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SOAP TALK: THE APPEAL OF SOAP OPERA TO CONTEMPORARY FEMALE AUDIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

"Soap opera is like sex outside marriage: many have tried it, but most are ashamed of being caught" (Buckman, 1984, p.1). This humorous statement accurately reflects the wide discrepancy between the attitudes and the behavior of the American people regarding daytime soap operas. Although soap operas are among the most disdained and ridiculed forms of television, they are also among the most watched, with more viewers on any given weekday than any other television genre (Allen, 1995). This irony is further enhanced by the fact that soap operas are the most economically successful advertising vehicles ever created in the area of mass media (Allen, 1995). Granted, soap operas are both popular and profitable, but why do they appeal so strongly to female audiences?

The purpose of this paper is to explain why women find contemporary television soap operas so enjoyable to consume. The primary methodology that is utilized to accomplish this purpose is a structural analysis of the eleven characteristics of soap opera proposed by communication cultural analyst Mary Ellen Brown (1994). To support this analysis, examples are taken from a currently airing television soap opera, "All My Children," which can be seen daily at noon on ABC. Implications for further study of the soap opera genre are then discussed. First, however, a

brief history of soap opera and several of its contemporary definitions are offered.

HISTORY OF THE SOAP OPERA GENRE

In the 1920s, before the advent of television, listening to the radio was a primary form of entertainment for women as they performed their household tasks during the day (Buckman, 1984; Hagedorn, 1995). Because successful radio broadcasting depended on delivering a large, regular audience to the sponsors who purchased radio advertising time, networks began designing their daytime programming especially for women. The result was the radio serial narrative, aired for the first time in 1928 (Buckman, 1984; Hagedorn, 1995). This new form of programming involved a continuing, relationship-oriented story told daily in 15 to 30 minute segments, with periodic messages from the advertising sponsor (Buckman, 1984). Specifically, the serials and their sponsors emphasized three overall themes that were expected to inherently appeal to the nature of women: the woman alone, problems of marriage, and family relationships (Frentz, 1987). Radio sponsors recognized that women were the primary buyers of household goods, and they hoped that by creating appealing programs for women they would simultaneously instill loyalty to their products (Brown, 1994; Buckman, 1984).

The popularity of the radio serial increased rapidly in the decades after its initial creation. By 1940, the 64 serials on network radio accounted for over 90% of all sponsored programs broadcast during the daytime hours (Allen, 1995; Hagedorn, 1995). As expected, women in the home environment constituted a large percentage of listeners. This tremendous popularity of radio serials sparked a series of studies in the 1940s to discover why women listened so loyally and with such enthusiasm (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994).

This research attacked the world of serial radio on three grounds. First, fans were depicted as lonely, isolated housewives who listened to compensate for "...some deficiency - whether emotional, psychological, social, relational, or some combination of them all" (Allen, 1995, p.6). Second, the content of the radio serials was described as unclean and morally harmful to listeners (Allen, 1995). Finally, in a time when women's activities were trivialized simply because of their association with women, researchers devalued the soap opera genre by their insistence that women were the only serial radio fans.

Although these findings were soon revealed to be stereotypes rather than facts, this derogatory view of the soap opera genre persisted throughout the 1950s, as the radio serials ceased broadcasting and entirely new serials were developed for television (Allen, 1995; Buckman, 1984). By 1960, when the last

radio serial left the air waves, the phrase "soap opera" still carried a negative connotation but referred exclusively to daytime television programs (Buckman, 1984).

Origins and Ironies of the Phrase "Soap Opera"

Although the person who first coined the phrase "soap opera" is unknown, the use of the word "soap" can be explained by the fact that soap manufacturers, namely Procter and Gamble, were the primary sponsors of many daytime radio serials (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994; Buckman, 1984; Frentz, 1987; Hagedorn, 1995). Although probably unintentional, employing the word "soap" to describe daytime television serials is extremely ironic on numerous levels of interpretation. First, while "soap" carries a connotation of cleanliness, many people claim that soap operas are about "dirt" - dirty secrets, dirty scandals, and dirty sins (Allen, 1995; Derry, 1992). Furthermore, every few minutes the "dirty" plots of soap operas are interrupted by commercials advertising various cleaning products for the individual and the household (Derry, 1992). Finally, the actual act of watching soap operas generates the "dirty" art of gossip, a style of communication traditionally regarded as unclean and trashy (Allen, 1995).

The word "trashy" is not only used in reference to the gossip generated by soap operas but is also frequently employed to

describe and devalue the entire soap opera genre. According to Brown (1994), "trash" suggests "that which ought to be discarded...cheapness, shoddiness, the overflow of the capitalist commodity system...a superficial glitter designed to appeal to those whose tastes are ill-formed..." (p.115). Describing the world of soap opera as "trashy," therefore, clearly devalues and puts down both the soap operas themselves and the women who watch them. Despite this obvious negative connotation, the word "trash" can have a different meaning for subordinate groups who take pleasure in activities regarded by the popular culture as trashy (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, most of this enjoyment stems from the knowledge of that subordinate group that they and their activities are devalued by the dominant value system (Brown, 1990, 1994). When applied to soap operas, this means that some of the pleasure of viewership stems from the fact that dominant masculine culture disapproves of the genre (Brown, 1990, 1994).

