

***BRINGING UP BABY: REPRESENTATIONS OF LONE
MOTHERHOOD IN MODERN POPULAR CULTURE***

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**Submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Higher Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy**

University of Leicester

June 2004

Acknowledgements

As a single mother working on this thesis alongside bringing up three children and trying to work full-time, there are inevitably a huge number of people without whom my fourth (and arguably my most time consuming) baby could not have been successfully delivered and put to bed!

I must first give great thanks to my supervisors, Drs Ros Coward, Sonya Andermayr and Alison Oram, whose ideas, support and awesome ability to spot an unnecessary comma at a thousand paces have been unwavering throughout the years of my study and whose help and advice has led me to this point (which at times seemed increasingly unlikely!).

I'd also like to record my thanks to the women with whom I worked, who showed enthusiasm for the project over and above that which was required, participating fully in the discussions and coming to me afterwards with extra thoughts and observations, above and beyond the 'call of duty'.

Thanks also to Sue Heyworth for her practical help and to Russ Heyworth for reading and making suggestions for changes to chapters, to Darren Tysoe for supplying with a laptop at short notice (and only the tiniest of grovelling) and to Karen Bullimore and Rob Farmer for teaching me to use it properly, to Caroline Ives for last-minute panic photocopying and to Graham Harris, Dorothy Nicholson, Gillian Wilkins and Andrea Sheridan for listening to my ideas and being around when I couldn't string a sentence together that wasn't about 'the thesis'.

And of course special thanks must go to my family. To my brothers and sisters who believed in me from the start and who show so much pride in me despite their own amazing achievements, but mostly to my boys, Nathan, Sam and Isaac, who went without attention and sometimes meals while I worked in their 'quality time', and whose help around the house prevented me from finding things to do that would keep me from the computer. Their tolerance and love kept me going throughout. And, most importantly of all, to my mum and dad whose love and support ranged from proof-reading to taking the children off my hands so that I could work: this thesis is as much yours as it is mine, and you'll never know quite how much you mean to me.

Abstract

Bringing Up Baby: Representations of lone motherhood in modern Popular Culture

Julie Teckman

This thesis explores media representations of single mothers, and considers how one segment of the audience interprets the messages and ideologies embedded within texts, in relation to their own experiences and perceptions. It combines textual analysis of selected texts from popular television and film with empirical data collected during seminars conducted with groups of teenage, female college students and young single mothers. The texts studied were chosen from television soap opera and situation comedy (both of which deal mainly with family relationships and family situations) and popular, modern Hollywood films; three areas I considered to be central in helping me to gain an understanding of how the media construct meanings and messages for audiences in a form and style designed for repetition and unambiguity, to create easy understanding for audiences, even when they are actually complex and contradictory.

The research groups were made up of young women aged between 16 and 20, from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of several weeks over the five year research period, and used with the case-study texts from contemporary popular culture. The data collected suggests that, beneath the increasingly diverse representations of single mothers in popular culture, media texts tend to define and represent single mothers generally as incomplete, lacking and/or deviant in comparison to 'normal' motherhood. However, the young audience members with whom I worked, used the parameters of their own experience and knowledge to simultaneously engage with and distance themselves from the seemingly entrenched ideologies embedded within the texts. As a result it seems that despite the essentially negative representations that continue to dominate media stereotypes of single mothers, young female viewers remain generally aware of and distanced from the messages being transmitted.

Word count:

Abstract: 301

Thesis: 100,148

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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

During the course of one week, selected at random in November 1998, the British media covered a number of stories that focused on representations of alternative family life.

New Woman magazine ran an article questioning whether men brought up by single mothers would have the skills necessary to take on and succeed in adult relationships.

On television a debate on the BBC's *Question Time* about the Government's family policy document centred on the importance of family values and erupted into a heated argument about both left and right wing attitudes to non-traditional families and the intervention of the so-called 'Nanny State' into human relationships. In the popular television soap opera, *EastEnders*, Ian Beale, abandoned by his adulterous wife, Cindy, found himself being forced to take over the care of her new-born baby (by another man), in addition to his own three children after she died in childbirth. The children's show, *Sort It Out*, which allows young people to discuss and debate issues considered to be of relevance and importance to them, sandwiched a discussion about whether teenage mums should be blamed for getting pregnant between 'Should I get my navel pierced?' and 'How do I get rid of my spots?'.

At the cinema two new films were previewed. The first, *Hope Floats*, concerned a woman coping with rebuilding her life and bringing up her disturbed child alone after her husband leaves her for her best friend. In the second film, *Stepmom*, the story followed the second wife struggling to be accepted into the lives of stepchildren whose natural mother is scheming, controlling and ultimately responsible for the 'happy ending' of the film when she 'permits' the children to bond with her successor - but this is only once she knows that she is dying from a terminal illness!

In the same week several national newspapers printed a story about benefit fraud suggesting that twice as many single mothers fiddle the benefits system as other claimants, and in the British music charts a song entitled *Just the Two of Us* by Will Smith, a popular black actor/singer, entered the Top 10. The titular couple is not, as might be expected, a romantic relationship, but that of father and new-born son, and despite the fact that Will Smith had recently married the mother of his own baby, the lyrics make it clear that, although the father is no longer with the child's mother, the paternal bond will nonetheless remain strong.

It is this proliferation of discourses about family life and the ways in which certain family issues come to be constructed in the media that forms the basis for this piece of research. In a social, cultural and economic climate where politicians from all main parties moralise about the decline in family values and the correlation between increasing lawlessness and the rising trend in fatherless families, the mass media appears to veer between hysterical witch-hunts attacking members of society least able to defend themselves, and a morbid fascination for parenting styles which deviate from the norm; be it the extended stepfamily arrangements of much married celebrity families or lone fathers and middle class professional women who are forced or who to choose to 'go it alone'.

Yet there are few people these days who remain unfamiliar with lone parenting as one alternative to traditional family structures. Whether we have experienced life as a single parent or the child of one, or spent time in the company of lone parent as a relative, friend or neighbour, the idea of the household headed by one parent rather than two is

neither unusual nor disturbing; and yet it would seem that the media retains and re-packages ideologies of the family that stick firmly to the notion that the only good family is a traditional one headed by a father and a mother (even better if they can be seen to enjoy the traditional patriarchal roles of male breadwinner and disciplinarian and female nurturer and home maker}. This thesis sets out to explore one area of media representation -the single mother - and to consider how a particular segment of the audience interprets the messages and ideologies present within texts, in relation to their own personal experiences and perceptions. It combines textual analysis of a variety of texts from a number of popular television and film genres with empirical data collected during two hour long seminars conducted with groups of teenage, female college students as a part of their media studies lessons.

The texts studied and discussed were chosen from two popular television genres: soap opera and situation comedy (both of which deal mainly with family relationships and familial situations) and popular films from the twentieth century. While these three areas are not the only ones in which representations of lone parenting are portrayed, I felt that they are key to gaining an understanding of how the media construct meanings and messages for audiences in a form and style designed for repetition and perceived as unambiguous, to create easy understanding for audiences, even when the result is actually both complex and contradictory.

Alongside the textual analysis I have considered the reactions to such discourses of disorder and concern by a segment of the audience that I felt would be particularly aware of the messages and values being applied to media products. Over the last five years I worked with five groups of teenage female students, to identify and analyse ways

in which they interpreted and made meaning out of the overt and covert ideas generated and validated through the texts.

The sample groups were made up of young women aged between 16 and 20, from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of several weeks during the research period between 1998 and 2002, and used as case-studies a variety of texts from contemporary popular culture.

I also had the opportunity to spend an afternoon working with a group of young single mothers at a 'mums and toddlers' group. These women were aged between 17 and 25 and were extremely aware of the perceptions around single mothers promoted by the mass media. We talked about television representations in general and soap opera representations particularly, and their sense of shame and anger is developed in the chapter on soap opera later in this thesis. With this group I did not have the opportunity to screen films or television programmes and had to rely on the cultural knowledge of the women themselves. Hence there is a greater quantity of response material to soap opera than to either popular film or even to situation comedy, as soap opera was the genre most familiar to and popular with the single mothers. I deliberately chose to work with a group whose members knew each other well and felt comfortable talking to a stranger (me) and in front of a group of peers. It is perhaps a measure of the stigma that still surrounds single motherhood that a couple of the girls, vocal in the informal precursor to the session, in which I simply spent time with the women, winning their confidence and explaining my interest in their views, did not feel confident enough to take part in the actual discussion sessions. It is possibly a measure of the interest generated in the subject that a number of the young women wanted to continue the

conversations started during the sessions after we had finished, while others later expressed regret that they had indeed excluded themselves!

My findings suggest two things: that media texts seek generally to define and represent single mothers as incomplete, lacking or deviant in comparison to 'normal' representations of motherhood; and that audiences (represented by the segment with which I have worked over the last five years) use the parameters of their own experience and knowledge to simultaneously engage with and distance themselves from the ideologies embedded within the texts. I will aim to show that while some fictional texts at least try to grapple with social changes, there is an underlying mythology of lone parenting that almost appears to necessitate that single mothers are depicted in a negative way, from downright evil and manipulative to stupid, naïve, irresponsible or incompetent.

David Buckingham points out in his study of young people and their relationships with the soap opera, *EastEnders*, the idea that audiences negotiate with texts and retain "a considerable degree of autonomy to construct their own meanings and pleasures" is not new (Buckingham, 1987: 154). However, research has tended in the past to concentrate on the relationships between audiences and particular texts rather than the textual relationship with one specific representative group. Thus, despite considering some particular texts in detail, my focus is not on programmes per se, but the genres of situation comedy, soap opera and popular film, and the discourses they develop around the issue of the single mother and her place in society.

This study develops previous work on media representation and ideology by concentrating on the specific issue of lone parenting, on which there has been little research focus even by social scientists considering the effects of lone parenting on children, and analyses political and ideological messages in terms of both text and audience.

I have undertaken to present a clear account of the route by which a group, in this case, single mothers, may become represented as a problem, and in some cases as an issue of grave concern (a moral panic) by a mass media eager to support a set of particular political ideologies, or to reinforce naturalised mythologies and beliefs. Secondly, I have attempted to evaluate how effective, in terms of creating apparent social consensus and conformity, such representations can be in a society in which issues of lone parenting affect one in four families. I have chosen to concentrate on single mothers rather than the issue of lone parenting in general as there are significant differences in the ways in which lone mothers and fathers are represented, which suggest that the study of lone fathers could constitute a doctoral thesis in its own right and that there would not be enough room in this thesis to do justice to the subject. However, where the representation of fathers and mothers bears specific comparison, I have endeavoured to show how differences in interpretation locate certain themes within the wider context of ideological and gender debates.

The regularity and predictability of media representations of lone parents might be seen to work on two levels identified by David Morley (1992:7). In the first instance, through the recurring use of bias identified and explored by the Glasgow Media Group in 1976, and secondly through the development of an hegemonic ideology based on social myths

of family values. According to Gramsci, culture reflects the “lived system of meanings and values” to constitute a “sense of reality for most people in society” which appears “absolute”, since it is very difficult for most members of society to move, in most areas of their lives beyond experienced reality (Williams, 1977:109 –110).

Morley (1992) suggests that by considering media effects through textual analysis alone, rather than through studying audiences and audience response, there is an assumption of media power over the audience. In attempting to study both text and audience response to text and message, this study suggests that, in the case of media representations of lone parenting at least, audiences bring important personal interpretations to texts which enable them to filter out and reject some of the messages being generated, developing the theory of active participation in the reading of media texts as suggested by Morley and others.

In order to begin to analyse the ways in which single parents, and in particular single mothers, have been represented in popular culture in post-war Britain, I want to start my exploration by considering the historical, social and political context of lone motherhood in Britain and the United States. I will map the ways in which illegitimacy has been perceived socially in order to then evaluate how dominant ideologies surrounding lone parenting have become reproduced and mythologised in cultural texts. I shall then develop the idea of mythologies in popular culture as they relate to motherhood and its differing interpretations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers, and use the concept of the moral panic to analyse whether the treatment of single mothers by the media can be considered as an example of this process.

Chapter three describes the processes by which popular culture presents and legitimises such representations, explaining how discourses of unrestrained sexuality, deviance and 'otherness' are commonly used to exclude single mothers from dominant paradigms of family life in an attempt to produce hegemony around family ideology. I will then consider the genre of television soap opera, explaining how the dominant social concept of family values has, from the earliest days of this traditionally female-orientated genre, been a central feature around which the narrative and characterisation has been organised. Several writers have focused on soap's tendency to concentrate on social problems (Weibel, 1977; Geraghty, 1992; Brunsdon, 2000) and it is clear that the unmarried mother and issues of paternity (not always contained within the same storyline) are staple examples of such 'problems', used to highlight the deviant behaviour of women in a variety of situations. I have explored, with the groups of young women and the group of young single mothers with whom I worked, the methods used to problematise the single mother in soap opera and its relationship to the experiences of real women and girls.

In the Chapter Five I have suggested that Hollywood film is an emblem of American media imperialism and related patriarchal ideology. Thus the single mother in film becomes not simply a symbolic warning to other women not to stray from the socially acceptable route into marriage and conventional motherhood, but also a symbol representing the rewards on offer for women who accept the role of the male as hero and allow themselves to be 'rescued' no matter how capable they might be. In general Hollywood single mothers suffer but are ultimately rewarded through either the love of an alpha male or the redemption that self-sacrifice and martyrdom can offer. I will be

using psychoanalytic and feminist theories to argue that Hollywood cinema utilizes both Oedipal and Freudian fears as an excuse to control the fertility and choices of women.

Finally I will be arguing that situation comedy, one of the most structured and convention bound genres of film or television, creates humour out of the dysfunctional and that it has, since the earliest days of television, attempted to define dysfunctional in terms of the 'normal' family from which, as with soap opera, the sitcom's narrative core is derived. By presenting viewers with families that are 'different' and then developing narratives around inadequacy, the genre offers alternatives whilst simultaneously offering reasons as to why such alternatives are not to be taken seriously.

In each case I have analysed a number of texts and offered a sample to the groups of young women with whom I have worked over the last few years, in order that I might both test out my own perceptions of meaning and those of a segment of the audience for whom the issues of single parenting are both personal and, at some point in the lives, a distinct possibility. What I have concluded suggests that, despite the rhetoric of politicians and the alarm of pressure groups, young audiences are sophisticated and skilled readers of media messages, who are able to simultaneously engage with and remain distanced from the programmes and films they continue to enjoy.

Chapter Two: THEORY, METHOD AND METHODOLOGIES

In 1993, when the Child Support Agency was established to chase absent parents in order to reduce the state burden of supporting lone parents and their children, fathers' groups suddenly appeared in force. The collective voice of angry men was represented on television, in newspapers and magazines and in meeting places around the country. In contrast, very little was heard from the mothers; women who had, in many cases, been abandoned and mistreated, were conspicuously absent from the public outcry about the new system. Similarly, when I began to research the subject of single mothers and their treatment by a media that is still essentially patriarchal (Walkerdine, 1997) it became clear that any body of work in existence would inevitably come out of feminist cultural studies rather than from any other area of social or cultural studies

I considered it important to identify dominant discourses around lone parenting and, in particular, to explore the ways in which single mothers are framed and represented across a sample of popular media genres, before evaluating the responses of groups of young women aged between 16 and 19 years in order to investigate how they relate mediated experience to first hand knowledge. Throughout the five years of the empirical research I worked with a different group of young female students each academic year, sharing with them the same texts and asking the same questions, but requiring little further information than age, family situation and responses to the texts presented within an informal but structured seminar.

Previous Feminist Research into Lone Motherhood

The historical development of lone parenting indicates that attitudes to and treatment of lone parents (particularly single mothers) have tended to be heavily dictated by political agendas and those of the mass media. However, much of the previous work on single parenting and the situation of families headed by mothers has developed through sociological research into changing family structures and ideologies.

In the 1970s Ferri and Robinson conducted extensive longitudinal research into the conditions in which children of one parent families lived (Ferri, 1976: 147-9). They concluded that the sex of the absent parent and the reason for the situation were of crucial importance to the family. Financial hardship was most likely to occur amongst unmarried mothers and least likely in the case of lone fathers and widows, and factors such as poverty, social class, family size and parental aspiration were more likely to impact on children than the number of parents.

As other studies before and after have also concluded, Ferri and Robinson found that children's well-being and development were most affected by the disruption caused to the family. Thus separation and divorce caused children more problems than bereavement in a stable home or those with one never married parent.

However, as they point out in their findings, their assessment of the children's progress was undertaken using statistical techniques to isolate the 'effects' of the family situation from other factors such as poverty and social environment. Without such supporting

evidence, the likelihood would have been that children from one-parent families would have appeared to do relatively less well than those from two-parent families:

There is a risk that, where teachers [and others involved with children in a practical setting] are unaware of children's home circumstances, the apparent poor showing of many from one-parent homes could be attributed to their family situation as such, thus giving rise to the self-fulfilling prophecy based on low expectations of children known to have come from one-parent families.
(Ferri, 1976: 148)

In other words, Ferri's research highlighted the importance of perception both by parent and teacher in the stigmatizing of children from lone parent families. Her findings showed that, while low income and poverty are the most important reasons for children struggling to achieve at school, the cause is more likely to be attributed to them being brought up in a lone parent family. Furthermore, Ferri points out that children in her research study were more likely to experience problems in mainstream society as a result of the "ambivalent and often negative attitudes" of a society which serves to isolate and discriminate against them, and the "apparent total inadequacies of the supportive services offered to one-parent families by official agencies" (op cit: 149).

More recently Melcher and Okongwu (1993) have explored the forces responsible for creating the rising number of female-headed and female supported households as well as the disproportionate representation of women and children amongst the world's poor. Drawing on examples from around the world, their book focuses on a number of factors that contribute to the growing phenomenon of isolation and poverty for mothers and their children. It concludes by recommending strategies to help women and offers policy recommendations for relieving the unequal burden borne by women around the world.

In 1991 Ann Phoenix's study of young single mothers in North London claimed that motherhood in young women might not be the social problem it is often considered to be. Her analysis of the lives of a group of mothers under 20 years of age concluded that their realities are very different from the socially constructed and negative stereotypes that are common in media representations. She concludes that poverty is the major problem faced by young mothers and refutes claims that teenage mothers jump council housing queues; most live with relatives or struggle in private accommodation. Yet, despite poverty and ambivalent attitudes to relationships and marriage, Phoenix argued that the subdued moral panic surrounding young women who become mothers in their teenage years is unjustified and that most do well despite the odds stacked up against them (1991:253). In the same way that Sharpe found that, with support from mothers, many girls were able to create a focus to their lives and gain a sense of identity, previously denied them (Sharpe, 1987), the girls in Phoenix's sample saw motherhood as a chance to redefine their self-concept. There has been little, if any, research into the self-perception of young single mothers and the representations of them by others although this would be a useful subject to develop. The positive effects of becoming a mother have been left generally unexplored although Maynes and Best note:

Sole parenting can be one of the few arenas in which a woman experiences herself as having a measure of control, and where she feels loved. (Maynes and Best, 1997: 125)

While such statements imply that that these women have few opportunities to succeed in their lives and that becoming single mothers is their only alternative, it is a view supported by the single mothers I interviewed who argued that they were determined to be successful parents although they tended to feel that they were failures in other areas of life. They were less supportive of the idea that having children gave them someone to love and fend for, and argued that being a young mother was not necessarily the

negative experience it is judged by others to be. They were keen to offer examples of why they felt they coped with and enjoyed the role:

I don't think that being young and on your own means you can't be a good mum. My mum brought me up okay and she had me when she was twenty and didn't have any help. Sally, 18. SM: 2001

I get on well with my family and I've got a lot of mates who I love so I don't think I need a baby to love me. I think that's a bit pathetic really. Lucy, 17. SM:2001

But people often think you do. I think people think you get pregnant to have a baby to love, but really you don't plan to get pregnant, it just happens by accident. Siobhan, 17. SM: 2001

I didn't choose to have a baby, but now I've had one, I think I'm doing alright. I get fed up sometimes but not like they make out on telly. It's nice being a mum most of the time. Carol, 19. SM: 2001

In contrast, however, in another ethnographic study of a group of 16 year old teenage mothers in Birmingham in the late 1980s, McRobbie found that the girls in her sample considered themselves to be in a situation from which it was difficult to escape. They found themselves living between family and boyfriends who often tended to move both themselves and their friends in once the girls managed to find accommodation of their own (1991:228).

