admits that her children

are awful, she claims that they are still better than Tina's. The tenseness of the situation is illustrated when Lois and Tina are each filmed in a close-up, angrily squinting at each other. So are Reese and Emily, Malcolm and Josh – who is smiling slightly – and Dewey and the garden gnome. Thrilling background music makes the scene even more dramatic. Another shot shows the two families standing opposite each other. Reese is kneeling because of his hurting legs which makes him the same size as Emily. They all turn to the camera when they hear music from the garden shed where Hal and Mike are singing loudly.

While Hal and Mike continue to be friends, the situation between the other family members is getting worse. Josh keeps telling lies about Malcolm and Reese is being terrorised by Emily who is seen chasing after him laughing, while Reese is screaming.

Racial issues are directly addressed in this episode by adding a supposedly Hispanic gardener. He is firstly introduced when Lois comes out of the house and hears Tina shouting loudly. She turns to the right to see Tina shouting at the gardener. Her powerful position is emphasised by the fact that the gardener is kneeling while Tina is standing. Camera perspective also contributes to the impression of Hector as powerless. While Tine is filmed from a low-angle perspective, Hector – being in a kneeling position – is shown in a high-angle shot. Tina is wearing white trousers and a red top, looking good and neat, while Lois is wearing her supermarked uniform. The gardener's huge name tag reveals that his name is Hector. Lois is disgusted by Tina's racist preoccupation which is illustrated when Tina says to Hector, "God, you people drive me nuts with your laziness!" When she tells him what to do, she also uses the Spanish word "sol" suggesting Hector's Hispanic origin. Interestingly, Lois is somehow placed on the same level with Hector due to the fact that both of them are wearing a uniform. Lois's position as a member of the white majority, however, allows her to voice her opinion and stand in for Hector, while Hector is not given a voice at all.

Similar to scenes in other episodes, Lois again decides to stand up for non-white people assuming that they are not powerful enough to take a stand on

their own. Lois shouts at Tina not to talk to Hector in such a degrading way, but she disagrees, indicating that she pays him which allows her to talk to him in any way suitable for her. While they are fighting, Hector is seen in the background using the leaf blower to blow away an empty drinks can. Although Lois still shouts at Tina, she also shouts at Hector when he does not just pick up the can but waste a lot of time using the leaf blower.

Furthermore, Dewey keeps fighting their neighbours' garden gnome. He is seen running onto the neighbours' front lawn, hiding behind the wheel barrow, and throwing a stone at the gnome. The stone, however, bounces back and finally hits Dewey's own face.

During the family dinner, nearly all the members of the family are angry at their neighbours. Lois is portioning out mashed potatoes and arranging the food onto the plates in an aggressive way. She is mad that Tina believes to be better just because she has had cosmetic surgery and because she can afford expensive highlights. Interestingly, although Lois's statement seems to be about Tina's appearance, it is actually about money and power. Although Hal really likes Mike, when the others are squinting their eyes at him, he recognises that he does not have a chance. Thus, they start seeing each other secretly as it is suggested when they meet at night sitting by the fence, each of them in their own garden. Mike's knowledge of what is going on at Hal's work suggests that they are relatively close.

Reese has become terribly afraid of Emily. When he is lying in bed at night, he hears Emily laughing, so he picks up a baseball bat from the floor next to his bed. There are plasters all over his arms. He takes the bat to bed, but when he hears the laughter again, he startles and accidentally hits himself instead. Thus, both Reese and Dewey are harmed when they try to take action against members of the other family.

The scenario around Malcolm and Josh reaches a peak one evening when Malcolm is sitting in his room, doing his homework. He is filmed through the window. The room is very dark, but Malcolm is using a desk lamp for his

homework. Reese is sitting next to the window anxiously looking out of it. He is afraid of Emily because she knows that he is completely powerless since he cannot use violence. Malcolm tries to comfort him by saying, “Reese, she’s four. You’re bigger and smarter than…well, you’re bigger”. Hence, Reese is again reduced to his body rather than being recognised as a mental being. At that moment, Lois calls Malcolm’s name and he leaves the room.

When he enters the kitchen, he sees Lois and Hal standing opposite two police officers who want to talk to Malcolm. A shot at the police officers is accompanied by a suspense sound effect. After a shot at Malcolm, whose eyes are open in astonishment, the screen slowly goes black. The next image is an intimidating extreme close-up shot of the female police officer, a camera distance often used when villains are depicted (Fiske, *Television Culture* 7). When the camera is zooming out, the female police officer is seen to be surrounded by Dewey, Hal, Reese, Lois, and the other police officer. They are filmed from a low-angle perspective which gives them power and makes them seem even more intimidating and threatening. Malcolm is sitting at the other side of the table, his hands lying on the table. The fact that he is alone as compared to the group of others makes him seem weak and guilty. When Malcolm is accused of peeping, the female police officer is holding a note book and a pencil, which gives her even more authority. Her knowledge of things that others do not know about is her instrument of power.

In the course of this story line, Malcolm is presented walking down the road when various people are staring at him. When the people look at Malcolm, the audience takes his perspective being directly looked at by the by-standers. Their gaze follows the camera even as it is moving supporting the impression that Malcolm is walking. Additionally, the fact that they keep staring at him all the time makes them seem even more intimidating. When a woman and a child see Malcolm, the woman protectively places her hands on the child’s shoulder shielding him from Malcolm’s gaze. Malcolm tells the audience that people have treated him like that for days. When he arrives home, he finds Dewey skipping rope in the driveway. He is singing a nursery rhyme with a text about Malcolm’s peeping to the melody of “This old man”.

Lois's and Tina's feud reaches a peak when Lois is leaving the house hearing hedge clippers. She sees Hector cutting the hedge between their front lawn and Tina and Mike's. Lois asks Hector what he is doing. However, Hector does not say anything, but just stops using the hedge clippers and looks confused. Lois is wearing a blue blouse that looks very similar to her uniform. Thus, she is again visually identified as belonging to a lower class than Tina. There is a brief shot at Tina peeking out behind a curtain, but she quickly closes it when she sees Lois's gaze. Lois runs onto the front lawn and shouts at Tina that she is not allowed to cut their hedges. Meanwhile, Lois is surrounded by the squirrels, rabbits, and gnomes in Tina's front lawn. Suddenly, the lawn sprinkling is turned on and Lois is getting wet, so she takes away some of the garden gnomes and animals and goes back to the house where she puts the figures on a table. Dewey comes along reading a comic book when he sees the gnome, screams, and runs out.

Finally, Tina and Mike's perfect middle-class life is revealed to be fake when Malcolm and Reese decide to take revenge on them. Since Reese thinks that it is not possible to redeem their own reputation, they are trying to ruin Josh's by placing stolen goods under his window and calling the police. Malcolm and Reese are dressed like thieves, Reese wearing tights over his face and Malcolm wearing a black hat. They use a garbage can to jump over the fence and then they lie in a bush when they see Tina in the whirlpool with Hector. There is some light flickering which might remind the audience of scenes where a helicopter is looking for someone. Thus, the impression is created that something illegal and exciting is going on.