The roots of the word "opera" are less clear than those of the word "soap" and have generated considerably less discussion among scholars. Buckman (1984) speculates that the term originated either from the melodramatic nature of the serial program or from the brief musical jingles that were heard throughout each radio serial episode. Allen (1995) and television theorist Charles Derry (1992), however, believe the word "opera" was intended to be ironic, in that opera is a highly artistic

expression of human experience, while daytime radio and television is not commonly viewed as a form of art. Given the irony surrounding use of the word "soap," the latter explanation seems most plausible.

Contemporary Definitions of Soap Opera

Regardless of where the title of the genre came from, Derry (1992) points out that, unlike the category labels given to other forms of television, such as "westerns" and "quiz shows," the name "soap opera" reveals little about the characteristics of the programs it encompasses. Derry (1992) humorously proposes that "Incest, Bigamy, and Fatal Disease" would be a more fitting title for the genre because it more accurately reflects the content of the programs than the phrase "soap opera" does.

What exactly are soap operas and how do they differ from other television genres? Scholars seem unable to agree on an answer to this question. According to Laura Stempel Mumford (1995), an independent scholar of the media and women's culture, scholars should attempt not to generate a universal definition of soap opera but instead to recognize and understand why the genre is so difficult to define. She states that the lack of an adequate theory of television as a whole is extremely problematic because those specifically interested in soap opera need an overall theoretical framework to guide their ideas. Developing

such a framework would require the creation of rigid genre categories, which is difficult because the boundaries between television genres are fluid and constantly changing. Furthermore, defining soap opera in terms of its function for viewers, as many scholars do, is limiting because many television genres overlap in the purposes they serve (Mumford, 1995).

Nonetheless, Mumford (1995) identifies some primary characteristics of soap operas by offering her own definition of the genre, not for universal application but in order to clarify her own ideas: "A soap opera is a continuing fictional dramatic television program, presented in multiple serial installments each week, through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationship within a specific community of characters" (p.18).

Brown (1994), however, asserts that definitions such as the one proposed by Mumford are problematic because they could be true of almost any given television genre and, therefore, fail to adequately capture what makes soap opera unique. In order to differentiate soap operas from other forms of television, an analysis of soap opera's narrative structure and an understanding of the psychological relationship between viewers and this narrative is necessary (Brown, 1994). To achieve this understanding, Brown (1994) conducted numerous interviews with women soap opera viewers and specifically asked them how they

would define the soap opera genre. As a result of this research and her own observations, she proposes that daytime soap operas are notable for the following characteristics:

a. the centrality of female characters;
b. the characterization of female characters as powerful, often in the world outside the home;
c. multiple characters and plots as well as multiple points of view;
d. the portrayal of many of the male characters as "sensitive" men;
e. emphasis on problem solving, and intimate conversation in which dialogue carries the weight of the plot;
f. plots that hinge on relationships between people, particularly family and romantic relationships;
g. the home, or some other place that functions as a home (often a hospital), as the setting for the show;
h. concerns of nondominant groups being taken seriously;
i. use of time that parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch or not;
j. serial form that resists narrative closure (never-endingness);
k. abrupt segmentation between parts without cause and effect relationships between segments. (p.48-49)

Both Brown (1994) and media analyst John Fiske (1987) assert that each of these characteristics is strongly associated with feminine values and culture, implying that soap operas should, by design, be most popular among women.

WOMEN AS SOAP OPERA VIEWERS AND "GENDERED TELEVISION"

Are women, in fact, the primary viewers of daytime television soap operas? No consistent statistics exist regarding the demographics of television soap opera audiences because many people watch irregularly and because the number of people who either cease or begin watching each week is virtually impossible to measure (Buckman, 1984). Nevertheless, evidence consistently suggests that the majority of soap opera viewers have been and continue to be women between the ages of 18 and 35 (Allen, 1995; Frentz, 1987). It has been estimated that over half of all U.S. women living in homes with television sets "keep up" with at least one soap opera (Allen, 1995). Women are not, however, the only viewers of soap operas. According to communication scholar Suzanne Frentz (1987):

> While it is well documented that the largest percentage of the daytime serial drama audience is women of child-bearing age, it is also known that men, and elderly and college age people of both sexes represent significant

portions of the audience numbers. (p.153)

In addition, a 1988 study by Mediamark Research of New York City (as cited in Brown, 1994) reports that 30% of the soap opera audience is male. Despite this, the misconception that only women watch soap operas is still widely believed (Brown, 1994).

Although research has established that soap opera is not consumed entirely by women, the fact that women do comprise the majority of the genre's audience is significant and should not be ignored. The question of why soap opera seems to be more appealing to women than to men has only recently been addressed by scholars, primarily because soap operas were not taken seriously in communication and cultural studies until the early 1980s (Allen, 1995).