McRobbie's research produced negative findings with the girls much more aware of their limitations and constraints. Interestingly, where Phoenix's research made little reference to media representations, McRobbie identified clear links between the girls' views of themselves and the young mothers they observed on television, and particularly on soap operas like *EastEnders*. Indeed the self-perceptions of the young girls seemed to be largely determined by comparing themselves to the representations of single mothers on screen:

None of these girls saw themselves as strong and determined go-it-alone single parents like Michelle in *EastEnders*. (McRobbie, 1991:228)

For them, the reality was more that of Mary the Catholic Punk who has to be bailed out of her problems by her disapproving mother and whose life spirals out of control due to her lack of family support or a respectable background. McRobbie's sample group tended to be supported by parents and few had jobs that paid more than a pittance, and certainly not enough to maintain an independent existence.

These ethnographic research projects highlight the difficulties of working with small sample groups of young mothers. Whilst it is possible to assess quality of life and level of deprivation through statistical material, it is much more difficult to objectify the perceptions of individuals, and to produce findings that are anything other than snapshots of modern life. Both studies allude to the 'feminisation of poverty' (McRobbie, 1991:234) but, while McRobbie acknowledges Phoenix's conclusions that poverty is really the main, and often the only, problem faced by young single mothers, she argues against the rosy picture painted by Phoenix of extended family networks:

Extended families are frequently *not* supportive. Sometimes, if her parents are strongly religious the girl is thrown out in disgrace. Often there is no mother to turn to as was the case with two of the Birmingham girls. In these circumstances young mothers become part of the new poor or the underclass in our society, living in 'bed and breakfasts' for years at a time and bringing up their children in unhealthy and cramped conditions. (McRobbie, 1991:231)

In her analysis of representations of motherhood in culture and melodrama E Ann Kaplan suggests that, in addition to empirical research into contemporary mothers and children conducted by feminists and sociologists such as Phoenix and McRobbie, there is still a need for a bringing together of a history of social discourses about motherhood, psychoanalytic approaches to mothering and the symbolic representations of maternity (Kaplan, 1991:5).

Silva's collection of accounts and analyses of historical patterns and social policies around family (focusing heavily on the experiences of lone mothers around the world) addresses two of Kaplan's trilogy of themes. There is an attempt to interpret the changing social perceptions of motherhood and cultural role of mothering, and a comparison between mothers and lone mothers as cultural constructions, identifying the often transient nature of lone motherhood as women enter and leave relationships (Silva, 1996).

Both McIntosh and Phoenix deconstruct social and cultural anxieties about the lone mother. McIntosh criticises "respected academics" on both sides of the Atlantic who have:

lent the weight of apparent sociological evidence in support of the belief that the children of lone parents do less well in life and cause more trouble than those brought up by their two biological parents, (McIntosh, 1996: 148)

while Phoenix uses current affairs programmes such as Panorama's *Babies on Benefits* and the American situation comedy *Murphy Brown* to argue that competing discourses have made lone motherhood a contested terrain both in politics and the media (Phoenix, 1996:176).

During the past decade, the issue of motherhood and the mother image has tentatively become a part of academic research into media and cultural discourses. The move towards disseminating the various approaches to the subject and myriad of images around one of the strongest and most subjective symbols of the human experience, has developed fairly slowly, a fact noted by Kaplan in the introduction to her analysis of the representation of motherhood in literature and film:

The Mother was in a sense everywhere –one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her – but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration. (Kaplan,1992:3)

Her examination of the mother in novels of the nineteenth century and films of the late 1980s addresses the proliferation of images of mothers within American culture and charts changing representations concluding that there is still much work to be done in this area of research. Kaplan uses a predominantly psychoanalytic approach to consider the differences between the historical and the unconscious imaginary mother, and argues that the complications inherent in using phallogentric discourses to address Oedipal fantasies, have meant that dominant representations of motherhood have tended to satisfy male desire more than female (1992:106).

Woodward's exploration of motherhood in terms of identity, meaning and myth (Woodward, 1997) attempts to site motherhood as a terrain of politically contested yet largely ignored identity. She employs psychoanalytic theories to highlight the construction of motherhood, how motherhood is positioned and how it is valued or devalued within symbolic and social systems (Woodward, 1997: 244), and suggests that the problematic relationship between the biological and social identities of motherhood creates a more complex field than is often acknowledged (op cit: 246).

Woodward analyses the representations of motherhood in modern women's magazines and uses the work of psychoanalysts, predominantly Irigaray and Kristeva (1984) to address different dimensions of "the dark continent" (Irigaray, 1991:35) of motherhood and concludes that psychoanalysis can only go part of the way to explaining concepts of maternalism, since it tends to suggest a universalism that historical, social and ethnic evidence challenges and denies (Woodward, 1997:282).

Similarly, Coward points towards an ambivalence in the way motherhood is portrayed in the news media particularly in the case of mothers who murder their children (Coward, 1997). She offers the view that during the 1980s discourses around mothering altered, largely as a result of feminism and the feminist drive to expose the difficulties of unsupported mothering.

This demystification of the joys of self-sacrificing motherhood was crucial in the formulation of feminist politics. (Coward, 1997:116)

Away from the feminist arena, mothers were glamorized in celebrity lifestyle magazines, promoting motherhood as an easy option for the rich and famous and largely ignoring the ongoing and daily hardships that many mothers (particularly single mothers) were facing. Coward attempts to re-open discourses on maternity and myths of motherhood and leaves the way open for further analysis of how mothers are represented in the press and other media.

Methods

As I stated at the start of the introduction to this thesis, my initial hypothesis was based on an argument propounded by Buckingham and others that the process of engaging with media texts is, by definition, an active one for the reader, and one that requires understanding of both the form and cultural context of the text itself. In addition, I wanted to explore ways by which the artifice inherent in any mediated product, in relation to lived experience or primary knowledge, impacted on interpretation of and relationship to the text. Thus I decided to use a combination of textual analysis and a relatively small scale sample of the audience.

While much of the research undertaken into the social realities of lone mothers and the myths that have arisen around them as a result of political, social and cultural discourses has touched on the ways in which they are represented in the mass media, there is little rigorous analysis of a range of modern cultural texts. Neither is there any empirical evidence of ways in which readers of such texts interpret the material they consume and decode information in relation to the knowledge they gather through personal experience as single mothers or through observed understanding from relatives, friends and peer group members. Each of these areas could form the basis for substantial research as individual topics in their own right, but I wanted to incorporate both within the clearly defined parameters of this research thesis and explore both texts and the interpretations placed on them by viewers.

The two styles of research methodology are contrasting approaches but each can illuminate as well as raise concerns about the other. Empirical research theorists have criticised textual analysis as too “subjective” and as ignoring the variety of interpretations made by different audiences and audience members. At the same time their work with audience members and sample groups is attacked for often appearing to ignore the processes of social signification and symbolic meaning construction that underpin the text and create cultural norms of understanding. Fairclough (1995) acknowledges some of these complexities and suggests that objections to textual and language analysis are framed around concerns that it puts undue emphasis on the text itself without considering the climate in which it is consumed :

a reaction against analyses of media texts which postulated meanings and effects, including ideological effects, without taking any account of how texts are actually received by audiences. (Fairclough, 1996:16)

Fairclough suggests that recent work on reception studies has started to accept that the construction of the text itself will affect and constrain the interpretations made by the reader of the text, and to this end, I decided to construct my own research using a combination of textual analysis and, albeit limited, audience research.

Cultural/Textual Analysis

Cultural studies research has tended to be grounded largely in socialist feminist theory (Van Zoonen, 1999:21) in which the oppression of women has been connected to capitalist modes of production. Yet cultural studies as a discipline has presented feminists with problems of definition and interpretation since the earliest days of the women's movement. Van Zoonen argues that feminist discourse has tended to present the media as making clear gender distinctions between men and women which are naturalised through the language and conventions of text and the relationships between text and audience (op cit, 22)

Roland Barthes' analysis of cultural texts attempted to challenge the 'naturalness' of text and to consider the methods used to convert bourgeois cultural values into 'universal nature' (Barthes, 1988:5). His book *Mythologies* published in 1957, attempted to uncover the secondary meanings inherent in all texts and often taken for granted or considered 'natural'. For Barthes, there is no such thing as true objectivity, the meaning of an object or text is in the codes and signs used to make it intelligible to a group. Mythologies are created to transform history into nature and to use signs, such as language, to construct meaning. As Saussure had earlier identified systems by which language itself could be organised in the process of creating a relationship between text

and reader, so Barthes considered the larger picture and attempted to explain the ways in which ideas and ideologies become naturalised into society and culture.

To this end he defined myth as “a system of communication that has a message” (Barthes, 1973:117), and claimed that the importance of the message lay not in its subject but in the way it was transmitted. Myth works through the relationships between form, concept and signification and it is during the formation of these relationships that distortion occurs:

Myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear ...in myth the meaning is distorted by the concept. (Barthes, 1972: 131-2)

Thus, the representation of woman (form) as mother (concept) involves a process by which varying levels of signification may be interwoven and distortion be created within cultural texts. Our definitions of a ‘good’ mother or a ‘bad’ mother are created through cultural discourses where knowledge and meaning are shared and shaped on a mass scale.

Livingstone (1990:58) suggests that myths consist of a number of recognised codes which include mythic narratives, organised around a single agent and a single perspective in which we all share the same understanding of good, evil and the value of the quest. From fairytale to soap opera, motherhood, then, is positioned in terms of good mothers, evil mothers and a culturally agreed set of ideologies around what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothering.

The telling of stories and the passing on of knowledge and of cultural norms from generation to generation, then, is a part of what the media is all about. The soap operas, situation comedies and films we consume during those times when we are often at our

most relaxed and receptive are the vehicles by which modern mythologies are transmitted and repeated until they assume an authenticity and reality that is rarely questioned. For such a process of naturalization and acceptance to be successful, it therefore follows that media representations will either use hegemonic methods of communicating messages as common sense 'truths', or they will create unrealistic alternatives that will 'prove' the inadequacy and, even, dangers of following other structures of belief. In the following chapters I will be considering how these messages and 'cultural lessons' are transmitted and interpreted by text and reader, and ask how easily the ideological messages sit with audiences whose lived experience offers alternative and often conflicting perceptions of the world.

During the 1970s Marxist theories of film analysis became subsumed within the framework of psychoanalytical study, a framework that has provided an often, controversial, paradigm for understanding the ideological constructs of popular film. Throughout the 1970s and into the 80s this paradigm provided film scholars with a unified basis for discourse, and even its fragmentation and proliferation into a number of complex and multi-faceted approaches during the 1980s did not prevent cine-psychoanalysis from coalescing around certain key principles and practices to form a central part of the discipline now known as Cultural Studies.

For psychoanalytic theorists the family is the site on which the primary experiences and conflicts that shape adult life are given meaning and absorbed into the concept of the self by which we come to know ourselves and others. Representations of motherhood go further than to simply re-state Judeo-Christian beliefs about the maternal role, and, from this perspective mythic structures recreate our deepest anxieties and fears about

gender roles and parenting. Frosh discusses the ways in which both Freud and Klein locate the father as central to a child's development. Freud positioned the father as rescuer of the child from the dangers of repressive absorption in the mother (Frosh, 1997:38), while in Kleinian thinking the father's relationship with the child develops through the internalised maternal object so the mother remains more central and powerful (Frosh, 1997:43). Julia Kristeva places the mother as central to the infant's desire whilst acknowledging Lacanian beliefs about the father's role by suggesting that the "loving mother" is:

someone who has an Object of desire; beyond that, she has an Other with relation to whom the Child will serve as a go-between ... Without the maternal 'diversion' towards a Third Party, the bodily exchange is abjection or devouring. (Kristeva, 1984: 251)

Kristeva chooses to reject Lacanian implications of a fixed symbolic order defined by the phallus and offers the proposition instead that the Third Party – the father – offers a space to support both infant and mother. Not only is the child incomplete without a father, but it is in danger of being unable to see itself as an entity separate from and different to the mother.

Psychoanalytic emphasis on repressed meaning has been criticised by scholars from other branches of study as being a means by which critics could "examine texts as much for what they displaced, condensed, or censored as for what they said" (Maltby, 427). For such critics, theorists such as Lacan, whose development of Freudian analysis into the mediations of language in the unconscious, provided the "means by which critics could generalise the unconscious beyond the site of the individual" (Maltby 427).

Psychoanalysis in cinema theory has considered each aspect of film construction. The ideological operation of the movie is considered in terms of 'representation' – the way it creates a version of the 'real' – and also in terms of the way the movie engages with the subconscious of the collective audience and the individual spectator. Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz have addressed questions about the pleasures of cinema going and considered the differing pleasures of masculine and feminine spectatorship.

Psychoanalytic theory has also reconsidered traditional areas of interest for film scholars by redirecting attention towards the movie image and the way meaning is constructed within narrative.

Using the psychoanalytic approach, narratives can be analysed in terms of their reference to Freudian, and particularly Oedipal modes of address, both within the text itself and in the method by which meaning is constructed by the spectator. Metz offered the theory that audiences decipher meaning by recalling key moments in personal development (Metz, 1982: 52-4), while Lacan compared the spectator's experience of identification with film reality to the 'mirror' stage of childhood development whereby the child acquires its sense of who it thinks it is (Easthope, 1996:12).

Where sociologists have traditionally accredited the spectator with conscious construction of meaning in film narrative, psychoanalysts have concentrated on the subconscious delusions offered up to the spectator by the cinematic apparatus surrounding them within the act of cinema-going. For Metz, the main identification in cinema is not with the characters but with the movie itself as a discourse (Metz, 1982: 96).

For a number of feminists the cinema experience enables the male spectator to revisit his sexual anxiety. Cook argues that the understanding called for by narrative cinema “involves a fear of women, disguised fetishistically as a controlled celebration of the female star, that narrative cinema invokes and then compensates for fears of castration” (Cook, 1999:348).

Mulvey points out that the “powerful look” of the camera, with which the spectator identifies, is directed at the figure of a woman, who “in narrative terms also, is thus given a place only as what is observed and controlled.” (op cit: 349).

In my chapter on representations of motherhood in film I have used psychoanalytic theory to examine styles of representation of motherhood and to consider how the “simplicity of characterisation and unambiguous delineation of villainy and virtue” (Warner, 1994: xviii) form the basis for so much of Hollywood’s output. In the horror film genre, for example, a genre which operates around human fear of the unknown and unknowable, subversions of the ‘good’ mother myth take us into the familiar territory of the ‘evil stepmother’ and enable motherhood to be presented as a source of terror. Using the same distinctions of sexuality to define good and bad, the metaphor becomes reality in films such as *Aliens* where:

the alien mother monster expresses the male fear of his mother and simultaneously carries the male fear of the pregnant fertile woman. (Roiphe, 1996: 140)

Sigourney Weaver’s character, Ripley, fights with the alien to claim maternal rights – female to female. Ripley represents both the masculine (in her appearance) and the feminine (in her adoption of the child). She is “the armed maiden of legend, but now with additional maternal responsibilities” (MacDonald, 1995:152). Yet Ripley is also

‘impregnated’ by the Alien and her ability to conceive becomes synonymous with her implied threat to her comrades. Her fecundity becomes a site of monstrous femininity and the subject of exploration of feminist critics such as Barbara Creed who suggest that her role is about finding ways of managing the threat to the masculine (Lacanian) Symbolic order posed by the woman-as-mother figure (Andermahr et al, 2000:172).

Fecundity and the “repulsively fecund mother-figure” known as the “monstrous feminine” (Andermahr et al, 2000:172) have fascinated writers like Bakhtin (1984) who depict her as grotesque and horrific, whilst for feminists such as Kristeva (1982) and Roiphe (1996) the image is more ambiguous. For Roiphe, the representation of the mother as monster who will destroy and consume in the search for food for her monster babies, is not too far distanced from representations of young mothers in tabloid press stories such as that of Mandy Allwood (News of the World, 10 August 1996; Mail on Sunday, 11 August 1996; Daily Express 12 August 1996).

I have applied the psychoanalytic model to film in order to examine the ways in which the mother image is presented in relation to the concept of the mother as Other and using some aspects of Oedipal analysis to consider strategies employed within media texts to reframe maternity as threatening and excessive when it is applied to the concept of the lone mother.

The Texts

In selecting the texts for analysis there were a number of criteria to be considered. The variety of cultural texts available to me was large and grew during the period of my research. Both America and Great Britain, for example, were producing increasing

numbers of films featuring lone parents (the reasons for which I have discussed in Chapter Five) while, an entirely new genre of romantic fiction was developing around divorcées and widows during the late 1990s; aimed at a voracious market of newly single women seeking reassurance that single motherhood need not signal the end of romance. On television single parents were appearing across all popular genres in increasing numbers: police series¹, hospital dramas² and children's drama³ have all incorporated alternative family structures as a staple element of dramatic patterning. I felt that it was important, in discussing readings of particular texts by one segment of the audience, to select texts that would not only have cultural resonance for the subject groups but that were more likely to be familiar to them. I also needed to select texts that would retain such familiarity to the young women over a period of years.

A second criteria that I considered in the selection of the texts used in the discussion groups was how the cultural capital and viewing competencies of young British viewers affect their reception of American texts. The Americanisation of British culture and the scheduling of American shows on prime-time British television has resulted in an audience which consumes and absorbs a greater amount of American cultural values than previous generations, and from a younger age (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 1995:8). Where Hoggart criticised the Americanisation of 1950s culture in Britain as intrinsically phoney, breeding a race of "passive, hedonistic barbarian[s]" (Hoggart, 1958:250), modern audiences both engage with and distance themselves from the messages and ideologies incorporated in American texts (Gauntlet and Hill, 1999).

¹ Samantha Nixon in *The Bill* is the most recent in a long line of single parent police officers that goes back to the 1970s and widowed Det Insp Maggie Forbes in *The Gentle Touch* for whom policing required similar skills to caring for her father and son.

² Series like *Casualty*, *Holby City* and the American series, *ER* have featured issues of lone parenting for major characters.

³ The dramatization of a number of children's books by the popular author Jacqueline Wilson featuring single mothers and fatherless children has become a staple part of children's television scheduling.

Thus it seemed more pertinent to select texts for the familiarity of message and ideological discourse incorporated than for the familiarity of cultural content. In both television and film texts the representations of femininity, motherhood and lone parenting were discussed in terms of the cultural beliefs they embodied or (on rare occasions) questioned.

What was clear from the outset was the understanding shown by the young women for the artifice inherent in the texts, and their knowledge of how and why narratives were structured as they were. They were easily able to explain and predict storylines and to use familiarity with generic convention to interpret the nuances of characterisation and plot.

The texts selected for discussion and analysis were, then, a combination of British and American, chosen for familiarity and for containing single mothers as key characters.

The films screened were *Erin Brockovich* (USA, 2000), *Jerry Maguire* (1996) *One Fine Day* (1996), *Stella Dallas* (1937) and its remake, *Stella* (1990). The American comedy shows were episodes from *Grace Under Fire* (episode 72: “Guess Who’s Not Coming for Lunch”; Episode 74: “This Sold House”) and *Sex and the City* (season 5, episode 5 “Plus One is the Loneliest Number”, Episode 6 “Critical Condition”). The British television shows were episodes from situation comedies *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC 1992-2003) and *Life After Birth* (ITV 1996) and soap operas *Coronation Street* (Granada 1960- present) and *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-present). The young women were all familiar with the British television shows and used this understanding as a basis for

their interpretations of the shows that they had not encountered before. Thus, for example, working class Grace was compared to some of the women in the soap operas, while the characters in *Sex and The City* (which was added in the last year of the research when Miranda's baby was born) were familiar to half the young women and often evaluated in terms of the extent to which the girls either envied or distanced themselves from the glamorous and monied lifestyles of the protagonists in the show.

Most of the young women had seen *Erin Brockovich* (again, introduced in the latter years of the research) and all of them had heard of the film and were keen to watch it as part of the discussion process. All but two had seen *One Fine Day* at least once, and one claimed that it was her "favorite film ever" and all of the young women had seen at least part of *Jerry Maguire*, certainly enough to feel confident about discussing the narrative and messages within the film.

The inclusion of *Stella Dallas* and *Stella* was more problematic. I was not surprised to find that none of the young women had watched either film and there was some initial reluctance to watching "some old-fashioned black and white weepie" (after the first group I decided to show *Stella* before *Stella Dallas* in the hopes that the story would win them over and encourage a more positive viewing. I also showed these last texts after the others in order that the women would be familiar with the style and process of the sessions and feel more comfortable discussing the older film. As it happened there were very few group members who did not profess to enjoy the text and to gain considerable pleasure from the melodrama.

