

Women in soap operas essay sample



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This deconstruction will focus on the representation of women in soap operas. This includes how they are represented in comparison with other groups of characters and how the audience should react to these women. The soap opera which has been used as the main study for this deconstruction is a British soap called Eastenders. This is usually aired in the evenings to a working-class audience. The main female characters, who appeared in the studied episode, will be listed and it will be shown how and why these women are represented in this way.

A strong female character is considered as a dominant woman who inspires or has a very strong connection with her audience, which makes the audience admire or support her or feel the opposite way. Many strong female characters are not intended to only appeal to women. They may be role models for females with freedom of expression and freewill, breaking the stereotype of the housewife. Seeing such an empowered character may interest men alike. When soaps first began, they were very popular with women because for the first time, women had strong role models on television. Christine Geraghty argued that there are four elements which explain the appeal of so-called “ women’s friction”:

1. An emphasis on a central woman whom the audience is invited to support.
2. A division between the public and the private sphere, with women understanding and controlling the private space.
3. An emphasis on building and maintaining relationships.

4. An element of fantasy in which values linked to the personal private sphere are privileged.

Dorothy Hobson, studied a soap called Crossroads and revealed that soaps can be seen as a cultural space or even resistance to masculine control.

These main characters are also seen as close friends or relations.

One of the significant strong female characters is Pauline Fowler; she has a controlling and over-protective personality, especially when it comes to family. Pauline, being a middle-aged woman finds it very difficult to let her twenty-year-old son leave her of fear of loneliness. Her neat living room shows that she is a very organised woman and enjoys the position of “Woman of the House” as she has a powerful control over her son and close friends. The low-key lighting used in one of her scenes conveys the tension in the room as Pauline and Martin conflict about permitting Sonia to stay over Christmas.

This shows the caution one must have when approaching such a powerful character. The use of close-up shots portray strong emotions between the two characters, enhanced by point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shots to show the reaction of Martin as Pauline declines to forgive Sonia. This is one of the more serious storylines of the episode. These shots allow us to identify with how other characters react to Pauline as she is such a manipulative and dominating woman. Pauline Fowler is represented mainly in a negative way as her powerful character has a more irritating personality than admirable because of her constant moodiness.

Another strong woman character, who, unlike Pauline, is not as clingy with her children, is Peggy Mitchell. Examples of this are that one of her sons, Grant, lives in another country and Phil, her second son, has a good family life. She is a supportive and humorous character. Similarly to Pauline, family plays a very important part of her life. Peggy Mitchell is a proud and successful grandmother. She is represented as the quite affluent landlady; shown by her attire of smart blazers, matching skirts and styled hair. Her main motives are usually influenced by countering the actions of rivaling families.

For example, she agrees to cater for Ian's wedding because she believes that Ian thinks she is incapable of doing so. Her point of view and behaviour towards others are also influenced by them, especially the Beales who have had a long history of conflict with the Mitchells. When Peggy is talking to Ian in this episode, high-key lighting is used which is effective in highlighting the expressions of the characters during conversation. The close-up shots are used to focus on the action-reaction shot. Peggy says, " Try not to cock it up this time."

This is in regards to Ian's wedding. Ian's shocked expression is quite comedic because Peggy refers to Ian's history and his numerous weddings and ruined marriages. This is one of the comic storylines of the episode. In another scene, where Peggy talks to Ben, her grandson, about being more supportive towards Phil dating women. The low-key lighting shows the calmness and assurance Peggy influences upon other characters. An over-the-shoulder shot is used to show the intimacy Peggy has with her family, especially with those of the younger generation. Peggy is represented as a prominent

woman of a family and the society in Eastenders, of whom others feel the need to protect. Her supportive actions represent her as a respectable woman and therefore, a more commendable character.

A younger 18-year-old female character, who breaks the stereotype of powerful people being just middle-aged men, is Ruby Allan; she is famous in the square for being Johnny Allan's daughter. Her father was arrested and eventually died, leaving Ruby with an inherited wealth and a big business at the Scarlet Bar, where she is the manager. Her prosperity in society has made her gain confidence over the years and an arrogance of power.