Tina's racist attitude is further emphasised when she says to Hector, "My God, you people are handsome", making Hector a physical human being rather than an intellectual one. This scene identifies Hector as a Latin lover, a stereotypical representation of sexualised non-whites (Benshoff & Griffin 64). When Hector recognises something behind Tina, he stares at it, gasping, but does not say a word. Again, he is not given a voice. Tina covers her breasts with her hands and starts shouting, just like Malcolm and Reese. Hector says "Dios mio!" (My

God!) which is the only time he actually speaks. His passiveness and his being unable to gain a voice further illustrate his lack of power. Interestingly, the only words he says are not even English, clearly marking him as non-American and non-white, and consequently, powerless. This lack of power is emphasised even further when Tina tries to get her towel and a chair falls into the pool, hitting Hector's head. He becomes numb and helpless while Tina is clasping his body. Different neighbours are seen peeking over their fences; Hal and Lois are also among them. Tina is trying to convince them that Hector is teaching her how to swim, but Lois smiles, knowing that her reputation is soiled.

This incident causes the family to move, which is introduced by a throwing sound effect and a shot at an orange removal van standing in front of Tina's house. Hal is standing next to a taxi, talking to Mike. Mike hands Hal a mix tape which additionally illustrates their close relationship. When the removal van leaves, it is seen crashing the gnome which was placed in front of the van's wheel by Dewey. Dewey runs there to jump on the last bits of the gnome – a representation of the shattered middle-class family values. In the background a broker is seen talking to a couple next to a "Sold" realty sign, indicating that the house has already been sold to someone else.

Meanwhile, Marlin Academy is visited by a national hero who is admired by Spangler. The scene is introduced by a throwing sound effect followed by military drum music. A low-angle camera shot shows students scrubbing and cleaning the floor on their knees while we see Spangler's feet as he is walking towards the camera. When he enters a room, all the cadets in the room immediately salute, although we still only see Spangler's feet. A close-up of Spangler's face further emphasises his intimidating character. This very first scene creates a highly powerful image of Spangler that shall be destroyed in later representations. The image of Spangler changes when he is seen performing the song "Candyman" with his cadets and his power further declines when he does not turn up to meet the army hero. Francis and his colleagues find out that he is drunk, lying on the sofa wearing a dressing gown and there is a nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the table. Spangler admits that he is nervous about meeting a hero because he has not achieved much in his life.

Consequently, he decides that he is only a worm and wriggles on the floor, losing the last of his power.

The versatility of meanings that are conveyed in the show is again shown when Francis checks on Spangler on the next day. Spangler is still wearing his dressing gown, lying on the floor with his feet on the table and the sofa. Francis tells Spangler that he drank whiskey with the army hero making Spangler happy. Thus, the audience is made to believe that Francis is actually a good guy, helping even Spangler who is not always nice to him. However, this impression is confused a moment later when the audience finds out that Francis took pictures of Spangler in a negligee and is waiting to get poster-size print outs.

Summarising, this episode strongly encourages a middle-class reading since it illustrates the high morale of the Wilkersons as opposed to other families. Both, the neighbouring family and Commandant Spangler are represented as powerful in the beginning, but those impressions are confounded in the end. While other episodes explicitly depict inappropriate behaviour on behalf of different members of Malcolm's family, this part is taken by another family in this episode. Although especially Malcolm is despised by his friends and neighbours in this episode, this is not caused by his wrongdoing, but by Josh's lies. Interestingly, this is also one of the episodes where Malcolm's family is not definitely associated with non-white stereotypes, but where they are rather identified as a socio-economically disadvantaged white middle-class family. The neighbouring family, then, is shown as particularly wealthy and consequently, the members of the family are portrayed as spoiled and corrupt.

3.5.3. "Forbidden Girlfriend" (04/06)

Generally, the episode "Forbidden Girlfriend" can be separated into four different story lines. While Lois and Hal cannot have sexual intercourse for a week, Malcolm starts dating a girl he is also tutoring. Two other sub-plots revolve around Reese finding Dewey's doppelganger and Francis who is now working at a ranch.

The episode starts with a cold open showing a supposedly normal middle-class family scenario where Hal and Lois are sitting on the sofa watching television and folding the laundry. They are watching the weather report but realise that something is wrong when they hear that it will continue raining while, actually, the sun is shining. Hal removes a video cassette from the recorder and when Lois switches on the actual television programme they hear a news presenter say, “And the three unidentified boys fled the scene on foot as hundreds of helpless spectators could only look on [?] in horror”. Hal and Lois leave the scene suggesting that they immediately assume their children are responsible for the news report. Hence, the image of a “normal” middle class family quickly turns into the idea of a family associated with crime and police action.

The first scene of the episode shows Malcolm walking towards a house complaining that his mother is making him tutor stupid children. When he rings the doorbell, though, the sitcom-experienced audience will probably assume that this student is different. A blond girl opens the door and greets Malcolm. He is still angry when looking at the camera, but smiles at the girl, Nicki. Later Malcolm and Nicki are sitting at her desk in front of a window; natural light is simulated, but Malcolm is slightly darker than Nicki, following a convention where women are usually presented lighter than men. When Nicki’s father comes in to check on them, he is represented as an intimidating character. He is generally filmed from a low-angle and he is wearing a dark green shirt stressing his past as a Vietnam soldier. Both of these characteristics make him even scarier and more threatening. Some scenes also show him in a close-up additionally emphasising his terrifying personality. When the father is gone, Malcolm kisses Nicki. The romantic music in the background is not followed by a whoosh sound effect this time, but the screen slowly turns black to introduce the next scene in order not to destroy the moment’s mood.

Malcolm and Nicki continue dating and are seen caressing each other at school. They are seen kissing in a park where there are a lot of kissing teenagers and as she turns away to grab her bag, Malcolm tells the audience how great his relationship with Nicki has become. When they kiss again, however, a hand

grasps Malcolm's shoulder and when he turns around, there is a close-up of Nicki's dad who is again filmed low-angle and wearing his army-coloured shirt. Malcolm is filmed from a high angle to create power relations and anxiety. When Nicki's dad has finished shouting at him, he forbids him to see Nicki again. The other couples in the background are all staring at Malcolm as he lies down on the table in a foetus position, whining. He is filmed from bird's eye view. Interestingly, this scene is not ended by a whoosh sound effect either, but rather by a slamming door sound effect which is often used in the programme to end dramatic scenes.

Although Malcolm is forbidden from seeing Nicki again by her father and his mother, they walk to school together the next day and start meeting secretly. This secrecy, however, leads to a lot of problems for Malcolm who has to jump into a bush in order not to be seen by Nicki's dad and gets hurt in the process. In another scene, for example, he has to lie down on the floor in the cinema so that he is not spotted by Nicki's dad. The audience sees him crawling through popcorn, chewing gum, empty cups and straws. In the next scene in Nicki's room, Nicki is fighting with her dad while Malcolm is hanging on the window sill outside the room. Malcolm starts to doubt their relationship since they are having so much trouble. However, when he talks about it with Nicki, he finds out that he really likes her and that it is worth it.