Watching the texts with the groups and listening to their conversations as they watched the films and television shows helped me to understand the processes by which they engage with and interpret media texts and representations. It was frustrating at times to witness their apparently limited attention spans and the ease with which they appeared to detach themselves from the dramas being played out before them. At first I suspected that this reflected an inability to negotiate meaning from the texts and that their frequent lapses in concentration were a result of the distance between the lives they were watching on screen and their own experiences. However, as the research continued and my understanding grew of how young people engage with texts (that they consume ideas and messages very quickly and discard the extra visuals they deem unnecessary to overall understanding) I was able to relate to Hobson's experience twenty years earlier watching episodes of *Crossroads* with young mothers and their families (1982: 112-3).

Audience research

In previous media research into how audiences engage with and respond to texts there has been a tendency to concentrate on how mass media texts are consumed by young audiences, and to concentrate on the very young (up to sixteen years of age) and the way they make sense of or distance themselves from the messages they receive (or in some cases, with which they are bombarded). More recently it has been recognized that young people have sophisticated levels of ability in engaging with and constructing meaning out of the texts they consume, and that far from being passive and uncritical, as has previously been suggested, they are actively involved in interaction and negotiations with the mediated information and messages they receive (Buckingham, 1987; Gillespie, 1995).

The young women with whom I worked within the college environment were all aged between sixteen and nineteen years of age. In a sample that roughly reflected the demographics of the area from which they were drawn, the ethnic mix tended to be predominantly white with roughly twenty per cent of the groups made up of West Indian, Asian or Chinese extraction. I felt that it was important that all the girls were British born and raised because I wanted them to have an understanding of the genres of British soap opera and situation comedy, and to be able to relate to storylines from earlier in their lives. The majority of the young women could broadly be termed 'lower middle' or 'working class', and, while several had experienced some period of living in a household headed by a lone parent, almost all had been a part of a two parent household for some period of time during the formative years of birth and ten years old.

My own role in the sessions was designed to be as objective and unobtrusive as possible. I asked the questions, recorded responses and prompted the groups occasionally, particularly in the earlier part of sessions until the girls (who had reasonably limited knowledge of each other, being peers rather than friends) gained confidence in speaking in front of the group. I occasionally asked questions directed at a specific group member if I felt that she had been excluded from the discussion for a period of time or if I sensed that she had a point that she did not feel confident about interjecting. I was conscious that my relationship with the young women was quite a formal one due to my status as their teacher, but I explained the reasons for the sessions and encouraged them to see themselves as participating in work that would be useful to their studies but that was, in effect, completely isolated from their normal lessons. At the end of each session I asked the groups whether they felt that the discussions had reflected their feelings and whether they had felt comfortable with the process. I used

the responses from earlier sessions to guide later ones and found that small changes made (mainly to the environment) were effective in encouraging participation. For example, one or two of the young women mentioned that the sessions would feel less intimidating if they took place in more comfortable surroundings than a classroom. It was difficult to find a suitable area on campus, so I compromised by providing drinks and biscuits for the sessions, thus setting them apart from normal lessons where the consumption of food and drink is prohibited.

In the first session, I took a tape recorder and recorded the discussion. However, I found this to be a less effective method than recording the material in writing myself. The girls were extremely conscious of the recorder and found it intimidating even when only the microphone was in evidence! I considered bringing in a scribe to independently observe and record the discussion but felt that this might adversely affect the relationship between the girls and myself, and could prove more intimidating than the tape recorder. As it happened, the girls decided that my writing brief notes around their conversations provided us with a distance which liberated them enough to encourage a more energetic dialogue.

As their teacher I was aware that the girls might feel they should be telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. They were extremely interested in my research and my findings but any discussion about this took place informally once the formal element of the session was complete. The sessions were all conducted in the same way. They each lasted for around one and a half to two hours and the girls would begin by filling in the short questionnaire provided (see Appendices 1a and b for the questionnaire and findings, and Appendix 2 for further information about the make-up of the groups)

which was designed to give a small amount of information about their backgrounds and family structures. After this I showed the key text. In the case of the films, I used one session to screen the film in its entirety on a large screen in the college's screening room, and then followed up in a subsequent session with the questions and discussion. In the case of the television shows, I would screen one show, stop for some discussion, then develop points in relation to other shows screened later in the session and in its follow-up. Questions related directly to the text were developed into general questions about media representations of lone parents and single mothers. The prompt questions used can be found in Appendix 3.

The young women with whom I worked have been identified only by forename and age, and their opinions used to support or to contradict observations I have made from the analysis of texts (each comment is coded with the speaker's name, age at the time of the session, the group code and year in which the session was held). I wanted to use the comments to examine how young, relatively inexperienced female college students would interpret media constructions of single mothers in the light of regular and unremitting images within certain contexts and cultural frameworks.

Working within a feminist framework

Feminist researchers have tried over the years to create new models of research built upon an ideology of respect and equality. In 1981 Ann Oakley advocated that interviews should be guided by an ethic of commitment over detachment and egalitarianism over role differentiation between researcher and subject and in the years since, feminist research methodology has moved towards building relationships with subjects using engagement and self-disclosure as an alternative to traditional academic

methods which have favoured distance and objectivity (Reinharz, 1992: 29). This idea of downplaying one's professional status in order to gain the trust of the subject has been defended by feminist researchers over the last twenty years (McRobbie, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Skeggs, 1995; 1997) and validated on the basis that many feminist researchers engage on a deeply personal level with their subjects. In my own case, I felt reluctant to share with my subject groups my own position as a single mother of three boys, as I was concerned that such information might affect the responses the young women gave me. It seemed that the basis of my relationships with the women was inevitably unequal, delineated by status (teacher/student in some cases, middle class academic/working class and unemployed in others), age (my own age being quite clearly several decades older than the subjects') and role (researcher/subject), and that self-disclosure, unless it came naturally out of discussion, would seem forced, inappropriate and even embarrassing for my subjects.

Van Zoonen suggests that inequalities between researcher and subject are acute not only during the actual interview process but also in the phase of writing up their experiences into a set of results because, no matter how hard the feminist researcher tries to reduce the distance between herself and the subject, ultimately the authority and responsibility for the story told lies with the researcher (Van Zoonen, 1999:130). It is for this reason that feminist researchers tend towards the strategy of starting with issues that bother them personally, out of which they define research questions and processes to create a focus which is a blend of the personal and the intellectual (Reinharz, 1992:359). As a feminist and a single mother I was concerned as much with the methods used to isolate and attach blame for numerous social inequities at the feet of those least able to defend themselves: young mothers coping alone. Yet I did not see myself as representative of

the victims and I do not think that my interviewees did either. While our shared experiences as single mothers enabled us to identify over certain issues, there was always an acknowledgement between us that, as an educated, middle class woman, there were choices and opportunities open to me that were not available to the women in the mums and toddlers group. Indeed, even the establishment of the group served as a reminder of their isolation, since, despite the fact that the group had been set up specifically for the young women who had complained of feeling marginalised by traditional mums and tots groups which they perceived as essentially for middle class, married women, its existence confirmed the 'differences' between the conventional and the unconventional.

Ultimately it seemed to me that the real issues of difference were around class, and this became very clear when I compared the findings of sessions with the students and the young mothers. As McRobbie found in 1991, issues of class were not articulated by the women, rather they expressed their concerns in terms of issues of power and choice. The single mothers perceived themselves as having little control over their lives: their partners had left them (often for other women, which in itself contributes to general feelings of helplessness and powerlessness); they could barely cope financially (which in turn restricts choice) and, without partners or money they felt unable to plan for the future. In contrast they could clearly see that I had a good job, that I owned a car (a sign to them that I was financially stable) and that I was furthering my personal development through the research I was conducting with them (one group member was keen to know what I would be able to do as a result of gaining my doctorate, for her, the work denoted opportunity, choice and fiscal reward).

On the other hand, the young students tended to judge the single mothers they saw on screen in terms of the amount of choice they believed the women to have had. Thus middle class, professional mothers like Miranda in *Sex and the City* and Edina in *Absolutely Fabulous* were judged using different criteria from women who were considered to have less control over their lives: Grace in *Grace Under Fire*, Sarah Louise in *Coronation Street* and Stella in *Stella Dallas*. For both groups of women, the ultimate heroine was Erin Brockovich in whom they could identify the strength and single-mindedness to take control of a situation from which she was initially excluded and belittled (the legal system) and to wrest personal power from those who had denied her it (middle class professionals). My status as a middle class professional inevitably therefore provided a greater gulf than could be bridged by my status as a single mother since it was clear to all of us that, even without detailed self disclosure, I was in a privileged position of having a greater degree of both choice and control over my life.

Reinharz defends the use of self-disclosure as a means of initiating “true dialogue...by allowing participants to become ‘co-researchers’” (Reinharz, 1992: 33) but even she acknowledges that in some cases, self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer can confuse, intimidate or irritate subjects, causing them to pass judgement about the interviewer or to try to second guess what was expected of them, in either case affecting material gathered (op cit:33). I decided that I would not offer personal information about myself unless it came naturally out of discussion or I was asked a specific question. Interestingly I inevitably found myself disclosing information about my own circumstances with both the students and the young mothers’ group but for different reasons. The students enjoyed the process of finding out personal information about a teacher. Some already knew my status as a single mother and guessed (correctly that

this had influenced my choice of research subject in the first place. Those who were 'in the know' were able to disclose the information to other students in the groups and took pleasure in having superior knowledge to their peers. The girls chosen for the screening and interview sessions came to consider themselves as 'special' for being selected and they gave the impression that a closer relationship with the teacher/researcher based on disclosure, was part of the 'benefits' of being in the subject group. It was they, for example, rather than me, who suggested that any personal information divulged in the session would remain between myself and the group rather than be shared with other students. They also interpreted the availability of refreshments as a sign that their status was, albeit temporarily, altered from student (with the concomitant connotations attached to the status) to 'research assistant.'

The relationship with the young mothers was inevitably and profoundly different. To this group of eight young women I was a stranger intruding on a session that was important to them for their social and personal esteem. I was introduced to them by the health visitor who was a regular part of the group and whom the women trusted and respected. She was also, as it happened, a single mother and she introduced me as a personal friend with whom she had shared many of her own experiences as a lone parent. At the time I felt that too much information about me might alienate the women since, single mother or not, I was clearly separated from them in terms of experience, isolation and the amount of control I appeared to have over my life in comparison to them. In retrospect, I decided that the combination of my introduction via the auspices of a third party, known and trusted by the group, and their recognition of the elements of lone parenting that we all share, regardless of background (childcare, families, isolation and relationships) were ultimately more useful than problematic, and that the

issues that made them initially suspicious of me were more about class differences and an element of surprise that anyone might want to hear what they had to say.

The session with the young mothers, unlike the sessions conducted with the students, did not involve watching specific texts. I wanted to try to encourage a more generalised ‘conversation’ around the women’s own experiences of interpreting representations of single mothers in the media, and to discuss how they negotiated meanings in texts based on the relationship between the mothers they saw on screen and their own lives. Since I only had one opportunity to work with the women, I was aware that any relationship built with them would necessarily be transient and possibly perceived as superficial, a situation I was keen to avoid. To this end I asked to meet the group the week before the two hour session was due to take place in order that I could be introduced. I wanted to try to break the ice a little before the session by explaining my research and asking for their help, and to try to assure them that I was not intending to interrupt the important social aspect of the group or to impose value judgements on them or their situations. With the health visitor as my intermediary I tried in this short introductory meeting to encourage questions and to counter suspicion. Arendell suggests that feminist research inevitably requires some explanation of the “gender-based organisation of society with all its related inequities” (Arendell, 1986: 157), but I was cautious about imposing political ideology upon the inherently personal experiences (both lived and mediated through film and television) of the women.

McRobbie argues that feminism forces women to address their personal experiences behind their answers to our questions and theories in order to recognise what women from other age groups, classes, races and cultures bring to the table. Feminist research

can then be used to make those voices heard “as a weapon of political struggle” (McRobbie, 1991: 63). There was insufficient time in the one formal session I held to deviate into personal experience other than where it connected in some way to reactions to media representations. Certainly there was a degree of frustration and annoyance that “people like us” are portrayed as stereotypes in a significant amount of media output, but there was also a sense that the negative representations were perhaps deserved in some way:

I suppose we are breaking the rules a bit aren't we? I mean, we're not as bad as the [single mums] you read about in the paper but we're all on benefit and stuff aren't we? It'd be different if we had blokes, I think. Marcia, 19. SM: 2001

I am conscious that in choosing to maintain some level of distance from my research subjects through the decision to avoid self-disclosure unless information was specifically requested, and through my limited access to my subjects, I open myself to the criticism that I have chosen traditional, patriarchal methods of research over feminist ones. I would defend my research methods by arguing that there are times when feminists must accept that the differences between women of age, class and experience, may be greater than the similarities between us, and that, there is a real danger of patronising and insulting our subjects if we attempt to bridge the differences through the assumption of “oneness” on the grounds of gender or that “the often shaky notion of ‘shared femininity’” (McRobbie, 1991: 71) makes both researcher and subject part of a united ideology

Indeed, McRobbie's query about the relevance of the contemporary women's movement to 'ordinary' women and girls today (op cit:71) became a central question during my own research. It was noticeable that the term 'feminist' was used only three times and each time as a derogatory term:

I'd call her a feminist wouldn't you? She's ugly and doesn't seem to like men much. Angela, 17 talking about Miranda in *Sex and the City*. E 2002

She's like a feminist but she isn't one because she dresses too sexily. And she's got children.....Emma P, 17 talking about Erin Brockovich. E 2002

She's trying to be a feminist isn't she? That's why she doesn't like Jack and she just wants to be at work instead of looking after her boy. But the film shows that you can't be a feminist and have everything.....Kelly, 19 talking about Mel in *One Fine Day*. E 2002

This negative framing of feminism and value-laden interpretations of how feminism manifests itself in media representations meant that I had to assume that the young women's observations were drawn from a range of perspectives that did not acknowledge feminism as an ideology relevant to them or their lives despite my own belief that feminism and the work of the Women's Movement has underpinned every aspect of women's lives since the 1970s. Their judgments of characters were generally based on personality rather than circumstance and, almost without exception, they dismissed the idea that characters' actions might be mitigated by circumstance.

Van Zoonen identifies a similar reluctance to associate with 'feminism' amongst women in their early twenties who consider their struggles to be different to those of their mothers (1999:3) and suggests that a political fragmentation of feminism, both resulting from and contributing to the "multitudinous developments in feminist theory", means that a "consistent and homogenous approach" is no longer possible. She offers instead a set of common concepts for distinguishing feminism from other theoretical perspectives. Firstly the unconditional focus on analysing gender as a "mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them", and secondly the issue of power relations between groups, in order to consider how relations of subordination (both in terms of gender and ethnicity) are being constituted (op cit:4).

These were paradigms of interpretation that both restricted and liberated the way I worked during my research period. I have recorded the views of the young women as they were articulated where their comments clarify or support their views of the texts we watched and discussed. It is interesting to note how hesitant they were about expressing opinions and how often they phrased opinion as question, seeking confirmation from others in the group or from me - evidence of their low confidence, and in some cases, lack of experience, in speaking out in a public arena. McRobbie offers caution in the way feminist researchers respond to recorded speech, suggesting that the act of selecting and recording speech can change meaning or present bias (McRobbie, 1991:69). However, I felt it important to isolate particular comments from the general discussion and to work with the range of positions being offered while remaining aware of the ease with which words can be exploited:

Feminists have been particularly aware of the exploitative or patronizing propensity of these relationships and have asserted continuously that we must avoid such possibilities at all costs. (op cit:70).

What I found was that, during the five years in which I worked with the groups of students, the comments and observations made by the young women changed very little. Despite some changes in the ways in which single mothers were delineated, the responses tended to remain constant and, to a large extent, interwoven with the ideological messages being expounded across the media⁴. In general, the girls seemed to have accepted certain media 'truths', particularly those of young girls falling pregnant as an escape from unfulfilling jobs or to 'trap' boyfriends, or of middle class women choosing to bring up children without partners. However, and at the same time, they were almost all able to use examples of friends and family members who did not fit the

⁴ I had planned to compare responses made over the five year period in order to assess changing perceptions and representations, but found that the remarkably small difference in either fundamental responses or representations during the research became a key finding in itself.

stereotype of the single mother. Of the 50 young women with whom I worked over the period of the research every one was able to talk with confidence of a friend, acquaintance or close family member who was bringing up children alone. Thus the young women were able to accept the 'truths' they experienced through media representations whilst still being able to talk from personal knowledge about examples that defied the mediated 'realities' they experienced on screen and in print. This simultaneous engaging with and distancing from textual ideologies supports Buckingham's argument that young people have the skills to move between different positions of engagement, exercising a "considerable degree of autonomy in defining their relationship with television" (Buckingham, 1987: 200), and, in my research, with film as well.

Chapter Three: THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LONE PARENTING

The Incidence of Lone Parent Families

In 1995 the National Council for the One Parent Family published a Population Trends report that calculated that in 1992 there were 1.4 million one parent families in Great Britain with 2.2 million children living in them, suggesting that 21 per cent of all families with dependent children were headed by a lone parent of which 8.6 per cent were fathers. In families headed by lone mothers, over sixty per cent were separated, divorced or widowed, leaving around 35 per cent as never married single mothers.

By 1998 the percentage of lone parent families had risen to 22%, with ten per cent of lone parents being fathers. Only fifteen per cent of lone mothers had never married or lived with the child's father. The average age of single lone parents has risen steadily since 1988 and is now 34. Less than three per cent are lone mothers under 20; almost forty per cent are in their twenties and the rest are thirty or above. Lone fathers tend to be older, the largest proportion of lone fathers tending to be in their early forties, while the largest proportion of lone mothers are in their late twenties and early thirties.

The National Council for One Parent Families has identified that sixty per cent of lone parent families live below the poverty line and that forty per cent of children will spend some part of their lives living in a one parent family.

It may be useful at the outset to clarify terms and to attempt to define the term *lone parent*. The application of terms such as “unmarried mothers”, “single mums”, “single parents” and “lone parents” tends to be determined by the circumstances and context, with “unmarried mother” being used less and less in favour of “single mother” and its accompanying connotations within the popular media. The National Council for One-parent Families defines a “lone parent family” as one headed by only one parent whilst “single parents” may consist of one or two adults who live together outside of marriage. The European Union defines a lone parent as a parent who is not married or cohabiting, who may or may not be living with other individuals or groups (friends or family) and who is living with and responsible for at least one child under the age of 18.

Definitions carry with them connotations. Bortolaia Silva points out the “very significant” differences in the concept of the “female-headed household” used to identify lone mother families in developing countries, and “lone mother” as applied in developed ones. Whilst the former carries connotations of “responsibility and power”, the latter implies “abandonment and loneliness” (Silva, 1996: 3). I will be looking more closely at the applications of language and the mythologies that have grown around the concept of lone mothering in Western culture later in this thesis, but it is significant that cultural perceptions are based on a conceptualized framework of signification.

Whilst these definitions are open to interpretation, it may make the focus of this study, which is to consider media representations of women raising children alone on a full-time basis, more cogent if the term “lone parent” is used to define any parent, male or female,

bringing up children alone, and 'single mother' is used to define a woman bringing up a child or children alone. I will be considering in more detail the connotative implications and pejorative implications of the term 'single mother' and the ways in which lone mothers (whether divorced or unmarried) tend to be considered one amorphous group in the texts I analysed. Where other types of female lone parent are referred to in the text, I will use the more specific terminology of 'widow', or 'cohabiting female' since the terms themselves carry semiotic connotations within the media and society in general. Indeed, I will make reference to the hierarchy of lone parenting that has existed for many years and which places widows over divorcees and single mothers in terms of the ways in which they are represented and the level of sympathy with which they are treated.

The role of the mother, and to a much lesser extent the role of the lone mother, has been an important element of feminist research for many years. Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva explores the transformation of the status of motherhood within a framework of feminist perspectives on lone motherhood. She argues that "redefinition, recognition and the transformation of 'the mother' are part of the history of women" (Silva, 1996:10), and that feminists consider mothering to have been progressively socially devalued. The importance of marriage as a precursor to motherhood has, from the Middle Ages, been intrinsically linked to social and economic factors. Most women were expected to marry and the experience of motherhood was based around the role of wife and the realities of class expectations (Giles, 1995: 2).