Fiske (1987) begins his explanation of soap opera's strong appeal to women by pointing out that, overall, "...different programs are designed (usually fairly successfully) to attract different audiences" (p.179). He further asserts that this creation of programs especially for specific audiences results in the classification of television viewers into broad and often stereotypical categories. One major categorization strategy is to divide television viewers into masculine and feminine subjects, a phenomenon which Fiske (1987) refers to as "gendered television" (p.179). Simply put, the concept of gendered television suggests that some television programs are meant for women while others are

intended for men. Gendered television originated in the 1950s, when sport and news shows were created for men, cooking and fashion shows for women, and educational and cartoon shows for children (Fiske, 1987). Since then, however, the boundaries between masculine and feminine television programs are less clear because television's techniques for gendering its audience have grown increasingly sophisticated. Today, gendered television exists in the form of the masculine and feminine television narrative (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987).

A television narrative is best described as the collection of strategies a television program uses to tell the story of the plot to the viewers (Fiske, 1987). For example, some programs utilize dialogue while others rely on physical action. Other strategy variables include the number, age, and sex of characters and the degree of continuation from episode to episode. While different television programs often employ similar narrative strategies, each television genre usually has a unique narrative style that is distinct from other genres. According to Brown (1994) and Fiske (1987), men and women differ in the kinds of television narrative styles or storytelling methods they respond to and enjoy watching. They further maintain that the storytelling strategies used by soap operas are extremely enjoyable for women to consume, and that the soap opera genre is the ultimate feminine narrative. To understand why this is true, an in-depth analysis of the eleven

characteristics of soap opera proposed by Brown (1994) is necessary.

ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOAP OPERA

The centrality of female characters

The fact that female characters are central in soap operas has an obvious appeal to women viewers because, put simply, women are more likely to be interested in and to identify with the lives of other women (Brown, 1994). For example, "All My Children" episodes regularly revolve around the life of Erica Kane, a character who has been central to this soap opera since it first aired over twenty years ago. Although some other television programs also emphasize female characters, the soap opera's focus on women is numerically unique because the number of female characters on the average hour-long soap opera is consistently equal to or greater than the number of male characters (Brunsdon, 1995). This fact is highly significant when one learns that most television shows, in general, feature two men for every woman (Brunsdon, 1995).

Female characters as powerful, often in a world outside the home

Soap operas not only favor women numerically, they also present female characters as powerful individuals. Although the empowerment of women also occurs in other television genres.

Brown (1994) argues that these other genres empower women only on an occasional basis and more frequently engage in the "symbolic annihilation" of women and women's issues. Symbolic annihilation involves portraying women in the mass media in generic and stereotypical roles, presenting them in relation to men, and devaluing their concerns and activities (Brown, 1994). To support her claim, Brown (1994) points out that recent content analysis studies of prime-time television programming have revealed that women are not only outnumbered by men, but also "...that women are usually younger than men, more likely to be minor characters, more likely to be victims of violent crimes, and more likely to be married and to hold less powerful positions than men" (p.49).

Because these trends are not true of the soap opera genre, soap operas provide women with an appealing alternative to the symbolic annihilation so common in prime-time television programs. "Women and men in the soap operas are probably more equal than in any other form of art or drama or in any area of real life" (Lopate, as cited in Fiske, 1987, p.186). Soap opera viewing, therefore, allows women to see themselves not as minor characters in relation to men but instead as powerful, independent individuals functioning in an atmosphere that is closer to true equality than any other they have seen or personally experienced.

Although soap operas use a variety of tools to present women as powerful, four characterization strategies are frequently

employed. First, female characters on soap operas often have socially prestigious careers outside the home environment. According to Derry (1992), "Although many critics have objected to soap opera's depiction of women's roles as mother, daughter, and housewife, the fact remains that soap opera depicts more women and careers than any other genre" (p.460). Common professions for soap opera women on "All My Children" include doctor (Maria Santos), corporate executive (Liza Colby), police officer (Taylor Canon) and business entrepreneur (Hayley Vaughn). Although viewers rarely see female characters actually engaging in their work due to the genre's focus on interpersonal relationships, viewers are nonetheless constantly aware of the careers of soap opera women and the powerful status those careers convey (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, soap operas frequently empower female characters by presenting them as capable of successfully balancing their traditionally male-dominated professions with their roles as wives and mothers (Brown, 1994). For example, on "All My Children" the character of Brooke English is portrayed as both a successful magazine editor and as a devoted single mother.

A second strategy employed by soap operas to empower women involves the positive portrayal and the continual validation of female sexuality. According to Fiske (1987), traditional patriarchy presents female sexuality as secondary to the sexuality of the male, whose primary goals are the possession of the female

body and the achievement of climax. Soap operas, unlike the majority of prime-time television programs, reject this patriarchal view of sexuality by emphasizing the feminine aesthetics of seduction and emotion (Fiske, 1987). "A woman's sexuality does not, in soap opera, result in her objectification for the male. Rather it is a source of pleasure in a relationship, or means of her empowerment in a patriarchal world" (Fiske, 1987, p.187).