The plot regarding Lois and Hal starts with an establishing shot of their house. Introducing a plot or scene with an establishing shot of the characters' home is a common practice in many sitcoms. Examples include shows like *The Nanny* where scenes set in the house are often initiated in that way. When Hal and Lois's house is seen, there is romantic music in the background, more precisely the song "Show and Tell" by Al Wilson. In the next shot, Hal is sitting on the sofa. Although only his face and chest are shown in the beginning, the audience most likely immediately assumes that he is naked. In the background there is a radio, candles, and flowers. Hal's hands are in his face and he is singing and moving his hands along his body. As the shot zooms out, Hal's foot touches a bottle of wine or champagne in a wine cooler and he moves the bottle around in the cooler, still singing and moving his arms. Through the window in the

background we see Lois passing by, as Hal looks towards the window and his watch. Thus, the audience is made believe that Hal had planned to surprise Lois. When Lois enters the house with shopping bags, Hal jumps up and dances. Although it is a medium shot that does not show Hal's intimate body parts, it is assumed that he is completely naked. In the following shots this part of Hal's body is often covered by Lois's shopping bags. When Lois turns off the CD player and tells Hal that the boys will be home in ten minutes, he does not restrain from his plan to have sexual intercourse. However, Lois tells him that – due to an infection – they will not be able to have sexual intercourse for a week. First, Hal is upset and trying to find a solution, but finally, he decides to just mow the lawn. That he is clearly still bothered by the fact that he will not be able to have sexual intercourse becomes obvious when he nearly leaves the house without his clothes. Hence, it is finally also revealed that Hal is completely naked.

Hal and Lois's abstinence leads to a number of changes in the house. In the next morning, Hal is seen painting the cupboards in the kitchen, his doing accompanied by rather fast music that sounds like circus music and suggests his agility. There are packed lunches in the background and Hal is making crepes. The breakfast table is full of fresh fruits which are beautifully arranged. Lois comes in carrying flowers to decorate the house.

In another scene, there is a shot of the house as the grass on the front lawn is getting greener and the flowers are getting more colourful. Additionally, everything is getting lighter to establish an even more positive image of the house. Lois is sitting at the table working through taxes and bills. In the background we see that all the drawings from the fridge have gone and everything is tidy and clean. When Hal comes home he tells Lois that he might get a raise at work and Lois has found out that they overpaid taxes some years before and will now get back 800$. While Hal is repairing a drawer in the kitchen, Lois is taking the last of her pills, which allows them to have sexual intercourse again. They look at each other, but then quickly go back their respective work.

When Hal and Lois are in the bedroom that evening, Hal is using dental floss while Lois is putting on some lotion. Although it is known from other episodes that Hal is obsessed with his body and usually takes intensive care of it, showing this scene at a moment when they are not allowed to have sexual intercourse might suggest that they do not always spend so much time on their hygiene. Based on the fact that they have accomplished so many things after having quit sexual intercourse, they conclude successful people like Bill Gates never have sexual intercourse and they decide not to do so either. As soon as they lie in bed, however, they seem to have a hard time abstaining and so Hal decides to sleep in the car and Lois asks him to park it a couple of blocks away.

After another shot at the family's now beautiful house and front lawn, Lois is seen sitting at the table. Everything around her is very clean. Lighting is particularly interesting in that scene, because the house appears lighter in general, which makes it more likeable and additionally there is light coming from behind which falls on the top of Lois's head which usually makes people more likeable. Being filmed in such an angelic fashion might suggest that Lois has become a better person after resisting her animalistic desires. Lighting from above was traditionally used to emphasise the superiority of white women (Dyer 122). In the background there are no toys or clothes lying on the floor. Lois is obviously bored and deliberately spills tea which she wipes away while smiling. When she realises what she is doing, she rolls her eyes.

Their sexual abstinence finally ends when Hal enters the rather dark bedroom wearing a tool belt and carrying a magazine, which might be taken for a "Do it yourself" magazine based on the fact that Hal is talking about his installing a new carpet and his plans to insulate the attic. When he turns around, a red rose appears from below. Lois is lying in bed wearing a negligee and makeup and there are candles next to her and a rose on Hal's pillow. Lois is stroking her face with the rose in a sexy way. Although Hal refuses to give in to the temptation he starts to take off his clothes when Lois uses the rose to remove the strap of her negligee. At that moment, the romantic music from the background is getting louder. While Hal is undressing, Lois asks him to leave on

the tool belt and the scene is cut. Interestingly, as opposed to various traditional scenes, the wife is the initiator of sexual intercourse in that case.

Another shot at the house reveals how the front lawn is getting less and less tended. The grass is brown again and there are no flowers. The next shot in the kitchen shows toys and clothes lying on the floor. Lois is hugging Hal and kissing him while he is moving towards the door. He is trying to remember something about his work, but Lois suggests he should come home for lunch. They kiss intensely, moaning, and when Hal leaves the house and closes the door, smiling, the audience sees the door knocker falling off.

While the other episodes that have been dealt with so far might allow a reading that identifies the disadvantaged position of Malcolm's family as a result of external factors and inequalities, this episode clearly blames Hal and Lois's sexual desire for their social status. Both, Hal and Lois, do not only improve their home and their parenting skills, it is also indicated that they are more successful at work and would be in a better financial position if they were able to control their desires and sensuality.

Most interesting about this episode is that the absence of sexuality in Hal's and Lois's life is introduced at the very same moment when Malcolm is having a forbidden affair. Hal's and Lois's lives improve significantly when they quit having sex. As opposed to them, Malcolm – who has a kind of romantic relationship with Nicki – now has to endure pain and anxiety because of his affection for Nicki. However, neither Hal nor Malcolm seem to be able to resist. In terms of whiteness, there are two possible interpretations of these parallels. Firstly, sexuality might be interpreted as a general need of humans which cannot be suppressed easily. As opposed to this reading, however, sexuality might also be interpreted as an indicator of social class. While successful people like Abe and his friends do not have sexual intercourse very often, as it is mentioned in other episodes, Hal is not able to abstain. Since class is often seen as inherent in dominant ideologies, Malcolm, too, is not able to resist and rather lies on the dirty floor in the cinema.

Although there are apparent analogies between Malcolm's story line and the plot revolving around Hal and Lois, there is only one scene where these characters actually meet. When Malcolm comes home, Lois tells him not to see Nicki again. Her objection towards their relationship might be interpreted as her realisation of the negative side-effects of relationships and sexual intercourse. It is known from other episodes that Lois does not encourage Malcolm in his relationships but rather fears romance might endanger Malcolm's education and success in life.

A sub-plot concerning Dewey and Reese is introduced when Reese walks down the street and is splashed with water by a passing red cabriolet. Reese shouts at the car, but when the driver stops and comes back, Reese pretends not to have said anything. The driver tells him to beware and when the car moves away, Reese shouts that he would like to have such a car, too. Then his attention is caught by something and we see Dewey getting some money from an old woman. Another man appears and hands Dewey money for a job he did the day before. Reese cannot believe that Dewey is getting so much money. When Dewey has the money, he is wearing a nice blue shirt and he is standing in the light as opposed to Reese.