Historically motherhood had no legal status until the late nineteenth century and lone mothers, deemed to be responsible for their situation and for their children's survival since, officially, illegitimate children did not exist,⁵ received little or no support. The Poor Law, established in Elizabethan England remained the primary method for dealing with unsupported single mothers until the nineteenth century although it did not change substantially until the insurance principle was introduced in 1911 and the emergence of the Welfare State in 1945 (Smart, 1996:49). Deserted and widowed women could expect to be taken into the workhouse, and outdoor relief set strict controls over behaviour with deductions made for 'improper' behaviour (Silva, 1996: 16). Unmarried mothers were considered to have behaved immorally and the bastardy laws were designed to reaffirm moral values particularly regarding female sexuality, as well as to save the costs of supporting illegitimate children. Unmarried mothers were forced to give up their babies to orphanages or workhouses while they looked for work or a husband, and were punished rather than supported for their situation. In extreme circumstances women were forced to keep their condition secret or, in desperation, to commit infanticide (Smart, 1995:49). Some were certified as insane and others sold their babies through advertisements (Silva, 1996:16-17).

The New Poor Law of 1834 attempted to promote female chastity by removing the woman's right to take her child's father to court to attempt to force him to marry her or to pay child support (Murray, 1984: 180). Even after the law was reversed ten years later,

⁵ Smart points out that it is only since the relatively recent emergence of the legal institution of motherhood that mothers have had any rights over their children, since only fathers and fatherhood existed in law (Smart, 1996:44)

growing urbanization and the mobility of the population meant that it was harder to find errant fathers and to rely on the community support that villages had often provided. Mortality rates for illegitimate children were estimated at around thirty per cent in babies under a year old, at least twice as high as babies born in wedlock, and Foundling Hospitals and orphanages would only accept children of mothers who had demonstrated previously “good character for Virtue, Sobriety, and Honesty” (Murray, 1984: 181) and who could prove that they had conceived through rape or a belief that they were in a relationship that would lead to marriage.

In the early part of the twentieth century only a very few progressive middle-class women were in a situation to rebel against convention and become “bachelor mothers” as a feminist alternative to marriage (Rover, 1970:132-9). Theirs was a political statement designed to combat the social stigma around illegitimacy and single motherhood and occurred in only a handful of cases.

In the 1940s, conservative familialism and Fabian social philosophy enduring from the previous century pressed to make motherhood more attractive and to support both married and unmarried mothers. After two wars and the significant loss of young men, concern over falling birth rates and the belief that this would adversely affect the nation as an imperial and world power forced the government to consider ways to encourage women to come out of the jobs they had taken up during the Second World War and embrace full-time motherhood. Family Allowances were given to enable mothers to stay at home and the child benefit system was introduced in 1948, although any sexual

relationship with a man was considered to make him responsible for the upkeep of both mother and children. Even single mothers were included in this allowance system as part of the new Beveridge system of “social insurance” (Silva, 1996: 19).⁶

In post-war Britain, the introduction of a national, means tested benefit system designed to support the most vulnerable in society, was based around recognition of the role of the mother as central to the reconstruction of the nation. However, this perception tended to be wrapped up in the presumption that married women were financially dependent upon their husbands. Unmarried mothers remained almost as vulnerable as before, since National Insurance and sickness/unemployment benefits were lost as soon as a woman left work and pregnant women, lacking any employment protection, tended to be sacked as soon as the pregnancy was made public (Smart, 1996: 51).

Illegitimacy rose at the end of the war to 10 per cent of live births in 1945, and then dropped to 5 per cent by 1950, remaining fairly consistent until the mid 1960s when it increased to 7 per cent rising to 9 per cent by 1976 (Lewis, 1992: 45). The introduction of Family Allowance in 1945, paid to the mother, enhanced the status of motherhood and, supported by research that appeared to show that children were psychologically damaged from being separated from their mothers, made it easier for divorced and separated mothers to keep their children. However, despite being entitled to the same allowances as widows, the stigma attached to illegitimacy continued to haunt single mothers who were still expected to give up their children for adoption and legitimization.

⁶ Indeed a letter that appeared in the Daily Mail in September 2003 referred to the fact that unmarried mothers without financial resources were allowed to keep their babies by granting them the same benefits as widowed mothers from 1948.

The increased availability of contraception after 1964 and the legalization of abortion after 1967 largely contributed to a decline in the number of unwanted pregnancies and pregnancies to very young women, and meant that lone mothers were more likely to be older and separated or divorced than never married teenagers. However, it was not until the 1970s that unmarried mothers began to see lone parenting as an alternative to adoption.

In 1974 the Finer Report, published by the Committee on One Parent Families, made substantial and radical proposals to extend the support offered to lone mothers from the welfare state (Smart, 1996: 53). It suggested an end to the hierarchy of lone motherhood that existed (from widows, through divorcees to never married women) and to treat all lone mothers equally, irrespective of how they came to be in their situation. More controversially the report also argued that the burden of supporting lone mothers should fall to the state:

The fact has to be faced that in a democratic society which cannot legislate (even if it could enforce) different rules of familial and sexual behaviour depending on the ability to pay for the consequences, the community has to bear much of the cost of broken homes and unmarried motherhood. (Lewis, 1995:28)

The proposals were deemed too expensive and extreme, and were never implemented, but they indicate the extent to which the issue of lone motherhood as a social 'problem' was beginning to be discussed in a more rational and reasonable way that continued throughout the 1970s.

However, by the 1980s, despite the continuing growth of lone parent families and the apparent lessening of the stigma attached to lone parenting socially, a combination of a

Conservative government with an increasingly articulated agenda to demonize lone mothers, and a rising movement dedicated to improving the rights of fathers and men in general, sought to challenge the status and rights of the lone mother (Smart, 1996: 54). A number of unsubstantiated studies conducted during the 1980s purported to indicate that children brought up without fathers were more likely to turn to crime and deviant activity, and to perpetuate a culture of subverting traditional family values. Fathers were no longer deemed simply financial providers and disciplinarians, but as equal to mothers as caring and nurturing parents.

This “renewed antipathy”(Smart, 1996: 55) towards lone mothers was reflected in several pieces of legislation that served once again to draw lines of distinction between married and unmarried mothers. Lone mothers were denied access to *in vitro* fertilization and the Child Support Act of 1991 aimed to force lone mothers to name the fathers of their children and for the state to recoup benefits paid to them by chasing absent fathers. It was a less than subtle attempt to promote marriage and traditional family structures that resulted in a multitude of newspaper and magazine articles reciting tales of acrimony and even violence between estranged couples who had previously managed to construct informal and ad hoc but successful arrangements between themselves.

By the early 1990s the number of lone parent households had trebled to 27% and continues to rise (Smart, 1996:52). Statistically the dramatic rise in children being born outside wedlock to a current level of around 39 per cent (Office of National Statistics, 2000), suggests that marriage and male support are no longer considered a major factor in

childbearing and that, despite the fact that male involvement makes a significant difference economically, women are choosing to bring up their children outside of marriage. However, even acknowledging that the majority of these children are born to unmarried but cohabiting couples, there has still been a threefold increase in children being raised by lone parents in thirty years. Greater freedom over the parameters of sexual behaviour, maternity and reproduction, alongside increased divorce, has given women a slightly greater measure of choice and control over both their fertility and social roles despite the patriarchal ideologies within which motherhood continues to be represented and judged. These changes have been seen by some sections of the mass media as a threat to social cohesion and a concern to family ideology:

Feckless women and irresponsible men know that the state – and the taxpayer – will always provide and the children produced by such people, tragically all too often find themselves on the same treadmill of dependency. (Daily Mail editorial, November 1995)

Now Blair gets Tough on Single Mothers. Up to 800,000 jobless single parents with children in school are to be *hauled* into Government employment offices to be found work, as part of a drive to end the *blight* of Britain's 'workless class' [*my emphases*]. (Observer, 1 June 1997: front page)

Traditional family values are being swept away by a wave of tolerance towards lone mothers, gay couples and unmarried parents threatening government plans to reinforce marriage and the nuclear family. (Observer, 25 October 1998: Front page)

There is a strongly held assumption that single mothers are selfish and irresponsible, or that they are predominantly feckless teenagers who fail to prevent conception or who use pregnancy as a means of being supported by the state:

Shock Rise in School Babies (Daily Mail, 11 December, 1998:1)

The ingredients of this story are a sad reflection on a society which boasts the highest rate of teenage pregnancy and has increasing numbers of children brought up by single mothers (Mail on Sunday, 3 January 1999: 13)

In reality, the official figures tell a different story. In 1966, the year before abortion was legalised in Britain, the number of live births recorded to teenage mothers in England and Wales was 87,000⁷. By 1997, the figure had fallen to 46,000 (Office of National Statistics, 2000). Only 3 per cent of lone parents are teenagers, the majority (sixty per cent) being separated or divorced women in their twenties and thirties with an average age of 34.

Furthermore, despite the proliferation of newspaper articles suggesting that single parenting is a lifestyle option chosen by women determined to live off the state, a survey in 1995 found that even among teenage lone mothers with no male support, none of the women had chosen their situation (National Council for One Parent Families, 1996). Most had started out in relationships that they believed to be long-term and committed, but had either been abandoned or left to escape domestic violence or the threat of violence to their children. According to the report, four out of five lone mothers were either married or had included a father's name on the child's birth certificate. Given that the law states that where a baby's parents are unmarried the father must be present in order to have his name included on the birth certificate, this suggests that in the majority of cases, there is some form of male involvement in the early days of most children's lives.

⁷ It should however be noted that this figure includes married teenage mothers as well as unmarried mothers. In the 1960s the average age of women marrying for the first time reached its lowest point.

In 1994 The Institute of Economic Affairs, dubbed by The Guardian newspaper as a “rightwing think-tank” (Guardian, 3 January 1995), published a report entitled *Farewell to the Family* that warned of the increasing threat to the traditional nuclear family from alternative arrangements, and to society from the delinquency of children from families headed by a lone parent. It claimed that a ‘mountain of research’ had shown that children brought up without two, married parents are more likely to suffer health and educational problems and to be delinquent and criminal. The influences of poverty, poor housing and interrupted education were seen as symptoms rather than contributory causes of this new underclass. Furthermore, the independence of women raising children without the support of men was leading to the emergence of a new ‘warrior class’ of young men with no ties or responsibilities to prevent them from turning to crime or antisocial behaviour. Thus lone mothers were to be held responsible not only for the deviant behaviour of their own children but also for the behaviour of the men they had apparently chosen to reject.

In her chapter on “feckless fathers”, Sallie Westwood suggests that the implication in Government rhetoric has long been that single parents and their children are a category apart from ‘the family’ rather than simply alternatives in the increasing diversity of family structures in Britain (Westwood, 1996:26). She suggests that the increased vilification of single mothers in the 1990s was in part an attempt by a government “eager to cut the welfare bill and recover the moral high ground of the family”.

It did so most controversially through the establishment of the Child Support Agency in 1993 with its concomitant emphasis on absent fathers and their role in children's lives. In a direct backlash to the Agency and its remit, men's groups fought back by further attacking motherhood and the women whose behaviour, they claimed, pushed men away. This issue of paternal responsibility became lost in a wider and heated debate over the apparent emasculation and isolation of devoted fathers by demonic ex-wives, despite the fact that many men remarried, produced second families and argued strongly that they had every right to abandon and cut maintenance to the children of the first family in order to afford their subsequent progeny. While media interest focused on the increasingly vocal and almost exclusively middle class, professional absent fathers, mothers were portrayed as delighted with a new system that effectively brought them in more money and hounded absent fathers until they were brought to justice. In reality women were less than happy with the Child Support Agency which they claimed bullied and intimidated many into naming (often violent) fathers and leaving them at the mercy of angry ex-partners. Informal arrangements between separated parents were disrupted and relationships destroyed and children affected adversely (Fox Harding, 1996:133-4).

Such attitudes were already being reflected in a resurgence of articles delineating single mothers as uncontrollable and anti-men (such as those discussed in more detail later in this thesis), once again placing the responsibility for family values firmly on the shoulders of mothers rather than on fathers. In the 1988 spring edition of *Arena* magazine, an article entitled "The Single Parent Fallacy: men are now the weakened sex", argues that, far from being wicked seducers, content to sleep with women and

abandon them if they became pregnant, men have been repositioned as the weakened and vulnerable sex. The author of the article describes a “bleak experiment in eugenics and selective lifestyle” with regard to a friend who had accidentally made an ex-girlfriend pregnant. Her decision to keep the baby and bring it up alone is derided as selfish and an example of the ‘inhumanity’ of women in general. The author, having established himself as rational and “completely aware of injustice in the gender divide”, then undermines the woman and women in general by suggesting that power relations between the sexes have been irreversibly altered and that men are left to suffer by ‘difficult’ women who could now make life changing decisions without consulting the men involved. Despite being given no information about exactly why his friend should feel so affronted - we are not told whether the man wanted the baby aborted, or whether he wanted to be a part of the child’s life (apart from presenting the friend as ‘manfully’ returning to be with her for the birth) - we are asked to share with both writer and friend in the horror of being no more than a sperm donor who must then live out his life in the knowledge that somewhere in the world is a child about whom he knows nothing (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988: 241-2). The point of such articles is to reinforce a perception of the apparent degradation of fatherhood and patriarchy by a warrior breed of women who, to all intents and purposes, rob men of their sperm and, later, their ‘rights’ to fatherhood, or indeed to not choosing to become fathers. Such debate came to a head in the late nineties with a series of well publicized cases of men fighting to prevent their ex-girlfriends aborting their unborn children, in effect, using legal systems to control women’s bodies and pregnancies.

However, in a report of a survey conducted on behalf of Sainsburys in 1994 which looked at family life and interviewed 14,000 people, it was suggested that lone parents shared exactly the same moral values and sense of parental responsibility as their married counterparts. Eighty-nine per cent of the lone parents interviewed said that they thought parents should take responsibility for their children up to the age of 16 and seventy-two per cent considered that parents should be fined for crimes committed by their children (Guardian, October 1994).

By the late 1990s, media awareness that the issue of family values was one guaranteed to generate heated reactions and consequently increase consumption, meant that lone parents became easy targets in the press and on television. Talkshow programmes such as *Kilroy* (BBC 1986-2004), *Trisha* (Anglia 1998-present), and *Esther* (BBC 1998-present) regularly encouraged their audiences to attack the morals and lifestyles of lone parents in shows with titles such as “Pregnant and I don’t know the father’s name” and “All my children have different fathers”. Emotive titles and excessive stereotypes were regularly used to delineate single mothers as deviant and devious. Even ‘serious’ news programmes used the subject to court controversy. When a question was asked about the Government’s document on family values on *Question Time* in November 1998, the subject of lone parents created the most heated debate of the evening with standard lines about benefit fraud and teenage mothers articulated by the largely middle class, educated audience of professionals.

Even children's television paid passing reference to the 'problems' of teenage pregnancy on magazine shows such as *Sort It Out*, on which the blame for pregnancy was laid firmly at the feet of the girls. The young people on the discussion panel espoused traditional and negative views of teen mothers and were asked whether they thought the fault lay with the mothers. The item, slotted between features on belly button piercing and whether spots should be squeezed or left alone, was less an indictment of how insignificant lone parenting is these days, and more a confirmation of a dominant ideology that believes that all teenage mothers must, by definition, be deviant (Phoenix, 1991).

Only occasionally did the subject get a constructive treatment, and this tended to be unexpected. In December 1998, a regional BBC programme, *Here and Now*, interviewed a woman who had given birth in her sixties and soon after found herself separated when her husband admitted to finding late fatherhood too demanding. The questions, all designed to demonstrate the negative aspects of late, lone motherhood, were fielded by the woman who clearly had no regrets, and given positive responses that suggested an awareness of the media agenda and the dominant discourses of maternity, and a determination to present her lifestyle in a very different way from that expected.

But it was the newspapers (particularly the tabloids) that most comprehensively supported the demonizing of single mothers with headlines such as:

Shame of lone parents who top the fraud league (Daily Mail, 28 November, 1998:19)

Single Mother City (Daily Mail, 11 July 1998:16-17)

Being Illegitimate once meant shame. Now it's common. What's changed? (Daily Mail, 3 January 1997: 23-4)

Both Conservative and Labour governments have been slow to recognise that demonizing single mothers is not a successful vote winner. It was not until October 2002 that the Conservatives declared 'an end to their war on lone parents'. Shadow work and pensions secretary, David Willetts told the party that it was time to stop blaming single mothers and start giving them support:

When they are not being ignored they are being blamed, when they are not being blamed they are being taxed. (Daily Mail, 9 October, 2002)

His pledge to 'support them and value them', made from the safety of the opposition party, is possibly the strongest sign yet that the demonisation of lone parents may no longer be reflective of a public in which one in four families is now headed by a lone parent. For this large portion of the electorate generalisations and accusations are irrelevant. For a segment of the population in which so many are unable to work and who live in poverty, ideological change is less important than economics.

It is likely that changing attitudes to lone mothers are due to two important influences. Firstly, with an estimated 40 per cent of children being brought up in lone parent households for some part of their lives it is increasingly likely that most people will come into contact with a lone parent at some point, and may experience the situation themselves for some period of their lives. It is much easier to attack an anonymous folk devil, or one with whom one is unlikely to come into contact. With the profile of lone

parents constantly rising in modern society, the single mother is no longer an invisible threat but a concept with form and substance.

Secondly, the increasing numbers of celebrity lone parents has brought the issue further into public consciousness. I will look more closely at the way that reporting of celebrity single mothers has been constructed by the media and how representations of those in the public eye have unsuccessfully endeavoured to perpetuate the myth of feckless and irresponsible behaviour, albeit without the element of poverty and unemployment to it.

There is a strong case to be made that, in a culture in which the cult of celebrity increasingly appears to provide a framework for assessing the validity and boundaries of behaviour, our perceptions and reactions to lone parenting are changing once again.

Certainly there is a suggestion in magazine articles with titles such as 'Going Solo: Heat celebrates the latest trend to hit the A List – the celebrity single mum' (Heat, 24 March 2001), are contributing to a culture in which single motherhood is seen to be an exotic lifestyle choice for women rich enough to break entrenched social rules and norms.

While the emphasis of my research has been on the British media and its methods of representing the single mother, I feel that it is important to consider how social attitudes to lone parenting in the United States are also relevant to cultural transmission of American material to other societies including the United Kingdom. In the United States political attitudes to single parenting have hardened and much of the British Conservative administration's 'Back to Basics' Policy came directly from a New Jersey initiative designed to get single mothers off benefit and into work (or simply to force

them into marriages or family dependency that they might not normally have chosen). The scheme, which refuses benefit to mothers who have a second child while still dependent on welfare, was used by Charles Murray in his discourse identifying lone mothers on benefit as a serious financial burden on the taxpayer, and exported from the United States to Britain “pretty much wholesale” (Roseneill and Mann, 1996:200)

Traditionally American social welfare policies have been shaped by a cultural ideology that believes in individual responsibility and sees those on welfare as “undeserving and dependent” (Millar, 1996:112). An early Aid programme, Aid to Dependent Children, was created in 1935 to provide cash assistance to children deprived of the support of one parent; generally the children of widowed mothers. This early programme was not intended to help parents find work because mothers were generally not expected to work outside the home (Bloom, 1996:4-5). Originally distinctions were made between those seen as capable of supporting themselves and their children and those who could not be expected to support a family without help, but public attitudes to the benefit programme have hardened over recent decades, largely due to social and cultural change. Firstly the number of people on the ADC programme increased from around 1 million in 1940 to more than 14 million in 1994 (MDRC, 2003) and secondly the composition of recipient characteristics has changed significantly. In 1940 about 85 percent of recipients were white and the children of widowed mothers⁸, by the mid-1990s less than 2 percent of cases were families headed by widowed parents, the majority being divorced and never married women. About half the cases were single, never married mothers and around 63

⁸ Initially the benefit was paid to children rather than to their parents, adults were not included in the calculations until 1950 (Bloom, 1996:4).

percent were non-white or Hispanic, a statistic that created a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst Americans and formed the basis for major change to the system by the mid 1990s⁹ (Bloom, 1996: 9).