Soap opera women usually have a multitude of sexual liaisons over a given period of time, and the source of pleasure in these sexual encounters is presented as the relationship between the involved parties rather than the physical bodies (Fiske, 1987). For example, sexual scenes on "All My Children" focus on the faces of and the dialogue between the people, not the actual physical acts. Furthermore, female characters in soap operas frequently (and often successfully) use sex as a weapon to control men, primarily through pregnancy and the attribution of paternity (Fiske, 1987; Mumford, 1995). An example of this is "All My Children" character Taylor Canon, who attempted to build a relationship with Noah Kiefer by pretending to be pregnant with his child.

The third and fourth strategies employed to create powerful soap opera women involve the development of two specific character types: the villainess and the matriarch. The villainess,

also known as "the bitch," is characterized by her ability to turn traditionally devalued feminine characteristics into a source of power and control (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). "She uses pregnancy (real or alleged) as a weapon, she uses her insight into people to manipulate them, and she uses her sexuality for her own ends, not for masculine pleasure. She reverses male and female roles..." (Fiske, 1987, p.190). "All My Children" character Kendall Hart embodied this prototype as she manipulated Erica Kane and her family to obtain financial security. Although the villainess is clearly intended by soap operas to be perceived as a "bad girl," research has revealed that this character type has strong appeal to women soap opera viewers (Brown, 1994; Seiter, 1987, as cited in Fiske, 1987). Specifically, women expressed admiration for and pleasure in watching the villainess resist the patriarchal restraints of society.

A fourth strategy utilized by soap operas to create powerful women is the existence of the matriarch, a character type who is represented at least once on nearly every television soap opera (Buckman, 1984). Typically above the age of 50 and often seen without male companionship, the matriarch conveys status and influence based on her long history as a member of a powerful family or a prestigious social circle. Matriarches from "All My Children" include the characters of Mona Tyler and Phoebe Wallingford. According to Brown (1994), the fact that soap operas

regularly feature strong matriarches appeals to women viewers because other television genres commonly portray women above the age of 50 as helpless and dependent. By presenting older women as competent and as valued members of the community, soap operas "...provide for women a fictional position only rarely available in the mass media" (Brown, 1994, p.51).

Multiple characters and plots as well as multiple points of view

A distinguishing feature of daytime soap operas is their use of a large, interrelated community that typically consists of between 30 and 40 regularly appearing characters (Allen, 1995; Buckman, 1984). Indirectly involved with this core group of individuals are a dozen or more characters who have moved away, become ill, been incarcerated or institutionalized, or are presumed dead (Allen, 1995). The interactions between this large group of people create multiple, intertwined plots that do not emphasize one "main" character or group of characters but instead divide attention more equally among the entire character community (Brown, 1994). Brown (1994) states that this lack of a well-defined main character makes soap operas unique because "most narrative forms in our culture...are constructed so that an audience member will identify with a particular character, usually a hero whose feelings and insights the audience shares" (p.51). Strong identification with one character does not occur among soap opera viewers because, stated simply, no protagonist exists with

whom to identify (Brown, 1994).

The absence of such a protagonist or protagonist group and the subsequent emphasis of the entire community of characters creates a unique narrative form that is attractive to women viewers. According to Brown (1994), "..it prevents the hierarchy of characters present when there are only a few well-rounded main characters whose discourse is given more weight than that of minor or secondary characters" (p.52). This means that no character is "better" than any other and that characters are portrayed neither as completely good/right nor completely bad/wrong. This aspect of soap operas is consistent with feminine culture because research has demonstrated that women tend to downplay hierarchical structures by emphasizing the group over the individual (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). Furthermore, evidence has shown that women perceive the world not in absolute categories of right and wrong but rather in subtle shades of gray (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987).

Soap opera's use of multiple plots is also appealing to women because it allows a variety of topics to be introduced and explored from a variety of points of view (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). Soap operas explore all sides of plot problems, especially controversial and "progressive" subjects such as abortion, homosexuality, and interracial relationships. To present numerous points of view, soap operas present characters who have varying opinions, reactions, and experiences regarding

these plot problems and social issues. As Fiske (1987) states:

> The viewer of soap opera is never allowed a stable reading position: no sooner has she understood and empathized with one character's reaction to an event than the focus changes and she is required to shift her experiential knowledge to that embodied by another. All sides of an issue can be explored and evaluated from a variety of social points of view, and, in contrast to the masculine narrative...no point of view... is given clear hierarchical precedence over any other. (p.194-5)

An example of this presentation of multiple points of view is currently found on "All My Children" in a plot involving the teenage mother Kelsey and the couple who is in the process of adopting her baby, Edmund Grey and Maria Santos. After giving birth to a baby that was conceived by accident, Kelsey's decision to give her son to Edmund and Maria seemed to be an an ideal arrangement because Kelsey felt too young to be a mother and because Maria biologically cannot have children. After seeing her baby actually living with Edumund and Maria, however, Kelsey began to have second thoughts. Although she does not feel she can practically provide care for her baby, Kelsey cannot overcome her feelings of emptiness and jealousy. Throughout this pregnancy and adoption plot, the audience sees both Kelsey's pain and the

frustration and anxiety of Edmund and Maria. Viewers see neither "side" as completely right nor completely wrong because both parties have believable and justifiable points of view. The audience can simultaneously empathize with Kelsey's sense of regret and with Edmund and Maria's strong desire for a child.