In the scene where Ruby is conversing with Stacey's mum, there are sequences of close-up shots which illustrate Ruby's shock and expression to the abnormal behaviour of the woman. "You're crazy," Ruby says with a look of fear on her face after confronting her future mother-in-law. The editing used is clean cuts and several mid-shots are utilized to show the quick and building tension between the two characters. In this scene, Ruby is represented as an egoistic person, almost as if she does not want to associate herself with mentally ill people.

In another scene, with Stacey and Ruby talking about Stacey's mum, Jean, there is a medium shot and low-key lighting. This shows the dark conflicting proximity between the two strong female characters and represents Ruby's domineering impression over Stacey. Furthermore, Sean angers Ruby, as he surprises her when he chooses family over "love". Sean throws her father's ashes urn at her, which she drops by accident, smashing it into pieces. A medium shot of her upset face and her frantically trying to pick up the ashes

shows that Ruby is quite vulnerable and helpless- a great contrast to her previous strong and confident disposition.

Another main female character of this episode, of the same age as Ruby, is Stacey Slater. She first appears in the episode talking to her brother, Sean, inside the Queen Victoria Pub. A medium shot is used with high-key lighting and close-up shots to display their comfortable sibling relationship. When Stacey talks to her mother, there is an easing-out establishing shot of a set filled with low-key lighting, which gives the scene an eerie feel. This represents Stacey as a caring and understanding daughter, when it comes to family. She is not afraid to be with her mentally ill mother who can be a cause for concern and frightening. When Sean and Stacey go home, there is low-key lighting also, to show a sense of foreboding.

This leads to one of the last main female characters of the episode, Jean, who is Stacey's mum. Jean's scenes are always in low-key lighting to portray her illness which makes her seem as if she is an intimidating and fearful character. The blue lighting through the blinds also depicts that she is mentally unstable. There is a medium shot expressing the action and reaction shots of her reluctant son greeting her. There are several close-ups and extreme close-ups of her face, in this intimate and dramatic scene, to exaggerate her expressions of insanity. How Sean reacts to her, such as facing away from her when they sit down together; he is leaning on his hand, which shows his frustration towards her, gives the audience an idea of what Jean is like.

This represents Jean as an irksome and burdensome character. She is also characterized as a person who inserts fear into others. This is shown in the scene between Jean and Sean inside the bathroom, which as high-key lighting with point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shots so that the audience can engage with Sean's uncomfortableness with intimacy. This also makes the audience infer that Jean has a past of distastefully familiarity with her son and possibly has sexually abused him. This represents Jean as an unlikeable character.

There are also other female characters, part of this studied episode of Eastenders, who don't have such a major role in the episode. Pauline, Stacey, Ruby and Jean were part of the more serious storylines whilst Peggy had a more comical storyline. However, Jane, Sonia, Stella and Dot had more minor roles with a more "run-of-the-mill" storyline that included gossip or launched some of the major storylines. Scenes with Dot and Sonia included high-key lighting and a medium shot. When Sonia and Martin are talking, there are over-the-shoulder shots, which show their close relationship. Sonia is represented as a comfortable person to talk to and a loving wife.

This is similar to the way Jane is represented when she is talking to Ian about their supposed surprise honeymoon. The high-key lighting also represents Jane as a comfortable wife to talk to. Stella is a character who is dating Phil Mitchell and is craving for the friendship of his son, Ben, in order to be accepted into the Mitchell family. There is a panning medium shot which sets the scene with a frame containing shiny cutlery to give the scene a "dream date" aspect and romantic setting.

In conclusion, women in Eastenders are represented in various ways according to the character and their characteristics. Stronger and more dominant female characters, such as Pauline, Peggy, Ruby, Stacey and Jean have close-ups shots so that more attention is on them and their personalities. They are also included in scenes with low-key lighting to show the caution other characters should have when witnessing these female characters' reactions. The lighting also reveals the reassurance, comforting, fulfilment for companionship and influential atmosphere that these characters provide. The lighting also reflects their intense personalities and storylines.

The minor female characters in the episode usually have mid-shots to not draw as much attention to them when they are in the frame. These characters seem to always be part of essential conversations and gossip that contribute to the plot of someone's storyline. These conversations involve many over-the-shoulder shots to portray the trustworthiness of these women. All women have family-based relationships and morals for family support. The family is seen as the private space and doesn't stir far away from what women were associated with in the past: family and the home.