When Dewey gets more money from another man, Reese finds out that there is a boy who looks like Dewey who has done all the jobs for the people. When he appears in the background while Reese is thinking about Dewey's getting money for no reason, he is standing under the U.S. American flag, which might indicate or mock the American spirit of community work and neighbourly help. Back in the boys' room at home, Reese tells Dewey about his lookalike and suggests that Dewey is this boy's evil twin. On the wall in the background there is a road sign "Reserved parking" which might have been stolen by the boys. When they get up, another road sign is shown, saying "Packers". These road signs further emphasise the boys' reckless behaviour.

Trying to make use of Dewey's lookalike, Reese blackmails Dewey into filling the red cabriolet with water and cement. The audience sees a hand ringing a doorbell and the car owner coming out of the house spotting Dewey standing on

his car with a water hose. When the car owner runs out of the house and Dewey runs away, a disguised Reese is standing on the pavement shouting the name and address of Dewey's lookalike. Reese is wearing a cap, sunglasses, a fake moustache, a trench coat and carrying a pipe, mocking the stereotypical representations of detectives in television and film. The next scene shows how the car owner talks to the police identifying Dewey's lookalike as the perpetrator. Reese is watching the scene from behind a tree laughing about the success of his scheme.

Interestingly, this is one of the few of Reese's misdeeds that is actually seen being done on television. Usually, many of his plots and schemes are only hinted at rather than being filmed. There are two reasons why this episode allows us to actually witness one of Reese's schemes. Firstly, the person who is the victim of the plot is not made very likeable. Although the audience does not get substantial information on him, he appears to be arrogant and wild, listening to rock music in his car. He also splashes Reese with water and intimidates him instead of apologising. Secondly, Reese is getting punished for his scheme by the car owner beating him up. The scene when the car owner takes revenge is a very good example of how the show continuously hints at violence very explicitly without actually showing it. Reese and the car owner are in the boys' room and the camera makes the audience nearly take the position of Reese. So when the car owner hauls off and moves his fist towards Reese, he actually moves it towards the camera, and respectively, the audience. However, although the audience hears a punch sound effect, a completely different image is immediately associated with that sound when we see Hal using a knee kicker installing a new carpet.

Additionally, another sub-plot deals with Francis and his life as a cowboy. In the beginning, Francis is introduced as a cowboy. He is putting up a fence in an idyllic landscape while wearing a cowboy hat, jeans, and gloves. Horses are neighing and two cowboys arrive on their horses. In the background there is Francis's truck with straw on it. The cowboys do not want Francis to put up a fence and make fun of him, because he is not a real cowboy, but only works at a kind of hotel. Their insults are encouraged when Francis's cell phone rings

and his ring tone is the children's song "This old man". On the phone, Francis talks about lavender soap, potpourri, and housekeeping which further encourages the cowboys' impression of Francis and they laugh at him.

In another scene where Francis is trying to put up the fence again, his German boss, Otto, is also there. He is wearing a cowboy hat and boots, too, but otherwise he only wears rather tight bathing trunks, a watch and a necklace. Otto is clearly marked as non-white due to his accent and his skin colour which is very red from tanning. Otto's sunburnt body also reveals that he usually wears string thongs, which might indicate his non-American attitude towards sexuality.

The sub-plot is resolved at a pirate party in Otto's hotel when the two cowboys come in carrying a fence. The song "Limbo dance" immediately stops as the cowboy tosses the fence to the floor. The cowboy and Otto start an argument and Otto asks Gretchen to fetch his Luger gun. In order to prevent a fight, Francis suggests a gate as a compromise and in the next scene Otto and the cowboys are seen drinking together, singing the song "Drunken Sailor" while everybody is wearing pirate hats.

All in all, this episode encourages a white-trash reading of the programme. Most obviously, Hal's, Lois's and Malcolm's inability to resist their sexual desires in spite of the included disadvantages and dangers is a stereotypically non-white characteristic that prevents the family from being realised as truly white. Blaming sexuality for their social deprivation also links class to an innate behaviour which marks non-whites as a distinct "race". Reese, too, is identified as white trash when he decides to take revenge on the owner of the sports car. His lower-class status is suggested when he is envious of the man's car and lifestyle. Lacking the power to change his own position and status, Reese decides to destroy the man's car, possibly making him responsible of Reese's disadvantaged position. In an oppositional reading, though, the car owner might be representative of other members of higher classes who are accused of being the cause of the discrimination against poor whites. Lastly, Francis's story line, though subordinate and short, is characteristic of the whole family's status.

Superficially, he looks like a cowboy, but actually he does not live up to the idea of cowboys. The cowboy, as the hero of Western films, is a representation of an idealised white man (Dyer 34), but Francis fails to comply with the appropriate requirements, for example, by being married to a Native American woman, which was stereotypically characteristic for Western villains (Dyer 35). Hence, his failure to meet the demands of being a cowboy might be representative of the whole family's failure to be truly white.

3.5.4. "Standee" (06/03)

"Standee" is one of the episodes which most clearly reveals how Malcolm's family is portrayed as a white trash family. The episode is structured into two main story lines, which shall be described and analysed hereinafter.

The cold open of this episode starts in the boys' room when Dewey enters and sees Reese, who is standing in the room, obviously waiting for him. On the wall in the background, there is a sign from a bus stop suggesting that the boys might have stolen it from there. Reese is trying to make Dewey open one of the drawers with a crab inside, but Dewey pretends to be a fool until Reese opens the drawer himself and is bitten by the crab. Although not related to the content of the episode, this particular scene does indeed refer to the white trash image of the family, or more precisely Reese's status as a white trash thug. To begin with, the scene hints at the boys' criminal activity by depicting apparently stolen road signs in their room. Furthermore, violence is seen as an ordinary part of their daily lives. Secondly, Reese is portrayed as lacking intelligence since his younger brother, Dewey, is easily able to make him blunder into his own trap.

Identifying Malcolm's family as a white trash family is also one of the main motifs of the different story lines in this episode. The first story line of the episode revolves around Lois and Malcolm who are arguing after an advertisement Lois believes to be racist and offensive has been placed at the store where both of them work. The story line starts in Lois's bedroom where she is looking in the mirror and smiling. Malcolm, who is also standing in the bedroom, turns to the camera and tells the audience that Lois has just got her

job back after begging her boss to employ her again. Lois is fixing her earrings and still smiling which might imply that she is happy to finally have her job back although she will be on probation for some time.

While Lois is working at the cash desk and talking to a customer, her co-worker Craig appears and attaches a button saying “Help me learn” onto Lois’s shirt. On Craig’s shirt there is still a spot where he used to wear the button himself confirming his statement that he has been on probation frequently. Craig starts talking about different codes and numbers while Lois is trying to ignore him and continue working, but due to his talk, she gets a number wrong and has to call for help. In the background, Malcolm is entering from the right carrying a key. Lois moves to the side and they avoid each other’s gaze when Malcolm opens the till. Both of them seem to feel uncomfortable with the twisted power relations they experience at work. Similar to most of the scene shot at the store, there is a special supermarket music in the background which is similar to the music often used in scenes shot in elevators.