Soap opera's use of numerous characters, plots, and points of view is consistent with women's culture in several ways (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). First, the multiple characters and points of view present on soap operas are equivalent to the multiple roles of wife, mother, and individual that a woman simultaneously plays in the context of the patriarchal family (Fiske, 1987). In addition, the multiple and cyclical nature of soap opera plots represents the numerous and repetitious tasks that form the domestic work routine frequently imposed on housewives (Fiske, 1987).

Portraying many of the male characters as "sensitive men"

"Women's view of masculinity, as evidenced in soap operas, differs markedly from that produced from the masculine audience" (Fiske, 1987, p.186). Fiske (1987) supports this statement by pointing out that most television genres reinforce the ideals of traditional masculinity by rewarding male characters who are assertive, goal-directed, and "macho." In this way, masculine men are positively constructed as heroes. In soap operas, however, males who display traditional masculine qualities are frequently

devalued and portrayed as evil, not as heroic. For example, the character of Mr. Santos on "All My Children" is presented to viewers as villainous and as an ineffective parent because he has poor communication skills, is unable to compromise, rarely expresses emotion and affection, and frequently displays a volatile temper. If these kinds of characteristics are unfavorable for males to possess, then what qualities do soap operas present as positive and valuable in men?

Brown (1994) states that "good" men on soap operas are "sensitive men," or men who embody "many of the cultural characteristics of the social construction of women" (p.54). The sensitive man is empathetic, caring, nurturing, verbal about his emotions, and a validating listener (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). Although he rarely expresses his masculinity through direct action, he remains consistent, decisive, and quietly strong (Fiske, 1987). "All My Children" features numerous sensitive men, including the characters of Edmund Grey, Stuart Chandler, Matt Santos, and Pierce Riley. The presence of such male characters on soap operas produces a "softer," more feminine ideal of masculinity that is more attractive to women viewers than the traditional one offered by other television genres (Fiske, 1987). Furthermore, sensitive men appeal to women because they foster the more egalitarian gender roles and relationships characteristic of soap operas (Fiske, 1987).

Emphasis on problem-solving and intimate conversation in which dialogue carries the weight of the plot

Soap operas strongly emphasize the process of problem-solving because their plots revolve around the efforts of characters to remedy and perfect their interpersonal relationships (Brown, 1994; Derry, 1995). Furthermore, characters who have the ability to solve problems in their own relationships and in the relationships of others are presented as positive and valuable (Brown, 1994). An example of this is the character of Maria Santos on "All My Children." Maria is portrayed as an independent, competent, and caring individual. Interestingly, the majority of her time is spent either managing the problems of her own marriage or offering advice to her younger siblings, Matt, Julia, and Anita, about the problems of their romantic relationships. According to Brown (1994), the fact that soap operas value the ability to manage relationship difficulties is attractive to female audiences because women's focus on maintaining effective relationships is often devalued in our society. In addition, research has demonstrated that women tend to pay more attention to interpersonal conflict than men. Specifically, when compared to men, women express more anxiety over relationship problems and are willing to expend more time and effort to correct them (Brunsdon, 1995).

Besides their emphasis on interpersonal problem-solving, soap

operas also revolve around talk, namely women's talk (Brown, 1994). Content analysis studies of several currently airing soap operas have revealed that they consist of approximately 90% dialogue and 10% action (Allen, 1995). Furthermore, the subject of this abundant amount of conversation usually involves the intimate details of the personal lives and relationships of the residents of the soap opera community. Derry (1995) humorously states that soap opera characters talk only about themselves and about other characters primarily because they lack other activities to occupy their time:

> Soap opera characters do not read books; they do not go to movies; they do not talk about politics; they tend not to have hobbies; they tend not to watch television; and, except for weddings and funerals, they tend not to go to church - in short, when you put them in a room together, they have nothing to talk about except whether or not they are happy (p.459).

This heavy use of dialogue is consistent with female culture in that both women and soap operas emphasize talking as an enjoyable process rather than a necessary activity used to obtain a desired outcome (Brown, 1994). Specifically, women tend to view talking not as functional communication tool, as men do, but instead as a pleasurable activity that is rewarding in itself (Brown, 1994).

Soap opera's reliance on dialogue results in the television

camera's focus on the faces and the facial expressions of characters (Fiske, 1987). In a typical scene on "All My Children," the camera moves back and forth between the faces of the involved parties and ends with a close-up facial shot that lingers on the screen for several moments after the dialogue has ceased (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). According to Fiske (1987), the facial close-ups found on soap operas constitute a feminine aesthetic because women are more skillful at the art of "reading people" and at deciphering all types of facial expressions. Furthermore, facial expressions "are the means of exercising the feminine ability to understand the gap between what is meant and what is said" (Fiske, 1987, p.183).