In the early 1990s several states developed a policy which offered lone parents benefit for the first child but nothing for subsequent illegitimate children, as an incentive to encourage women not to continue to raise children alone. It resulted in increased poverty for the most vulnerable elements of the community, particularly for women from ethnic minorities who were often less likely to have family support around them.

In 1996 radical changes were made to Federal Welfare Law which aimed to reduce welfare dependence and create effective work strategies. At this time approximately 11.9 million people (8.2 million of them children) were receiving welfare, less than 5 percent of the total population of the United States and less than ten percent of AFDC families were headed by teenage mothers, the majority being divorced women receiving no official child support payment from the father. The drive to force single parents on welfare into work led to a series of programmes that gave jobs to mothers with low levels of education and skills or who were suffering from emotional problems relating to domestic violence, childcare issues and mental illness, problems:

likely to be exacerbated by the types of jobs recipients typically find. Such positions are unlikely to provide fringe benefits such as paid sick days, and may offer little flexibility to allow employees to deal with personal or family issues. (Bloom, 1996:10)

⁹ Garin, Molyneux and DiVall's research into public attitudes to Welfare Reform found that 79% of respondents from differing racial and political backgrounds felt that the welfare system did not work, discouraging work and causing family break-up (Garin, Molyneux and DiVall, 1994)

Such jobs often resulted in women being transported to workplaces in other states which affected the amount of time they could spend with their children and led to several high profile cases of children being left at home alone.

Roseneill and Mann offer two substantial differences between anti-lone-mother rhetoric in Britain and in the United States (Roseneill and Mann, 1996:201). They suggest that in the United States there is a racialised element to discourses that is not apparent in Britain. Black American women who gave birth outside marriage were expressing their “natural” and “unrestrained sexuality” whilst white women were seen to be “maladjusted and in need of help”. Illegitimate white babies were removed from their mothers as a first step to ‘helping’ the mother to ‘readjust’ and given up for adoption¹⁰ while illegitimate black babies, in less demand by adoptive parents, were left with their mothers (considered not to be in need of ‘curing’) to become the focus of racist discourse about the social liability of black illegitimate children (op cit: 202). As a result, black women became the first group to receive birth control, abortion and sterilization (even when they were unwilling).

Secondly, Roseneill and Mann suggest that it has been more difficult to translate discourses against lone mothers into policy in Britain than it has been in the United States. This is partly due to the higher incidence of lone mothers under twenty in the USA in the mid-1990s which, combined with the political and cultural strength of the American right wing, has enabled the discourse to be pushed further than in Britain, and for political rhetoric to be translated into policy proposals that more actively discriminate

¹⁰ In the 1950s unmarried women were positively regarded as non-mothers if they gave up their children for adoption (Bortolaia Silva, 1996:12).

against lone mothers (op cit 202-3). In Britain, social policy has tended to disproportionately affect single mothers but has not been directly aimed at them.

The racist element to American discourses about lone parenting can clearly be seen in Michael Medved's attack on the "complacency" of the American Entertainment Industry which he accuses of "sleaze and self-indulgence" ((Medved, 1992: 8). Medved suggests that media representations of American family life do not reflect the situation in society and considers that, across the United States "traditional patterns of family life remain *surprisingly* [my italics] intact", making reference to 1990 figures from the American Census Bureau which state that 72.5 per cent of all children in the country under eighteen currently live with both parents. Medved develops this statistic by claiming that among the white majority in the United States, 79 per cent of all children live in two-parent homes; yet in the Afro-American community, the figure is just 37.7 per cent. He suggests that this is a major contributing factor to a host of social problems that can only be tackled by "defending and enlarging the percentage of these intact, traditional, two-parent families" (op cit:145), an effort in which Hollywood should be playing an important part in his view.

Medved, like so many of the white middle class Americans he purports to represent, equates single parenting with "a host of social problems" without considering the other related reasons such as poverty, lack of education or access to contraception. However, Medved believes that there is evidence to support his views:

Despite the fact that experimentation in out-of-wedlock childrearing is temporarily trendy, the evidence is overwhelming that such arrangements are

disastrous for the children involved. In 1985 a major research project by Stanford University's Center for the Study of Youth Development showed conclusively that children in single-parent families have higher arrest rates, more disciplinary problems in school and a greater tendency to smoke and run away from home than do their peers who live with both parents - *no matter what their income, race, or ethnicity* [Medved's italics]. (op cit: 145)

He also claims that data gathered by U.S. *News and World Report* (June 1992) from the National Center for Children in Poverty, the American Enterprise Institute and the National Center for Criminal Justice, demonstrates "some of the *devastating handicaps* [my italics] faced by the offspring of unwed mothers" who are apparently more than twice as likely to repeat a grade in school (33 per cent to 13 per cent) than children living with both parents; more than three times more likely (17 per cent to 5 per cent) to be suspended or expelled from school; and more than four times more likely to be assigned to a juvenile correctional facility.

Amazingly enough, children raised by never-married mothers were nearly three times more likely (39 per cent to 14 per cent) to spend more than ten years on welfare than *children raised by divorced single mothers*. [Medved's italics] (op cit:145)

Right Wing ideology has produced a simple answer to the social 'problems' in America:

There is only one way to stop the epidemic of illegitimacy and the resulting poverty among children - and that is to bring back the stigma of unwed motherhood. The TV writers are moving in the opposite direction. They may congratulate them-selves for being brave - but what they really are is pernicious. (Mona Charen cited in Medved, 1992:146)

Problematizing the single mother

So why has the motif of the single teenage mother remained such a potent one? From the image of the seduced, abandoned fallen woman to the more recent soap opera incarnation of the manipulative harpy using her sexuality as a weapon and her fertility to ensnare men, single mothers have been used in popular culture to sermonise and demonise.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the media's treatment of 'real' lone mothers in newspaper and magazine journalism. My research considers how the issue has been represented as political and how the subject has become a site through which a succession of government discourses and ideologies on families and parenting have been expounded.

The issue of lone parenting is politicised through both the government and the media. Lone parenting tends to sit high on political agendas, used in discourses on poverty, economic, social and moral issues. Terms such as 'the unemployed' and 'the elderly' are often used as umbrella descriptions of a large amorphous social group; the term 'single mother' enables politicians particularly to make reference to those who are isolated from mainstream society in terms of money, education and moral values. In the representation of single mothers in terms of 'folk devils,' the key difference between single mothers as a category and the other 'sub-groups' mentioned above is that, for single mothers, there is the implication of choice, both in conceiving and in taking on the role of lone parent.

Myra MacDonald suggests that discourses about mothering have frequently been deployed to serve the interests of the state and the economy. She argues that, "spurred by worries about moral decline, increasing crime, and the reliance on a shrinking welfare purse of a growing number of young families" (1995:135), politicians have put together a 'moral rhetoric' of family values which has been taken up by the media and developed into a panic about young single mothers opting to bring up children alone. The hysteria was whipped up further by several newspapers reporting stories about single women leaving their children alone whilst they enjoyed themselves (most of which turned out to

be unsubstantiated) until the demonisation of single mothers gained an element of respectability as a Panorama documentary entitled, *Babies on Benefits* (BBC:20 September 1993), which claimed to be able identify whole estates of single mothers bringing up their children on state handouts and apparently rejecting paternal involvement. The fathers of the children remained mainly invisible, and the few chosen as representative of fathers in the documentary were quick to complain of their ejection from the family unit, once again implying that male involvement is limited to impregnation after which point he is invalidated. It was interesting that the interviews with the token males took place in pubs, signifying perhaps the last bastion of masculinity where the hounded might remain safe.

The Panorama programme chose to follow a line of representation of lone parents favoured by most newspapers and politicians. By generalising and selecting only the information which would confirm the stereotype of the scheming unmarried mother choosing state support over a husband, they consistently ignore widely available statistics which indicate that only a third of lone parents consist of single, never married women.

Several elements of the mass media have long adopted the self-appointed role of arbiter and upholder of public morality. In 1972 Jock Young and Stanley Cohen were the first to identify the ease with which the media were able to construct folk devils out of groups of young people perceived as deviant and dangerous. Using the mods and rockers of the 1960s as an example, Cohen demonstrated that when a situation or group of people

emerged to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests, the nature of the threat became stylised and stereotyped by the media:

The moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially credited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen, 1972: 9)

Cohen defines deviance as:

Not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label. (op cit: 13)

Using Cohen's five determinants of what constitutes a moral panic, I set out to consider the representation of single motherhood within the paradigm of a moral panic and to attempt to establish whether the media had managed to create folk devils out of single mothers. Firstly, Cohen suggests that concern over a group's behaviour and the consequences of the behaviour is raised through public opinion polls, media attention and proposed legislation. Such attention is presented as a legitimate response to the perceived threat. Concern over the behaviour of single mothers and their children will be shown to have dominated some areas of the media and to have formed the basis for the now infamous 'Back to Basics' policy of Conservative Governments of the 1990s. Woodward points out that negative representations of single mothers are to be found in the rhetoric of both the left and right wing and that both extremes promote family values in their most traditional sense. By creating concern over single mothers, representations may be constructed of motherhood which position women within a political and moral discourse (Woodward, 1997: 260).

Cohen's second determinant is that hostility to the group increases and its members are collectively designated as the enemy of respectable society. The division is then made between the 'us' (good and respectable) and the 'them' (deviants, outsiders, undesirables) and the resulting stereotyping generates the idea of the folk devil. In order to assign lone parenting as a social problem, the media has tended to concentrate on the issue of the teenage mother and the threat of the Amazon mother who chooses to parent alone. The threat of the single mother thus becomes a collective threat to men and masculinity within the family, and a myriad of articles about the future of fatherhood and the undesirability of raising children without men have stereotyped women bringing up children alone as an attack on men in general.

Thirdly, for an issue to become a real moral panic, a substantial segment of society must perceive the group and its behaviour as a serious threat, a result, generally, of an overestimation of the size of the 'problem'. Statistically, there is no question that there are currently more lone parent families in the United Kingdom than there have ever been before, and that one in four families is now headed by a lone parent. By stereotyping lone parent families as teenage single mothers, however, the statistic takes on a more sinister meaning, that of the young pregnant girl, happy to live on benefit and jump housing queues:

Contemporary political discourses frequently give expression to anxieties about the family and the threat to social cohesion and stability which it is claimed that family breakdown and in particular single motherhood presents. (Woodward, 1997:250)

This overestimation, more apparent in the United States than in Britain, constitutes the fourth stage of a moral panic.

Finally, the fifth stage requires that a moral panic remains volatile, erupting and usually subsiding fairly quickly with hostility rarely sustained for long. The important thing is that the moral panic locates a 'folk devil', that it is shared by a number of agencies, that it is out of synch with the measurable seriousness of the condition from which it emerges, and that it varies in intensity over time (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994:34). Antipathy to single mothers is a regular element of both right and left wing rhetoric and the level of perceived threat by single mothers tends to intensify when issues such as crime, benefit spending, social upheaval and sexual behaviours are highlighted by politicians and the press. In a patriarchal society lone parenting by (often young) women presents a tangible threat to social order and to gender roles and relationships.

Cohen suggests that every society holds sets of ideas about what causes deviation from established norms and a set of images of what the typical deviant is like. These conceptions will determine how the behaviour is dealt with. Where the deviation is seen to break legal boundaries and to sit outside the norms of right and wrong, the social consensus tends towards a need for punishment and retribution. In the case of the single mother however, the deviance is harder to define and the treatment of the behaviour, more difficult to determine.

Cohen's view that the media contributes to defining and shaping a social problem is particularly important in the analysis of the extent to which single motherhood has been problematised. Despite the findings of a report by the Rowntree Foundation that the absence of a parental figure was not the most influential feature on a child's

development, and that the two biggest factors that most adversely affect children were poverty and conflict between parents, there is a fundamental ideology that fathers are crucial to a child's healthy development:

We've lost the critique somewhere that parenting is impossible when it's done on a single basis ... Part of the reason we've lost that critique is because of the attack on single mothers. (Orbach, 1997:95)

Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest that moral panics tie together concepts from a variety of disparate areas – deviance, crime, collective behaviour, social problems and social movements. They are used to “clarify [the] normative contours and moral boundaries” of the society in which they occur and to demonstrate the parameters of tolerance towards diversity in a society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

While diversity may be paid lip-service in a multi-cultural society, the concept of lone parenting breaches the fundamental tenets of Judeo-Christian, patriarchal, capitalist ideologies that situate marriage as the foundation of a civilised society and as a social control for femininity and fertility. Lone mothers are frequently positioned as promiscuous, with regularly changing partners fathering increasing numbers of children, and challenging traditional perceptions of family values. Family life, under the patriarchal control of a father or father figure, is perceived as synonymous with order, conformity and responsibility (Jewson, 1994:2). Thus, any other type of family becomes deviant, unnatural, flawed and even threatening to the norm, and must be controlled through demonisation and the creation of the moral panic:

Single mothers ...are currently being blamed for everything from truancy to exam failure to murder. (Smith, 1997:105)

For Cohen, a key element in the creation of a moral panic is symbolisation and the process by which it occurs. He suggests that the creation of media stereotypes, of which the single mother is a modern example, relies on the “symbolic power of words and images” (Cohen, 1972: 40). A term comes to symbolise a delinquent or deviant status, objects or actions symbolise the term and then the objects or actions themselves become symbolic of the deviant status and the emotions attached to the status. The final stage of symbolism occurs when the labels require no explanation and become naturalised terms of abuse.

Through this process the term ‘single mother’ may be seen to have become a symbol for the deviance of teenagers who are believed to enter motherhood as a lifestyle choice and as a means by which state benefits may be obtained. The term is now used on a regular basis as a short-cut explanation for a whole range of deviant behaviours. Newspaper articles about ‘latchkey children’ (an emotive term conceived to describe children returning from school to empty houses), home alone children and teenage delinquency, inevitably make some reference to single mothers. A recent story about a schoolgirl sent home from school for wearing thong-style underwear referred to her ‘single-parent’ mother to symbolise the apparent deviance of the teenager’s homelife. In comparison, the head teacher, referred to throughout as Miss Harrison, represents middle-class, consensus values in her refusal to allow ‘deviant’ behaviour in her school (Daily Mail, 27 May 2003).

Symbolisation is used to explain ambiguous behaviour and make it easier to rationalise and apportion blame. For example, the child left alone while the mother goes on holiday is abandoned *because* the mother is a lone parent rather than for other, more complicated or socially accountable reasons. The term 'single mother' used in a pejorative sense, negates the need to explore or explain; the behaviour becomes a recognised feature of the deviant status and the implied message is that any single mother might do the same thing.

Cohen defines this process as part of the cumulative effects of symbolisation whereby first the expectation is created that particular behaviour will occur as part of the deviation. Later, once a "wholly negative symbolization" is created around a group and behaviours associated with it, full-scale demonology can develop enabling the group to become a contemporary folk devil (Cohen, 1972: 44). In the case of the single mother, reports of feckless teenagers trying to gain council housing by falling pregnant, irresponsible women partying or holidaying while their children remain at home alone, and fraudulent activity allow the media and successive governments to maintain the myth of "aberrant maternity" (Warner, 1994:13)¹¹.

In demonising a group there is a requirement that the media over-reports an event and exaggerates both the event and its seriousness (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 24). A folk devil is a symbol divested of all favorable characteristics and imparted with exclusively negative ones, a process by which "images are made sharper than reality" (Cohen, 1972: 43). Thus single mothers are represented as licentious, greedy and stupid –

¹¹ Demonisation is used as a means to reduce ambiguity in lifestyle and behaviour, and to reassure the majority by attributing blame to isolated groups such as the homeless, asylum seekers and travellers.

simple unambiguous traits that emanate from character faults – reducing the need to evaluate effects of poverty, divorce, isolation and sexual inequalities that continue to allow young men to avoid their responsibilities.

Folk devils' actions are deemed selfish and harmful to society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 28). In 1995 Frank Field, Labour MP for Birkenhead and Chairman of a Commons Select Committee considering the issues of lone parenting and poverty, claimed that lone parenthood had replaced unemployment as the biggest cause of poverty. He was quoted in the Daily Mail (May 1995) as suggesting that the 'trend' now is for young single women to have children by young men who are permanently "unemployed, without money and not very marriageable" which "reinforces the trend of younger women thinking it's better to make it on their own" (Daily Mail, 24 November 1995). Not only does the Daily Mail article concentrate on the emasculation of young men who will never work, who continue to live with their parents without rights to any benefit and pushed into 'prolonged adolescence', but the general tone makes the point that this situation is the fault of the young women who mate and then reject the fathers of their babies. There is an implied calculation in such behaviour which reinforces the unsubstantiated stereotype of young women becoming impregnated by passing males in order to be housed and funded by the State, and this particular article takes the image of the Black Widow spider a stage further. Not only do these women 'use' unsuspecting males for procreation, but they leave them apparently pretty much useless for anything other than the life of prolonged adolescence identified by Frank Field.

An article in The Guardian about the same Select Committee report, included the same statistics and comments from Frank Field and other MPs but made no reference to young women getting pregnant by unemployed young men. While this suggests that the hostility in the Daily Mail article reflects the politics of the paper rather than the politician, the tone is designed to express concern and hostility towards single mothers through references to “feckless women and irresponsible men” on “the treadmill of dependency”. Such articles aim to create a moral and intellectual distance between the reader and the deviant group.

The Daily Mail’s style and focus of reporting stories about single mothers is a good example of the way that moral panics are established. There is an implied threat to the values and morals of the rest of society and a crusading tone to the rhetoric that suggests that the newspaper will lead the way on behalf of ‘right thinking people’ (readers of the Daily Mail) in exposing this underclass and demanding that something be done to eradicate it. McNair suggests that reporting a perceived problem labels it as socially meaningful (a problem) and that:

The mobilisation of society around hitherto neglected problems can be one of the most positive effects of journalism or, as in the case of moral panics, it may be judged unhelpful to the sensible administration of society. Often those labeled as ‘folk devils’ in moral panics suffer discrimination and harm as a result. (McNair, 2002:55)

Certainly the attitude of the Daily Mail to the ‘problem’ of family breakdown and lone parenting suggests a concerted effort on the part of the newspaper to create concern and even fear out of alternative family lifestyles that threaten patriarchal structures but which appear to be condoned by the authorities. It is an attitude that Smith considers to be

indicative of a moral climate that scapegoats mothers rather than face up to unpalatable truths about absent fathers (Smith, 1997: 115).

McNair argues that “journalism has the power to make things visible to the public and thus to make them important” (McNair, 2002:49). Journalists give events social meaning and construct them as real for society as a whole. In other words, our concerns about the world are not so much about what is happening but about what journalists *tell us* is happening, a process McNair considers to have huge implications for social action. He points out that while it is almost impossible to influence what people think, it is relatively easy to control what people think about and that the process of gatekeeping in journalism means that it becomes relatively easy to control attitude and belief.

The agenda-setting approach confers on journalism the important function of watchdog on the public’s behalf; warning about dangers as they arise, facilitating discussion of the possible responses and representing public concern to the politicians. In many cases, however, the ‘dangers’ or problems exposed by the news coverage turn out to have far less statistical significance than the quantity and quality of their coverage would suggest. (McNair, 2002: 51)

If we apply Cohen’s criteria for constructing moral panics out of social phenomena, McNair’s views on the role of the journalist in constructing a ‘problematic reality’ should be a key element in the extent to which public anxiety is generated and an official response is expected. News stories identified in this chapter suggest that issues promoted for public concern, are, at best spurious, and at worst, designed to be read in isolation from social, economic and political agendas.

In an article provocatively entitled “Shame of Lone Parents who top the Fraud League”, The Daily Mail reveals statistics suggesting that “Single mothers head a worrying

catalogue of benefit fraud and waste costing the taxpayer nearly £1 billion a year". The article further suggests that "one in ten lone parents is fiddling income support as opposed to an average of one in twenty among all recipients of the benefit" and one in fifty for pensioners "whose far smaller claims are usually caused through confusion over such areas as savings" (Daily Mail, 28 November 1998: 19).

The implication here is that pensioners (with savings, an emblem of respectability) make genuine mistakes whilst single mothers actively look for ways to defraud the benefits system. The "shame", then, in the headline, is clearly not being expressed by the lone parents themselves but by the rest of us, those inside the system who are being required to support their criminal ways.

Such rhetoric also implies that all single mothers may be implicated in the fraudulent behaviour rather than clarifying the specific group, *some* single mothers on benefit. This reinforces the twin assumptions that all single mothers are supported by the state and that single motherhood, by its very nature, constitutes and results in deviant behaviour.