When the customer has left, Lois looks at something and there is an eye-line match shot (Villarejo 47) revealing how Craig puts up an advertisement promoting a brand of malt liquor called “Sm-o-o-o-th”. The advertisement shows a black man who is wearing a dirty uniform and carrying a mop in his left hand which might suggest that he is working as a janitor. In his other hand, he is holding a six-pack of malt liquor. The man is laughing and wearing a name tag saying “Slappy”. Lois is immediately offended by the advertisement which represents a variety of different stereotypes regarding black people. Representing the black man as a janitor might suggest his low level of education and class affiliation. According to his social status and race, he is also associated with alcohol carrying and promoting beer. The name “Slappy” is an expression for a foolish person as revealed by the Urban Dictionary (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slappy) and it might additionally imply violence if it is understood as deriving from the word “slap”. Being offended by this stereotypical representation, Lois decides to take the advertisement down. In the next scene at the supermarket, though, Lois watches Malcolm put it up again and confronts him. Malcolm, however, refuses

to take it down and when he turns around and starts walking away, the supermarket music changes to a kind of drumroll introducing their argument. While Malcolm is wearing a satisfied look when he turns around, that look quickly changes into an anxious one while Lois watches him with an indignant expression.

From then on, Lois tries to manipulate Malcolm into despising the picture, too. Firstly, Lois is working at the cash desk and watching Malcolm arranging plush toys on a shelf when she makes another mistake and needs Malcolm to come to her cash desk. Her look and her pronunciation of the word “Oops” when entering the wrong number clearly suggest that her fault was intended. When Malcolm comes to the cash desk, he recognises a photo showing him wearing a hula skirt, a coconut bra, a pineapple on his head, and flower garlands. Malcolm is upset and confused when a customer thinks Malcolm is homosexual and gives him her son’s telephone number with a wink. The very next scene, however, starts with a close-up of the picture as it is ripped off and reveals the Lucky Aide logo. Malcolm is standing at the cash desk holding a big folder, pointing his finger at the text and quoting a part where personal items are not allowed at the store. Mr Crechale, their boss, is standing behind Malcolm and watching everything while other employees are putting their personal items into boxes. Shirley, another co-worker, is putting a crucifix into a box saying “I’m sorry, God. You’re against the rules here” and Craig is crying standing in front of three boxes full of dolls, snowballs, and other toys. Mr Crechale is again seen in the background observing the employees.

Lois's and Malcolm’s boss, Mr Crechale, is an interesting character because his orders are continuously carried out without him saying anything in the whole episode. He always wears a shirt, a tie, and glasses, which make him look strict and superior to the other workers who have to wear uniforms. Holding a folder and a pen most of the time, the viewer gets the impression that he is continuously observing his employees and taking notes which undermines his powerful position in the store. Being humiliated by her boss and customers and not being able to do anything about it without losing her job, Lois might feel

responsible to prevent others from getting into such a situation which explains her attempts to do something about the insulting advertisement.

Finally, Lois tries to make Malcolm understand her position by putting up the advertisement in front of the table where Hal and his black friends are playing poker. Her assumption that she is able to tell how black people feel about the advertisement, however, clearly marks her as a white person. Similarly, her feeling of responsibility for the rights of black people makes her act in a racist way herself by denying black people the ability to stand up for themselves. There is complete silence promoting the tension that arises when Lois asks Malcolm to explain why he put that advertisement up at the store. While the audience is waiting for the black guys' reaction, typical waiting music encourages the suspense. However, Hal's friends only make fun of Lois and Malcolm and their relationship to racial stereotypes. Even Hal joins in, trying to be a member of the group, who are talking about white people's flat bottoms and imitating their stereotypical dance moves. The fact that Hal's black friends are able to make fun of the advertisement and of Lois's attitude towards racism also hints at their privileged position at Hal's house. Considering the status of Hal's family, his black friends are to a certain extent portrayed as superior to him which allows them to react to the advertisement in that way. Additionally, their class prevents them from identifying with the black person from the advertisement and makes them regard it as ridiculous rather than insulting.

A particularly funny moment is created when Abe, who had previously spilled his beer, comes back from the kitchen with a mop in his hand. After picking up his can he stands next to Slappy and the men start laughing. By using this situation in order to make additional fun of Lois, Abe and the other black men are given even more power and clearly show that racism is not an appropriate topic for a white woman like Lois. Malcolm and Lois continue fighting and even more tension is created when it is revealed that Lois thinks Hal is being stupid about the garbage. However, like many emotionally extremely tense situations, this one is resolved by a joke. Abe asks them to stop fighting so that they can continue to play cards which tells the others that he might win and they drop out of the game.

At last, when Malcolm puts up the advertisement again, Lois decides to take it down. Shirley confronts her and thanks her for taking it down. It is assumed that Shirley, too, finds it offensive, but it turns out that she thinks it attracts black customers and they do not have enough people to observe them and prevent them from stealing. Thus, Shirley is identified as a racist woman who might even believe the stereotypes represented by Slappy to be true. Given their equal racial status, Shirley also assumes that Lois shares her attitude towards race. Interestingly, Shirley was presented as a religious woman earlier in that episode when she had to remove her crucifix from her cash desk, which might suggest the church's conservatism. The supermarket music changes into a kind of music that suggests thinking when Lois is filmed. Finally, she smiles and puts Slappy back. As soon as Lois tells Malcolm that she wants Slappy to stay, however, Malcolm suddenly finds Slappy extremely offensive, which is illustrated when he tells the audience,

> Wow, now all I want to do is take it down. I mean, look at this thing! It's horribly offensive! What year are we living in? His name is Slappy, for God's sakes! But if I take it down know, she'll think I'm only doing it to be contrary. Am I only doing it to be contrary?

The last scene at the supermarket shows how Malcolm is unable to decide what he really thinks. So he flips a coin, but the coin stops moving without flipping. Looking into the camera, Malcolm looks as if he cannot believe it. Malcolm's inability to define his own feelings might emphasise the fact that it is actually none of his business.

In this story line, Lois is clearly identified as white in that she believes her privileged white position allows her to speak up for passive and powerless non-whites who do not have a voice of their own. This behaviour might also be linked to the phenomenon of white guilt. As a white woman, Lois also believes in the validity of her opinions, ideas and moral values. Nevertheless, in spite of her privileged racial position, Lois is also shown as powerless due her being on probation. She is oppressed by institutions, rules, and her boss which might be another reason for her trying to stand up for mistreated others.

Malcolm is also presented as stereotypically white, but in another way. Firstly, he is seen struggling not to be racist although he does not actually know what is considered as racist by non-whites. Thereby the white problem of trying so hard not to be racist that the behaviour might actually be interpreted as racist is addressed. On the other hand, Malcolm is also particularly shown as white with regard to his attitude towards his job and money. Lois accuses him of valuing money more than morale and he is depicted as following rules and orders without thinking about the consequences. Thus, Malcolm is depicted as the representation of American materialism and capitalism, a recurring motif in American culture (Sieper 160).