Plots hinge on relationships between people, particularly family and romantic relationships

"Relationships between people are the essence of soap opera plots" (Brown, 1994, p.55). Content analysis research reveals that the kind of relationship that receives the most attention on soap operas is heterosexual romance, with various family relationships a close second (Brown, 1994). The emphasis on romantic relationships between people reflects society's expectation of eventual marriage for women (Brown, 1994). The emphasis on family is not surprising, given the fact that almost every currently airing soap operas was built on and still relies upon the existence of one or more large, extended family networks.

For example, "All My Children" revolves around the Martin and the Santos families, beginning with older generations and continuing down to children and grandchildren. Soap opera's emphasis on relationships is consistent with women's culture, given the fact that "the public world of wars, morality, rules, money, and competition are constructed as masculine, whereas family and relational matters are assigned to the culture of women" (Brown, 1994, p.55).

The home, or some other place that functions as a home (often a hospital), as the setting for the show

Virtually all soap operas take place within the context of a specific town or city (Brown, 1994; Derry, 1995). For example, the events on "All My Children" occur primarily in the community of Pine Valley. Soap opera cities are usually portrayed as "Anytown, U.S.A.," meaning that they are designed to resemble a typical middle-sized community that could be found almost anywhere throughout the country (Derry, 1995). Although characters and plots may come and go, the particular city a soap opera revolves around remains constant over time. Furthermore, Derry (1995) states, "The stability of the usual setting contrasts with the turbulence of the characters' personal lives" (p.450).

Within the soap opera city, the plots advance in several recurring locations, the most common of these being the private home (Brown, 1994). The private home functions as the setting for

a character's most personal obsessions, ambitions, dreams, and sexual activities, all of which inevitably affect and transform the entire soap opera community (Derry, 1995). For example, on "All My Children," the home shared by Edmund Grey, Maria Santos, Dimitri Marek, and Erica Kane is frequently the site of personal discussions, emotional revelations, deceptive eavesdropping, and sexual relationships that often have implications for other characters. Although the camera has traditionally emphasized the home locale by featuring the parlor or the living room, the focus on the bedroom has recently increased (Derry, 1995).

According to Brown (1994), the home as the primary soap opera setting relates and appeals to women for numerous reasons. First, the home is a historically familiar place for women. Until recent decades, women were frequently confined to the home arena while their husbands and/or male relatives pursued activities in the public sphere to provide for them. Second, the home is culturally constructed as a positive place for women. With the exception of those affected by domestic violence, the home is perceived as a source of shelter, safety, and comfort for women. Third, dominant culture views the home as the area of feminine expertise. Specifically, the home is the place of rituals participated in and controlled by women, such as parties, holidays, and children's activities. For these home-centered events, women make the decisions and their knowledge is valued. Finally, the soap opera

home environment represses and minimizes the domestic work routine that so often characterizes women's day-to-day lives.

In addition to the private home, several other locations are frequent components of soap opera settings. These include the hospital, the court room, the newspaper office, the television studio, the restaurant, and the night club (Derry, 1995). For example, on "All My Children," events often take place at Pine Valley Hospital, at the Pine Valley police station and jail, at the Tempo magazine office, and at the television set for the program "The Cutting Edge." All of these alternate locations are similar to the private home setting in that they are indoors and allow many characters to interact and converse with each other (Derry, 1995).

Concerns of nondominant groups are taken seriously

Nondominant groups are individuals whose values, activities, and identities are not embraced by popular culture (Brown, 1994). Because this definition is loose and highly subjective, Brown (1994) states that whether or not individuals actually are members of a nondominant group is often secondary to whether or not individuals perceive themselves as such. In other words, viewing oneself as belonging to a nondominant group relegates one to nondominant status, even if one's belief is inaccurate (Brown, 1994). With this phenomenon in mind, nondominant groups often include but are not limited to the following: racial and ethnic

minorities, homosexuals, the elderly, the homeless, the poor, victims of violent crimes, and individuals with the HIV/AIDS virus.

Soap operas emphasize the concerns of nondominant groups by featuring nondominant characters and/or groups of characters who are usually absent from other television genres (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). Furthermore, while nondominant groups are often represented in prime-time television with "token" characters who merely exist and do not affect the plot, soap operas frequently employ members of nondominant groups as central characters (Brown, 1994). Examples of these trends are abundant on "All My Children," which currently features a homeless shelter and a formerly homeless teenager (Laura Kirk), a homosexual teacher struggling for his job and for societal acceptance (Michael Delaney), a large Hispanic family (the Santos characters), and several central African American characters (Noah Kiefer, Derek Frye, Taylor Canon).