An examination of the exact nature of the deviant behaviour indicates that the most common form of deception involves living with a partner but not declaring the cohabitation. Given the transient nature of many relationships, particularly where poverty and unemployment have created an underclass with its own set of cultural and moral values that differs significantly from that of the middle class, it is possible the 'deception'

is more likely to be oversight due to these patterns of temporary and short-term cohabiting rather than as a deliberate action designed to defraud the State.

The Daily Mail is particularly vitriolic in its continuous attacks on single mothers. In July 1998 it featured a double page spread entitled “Single Mother City” which identified the town of Knowsley in Merseyside as:

the illegitimacy capital of Britain with nearly sixty per cent of all babies born outside marriage – a high proportion of them to single mothers (Daily Mail, 11 July 1998:pp16-17)

and asking the question: ‘So what has gone wrong?’

The highly emotive piece begins with the suggestion of street kids roaming the area:

No-one visiting Knowsley can fail to notice the children. They are everywhere, in the shops, running down the pavements, lingering on street corners ...Every girl above school age seems to have a child, or two or three. (op cit)

To reinforce the image of feral children running wild on the streets, the photograph accompanying the feature depicts three young mothers in the middle of a gloomy, council estate. Each pushes a buggy and one has a toddler clinging to her hand while, behind them, metal fencing creates the impression of a compound.

The young mothers of Knowsley are presented as a metonym of a larger ‘problem’. The Mail argues: “Single mothers and the dependency culture that surrounds them is perhaps the most pressing social problem this country faces”. The journalist asks the ‘baffling’ question “so just what has gone wrong in Knowsley?” despite the fact that there is little evidence that the situation is perceived as a problem by anyone else:

Amazingly Karen's view that the State should be responsible for her behaviour appears to be backed by Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Labour Council. When asked how it is dealing with the problem of the highest rate of unmarried mothers in Britain, Press Officer Karen Vaughan is outraged: 'We don't see it as a problem. Why should it be a problem ... I don't understand why you think it is.' (op cit)

Furthermore the area is described by locals as 'a pretty good place to live' with large designated greenbelt areas. The reference to 'pockets of deprivation' suggests that, as far as the local population is concerned, the town is no better nor worse than anywhere else. In other words it is a fairly typical predominantly middle-class town and the young mothers are presented as being some form of threat to the 'respectable' inhabitants of the area. Throughout the two page spread there is no reference to any outraged locals, only the women themselves, and one errant father, are included in the feature, another hint of the disingenuousness of the discourse. Thus the concept of the 'social problem' referred to in the editorial is addressed to specific segments of the readership: those whose political ideologies align with those of the newspaper.

The Daily Mail is an overtly political, moralistic newspaper described as never having been content with reporting the news without being at the centre of it, "proving its potency" (Engel, 1996:71). It has no qualms about passing judgement on groups deemed deviant and the demonizing of lone mothers has long been part of the paper's agenda. In this particular piece, the Mail describes Knowsley as a place with "no moral compass where girls expect the state to provide for their children with designer clothing, and fathers don't want to know". There is, unsurprisingly, a political underpinning to the whole article. It is a Labour council that considers that there is "no problem", and the paper expresses concern that:

Seemingly with the sanction of authority, a generation is growing up grounded in the 'entitlement culture'. (op cit: 17)

The issue of these young mothers in Knowsley is problematised and politicised. The article, like so many others, uses the language of choice and individual responsibility to construct single motherhood as both a personal lifestyle choice and a moral aberration. Readers are invited to distance themselves and to judge the women:

It's almost an understatement to say that Knowsley has lost its moral compass ... a culture of promiscuity, infidelity and irresponsibility is rife. (op cit)

Without any analysis of why the young women get pregnant, no acknowledgement that the children are, in general, loved and well cared for and part of large, informal networks of carers and extended families, the pathologised single mother becomes more important than their actual experiences. The article 'interviews' four young women, and makes much of their apparent passivity. They appear perfectly happy to receive state benefits and seem to accept the reluctance on the part of local males to support the women they impregnate or to help bring up the children they sire. The women's complaints are not about a society that offers them little alternative to young motherhood, a lifestyle they accept and with which they are reasonably content, but about irritation that the benefits they receive are not enough to dress their children in designer clothes. Thus they are framed as petulant, selfish and ungrateful as well as immoral, promiscuous and selfish.

At the same time the women are presented for our disapprobation and condescension. Their views are constructed in such a way that they reaffirm the apparent consensual view that single mothers are greedy, lazy and stupid. Valerie, a mother of six and grandmother of 2 at the age of 38, distances herself from her own daughter's peers,

accusing them of getting pregnant on purpose and thinking that “having a baby is a bit of fun.”

The article creates a ‘problem’ and ‘a depressing picture’ by constructing a paradigm of difference. These women are stereotypes and symbols of the term ‘single mother’, representing ignorance and cupidity, with only a couple of paragraphs dedicated to denouncing the young men who use their Catholicism as a reason for rejecting contraception and who:

demand sex and ... if that results in pregnancy, they will move on to the next girl and leave the welfare state to pick up the tab. (op cit: 17)

For newspapers like the Daily Mail, the single mother is public property and her lifestyle as open to scrutiny as that of politicians. Such newspapers contribute to defining and shaping a social problem by reporting ‘facts’ in a style designed to generate public “concern, anxiety, indignation or panic”. At the same time they offer a mediated and, apparently consensus opinion that particular values need to be protected, in this case, traditional family values, and over a period of time they can elevate localized issues to a national ‘problem’.

The process of creating stereotypes and representations out of particular groups may be seen to be a means by which members of a culture produce meaning through language. Hall offers three approaches to representation which may clarify somewhat the means by which the demonisation of single mothers occurred during the 1980s and 90s (Hall, 1997). Firstly the *reflective* approach sees meaning as created out of the object being reflected, the object being responsible for the way meaning is constructed in this case.

His second approach is the *intentional* whereby the meaning is imposed on the word by the producer of the message, but he argues that both approaches are intrinsically less satisfactory than the *constructive* perspective which links objects, concepts and signs which, arranged into 'languages', come to stand for the concepts. In this way, representation becomes a process of interpreting information through language and signification. If Hall's criteria are applied to the representation of single mothers we can see that language and signification used in media constructions may contradict the understanding of the concept of lone parenting gained through everyday discourse and lived experience, producing a fundamentally contradictory set of messages and values.

McRobbie suggests that there is an ease with which those in poverty are portrayed as caricatures rather than as individuals caught up in "wider social circumstances over which they have little or no control" (1991:232). She takes issue with the images of the "social-security scrounger" and the amoral teenage girl bent on beating the system and getting herself housed "on the state" (op cit:232) which she considers to be neither accurate nor useful.

Kathryn Woodward puts the argument in historical context by suggesting that newspaper articles stigmatize single mothers by:

Drawing on nineteenth century discourses of the dichotomy of the "deserving poor" versus the "undeserving poor". (Woodward, 1997:261)

An example of this style of framing of lone parenting came in 1996 in the coverage of Mandy Allwood who, with her partner, Paul Hudson, found herself pregnant with eight babies after IVF treatment to conceive. The press made much of certain factors in the

story that raised the newsworthiness of both story and protagonists. First was the fact that Mandy Allwood and Paul Hudson were not married and that Allwood herself was divorced. In addition she had one child already and had also had a miscarriage and a termination, both of which were presented as being consequences of her irresponsible behaviour. A third element to the story was that the multiple conception occurred as a result of sexual activity while receiving fertility treatment despite being instructed to abstain, and fourthly, the couple stood to make a substantial amount of money should the babies survive. A final point, raised by several papers was that both Allwood and Hudson had several county court injunctions and minor convictions on their records. The story became a news focus for several days and raised its head again briefly as Allwood lost the eight babies and the opportunity to make money out of the situation. Key to the newsworthiness of the story was the apparent sexual profligacy between a black man (with several other children by other women) and a white single mother, combined with greed, criminality and immorality on several levels. The Mail on Sunday called Allwood's deal with the News of the World, "a business transaction conducted with the same cold logic that she no doubt uses at her property business in the Midlands" (Mail on Sunday, 11 August 1996: 8-9).

The story was constructed across the print media as a prime example of a single mother determined to use her excess fertility to make as much money as she could. Cultural values of maternity and restraint were used as a measure against which both Allwood and Hudson could be tried and found wanting. Her ex-husband described her as "not an earth mother figure" and the newspaper makes sarcastic reference to attempts by the News of

the World to present the story as 'a fairytale' to make Allwood look as 'wholesome as possible'.

The monster connotations are developed in a Daily Express feature on the 12th of August which talks of her "freak pregnancy" and asks the question "Does she deserve 8 babies?" as its main front page headline accompanied by a photograph of Allwood and the baby from her "failed marriage". The article, which continues over five pages under bylines such as "Selling story will help solve big cash crisis" and "She should never have been given fertility drugs says MP", describes Allwood as an "unsuitable case for treatment". The eight foetuses are presented throughout as the victims in the case, while Allwood is presented as a greedy monster who is cheating both her babies and the thousands of 'deserving' (married?) women who are failing to get NHS fertility treatment. The Express suggested that MPs, church leaders and doctors had all expressed concern as to "how she was deemed suitable for fertility treatment despite a colourful medical and personal history". In the dichotomy of good and bad mothers, Allwood's undeniable desperation for children is presented as evidence of her self-absorption and lack of control. The stereotypes of the white single mother with mixed race children, and the irresponsible sexual behaviour of the black man are fundamental to the mythology of the single mother and her lifestyle.

Such articles take a major role in the amplification of the myth of irresponsibility and fecklessness until myth and reality become intertwined in public consciousness. More importantly, they offer a construct of behaviour which, unlike most 'role models' is the

opposite to that encouraged by the moral and ideological guidelines of the culture. The group of young single mothers with whom I worked was extremely aware of the ways in which they were represented in popular culture. They understood the negative connotations of the term 'single mother' and the difference between their own experience and the lives the media insisted they were living, and it is clear from their responses analysed later in this thesis that they believed themselves to be judged harshly and misunderstood as a social group. In addition agencies of social control – the government, the police and the courts – are manipulated by media coverage of apparent public alarm into devising new policies to increase control over the deviant group. As action is taken and reported by the media the sense of moral panic grows. For Abercrombie, this phenomenon marks an example of the ways in which the media become part of the phenomena they are attempting to report (Abercrombie, 1996: 159). Indeed television is increasingly considered to be an integral part of the reality it reports (Gurevitch, 1991: 185). It is not too difficult to imagine the ways in which articles such as the Knowsley 'exposé' and television programmes such as *Babies on Benefits* are able to construct a problem simply as a result of the implications of media interest in the subjects. While the tone of both content and delivery is designed to shock and moralise, the subjects are objects of entertainment and curiosity in much the same way that the participants of talk shows such as *Oprah* and *Trisha* are framed for their intrinsic amusement value, their voices hierarchised, contained and managed (Fairclough, 1995: 140).

Negative constructions of single motherhood are to be found in the political rhetoric of both left and right wing debate, since both find it expedient to promote family values in

their traditional sense. Gough-Yates suggests that Major's 'Back to Basics' campaign and the 'supremacy of the nuclear family' has been continued by Tony Blair's New Labour and its aim to reinstate the family to a position of central importance in everyday life (Gough-Yates, 2000: 230). Traditional family values emphasise patriarchal doctrine that enables women to be positioned within a political and moral discourse and which provides unambiguous and quotable material for the media, most notably the Press.

Woodward suggests that public debate about single mothers tends to be expressed as an attack on 'family values' both explicitly and by implication. She identifies the association between a woman's status as a single mother and dependence on state welfare, and cites Whaneema Lubiano's description of the 'welfare queen' in narratives of African American women in the United States, a woman "omnipresent in the media" (Lubiano, 1993: 332-3).

Both Ann Phoenix (1991) and Lubiano suggest that politicians are keen to use black single mothers as scapegoats even when statistics and research fundamentally disprove the arguments. The effects of economic and structural inequity are shifted onto 'irresponsible' single mothers who drain the system (and by implication, take from 'responsible' taxpayers and deprive the 'deserving poor'), hence newspaper reports of the nature of the Mail's 'exposé' of benefit cheats. In 1992 Social Services Minister, Peter Lilley, gained himself huge media coverage when he rewrote WS Gilbert's lyrics into his own 'little list' of social undesirables, including "young girls who get pregnant to jump the housing queue", and later when he promised support for 'deserving' lone parents - the

widowed and divorced (through no fault of their own) -whilst classifying as a problem the 'undeserving' single mother who is "both a drain on society's economic resources and morally reprehensible" (quoted in Woodward 1997: 259). Thus, by placing lone mothers into a hierarchy of worthiness based on their control over the situation: from widows (who clearly did not choose to be in their situation) and divorced women (whose husbands chose to leave and divorce them for another woman) to unmarried mothers, politicians aim to 'divide and rule', to categorise and stigmatise lone mothers.

It may be that, since single mothers are not restricted to one ethnic group or social class these days, the most poor and vulnerable represent a target which can be attacked with the knowledge that no one religious or political group will rush to speak out in defence. On the contrary, it has already been suggested that for most of these groups, the issue of illegitimacy represents a deviation from norms and values, and thus forms a platform upon which support may be guaranteed.

When attacks by politicians and the media on single mothers for moral turpitude begin to lose their edge, the press evoke "the spectre of the bitch" (MacDonald 1995:135), the mother who leaves her child alone whilst she enjoys herself holidaying or partying. A Daily Mirror report of one such mother "haunted the coverage of all single mothers regardless of status" (op cit:136) and produced a spate of similar stories in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers giving a new shock element to the subject of single mothers.

Yet, for all the dramatic stories and heightened moralising, audiences appear to consistently reject these political witch-hunts. The debate on the BBC's *Question Time* (5 November 1998) over the Government's Family Document caused heated argument once it moved onto the subject of lone parents. Politicians who smugly repeated the family values rhetoric were fiercely talked down by audience members decrying a 'nanny state' intent on hounding its most vulnerable members. The comments made to the panel by members of the public demonstrated a clear sense of understanding of the generalisations and misleading statistical evidence being offered as concrete, and impatience with the presentation of single mothers as deviant, in opposition to the consensual opinion that marriage was the 'correct' environment in which to raise a family.

Over the last forty years a number of people have pointed out the ironies of castigating single mothers for relying on benefit and state 'handouts' in a culture where mothers are still encouraged to remain at home (Smith, 1997; Yudkin and Holme, 1963). Wimperis argued that many of the unmarried girls in the sample she studied might have been good mothers but were prevented by the need to work outside the home for long periods (Wimperis, 1960). Yudkin and Holme found that the unmarried mothers they studied amongst the working mothers of their research were pushed into working and spending less time bonding with their children, than the married mothers who were being pressurised into leaving the workforce.

More recently Smith exposed the irony that, days after a *Panorama* programme claimed that the children of working mothers were more likely to fail at school, Peter Lilley

announced a Jobs Drive for Lone Parents in which 20 million pounds would be spent to “help move 100,000 single parents from welfare into work” (Smith, 1997: 111). In contrast, it is very noticeable that articles in the press about lone fathers are more likely to applaud their decisions to give up their jobs and stay at home with their children:

I stopped working almost as soon as Steven came to live with me. I miss having money in my pocket but I'd never swap the past for what I have now. I've changed; I've become more responsible...there's no way I could leave the mothering to someone else and risk losing the closeness I've built up with my son (from 'Men who are mothers' *Options* magazine. October 1966: 80)

The continued demonisation of single mothers sometimes begins to serve only as an indication of how far from the electorate politicians continue to move. Whilst the frenzied attacks on Mandy Allwood and her lifestyle could titillate most factions of tabloid readership, Margaret Thatcher's speech in Kentucky against illegitimacy was simply an example, if one was needed, of her lack of understanding of the human condition which, by implication, might also be attached to her fellow politicians. That she chose a state with a reputation for marriages between girls barely in their teens and older relatives to declaim that the spread of illegitimacy “devalues our values, our community” (Daily Mail, 21 October 1998) seems bad enough, but to then suggest that single mothers and their children would be better brought up in religious orders than on welfare in order that they “be brought up with family values”, at once devalues personal liberty, ignores basic humanity and makes clear that for many in the political arena the issue of lone parenting is about rhetoric and bigotry rather than reasoned concern.

Both Smart and Silva identify a clear resurgence in patriarchal values in the 1990s that has contributed to the “degradation of mothering” in political and media rhetoric (Silva,

1996: 7). They suggest that the backlash against single mothers is part of a concerted move to bring fatherhood “out of the shadows to try to reclaim its lost status in the family and in wider society” (Smart, 1996: 54). Gough-Yates observes that anxieties about threats to masculinity:

were mirrored in concerns about the erosion of traditional forms of femininity, which manifested themselves in debates about, for example, the moral recklessness of young single mothers, about the contribution of women and feminism to the decline in family values, and in questions about the perceived shift towards aggressive behaviour by young women. (2000: 231-2)

This reconstitution of the father, then, has come not from the renegotiation of the father’s role (eulogizing over celebrity fathers like David Beckham and Jude Law who are regularly photographed with their children), but through the reduction of the importance of the mother’s, particularly where she is attempting to operate as both parents alone. However, Silva suggests that such attempts will only be partially successful because popular perceptions of lone motherhood now frame it as a ‘quasi-normal occurrence’ despite the rhetoric of politicians and the media (Silva, 1996: 7).

Several years on from Silva’s research it may be reasonable to take her argument further and suggest that, certainly to the young women with whom I worked, the concept of lone motherhood, whilst not seen as an acceptable or even desirable life choice, has become a normalized experience for many of their peers and indeed for many of their parents. Of the fifty-eight young women (including a group of eight young single mothers), 17 had lived for a time with their mother alone (another 4 had lived with their father), 33 had first-hand experience of a single mother within their immediate family, and all but two could name a relative or acquaintance bringing up children alone. Thus, in almost every

case, the young women could make comparisons between real and mediated examples of single mothers. Interestingly, 6 out of the ten single mothers had lived in single parent households themselves, yet they were more likely than the students I interviewed to believe that the negative media representations they had experienced were accurate and that their situations were perceived by the world at large as 'abnormal' in some way. It seemed that these young single mothers had lower self-image than their peers, in part as a response to negative first-hand life experiences but also due to the interpretations they made of media texts and their perceptions of other people's perceptions of them as a result.

Roseneill and Mann take the argument further and suggest that, alongside the targeting of lone mothers as a moral panic and as a burden on the ideological and fiscal structure of the welfare state, a third strand to the discourse, and one that applies equally in Britain and the United States, is that of anti-feminism (Roseneill and Mann, 1996:203). They pursue the arguments of Faludi (1992) and others that two decades of increased social and economic independence for women have resulted in a backlash against feminism and the 'trendy theorists' who have undermined masculinity and fatherhood and encouraged the creation of an underclass of lone mothers who deprive their children of a moral compass and the 'respectability' of two-parent family life.¹² Whether the demonisation of lone motherhood is a reaction to feminism or simply to the implied threats attached to increased female independence, the connotations of motherhood require further analysis.

¹² Ironically, in Britain, much of the discourse about violent crime and criminality amongst young men growing up without fathers in the early 1990s centred on the murder of James Bulger in February 1993, despite the fact that both of the boys subsequently convicted of the abduction and murder of the toddler lived in, albeit socially deprived and violent, two-parent families

Mythologies of Motherhood

Discourses about mothering have been used from the earliest times to create mythologies around the concept of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' mothering. From the fairytale construct of the evil stepmother usurping the position of the good natural mother and alienating the father through implied sexual favours (Warner, 1995) to modern soap opera matriarchs, the overriding paradigm of maternity is that 'good' mothers are de-sexualised and pure, while 'bad' mothers are highly sexed and sullied. In Western culture the idealised mother discourse has for centuries been based around the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculate conception and the Virgin birth, for which no sexual activity was required. Smith talks of the "radiant young mother" whose career, from Annunciation to "radiant" motherhood "provided the only approved images not just of maternity but of womanhood itself" (Smith, 1997: 52) and these images persist today in media representations of 'good' and 'bad' mothers.

The 'ideal mother' and the self-effacing Madonna are inscribed within Western culture, constructed within a moral context, and yet also somehow assumed as biological products, as if giving birth transforms a woman into the ideal mother. (Woodward, 1997: 243)

The idealisation of the mother requires her to be ever-present but largely ignored (Kaplan, 1992) and her elevation to centre-stage is often simply a means to attack her, "for example as the 'bad mother' constructed by discourses of social policy, medicine and psychology" (Woodward, 1997: 243).