Yet another perspective of whiteness is offered by Craig who seems to be entirely ignorant and indifferent about racial issues. Similar to Malcolm's allegedly capitalist attitude, he is shown to be interested in the profit of the supermarket when he mentions that Slappy has increased the sales of malt liquor. However, Craig's insensitivity towards racial issues differs from Malcolm's struggle to find out about his true feelings. As opposed to Craig, Malcolm certainly occupies himself with different considerations regarding the advertisement and struggles to find out how to act politically correct.

Although a majority of viewers might identify with Lois's position regarding the insulting portrayal of a black men in the malt liquor advertisement, Malcolm's indecision allows alternative interpretations and readings. Since it is Malcolm who the audience is supposed to identify with, he is not allowed to take a strong stand in order not to threaten the multiplicity of meanings needed for attracting a broad range of different viewers. If the television programme made Malcolm take a position, not every viewer might be able to support him. Hence, their interest in the programme might decrease.

The second story line deals with Hal's argument with a dustman. Just like the other story line, this one also starts in the bedroom when Hal runs in and drags Lois to the kitchen to show her a cat habitat and tries to convince her to get cats. Lois does not say anything but her expression seems annoyed. Interestingly, light falls on her face as if it comes through the window which

gives her expression even more power than the one of Hal who is not specifically lighted in this scene. Accordingly, the next scene shows Hal dragging the cat habitat towards the dustbins in front of the house. Dewey is also standing outside the house and the viewer is again confronted with the Wilkersons' brown front lawn as compared to the green ones of the other neighbours. Hal leaves a six-pack of beer for the dustman so that he takes the cat habitat despite its size. His assumption that the dustman could be bribed with beer is an indication of his prejudices and belief in stereotypes. Hal is sure that the dustman, being a lower-class worker, will enjoy a free six-pack of beer. Thus, also the audience's expectation of the dustman is influenced and formed. He is sorry that he has to get rid of the cat habitat and says, "You're the only thing I've ever been proud of" while Dewey is standing next to him which shows how Dewey is continuously ignored and underappreciated by his parents. In the background, there are birds twittering very quietly.

The next scene is a close-up of the cat habitat which slowly reveals Hal and Dewey as they are standing behind it. The dustman apparently refused to take it but did take the beer. Hal is angry and chases away some cats from the habitat. The next scene involving this conflict shows the refuse-collecting vehicle which is emptying one of the dustbins in front of Hal's house. Accompanied by the sounds of the crane carrying the dustbin there is a shot of the house and Hal running out of it, waving his hands. He is wearing shirt, tie, and a golden watch. Whenever Hal is talking to the dustman he is dressed in such a fashion as opposed to the green pullover he wears in the beginning and in other scenes in which the dustman is not present. Interestingly, his green sweater is similar to the green colour of the dustbin and the dustman's uniform. As soon as the dustman gets out of his truck the audience hears opera music which assumedly comes from the truck's radio. The opera music from the truck contradicts both Hal's and the audience's expectations of the dustman since it suggests a certain level of education. The dustman is wearing a green uniform with a nametag saying "Jerry".

When they get into an argument, Hal wonders why the dustman took the beer, but left the cat habitat behind. Consequently, Hal's feeling of white superiority is

challenged when a supposedly lower-class dustman explains why Hal's family owes him an apology:

> Because you people are pigs. You don't even use half the stuff you throw out. And nine months after your wife leaves three birth control pills in the pack, here comes the disposable diapers again. Talk about screwed up priorities: You guys buy those generic diapers that break apart in the can, yet I know that someone can afford a Toblerone every Friday.

Although Hal is wearing a suit as opposed to the dustman's uniform, social hierarchies are twisted by Jerry's statement who explicitly refers to the family's lower-class status when mentioning their number of children, a clear signifier of lower-class.

While Hal is trying to reason with the dustman, Reese enters from the right with a plastic bag in his hands that is assumedly full of trash. Shouting "Hey Oscar, here's your lunch!", Reese throws the bag at Jerry. This scene implies Reese's feeling of superiority towards the dustman and his disrespect for the man's job. Caused by Reese's insult, Jerry gets angry, throws the bag at Hal's feet and kicks the dustbins. Calling Jerry "Oscar" is a reference to a character from *Sesame Street* who lives in a dustbin. Thus, Reese is not only identified as white by his unjustified feeling of superiority, but also by a reference to an American television series. Hence, the audience might create a correlation between Reese's behaviour and his representation as stereotypically white and American.

When Hal decides to take revenge on the dustman, though, the audience finds out that the dustman lives in a nice house in a middle-class neighbourhood. The scene shows Hal sitting in the car in front of Jerry's house while Jerry is watching television. Hal is looking suspicious since his face is partly covered by his jacket and the scene is quite dark. The background music produced by a digeridoo and sounds exciting and fast which suggests the tension of the situation. The audience also hears the car's engine in the background. Through the window, which is above a beautiful rose garden, Hal sees Jerry leave the room which is when Hal gets out of the car and empties a bag of garbage onto the man's front lawn. This action emphasises Hal's reluctance to accept his own

lower-class status and admit the dustman's superiority. The scene ends with a close-up of Hal who is smiling as he drives away, fantasising that he has now challenged the dustman's middle-class status.

In the next morning, Hal is standing in front of the house gaping. The next shot filming him from the other side reveals that the family's front lawn is full of garbage so that the house is nearly fully covered in garbage. In the background, the audience hears the voices of ravens or crows. Interestingly, this is the only scene that is not ended by a throwing sound effect but by the sound of a smashing door. In the next shot Lois is seen in the same fashion as Hal in the previous shot. She is wearing a dressing gown and looking at the pile of trash, agape. The scene is accompanied by different sound effects like the buzzing of flies and the twittering of seagulls. Hal comes out of the house and they are standing in front of the pile of garbage while he explains that he has to continue fighting in order to prevent them from living in "garbage of the spirit". Lois does not respond at all, but just makes Hal stop talking and goes back into the house.

Claiming that he is fighting the dustman for moral principles also identifies Hal as white. Analogous to Lois, he believes in the truth and justness of his own principles, an indicator of whiteness, or more precisely, "Americanness" (Babb, *The More Things Change* 18). Hal's attempt to transfer the argument with the dustman into a moral fight again highlights how he is desperately trying to ignore his social status and delude himself. By accepting the social status of his family he would actually also admit his failure of achieving the American Dream and his failure to provide for his own family. Another indicator of that refusal is his use of air freshener. By applying air freshener onto the pile of garbage, Hal is trying to improve the situation and his general position.

Hal's and Lois's attempts at standing up for their principles might be referred to in the title of the episode, "Standee". Both of them try to stand up for their principles, assuming that their morale and values are superior to those of others. Additionally, the title of the episode is also clearly related to the standing advertisement showing Slappy who is the only one who cannot support his own cause. Interestingly, there are various parallels between Jerry and Slappy since

both of them are linked to stereotypically lower-class cleaning jobs and similarly they are both somehow associated with beer. Additionally, there are other characteristics which apply to these two characters since they are wearing a uniform and a nametag. Even more striking, however, are the differences between the two characters. While Slappy seems to correspond to stereotypes associated with lower-class workers or non-whites, Jerry is shown as powerful and superior. Furthermore, Jerry is able to assert himself in the fight against Hal, while Slappy – being made of cardboard – is denied any power and has to rely on a white woman in order to take a stand for him. Hence, the episode clearly features white power as opposed to black inactivity and weakness.