How does the attention given to nondominant groups by soap operas appeal to female audiences? According to Brown (1994), women, especially older women, often perceive themselves as nondominant in relation to men and can, therefore, relate to other groups with such a status. Because most prime-time programming engages in the symbolic annihilation of women and of other nondominant groups, women logically enjoy a television genre which

emphasizes their concerns and the concerns of others like them (Brown, 1994). In addition, soap operas' focus on nondominant groups often leads to controversial plots which allow women to see traditionally subordinated groups struggling to gain equality from those in power (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). According to Fiske (1987), women can relate to this struggle and find it highly enjoyable to watch. "The dominant ideology is inscribed in the status quo, and soap operas offer their subordinated women viewers the pleasure of seeing this status quo in a constant state of disruption" (Fiske, 1987, p.181).

Use of time parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch or not

Soap operas utilize time in a manner that is distinctly different from other television genres (Brown, 1994; Derry, 1995). What makes time on soap operas so unique? According to Derry (1995), soap operas employ a combination of three complex and often contradictory time schemes that create an unusual sense of reality.

First, soap operas frequently use "landmark time," whereby the plots of soap operas parallel the events of real life (Derry, 1995). Landmark time usually occurs during holiday seasons so that the soap opera community celebrates Thanksgiving, Christmas, Independence Day, etc. along with the real world. For example, the December 31, 1995, episode of "All My Children" revolved

around a large New Year's Eve party that many of the central characters attended. Second, soap operas utilize a schedule of "extended time," whereby one day of soap opera events can be extended into a week or more of television episodes or vice versa (Derry, 1995). This time schedule recently occurred on "All My Children" when Julia Santos was held captive in a dilapidated apartment by the character of Louie Greco. Although Julia was actually held hostage for several weeks, her time in captivity was shown on over a month of television episodes. Finally, soap operas employ "idiosyncratic time," which involves the advancing or slowing of the passage of time not for the entire soap opera community but instead for specific characters for the purpose of plot development (Derry, 1995). Examples of this phenomenon include a soap opera woman who conceives in December and gives birth in March and the miraculous growth of children into adolescents in only a few years. Specifically, on "All My Children," Kelsey's pregnancy and delivery took far less than nine months even though she supposedly carried her baby the full term.

Brown (1994) states that the fact that soap opera time often parallels actual time provides female audiences with a sense of continuous, ongoing pleasure and enhances the believability of soap opera characters and their lives. She states:

> Time on serial dramas seems to continue even though the audience is not present. The illusion one gets in watching

> soap operas is that each group of characters continues to interact with each other even after the cameras and microphones are off. This is one of the reasons that it is so easy to pretend that the characters are actual people. (p.58)

Brown (1994) further argues that time on soap operas constitutes a feminine aesthetic because it focuses on viewing as a enjoyable process in itself rather than as a means to achieve a single pleasurable end. In addition, the fact that characters seem real allows women to "keep up" with the characters' lives just as they "keep up" with the lives of their friends (Brown, 1994).

Serial form resists narrative closure (never-endingness)

"Whereas traditional literary narratives have a beginning, middle and end, soap operas consist of an ever-expanding middle" (Brown, 1990, p.186). This never-endingness stems from the fact that soap operas are members of a larger category of media products known as serial narratives. Allen (1995) defines a serial narrative as "...not merely a narrative that has been segmented, but one whose segmentation produces an interruption in the reading, listening, or viewing process. Furthermore, that interruption is controlled by the producer or distributor of the narrative, not by the reader" (p.1). In other words, soap operas are stories narrated to viewers in segments. The producers of soap operas determine not only how and when the narration of the

plot starts and stops, but also how and when the viewer's engagement of the text starts and stops (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994).

The primary consequence of soap opera's serial form is that it is an open narrative, meaning that a single point of plot closure does not exist (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987). "A soap opera narrative strand has no climax to close it off, no point at which it is seen to have finished...no solutions are final, smooth patches are never free from the sense of impending disasters" (Fiske, 1987, p.182-3). Practically speaking, this means that no soap opera episode will ever be the one in which all individual and community problems are solved and everyone lives happily ever after (Allen, 1995). This feature of soap operas is more readily understood when placed in opposition to a non-serial closed narrative, such as the traditional murder mystery. Murder mysteries involve a single protagonist or group of protagonists, a linear plotline that is goal-directed, and a final moment of narrative closure when the murderer is revealed and reader/viewer satisfaction is achieved (Allen, 1994; Fiske, 1987). Soap operas, in contrast, have no clear protagonists, have cyclical plotlines, and lack a final climax (Allen, 1995; Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987).

A secondary consequence of soap opera's open form and never-endingness is that it is a relatively poor vehicle for transmitting concrete ideological messages to viewers (Allen,

1995; Fiske, 1987). Because no final point of resolution exists, viewers are not searching for a message or moral to the story in the same way they do during a non-serial closed program (Allen, 1995). As previously mentioned, lack of narrative closure allows soap opera writers and producers to raise numerous potentially controversial subjects without having to make any commitment to their continuance (Allen 1995).