MacDonald suggests that within Roman Catholicism, the dominant image of Holy Mother and Child:

invites our admiration for what she symbolises, not for who she is. Impregnated without sexual contact, she teaches us that nurturing is a spiritual experience untouched by either the complications of physical passion or our own desires. (MacDonald, 1995: 133)

The Virgin Mary is positioned diametrically opposite to Eve whose sexual temptation is portrayed as the reason for man's fall from grace. Female sexuality is thus represented as a fundamental threat to masculinity as a gendered position and as a source of power. It can be controlled only through the subjugation of female power within the confines of marriage and patriarchal direction¹³. Thus the single mother, away from male control becomes an ungovernable and unacceptable threat to masculinity. It is the attempt to curtail female sexual power that underpins the mythologies of lone parenting and single motherhood that I will be exploring in the second section of this thesis in my analysis of television and film constructions of the single mother.

Coward considers 'bad' mothers as mythological representations of the monstrous. She cites Medea, the child-devouring mother of Greek mythology, as the basis for modern constructions of evil mothers who go on holiday leaving their children at home alone, and child murderers whose gender renders them more evil than male counterparts in media reports (Coward, 1997).

There is a view that feminist writing has a strongly demythologising emphasis in terms of deconstructing patriarchal myths and ideologies across the entire gender spectrum from language to ideology and politics (Andermahr et al, 2000: 174). In 1994 Marina Warner,

¹³ It is interesting that the postmodern irony of a recent car advertising campaign was based on the seduction of the car driver by a highly sexed woman who turns out to be not only his wife but also the mother of his children.

in her Reith lecture, explored the antithesis of the asexual idealised mother by looking at the representation of mothers as monsters. She cited the blockbuster film, *Jurassic Park*, with its rampaging, uncontrollable female dinosaurs as “naked confrontation between nature coded female and culture coded male” (Warner, 1994:12). This ungoverned female energy raises the issue of motherhood and the “fear that the natural bond excludes men”. Warner argues that the single mother has become a modern example of a long tradition in She-monsters, originating in classical mythology with Harpies and Sirens, designed to trigger collective fear and anger.

Warner defines a myth as a kind of story told in public and passed down from generation to generation. She describes myths as “wearing an air of ancient wisdom” which they use to seduce and “lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear”. Like Barthes’ view of myth as grounded in ideology and politics, which takes basic human responses to the environment, and presents them to us as ‘natural’ and ‘true’, Warner suggests that we use mythology to create a sense of human identity in terms of values and expectations which are “always evolving” (Warner, 1994: 14).

Using this definition, the myth of the “ungovernable female appetite” (Warner, 1994: 11) may be used to explain and understand the media and government responses to the increasing numbers of single mothers. It means that the full responsibility for a major change in social and cultural behaviour may be placed on mothers themselves rather than requiring explanations for increasing marriage breakdown and fathers refusing to maintain contact with their progeny. Warner suggests that, rather than contributing to

tearing the fabric of society, lone mothers might equally be considered to be simply trying to fulfil the “most ingrained conservative view of women’s function ...having and looking after children” (Warner, 1994:13).

The myth of the ungovernable sexual predator is not confined to single mothers. It occurs in newspaper stories and television programmes about single women without children as well, and films like *Disclosure* and *Fatal Attraction* create monsters out of highly sexualised and manipulative single women whose aim is to destroy ‘innocent’ men and their marriages. The implication in these representations is that men are victims of their own sex drives and the sexual energy of unscrupulous women, an assumption that may also be used to frame representations of the men who impregnate and abandon the young single mothers castigated in newspaper reports.

MacDonald suggests that the polarity between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ mothers remains active in popular media coverage of family relations because such simple demarcations preclude the need to consider the social and economic factors that make up the foundations of family life. She cites the case of a single mother, arrested for leaving her child at home alone so that she could go to work, as an example of how the press has difficulty steering a course between support for her intentions to support herself and her child, and condemnation of her unmotherly behaviour (MacDonald, 1995: 160). Such discourses contain ambiguities that are both ambivalent and conflicting. Attempts to frame single mothers as inadequate or irresponsible choose to overlook other important issues such as the decision not to terminate a pregnancy, or the autonomy and independence that even

those who live below the poverty line claim to enjoy. In a culture that elevates the maternal over most other identities, representations of single motherhood become sites of conflict between 'ideal' and 'flawed'. Certainly the single mothers with whom I worked appeared to be unsure of their own identities as mothers; both proud of their children and their status as mothers, and, at the same time, ashamed of the implied failure to maintain relationships with the fathers of their children and of their stigmatized social status.

In the same way that mythology abolishes the complexity of human acts by simplifying them into what is immediately visible and doing away with dialectics (Barthes, 1972:133), media coverage of lone parenting organises a world without contradictions, without depth and without ambiguity. Concepts of right and wrong become concrete definitions with an assumption that they are shared by the majority, and meanings are constructed based on 'natural' interpretations and statements of fact.

Celebrity and lone parenting

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we live in a society that appears to be obsessed with the cult of celebrity and stardom. Celebrities tend to be media creations easily slotted into stereotypical extremes of individuality. Thus we are presented with extremes of sexuality, glamour, machismo, vulnerability and even maternity. Celebrities, like the stars of the cinema before them, are expected to do things differently. They form a fundamental part of modern popular culture, and those who achieve such status tend to do so largely because of the "attractive persona which they project" (Burton, 1990:90). Hollywood's Studio System set things in motion with well-oiled publicity machines

designed to create glossy lifestyles for the men and women central to the film industry and its audience and their private lives became as important to audiences and to the studios that marketed them as the roles they played on screen. For this reason homosexual stars were forced into so-called Lavender marriages for the sake of their careers, and any hint of scandal surrounding them was quickly dissipated by the studios and agents employed to protect them. In extreme cases, for example Fatty Arbuckle's rape trial and Ingrid Bergman's affair and subsequent 'illegitimate' child, it proved impossible to prevent the stories getting out and permanently or temporarily harming careers (Dyer, 2000: 122), but audiences clamoured for both the glamour and the apparent authenticity of the lives of the people they saw on screen.

For modern audiences, equally curious about the lives of the rich and famous, there is a proliferation of publications to cater for the demand for information about those performers who regularly appear on film and television. As glossy magazines, such as Hello, InStyle and OK!; weeklies like Now, Heat, Closer and Etc, tabloids including The National Enquirer; gossip columnists and even television, delve increasingly into the lives of celebrities, the demand increases and stories about them, at times, replace or become headline news stories.

McMahon and Quinn suggest that stars "personify specific cultural norms" enabling audiences to fulfil "their own cultural aspirations" (1986:93). This might explain why, for the media, it is important to position celebrities and stars in accordance with their public

persona, and why an issue like parenting, and the form it takes for these people, becomes a matter for public information and debate.

Evans and Wilson equate the attraction of modern stars and celebrities with the worship of the Gods and Goddesses of Greek times. They suggest that living together “in a world that was half real and half fantasy” (Evans and Wilson, 1999: 2), the immortals embodied and became archetypes of the physical and intellectual qualities desired or feared by human beings. Modern celebrities are also seen to live life on a much larger scale than the rest of us and their triumphs and mistakes are played out in the public domain, enabling spectators to use their lifestyles and life choices as entertainment and occasionally as moral instruction.

Dyer explores the public/private, individual/social dichotomy embodied by stars and the media construction of authenticity in their ‘private’ and intimate lives (Dyer, 2000:133) and argues that there is an irony in the way that privacy is produced within the public sphere of the mass media. Family life and relationships arouse intense curiosity in ‘civilians’ who seem to look to celebrities for lifestyle guidance or simply to assuage a need for identification and role models that our increasingly socially isolated lives appear to lack.

In women’s magazines particularly, interest in the lifestyles of celebrities has replaced traditional representations of family life although the emphases and underpinning ideologies of the importance of maternity and femininity have changed very little. From

the 1850s onwards magazines have contributed strongly to regulating women's attitudes to their husbands and families (Fowler, 1991) and modern women's periodicals offer a sense of identity and opportunities to "negotiate problems of femininity which they also define" (Woodward, 1997:261-2). In a culture in which celebrity motherhood is framed alongside more established references to motherhood and mothering, the lifestyle choices of celebrities such as Madonna, Jodie Foster and Elizabeth Hurley, become as plausible and naturalised as those of the mythical mothers of a previous age. Moreover, while female self-fulfilment has replaced duty and constraint in the construction of paradigms of modern femininity, the concept of self-actualisation continues to be placed within a framework of traditional female roles. In a magazine such as *Cosmopolitan*, for example, where the idea of motherhood exists only as a caveat for unprotected sex, femininity is presented almost entirely in the context of relationships; with partners, prospective partners, friends and colleagues. Other women's magazines provide a social construction of motherhood that suggests that readers can be fulfilled through careers and as individuals but that the ultimate self-fulfilment is in the role of wife and mother, and the celebrity mother has become the ultimate symbol of successful maternity.

In his book *HOLLYWOOD VS. AMERICA*, critic Michael Medved accuses the entertainment industry, particularly Hollywood, of actively promoting "alternative arrangements for raising children" (1992:139). He suggests that celebrities and stars are guilty of disregarding:

the conventional notion that kids fare best in a situation where they live together with a father and a mother who happen to be married to each other. (Medved, 1992:139)

He further suggests that when traditional families are portrayed the image of them is increasingly unflattering.

Importantly for this research, Medved does not distinguish between parents who bring up children alone and those who cohabit (some in what might be considered lengthy relationships in celebrity circles). He lists “an impressive array of prominent entertainers” who “proudly bear children without benefit of matrimony” alongside several other celebrity couples who have since married. For these couples the issue of commitment to the relationship and the child or children is more important than the issue of financial burdens on the lone parent as is the case for the majority. This makes it easier to place emphasis on the moral and ethical stance being made, and the media can speculate on the more interesting subject of how responsible or otherwise these people are being. Medved argues that “many of the leaders of the show business community make a deliberate point of avoiding marriage, even after they bring children into the world” (op cit: 139).

There is plenty of evidence that many celebrities choose not to marry formally but to cohabit, often for long periods but very few seem to choose to live as ‘true’ lone parents - that is, carrying or bringing up a child or children alone. Where women give birth as single mothers, the father of the child is inevitably thrust into the limelight, whether he be a celebrity in his own right or unknown. It is likely that this happens in order that the legitimacy of the relationship if not the child can be highlighted and that the semblance of heterosexual normality enhances the iconic and sexual value placed on celebrities.

Medved’s attack on celebrity morality does not take into account the fact that two-parent families are not necessarily families where the parents are married. In Hollywood

particularly we are offered a proliferation of unmarried but cohabiting celebrities who bring up children in families that are non-traditional in structure and parenting style but which none the less are not headed by lone parents.

Indeed the emphasis on celebrities raising children in couples rather than as lone parents - even if the resulting union is short-lived - is so strong in the media that it is difficult to name any never married single mother celebrities other than Elizabeth Hurley and Jodie Foster (whose female partner remains 'invisible' to the public eye). 'Orthodox' families such as Mel Gibson's which contains seven children, and David and Victoria Beckham, are regularly given photo spreads in glossy magazines such as Hello, Now, Woman's Own and Chat, and serve to portray celebrities as ordinary folk beneath the glamour. This is not really surprising since research into women's magazines consistently identifies an enduring veneration of marriage and family life, holding these two institutions up as ideal, if not always expected, by presenting alternatives as bizarre, problematic or too exotic for 'normal people' (Ferguson, 1983; Winship, 1987 ; Hermes,1995).

Additionally, there is still overwhelming evidence to support the view that Hollywood, although it may explore the novelty aspect of lone-parenting, follows traditional, and some might argue conservative, attitudes to marriage as the "icing on the cake". In almost every film featuring lone parents, especially in the romantic comedy genre, the issue has a prime narrative function in developing the characters of the protagonists or in driving the plot-line. Rarely do 'good' single parents end up alone, rather they gain their reward by finding a life partner to care for both them and the child or children.

Where couples marry after having children, the decision to conform is highlighted.

Acceptance of dominant family values enables the media to focus on consensual beliefs and to reinforce dominant family values: “family life is seen synonymous with order, conformity and responsibility” (Jewson, 1994:2).

This emphasis on celebrity coupledness is particularly evident when the parents-to-be have a fan-base which consists mainly of children and young teenagers. The announcement of the pregnancy is usually preceded or followed quickly by newspaper front page photographs of engagement rings, and in some cases by what might come under the banner of shotgun weddings. Melanie Brown of the Spice Girls not only married the father of her baby but became one of the rare celebrities to take her husband’s name, becoming Mel G; Melanie Blatt of the band All Saints, popular with young girls until its acrimonious break-up, is rarely mentioned or photographed without her fiancé, Stuart Zender, also being included. Whilst tabloid editorials worry that young girls might be tempted to copy their idols and decide to sport pregnancy as fashion, the magazines more frequently consumed by teenage girls concentrate on other issues emphasising the apparently solid basis on which the mothers-to-be had chosen their babies’ fathers.

When the groups of students with whom I worked were asked to name celebrity single mothers they were hard pressed to do so. The most quoted examples were Jordan and Elizabeth Hurley, (the only ‘true’ single mothers mentioned at all) and, earlier in my research, Madonna who later went on to marry and reconstruct her public image as a wife and family woman. Several divorced and separated mothers, including Melanie Brown,

Angelina Jolie, Nicole Kidman and Sarah Ferguson were also mentioned over the research period. Other women, such as Tamara Beckwith, Koo Stark and, for many years, Joanna Lumley, whose public personas did not include their lives as single mothers, avoid publicity about their parenting status, and the media, unless speculating on paternal identity from time to time, tend to leave them alone.

Indeed, it would seem that the perceived stigma of lone motherhood is so great for many celebrities that they go out of their way to express a determination not to have children out of wedlock despite the fact that, for them, the financial burden at least, would not be an issue. Famous women, notoriously insecure about their attractiveness, seem to need the reassurance of a partner even when they appear to really want a child more. In interview after interview, particularly in women's magazines, celebrities such as Anthea Turner, Cindy Crawford, Julia Roberts and Calista Flockhart who represent aspects of young, successful femininity, have all communicated their desperation to have children but insisted that they would not consider doing it alone. Of these listed, Cindy Crawford has now married and had two children; Julia Roberts and Anthea Turner have married and publicly grieved over their apparent inability to conceive, leaving only Calista Flockhart to adopt a child alone (and she is now framed in the context of her relationship with Hollywood star, Harrison Ford who is described as being a great father to her son). Most recently, pop icon, Kylie Minogue's desire to have children has been described as causing her "much private anguish" (Closer, 13 September 2003) although the same article questions when "wedding bells and nappies" will be "on the cards", establishing that parenting alone is not an option for the celebrity. In the same way that fictional

single mothers have tended to be redeemed through marriage and the embracing of traditional family values, so celebrity single mothers have been portrayed as desiring a similar resolution to their own situations.

High-profile lone mothers tend to be positioned as 'different', slightly exotic and ambivalent to men in their behaviour. Articles about them often contain an underlying message that whilst their lifestyles are fascinating they are, at the same time, not to be envied or emulated by 'normal' women. Elizabeth Hurley is constantly framed as a 'vamp', a woman who 'steals' other women's men and whose choice in men appears both questionable and self-serving to the 'ordinary' women who envy her looks but may no longer envy her lifestyle since she has been re-framed as a woman who has been used and abandoned. Jordan is positioned as a parody of womanhood, whose excessive body reshaping has enabled her to reconstruct herself as both a caricature and an embodiment of femininity and male fantasy. Both women have been portrayed by the press as victims of their own ambitions and of womanising men.

Other prominent single mothers, Jodie Foster and, for a time, Madonna, are high earning, highly successful entertainers who have been seen to have stormed the male dominated bastions of Hollywood and the music industry; Foster through producing and directing a number of films (all of which have, interestingly, centred on families and family life), and Madonna through her control over her multi-faceted career and her record label, Maverick - a reflection, it has been suggested, on her approach to the establishment. Madonna has long been portrayed as a "subversive culture figure" (Baehr and Gray,

1996:50) whose major attraction for the young female fans has been her independent attitude and nonconformist style; both she and Jodie Foster are often represented as indicative of a breed of women who reject not only patriarchy and patriarchal structures, but also men as individuals and as partners. The speculation over Foster's sexuality has been well-documented over recent years, particularly after the publication of her brother's unauthorised biography of the actress which emphasised the lesbian relationship between their mother and the woman they came to know as Auntie Jo D, and from whom Jodie took her professional forename. Foster has maintained a longstanding relationship with a partner whom she keeps out of the public eye, behaviour which, in the publicity hungry world of celebrity seems subversive in itself!

Before her marriage and subsequent respectability, Madonna was regularly photographed in the company of women and her name linked several times with that of her lesbian friend, Ingrid Cesaes. The representation of lone mothers as man hungry or man haters enables them to be positioned outside a framework of patriarchal values and thus constructs them as both exotic and, on a psychoanalytic level, fetishised. Whilst Foster has tended to shy away from publicity and avoided becoming involved in media speculation as to her situation, Madonna long embraced her role as cultural icon, demonstrating "the possibility of a female sexuality that was independent of patriarchal control. It was a sexuality that defied rather than rejected the male gaze" (Baehr and Gray, 1996:51).

Fiske has argued that Madonna's image encouraged young women to reject 'patriarchal hegemony' and to experience an alternative to masculine fantasy. She became:

a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young. (Fiske, 1991:97)

His analysis of teenagers' responses to Madonna and her behaviour found that, whilst males felt that she was not likely to be married for long because she would be difficult for men to handle and might "give any guy a hard time", the girls considered that the traditional confines of marriage wouldn't suit Madonna and that both men and the patriarchal institution of marriage would be threatened by Madonna's sexuality (Fiske, 1991: 99). For both male and female teenagers, Madonna's sexuality offered "a challenge or a threat to dominant definitions of femininity and masculinity" (op cit:99).

Fiske's sample of teenage girls expressed over and over again their admiration of Madonna's ability to please herself and to do what she wanted without relying on men or even concerning herself as to their thoughts about her behaviour (Fiske, 1991:100). This recurring representation of her as a woman who neither needed nor relied on male approval or help has been crucial to Madonna becoming the symbol of a post-feminist movement known for a time in the 1990s as 'Girl Power'.

Yet, whilst her media persona has been identified in such a way, Madonna herself has made repeated references to herself as a woman who is, at least in part, a sex object. Videos such as *Material Girl*, *Like a Virgin* and *Open your Heart to Me* play with the idea of the Male Gaze; her controversial book *Sex* and the tour of the same name develop

the theme of the woman complicit with male fantasy; her hints that she was happy to grant sexual favours on her journey to star status; and her fascination with Marilyn Monroe:

an intertextual reference to another star commonly thought to owe her success to her ability to embody masculine fantasy. (Fiske, 1991:96)

And alongside these key representations of Madonna as feminist icon and sex object is a third, again perpetuated by the woman herself: that of the good Catholic girl for whom the Madonna (as in Mother of God) is a key role model. In videos such as *Like a Prayer* and *Papa Don't Preach* which feature images of Catholicism and the Virgin Mary, and even in the earliest videos in which Madonna turned large crucifixes into fashion accessories, she develops her theme of the Catholic upbringing. Fiske identifies it as “neither religious nor sacrilegious” (op cit:103) and argues that she frees religious iconography from its ideological basis in order to “enjoy it, use it for the meanings and pleasure that it has for *her* not those of the dominant ideology” (1991:103). Fiske quotes her as wanting to take beauty and suffering and then to treat it with a tongue-in-cheek approach.

It is this third representation of Madonna that most clearly suggests her attitude to herself as mother. Her public image has once again been reconstructed into what might be described as a caricature of motherhood. Her physical appearance has changed from the hard-edged, well-toned and scantily-clad blonde diva of the *Sex* book and tour, to the brunette earth-mother seen in tabloid newspapers and magazines. It is perhaps ironic that Madonna's most recent incarnation is that of traditional (and largely stereotypical) English country wife and middle class mother, and that her decision to recreate herself

firmly within patriarchal confines appears for the time being to vindicate patriarchal values and ideologies¹⁴.