Dewey's response to the pile of garbage is particularly remarkable. As it can be seen in previous episodes, Dewey often likes to delude himself and pretend things are better than they really are. Accordingly, when Dewey looks out of the window and discovers that everything is covered by garbage, there is a close-up at his face and the audience sees him smiling while hearing the song "Sleigh Ride". Pretending that the garbage is snow, Dewey puts on warm clothes and starts to slide down the pile of trash on a snow disc, build a snow man, throw snow balls, and create snow angels. Dewey does not seem to mind the garbage and in various scenes we also see him wear old clothes from the pile of garbage. Comparing garbage to snow is an unambiguous symbol of white trash. Hence, when Dewey gets caught in the garbage, this also suggests how he is captured in a certain social class.

When Hal plays poker with his friends at his house, they all make jokes because of the pile of garbage in front of the house. As it is known from other episodes, Hal's friends are professionals who often look down on him and his lack of money and power. Thus, Hal is seen as struggling to be a part of the group by behaving stereotypically black. As soon as Lois is laughed at rather than him after putting up the malt liquor advertisement, Hal gains power by pretending to be a member of the group.

Finally, Hal decides to do something about the pile of garbage and asks Reese for help. The scene mimics a secret meeting by a tree as it is often shown in

movies about Secret Service officers or criminals. In the beginning, they do not even look at each other which also imitates this filmic fashion. In the next scene, the audience sees a refuse-collecting vehicle driving down the street and hear Hal talking. He seems very nervous and is trying to convince himself that he is not stealing but only borrowing the truck, while Reese is sitting on the passenger's seat smiling and looking satisfied. Finally, Reese and Hal try to fill the dustbins with the garbage and empty them using the crane of the lorry. However, Reese fails to operate the levers in the lorry and accidentally tears out the hydrant. Operating another lever, Reese slightly moves the vehicle which hits another car and turns on the car's alarm. There are many sounds from the lorry, the car, and the water which suggest the high tension and hopelessness of the situation. This scene reinforces the impression of the dustman's privileged status. Reese, who believes to be superior to the dustman, is not capable of handling the refuse-collecting vehicle's complicated levers.

Within the whole episode, Hal's immaturity is frequently stressed, for example, when he begs Lois to get a cat. These scenes are specially striking when opposed to Dewey who often acts more responsibly than Hal. Hence, their roles in the family seem to be twisted regarding age-appropriate behaviour. This immaturity might encourage the audience to regard Hal as non-white, since maturity is usually one of the axes by which white power is exerted (Fiske, *Media Matters* 45). Furthermore, maturity is usually strongly associated with masculinity (Fiske, *Television Culture* 200); therefore, the distorted gender roles in the family are again illustrated. The audience is, for example, encouraged to recognise Hal's childish behaviour when he runs away after stealing the refuse-collecting vehicle and damaging the hydrant. While he acts foolishly, Dewey is the one who tells him that running away will not improve the situation.

This interpretation is further encouraged by the last scene showing Jerry sitting at a table in front of the house. There is a white table cloth and a white vase with a red rose. He is eating steak and Hal is pouring red wine into his glass. Steak and wine here clearly serve as a metaphor for upper-class meals. The audience hears classical music and flies buzzing. Hal is again wearing his shirt, tie, and golden watch, but he is also carrying a tea cloth. Jerry agrees to take

away two cans of garbage that day. The fact that Jerry does not meet Hal’s eyes, but only gestures that he would take away two cans that day emphasises Hal’s inferiority.

Summarising, this episode identifies all the members of the family as particularly white, even if they are denied white privileges. Their lower-class status is clearly stressed by combining the garbage in the garden with “snow” as a representation of whiteness. Additionally, Hal’s inferiority to the dustman and Lois’s oppression at work suggest the family’s class status and lack of power.

4. Conclusion

Although it is appreciated that audiences actively produce meanings from television texts, dominant ideologies and preferred readings are present in contemporary programmes. Since many representations, codes, and techniques have become clichéd, dominant ideologies might even have become more subtle. Despite the fact that representations and story lines are usually ambiguous in order to attract a large audience, television is indeed capable of drawing the audience's attention to certain topics by featuring problems that are of common interest to people around the world. Television is a crucial part of current culture and contemporary beliefs and shapes its audience's impressions of and attitudes towards certain topics. Thus, the role of television as a political instrument or, at least, as an influential factor in political discourses, must not be miscalculated (Fiske, *Media Matters* 24-25). Consequently, the viewers' attitudes towards gender, race, and class, are influenced, for example, by what television represents as typical female clothing or typical middle-class housing (Kellner 7).

Similarly important is the study of whiteness in order to discard its invisibility. Hence, this study has tried to find out how whiteness is portrayed in contemporary sitcoms, using the example of *Malcolm in the Middle*. Although various readings of the television programme are possible, the most prominent one is the identification of the family as white trash. Interestingly, the sitcom follows the convention of associating a white trash family with traditionally non-white stereotypes, including hyper-sexualisation, rudeness, criminality, aggression, and violence: If the Huxtable family in *The Cosby Show* is white in all but skin colour (Jhally & Lewis qtd. in Mills 106), the opposite is true for the Wilkerson family in *Malcolm in the Middle.* While the black family in *The Cosby Show* represents a conservative nuclear family based on white family values (Fiske, *Media Matters* 114), Malcolm's family is identified as non-white due to their social status as a white-trash family. Hence, even if they are liked to non-white stereotypes, they are still portrayed as white, for example, when concepts like white guilt or white superiority determine their actions, as it is shown in the close analysis of "Standee" (06/03).

The close analysis has also exposed an oppositional reading which blames others for the socio-economically disadvantaged position of the family. This kind of reading shows Malcolm's family as struggling to achieve a middle-class standard of living while the corruption of other classes, especially the upper-class, prevents them from doing so. This reading is encouraged by representations of the family as morally superior to others, particularly as opposed to wealthy people or members of the upper-class. Malcolm's high level of intelligence and his ambition also promote this kind of reading, since he can be considered as an upstart and a possibility for the family to climb the social ladder. Hence, Malcolm can be regarded as the embodiment of the American Dream. Interestingly enough, Malcolm is also the character who the audience is believed to identify with which prevents the viewers from having to identify with members of the family who are identified as "white trash".

While this ambiguity invites the viewers to form their own opinion of the family, both of these readings might actually serve dominant ideologies since they celebrate the American middle-class as the bearer of American values and ideals. Identifying the family as white trash, as is suggested by the episode "Standee" (06/03), emphasises their incapability of living a middle-class life due to their non-white behaviour. It is suggested that the family would be able to live a better life if they succeeded in adopting stereotypically white characteristics, like etiquette or control of sensuality and sexuality. Hence, the family fails to achieve the American Dream due to their laziness and lack of ambition.

In contrast, the portrayal of wealthy people as spoiled, arrogant, and corrupt might contribute to an interpretation of the family as belonging to a kind of middle-class where members cannot afford a middle-class lifestyle. Their moral principles and the corruption of and discrimination by authorities and other classes prevent Malcolm's family from achieving the American Dream. Hence, it is pointed out that – although rude and simple – Malcolm's family is entitled to live a middle-class life due to their racial status.