Although Brown (1994) agrees that soap operas are poor agents of definite value messages, she nevertheless argues that soap operas are a prime example of "hegemony," or the incorporation of current mainstream values into the majority of the soap opera text. She asserts that while soap operas don't introduce completely new values, they do mirror both the current ideology and the questioning of its assumptions. An example of the phenomenon of hegemony at work in "All My Children" is storyline of Michael Delaney's attempt to retain his high school teaching job despite the fact that he is open about his homosexuality in his classroom. The dominant ideology states that homosexuality is deviant and punishable. "All My Children" reflects this point of view with its presentation of numerous characters who oppose Michael at all costs, including his own brother-in-law. However, "All My Children" also reflects the questioning of the dominant homosexuality perspective through the presentation of characters who sympathize with Michael and help him fight to keep his job.

Besides allowing for the exploration of various topics, another practical purposes of the soap opera genre's lack of narrative closure is to secure a solid audience for future episodes. Allen (1995) notes:

> Each episode ends with some degree of narrative indeterminacy: a plot question that will not be answered until the next episode. In the U.S., where daytime serials are broadcast Monday through Friday, the greatest indeterminacy is left with the viewer at the end of the Friday episode, encouraging her...to tune in next time on Monday. (p.17)

Examples of these plot "cliff-hangers" prominent on Friday episodes can be found on every currently airing soap opera. On "All My Children," for example, a recent Friday episode concluded with an image of the body of Julia Santos in a box waiting for transport from Jamaica to the United States, causing viewers to wonder if she was actually dead and, if not, if her friends and family could save her before she suffocated.

The soap opera genre's serial form and lack of narrative closure is consistent with women's culture. Fiske (1987) states that on soap operas, the outcome of the plot is relatively unimportant and often not unknown. What is important is the process the characters go through, not the end result. This can be interpreted as:

> ...an articulation of a specific feminine definition of desire and pleasure that is contrasted with the masculine pleasure of the final success. The emphasis on the process rather than the product, on pleasure as ongoing and cyclical rather than climactic and final, is constitutive of a feminine subjectivity in so far as it opposes masculine pleasure and rewards. (Fiske, 1987, p.183)

Abrupt segmentation between parts without cause and effect relationships between segments

The typical daytime soap opera episode consists of a series of scenes that is presented to the audience in a non-sequential order (Derry, 1995). Specifically, the camera focuses on one scene for two to five minutes and then abruptly switches to a new setting and group of characters with no apparent relationship between the adjacent scenes (Brown, 1994; Derry, 1995). Examples of this tendency are abundant on every currently airing soap opera. Specifically, a recent episode of "All My Children" began with a heated discussion between Tad Martin, Liza Colby, and Adam Chandler a television studio and then abruptly moved to a romantic encounter between Noah Kiefer and Julia Santos in a small hut on the island of Jamaica. Both the characters and locations featured in these scenes are completely unrelated.

According to Brown (1994), this abrupt segmentation between

scenes constitutes a feminine aesthetic in two ways. First, the camera's continual motion from place to place parallels women's back-and-forth movements from task to task as they carry out their housework (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, just as scenes are never fully complete and are always returned to by the camera, women's household duties never truly end. Second, the soap opera genre's abrupt scene changes reflects the traditional female style of communication, which is non-linear and involves jumping around from topic to topic (Brown, 1994).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The previous structural analysis of Mary Ellen Brown's characteristics of contemporary daytime soap operas illustrates how the genre has been constructed to appeal to female audiences. While other scholars have described soap opera's theoretical feminine characteristics in brief, this discussion is unique because it provides a more in-depth look at the soap opera genre as well as some concrete examples from a currently airing soap opera. Furthermore, this paper provides a starting point for those seeking to expand on the analysis of any one of Brown's proposed soap opera characteristics.

A logical extension of the structural analysis of the soap opera genre is to analyze the women who compose its primary

audience. Specifically, scholars could explore how women consume soap operas, what knowledge and skills they gain from watching, and what purposes soap opera viewership serves in the real world. Brown (1990, 1994) has investigated these and other related issues and subsequently asserts that a primary function of soap operas is to generate social interaction among women. Specifically, she states that soap operas are closely related to women's oral culture in that their form and structure facilitates the art of gossip and verbal speculation (Brown, 1990).

Allen (1995) agrees that the content of soap operas easily generates dialogue among viewers. "Perhaps more than any other form of television, soap operas encourage viewers to extend the pleasure of watching to the pleasures of talking about what they watch" (Allen, 1995, p.4). Fiske (1987) labels the talk among women that is generated by soap operas as "the tertiary text," which he formally defines as any oral or written text that viewers construct themselves out of their responses to the original television narrative. Soap opera tertiary texts, therefore, include not only women's gossip about characters and plots but also letters written to soap opera actors and actresses, producers, writers, and magazines (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987).

Clearly, the subject of soap operas and women's oral culture is a growing area of interest that has yet to be fully explored. This paper provides a foundation for such topics to be examined.

Although many scholars have touched on the structural attraction of soap operas for female audiences, only Brown (1990, 1994) and Fiske (1987) have devoted significant attention to the purposes soap operas serve for women in the real world, namely social interaction. But, as Allen (1995) frequently points out, the area of soap opera scholarship is so new and unexplored that future work is promising.

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