Summarising, the close analysis of four episodes has shown how a middle-class reading as well as a white-trash reading of the show might both serve dominant ideologies by drawing on stereotypes about the American middle-class and the American Dream. However, although different stereotypes regarding the family's race and class could be identified, the close analysis cannot predict how these stereotypes will be interpreted by the viewers. Most viewers will probably not adopt an unadulterated version of either white-trash or middle-class reading, but interpret the programme according to their own race, status, attitudes, and values. Depending on the viewers' subject positions and viewing habits, various readings and interpretations of the programme *Malcolm in the Middle* might occur.

In conclusion, this study has shown how different ideas of whiteness and race are transmitted via television and how these are used to serve dominant ideologies. Although polysemic readings are offered, most of them do in some way contribute to the prevalence of dominant ideologies and support stereotypical understandings of whiteness, race, and class. Consequently, this study illustrates the importance of studying how whiteness is represented on television for the sake of making the concepts and techniques of whiteness visible to television audiences.

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6. Index

7. Abstract

Television influences contemporary opinions and discourses by transmitting different ideologies. Hence, television is one of the means by which dominant ideologies regarding race and ethnicities, gender roles, and classes and social mobility are conveyed and encouraged. Among those discourses, whiteness is one of the most prominent and most dangerous ones considering that it is broadcasted in a specifically subtle way. Since whiteness is often assumed as "standard", it usually remains invisible and unchallenged.

Consequently, whiteness studies try to expose how values and ideologies regarding whiteness are conveyed and to make these insights accessible to others. The aim of this thesis, hence, is to make discourses regarding whiteness visible.

Using the television programme *Malcolm in the Middle* as an example, this thesis attempts to show how whiteness is represented on television and how discourses confirming white power are subtly fostered by television. Before a close analysis of four episodes, two possible readings are illustrated which either identify Malcolm's family as "white trash" by associating them with non-white stereotypes or as a middle-class family who are prevented from achieving the American Dream by social inequalities and the corruption of other classes.

The close analysis of four different episodes shows that both of these readings might indeed promote dominant ideologies. However, by polysemy and ambiguity alternative readings are also possible depending on the viewer's racial identification, class, interests, and other external factors.

8. Zusammenfassung (German summary)

Durch die Übermittlung verschiedener Ideologien bestimmt und beeinflusst das Fernsehen gängige Meinungen und Diskurse und ist bestrebt, vorherrschende Weltanschauungen bezüglich Rassen und Ethnien, Geschlechterrollen und sozialer Zugehörigkeit zu bestärken. Unter allen Diskursen, die im Fernsehen vermittelt werden, zählt jener des Weißseins zu den weitverbreitetsten und auch gefährlichsten, da er oft unbemerkt propagiert wird. Indem Weißsein meist als Norm angenommen wird, bleibt es weitgehend unbemerkt und unangefochten.

Weißseinsforschung ist daher bestrebt, aufzudecken, wie Werte und Ideologien bezüglich Weißsein vermittelt werden und dieses Wissen anderen zugänglich zu machen. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es also, ebensolche Inhalte sichtbar zu machen.

Anhand der Serie „Malcolm mittendrin“ (*Malcolm in the Middle*) soll aufgezeigt werden, welche Diskurse bezüglich Weißsein vermittelt werden und wie diese arbeiten. Im Vorfeld werden dazu zwei verschiedene Interpretationen der Serie erörtert, welche Malcolms Familie entweder als „White Trash“ identifiziert, also der sozialen Unterschicht zuordnet, indem sie mit nichtweißen Stereotypen assoziiert werden, oder als der Mittelschicht zugehörig, wobei soziale Ungerechtigkeiten und die Korruption anderer Schichten ein Erreichen des amerikanischen Traumes verhindern.

In einer eingehenden hermeneutischen Analyse von vier verschiedenen Episoden wird gezeigt, dass jedoch beide Interpretationen vorherrschende Ideologien unterstützen und fördern könnten. Indem die Serie allerdings immer wieder auf Mehrdeutigkeiten zurückgreift, wird aber auch sichergestellt, dass Zuschauern je nach deren sozialer Zugehörigkeit, politischer Interessen und anderer äußerer Faktoren auch alternative Interpretationsmöglichkeiten geboten werden.

9. Curriculum vitae

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Geburtsdatum: 02. Juni 1989
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Berufserfahrung

09/2012 – dato Lehrerin (Unterrichtsfach Englisch) am Erzbischöflichen Gymnasium Hollabrunn sowie am Bundes- und Bundesrealgymnasium Hollabrunn

- Englischunterricht für SchülerInnen der 1.-8. Klassen
- Klassenvorstandstellvertreterin

01/2010 – 06/2012 Englischunterricht im Landeskindergarten Harmannsdorf – Rückersdorf und im Landeskindergarten Würnitz und ab 09/2010 im Landeskindergarten Obergänserndorf

- spielerischer Englischunterricht für Kinder von 2-6 Jahren
- Arbeiten mit Kindern in kleineren und größeren Gruppen
- Kinder motivieren, eine neue Sprache zu lernen

03/2008 – 06/2012 Lehrkraft für Englisch im Nachhilfeinstitut Lernquadrat

- Regelmäßiger Englischunterricht für alle Altersklassen, Schulstufen und Schultypen in Gruppen von bis zu 6 Schülern und Schülerinnen
- Mathematikunterricht für Volksschule, Unterstufe sowie erste und zweite Oberstufe auf Anfrage
- Leitung von Intensivkursen in Weihnachts-, Semester-, Oster- und Sommerferien

Ausbildung

09/2007 – dato Lehramtstudium für Englisch und Geschichte, Sozialkunde und Politische Bildung an der Universität Wien

- Diplomarbeit: “Whiteness in American television: Concepts of Race and Ethnicity in American sitcoms using the example of *Malcolm in the Middle*”

09/2003 – 06/2007 Erzbischöfliches Gymnasium Hollabrunn

- humanbiologischer und -psychologischer Schwerpunkt
- Matura mit Auszeichnung

Weiterbildungen und Seminare:

- Lehr- und Lerntechniken Seminar organisiert vom Lernquadrat
- Seminar zur Zentralmatura organisiert vom Lernquadrat
- Praktika und Hospitationen im Rahmen des Studiums an mehreren Schulen und unterschiedlichen Schultypen

Kenntnisse und Qualifikationen:

Sprachen
- Deutsch (Muttersprache)
- Englisch (fließend in Wort und Schrift)
- Latein (Schulkenntnisse)

Führerschein
- Klasse B

Programme
- Microsoft Office (sehr gut)
- Moodle

Instrumente
- Klavier und Keyboard, Ziehharmonika

Persönliche Eigenschaften:

Geduld, Teamfähigkeit, Pünktlichkeit, Ehrgeiz, Fleiß

Interessen:

- Reisen und fremde Kulturen, Kochen, Lesen, Theater und Oper
- Sport: Radfahren, Eislaufen, Tennis, Fußball