Both Jodie Foster and Madonna, whether they choose to shun the limelight, as in the case of the former, or embrace it, in the latter's case, continue to be held up to public scrutiny by the media as women who are electing to reject or present alternatives to the dominant and hegemonic ideology of the two-parent family. What is perhaps most worthy of note is not that wealthy, powerful, independent women should opt for an alternative ideology, but that so many others, in similar circumstances, opt not to. Even Madonna, in a total repackaging of her earlier persona, has chosen to embrace the conventional emblems of family life. For such women, it is not the practicalities of lone parenting that constrain them, nor the social stigma that affects the lives of the poorest members of the community, but the underlying concept that to parent alone signifies failure.

Coward has suggested that, for many celebrities, children have become the "ultimate accessories" and that media coverage of celebrity mothers has given the impression that, for these women, caring for children is easy:

Contemporary feminism, fighting a rearguard action, has only been able to say that single or working mothers can have it all too. (Coward, 1997: 117)

Celebrity magazines such as Hello!, OK! and Heat now feature single mothers as modern oddities. An article entitled "Going Solo" (Heat magazine, March 2001:52-3) "celebrates the latest trend to hit the A list – the celebrity single mum" while the Daily Mail, in

¹⁴ Indeed, her appearance in a 1950s inspired, rose-printed dress at the launch of her children's book, *The English Roses*, in the Summer of 2003, might be considered the ultimate adoption of a retrospective and highly idealised representation of motherhood.

December 2002, describes Patsy Kensit as going from “Man-Eater to Matron: no longer pursued by men, no more the toast of the town.” The article depicts Kensit as:

facing an uncertain future ... a loser in love who is struggling to overcome the depression which has landed her in clinics more than once, and a woman fighting an addiction to drugs and alcohol which nearly destroyed her. (Daily Mail, 2002:23)

Making constant references to her status as a ‘single mother’ the feature infuses negative descriptions with judgmental references to her previous role of a sexual predator, content to mate and move on to her next ‘victim’. There is an implied warning to other women in the recounting of her downfall and association between her status as single mother and her other addictions.

It appears that, despite the inroads made by feminism over the last forty years and the apparent increased choice offered to young women in modern society, dominant ideology continues to reinforce the message that, even successful, women continue to be defined by their relationships to men, and that single mothers, even rich and famous ones, are at best portrayed as eccentric rule breakers, and, at worst, as neurotic deviants.

Chapter Four: SOAP OPERA AND THE LONE MOTHER AS OUTSIDER

Early in conversations with the young women in my discussion groups, it became clear to me that the genre that most consistently featured in their conversation, and which was most used as a frame of reference for their observations of the way the media represents single mothers, was soap opera, and in particular, the British soap, *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-present). In this chapter I intend to explore the ways in which the genre has carved a niche for itself in its emphasis on family and community issues as narrative features and to argue that despite the apparent realism of representation and storyline within the genre, the treatment of single motherhood is both moralistic and highly stereotyped into paradigms of deviance and negativity.

I will first show how its development and structure, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, have incorporated dominant ideologies and mythologies about the family, creating drama out of dysfunction and 'otherness.' I will then explain how the genre has come to be seen as primary in establishing strong female characters and why feminist research has centred around soap opera in relation to how female audiences read texts, and suggest that in relation to single mothers, the genre back-pedals in its positive approach to women. Finally, I will examine three levels of representation of single mothers and evaluate how a group of young single mothers and several groups of teenage girls interpret and construct meaning out of the discourses contained within them.

The study of soap opera and its relationship with its (largely female) audience has become a key element of feminist study. Charlotte Brunsdon suggests that it is in

relation to these subjects that feminist critical work on television has made a 'distinctive contribution which is recognised as such in the wider arena' (Brunsdon et al, 1997: 115), and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that feminist critical discourse has provided the strongest understanding of how women construct and produce meaning from soap opera texts (Hobson, 1978; Ang, 1985; Mattelart, 1986; Gillespie, 1995). Indeed, Brunsdon goes so far as to offer the suggestion that while feminism and soap opera have often been perceived as incompatible (and feminist scholars have often distanced themselves from the act of spectatorship and consumption of soap texts as a result),

it is arguably feminist interest that has transformed soap opera into a fashionable field for academic inquiry. (Brunsdon, 1995: 50)

In the earliest days of feminist interest in soap opera, hypotheses were constructed to consider how women responded to the genre, and while work since the 80s has increasingly moved away from the subject specifically (Brunsdon, 1995:55), its treatment by feminist theorists has also moved. From a hostile approach that saw soap operas as a symbol of the ways in which women were conditioned into traditional roles, feminists have come to recognise the active part played by the genre and its audience in developing political discourses from the everyday rather than the exceptional. As feminists have come to respect the genre they once repudiated (along with most other 'serious' thinkers), they have been able to construct a paradigm around issues that are important to women and to analyse the ways in which soap operas ameliorate the position of women within the everyday, and facilitate the politicisation of gender.

The ambiguous relationship between feminist research and soap opera spawned a wealth of material between the late 70s and early 90s by which time it seemed that the

genre had given up its secrets and had become almost redundant to theorists. Certainly since 1995 there has been little published that adds new understanding of the genre and its audience, and recent texts have tended to regurgitate and evaluate work undertaken more than a decade previously as though there is little new that can be drawn from soap opera and its audience. Yet, soaps, with their never ending narratives of 'real' life and 'real' people, continue to reflect ideologies of family life and social issues, and to ignore them will inevitably cause us to miss out on important messages about what we watch and how we construct meaning from and about everyday issues, despite the fact that both messages and issues continue to feature so heavily in the lives of women across a range of backgrounds. It is my intention in this chapter to provide a new angle on the ways in which soap operas talk to viewers about their own lives and the methods used by young women to engage with such messages.

Soap Histories

The soap opera, or 'daytime drama' as it was originally called, is a genre which consistently achieves the highest television ratings both in the UK and around the world. Audiences find it easy to differentiate between soap opera and other forms of television drama (Buckingham, 1987) yet few can verbalise the conventions which make it distinct. However, it is important to clarify these distinctions in order to analyse the way audiences read and understand soap opera and its relationship to their lives and values.

From its earliest days, on American Network Radio in the 1930s, the genre has become a symbol, in the minds of many, for all that is bad and corruptive about modern mass media production (Winn, 1977; Postman, 1985). The term 'soap opera' derived from the

Proctor and Gamble corporation which developed the idea of daytime drama for housewives and whose commercials, slotted intermittently into the 15 minute shows, gave it its structure, and from the melodramatic and stylised content. Both the design and content of the genre were aimed at attracting a large and loyal audience of women in order to encourage a positive and regular response to the accompanying commercial messages.

The early soaps with their melodramatic and romantic treatment of family and community relationships were based on the domestic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century with themes that are still recognisable in modern shows – infidelity, family problems, money worries and missing relatives. Serials such as *Ma Perkins* (NBC/CBS 1933-60) and *One Man's family* (NBC 1932-59) proved so popular that the number quickly grew in line with expanding radio networks in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s and, since they were cheap to produce and potentially never-ending, they became a desirable asset in the eyes of broadcasting corporations. The cultural and ideological values of America were deeply embedded in the storylines and, with no desire to alienate the powerful religious leaders of the dominant churches, the shows often had moral titles and themes. (One example of this is *The Guiding Light* [CBS 1937-present] about a clergyman and his family, which continues, albeit with slightly different form and content, to the present day). When television developed in the United States several established soaps, including *The Guiding Light*, simply transferred from one medium to another.

Soap operas did not, however, take off quite so quickly in Britain, since the Reithian ideals of Public Service Broadcasting regarded such populist entertainment with deep

suspicion and even aversion. The soap opera came to represent a low-brow, mass-produced cultural form, pandering to working class taste and exploiting the “non-selective” and “passive” listening behaviour of the ill-educated (Kilborn, 1992).

What the British failed to understand was that American soaps:

invented and sustained a reality all their own, a peculiar blend of fantasy and traditional moralitya public attitude to morality shared by the majority.
(Buckman, 1984: 12-13)

It was not until 1940, with the advent of *The Frontline family* (BBC 1940-48), a wartime propaganda soap (later retitled as *The Robinsons*), and *Mrs Dale's Diary* (BBC 1948-69), followed ten years later by the enduring serial *The Archers* (1950-present), that acceptance of this unassuming, popular genre was given, somewhat grudgingly by the BBC. Even so *The Archers* was only broadcast originally as a “Dick Tracy of farming”, a heavily didactic serial to enable the Department of Agriculture to provide information in an interesting way to the widespread network of agricultural workers (Painting, 1975). This tradition of education through entertainment has continued through into modern television soaps by way of issue-based themes and storylines and will be examined in more detail below.

When television, with its vastly extended potential for reaching audiences, entered into the public arena, the radio device of the narrator guiding audiences through the episode ended. The traditional male narrator, with whom lay the responsibility for extolling the virtues of the sponsors' products, and whose voice provided a patriarchal reminder that enjoyment of the stories was secondary to domestic duties using the advertised products, was supplanted by the opportunity for advertisers to reach a mass audience

using “daytime drama serials”. These aimed to capture the female viewer during her short leisure periods in the mid-afternoon and were carefully designed to enable her to continue with domestic duties around her viewing (Cantor and Pingree, 1983). Since the producers of radio soaps simply transferred to television (with several continuing on both for a number of years), the formats remained unchanged: daily transmission, short scenes to allow other work to continue uninterrupted with commercial breaks for the sponsor; and resolution of storylines within an unending overall framework. Indeed this format continues to the present (Hobson, 1983; Buckingham 1987).

Once again Britain followed America’s lead although, again, the BBC was reluctant to commit itself to pure entertainment, choosing instead for its first television soap a serial called *The Grove Family* (BBC 1953-56) which was even more didactic than *The Archers* and which preferred to lace its stories with heavy-handed public information and advice. In one episode around ten minutes was given over to a discussion about the selection of good window and door locks in line with a Government initiative on improving home security, and the stories generally developed slowly and with little drama until the primary concern of audiences was with the day-to-day unfolding narrative rather than any expectation of resolution.

It was left to Independent Television to screen the primetime (evening) soap operas which achieved mass and sustained viewing: *Coronation Street* (Granade 1960-present) and *Crossroads* (ITV 1964-88)¹⁵. The BBC experimented with several short-lived soaps before committing itself to *EastEnders* in 1985 in a bid to gain a mass audience during

¹⁵ *Crossroads* made a brief return to television in 2001 but failed to secure the viewing figures it once enjoyed and was axed in 2003.

the early part of the evening. Channel 4, with the advantage of other's experience to build on, was launched in 1982 with a soap opera designed by Phil Redmond, who had already created the issue-based children's soap *Grange Hill* (BBC 1978-present), called *Brookside* (Ch4 1982-2003). In keeping with the remit of the channel, *Brookside* was to be modern, contentious and defiant as opposed to the older, somewhat nostalgic, family-orientated British soaps, or their brash, glossy, fantastic American counterparts, *Dallas* (CBC 1978-91) and *Dynasty* (ABC 1981-89). These had captured massive audiences in the 1980s using a combination of melodrama, glamorous locations and stereotypical characters whilst bearing little relation to original definitions of the genre (Kilborn, 1992). At the height of their popularity these shows clearly demonstrated the immense power of television in capturing the public imagination, together with the knock-on effects of exposure throughout the other media, in storylines such as "Who killed J R Ewing?" which were headlined on BBC nightly news programmes and debated in otherwise serious fora.

Allen suggests that soap opera as a form has changed to reflect changes in the definitions of women's roles during the twentieth century, particularly with regard to "domestic ideology" (1985:146). After the First World War women were encouraged to give up their public employment, in favour of the returning menfolk who needed work, and to go back into the home through a process of redefining domestic ideology. Being a wife and mother was promoted as a demanding job with a set of skills and knowledge which would influence the world, through supporting and nurturing one's family. A similar set of discourses continued through the Second World War when radio soap operas developed storylines which closely reflected the real-life experiences of women listeners and enabled them to feel that their problems and concerns were not isolated. In

Britain, with the social realist tradition established firmly in the late 1950s and 1960s, this emphasis on social issues and experience has remained a cornerstone in the construction and understanding of soap opera.

Yet, despite the massive post-war social changes which were reflected and repackaged in television programmes of all kinds, from situation comedies to drama, there was one area of cultural change which did not dramatically affect the style or storylines of soap opera. The burgeoning Women's Movement of the late '60s and '70s began to increase pressure on programme makers to produce television which would portray women in a wider variety of roles across all genres. In the ever popular crime series, traditionally heavily patriarchal, with women designated to passive girlfriend and victim roles, new shows were devised to represent a more female approach to crime fighting. In Britain shows like *Juliet Bravo* (BBC 1980-85) and *The Gentle Touch* (ITV 1980-84) had strong female officers in their lead roles, and in the United States the glamour of *Charlie's Angels* (CBS 1982-88) gave way to the immensely popular *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-88) which, when CBS threatened to take it off air after a couple of years for being dull and lacking glamour, garnered support from the feminist National Organisation of Women who forced the Network to reconsider its decision and reinstate the show (Cashmore, 1994: 118).

In soaps, however, women continued as they always had. They supported their men and their families, they solved domestic and community problems and they operated primarily on an emotional and reactive level. Life happened to them and they steadfastly coped. Whilst most of them worked they were employed close to home in jobs which were menial and servile. In *Coronation Street* Mike Baldwin's factory gave

women work in their own street, whilst the Crossroads Motel provided an extended family environment for both the Richardson family and the workforce who, in the early years of the soap, were rarely seen outside the motel setting. Cashmore suggests that domesticity was so central to women in soap opera that “the few who, like *Coronation Street*’s Elsie Tanner, self-consciously spurned the ‘little woman’ role, ran the risk of being called scarlet women” (Cashmore, 1994: 121-2).

Even the American ‘Super Soaps’, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* - which broke soap opera tradition by working with lavish budgets - and *EastEnders* and *Brookside* - which aimed for a realistic portrayal of working class life in Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s - perpetuated the convention of the family at the heart of the community and the emphasis within it on the importance of maternity and domestic relationships. Whether women were contextualised within the millionaire lifestyles of the Ewings, Barnes, Carringtons and Colbys or the financially impoverished but socially enriched lifestyles of the Fowlers, Beales, Grants and Corkhills, the women were wives and mothers first and foremost, family builders before all else. Theorists have placed heavy emphasis on the fact that soap opera women have traditionally been ‘allowed’ to have jobs, to run businesses and to compete with men on a professional level (Brunsdon, 1997; Geraghty, 1991) yet the matriarch and the maternal role has underpinned the representation of these women throughout.

Indeed, *Brookside*, created to be different from the other British soaps in its refusal to include the soap opera metaphor for community spirit, the pub, choosing instead to portray the relatively isolated lives lived by families moving to new estates and self-

contained detached properties, actually matched most closely the familial heart of the genre by establishing a handful of families within the cul-de-sac of newly built houses.

Only characters such as “the scheming, high-powered she-devil, Alexis, who seduced and seduced men in roughly even amounts” (Cashmore, 1994: 122) provide an antithesis to the family-centred women in her own and other soaps. Alexis, who is discussed in further detail later in this chapter, operated from outside the family, both literally and symbolically, positioning her both as an archetype of the vengeful divorcee and as a virtual caricature of the modern monster mother of Marina Warner’s 1994 Reith Lectures.

Through the 1990s and into the new century, whilst other genres ebb and flow in the ratings and popularity stakes, soaps have consolidated their popularity by continuing with their apparently simple formulaic themes and styles.

Defining Soaps

Using the domestic and familial issues that make up the lives of the women who watch them, soaps foreground family dramas designed to threaten family unity and test familial loyalties and values, contextualising universal issues and themes within the family arena. The visible success of such conventions has permeated through to other television genres causing mutations into generic hybrids which draw on similar structures to raise their own rating. Thus crime series and hospital dramas are now often indistinguishable from soap operas, with linear narratives giving way to multi-strand storylines in which open-ended family or relationship narratives run adjacent to the closed episodic plots. This new emphasis on the family in genres that have previously

been action rather than relationship-centred, suggests a drive towards building and maintaining female audiences at the risk of devaluing the genres in terms of how the 'Real World' is represented (Brunsdon, 1997:28).

It may be that by defining female characters as mothers as well as professionals they can be given storylines that enhance the realism of character and motivation, but it may also be argued that by positioning women within the patriarchal framework of dominant beliefs around motherhood female characters are reduced in terms of their ability to compete with men. A recent storyline in *The Bill* (ITV 1984-present), for example, has centred on DI Samantha Nixon, whose personal issues with her illegitimate daughter have affected her ability to make important decisions at work. Certainly, the girls with whom I worked found that the intertextuality between genres made it increasingly difficult for them to distinguish between traditional soap operas and their multi-genre counterparts. Discussion about single mothers in soap operas often digressed into discussions about single mothers in other shows:

I would call *The Bill* a soap opera about the police. Is that right? Angie, 16. C: 2000

Duffy, that nurse in *Casualty*¹⁶, she was a single mother wasn't she? She couldn't do her job properly because of looking after the baby. Sophie L, 18. E: 2002

Brunsdon suggests that soap opera demands competence in three specific categories: generic knowledge, serial-specific knowledge and cultural knowledge of the socially acceptable codes and conventions for the conduct of personal life (Brunsdon, 1997: 17). The reactions of my respondents to questions about motherhood in soaps, supports her argument. The girls were absolutely clear about generic conventions and cultural norms

¹⁶ BBC 1986-present

and they were able to find such conventions across a range of genres. However it is the inherent messages of the soap opera that are most easily detectable in other genres. In other words, it is not the fact that characters are mothers as well as police officers or nurses, but that they react to situations and behave using codes and conventions familiar to viewers from long exposure to soap opera.

Laura Stempel Mumford begins her attempt to define the genre by stating that:

Despite the close critical and theoretical attention that has been paid to soap operas over the last decade, few writers have offered a very clear definition of the genre. (Stempel Mumford, 1995:14)

While Allen defines soaps as “daytime dramatic serials” (a taut definition which effectively excludes most British-made soaps), Brunsdon considers it to be “the paradigmatic television genre” including domestic, continuous, contemporary, episodic, repetitive, fragmented and aural elements (1995: 14). Stempel Mumford further suggests that the difficulties of definition possibly lie within the fact that it is because:

industry parameters for the original and still-dominant version, U.S. daytime soap operas, have so closely tallied with viewers’ understanding of the genre that the category has appeared already to be defined [and] the need for a more precise definition has not seemed especially urgent. (op cit :15)

Christine Geraghty has spent over twenty years attempting to move away from a purely text-based definition of the genre towards one more concerned with the processes through which viewers make use of it. She argues that the principle bonding the very different British and American soaps:

can now be defined not purely by daytime scheduling or even by a clear appeal to a female audience but by the presence of stories which engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation. (Geraghty, 1991: 4)

Whilst such a definition can arguably be applied to many other types of programme which are clearly not soap operas either structurally or in terms of content (Stempel Mumford argues that talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (syndicated 1986-present) or situation comedies like *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-98) have also raised public debate and brought the private sphere out into the public domain), Geraghty's point makes clear the dangers of interpreting too closely a broadly delineated set of criteria.

Given the range of definitions, then, I propose to summarise the genre in terms of structure by reference to one writer, Richard Kilborn, who draws upon and consolidates the studies of other theorists of the genre (Kilborn, 1992).

In essence, Kilborn suggests that a soap opera is a never-ending story of "ordinary people" who live and work together in close communities. These people may be framed as rich Texans or working class Britons but they are 'ordinary' in that their motivations and reactions to events and other characters are presented as generally true to life.

Whilst some soap operas are broadcast on a daily basis and others less frequently, they are all essentially aimed at a female audience and originally scheduled for the afternoon and early evening period, at times traditionally connected to women's leisure periods.

This is certainly the case for those shows broadcast in the USA and Australia or on Satellite and Cable channels which aim to quickly build loyal and sizeable audiences to compete with the variety of channels on offer, and for terrestrial channels which use inexpensive imported Australian soaps to attract afternoon viewers without denting budgets too dramatically.

The structure of soap operas consists of several stories which interweave and enhance our knowledge of characters without ever reaching a clearly defined resolution.

Storylines begin as others wind to a climax and may take up to a year (in the case of a pregnancy for example) to develop. Even on the rare occasions that soap operas end, the final episodes allow for future resumption of storylines, implying that characters will simply continue with their daily lives unobserved by the audience. The very nature of soap opera encourages belief in the separate existence of characters so that when the final episode of *Dynasty* culminated in a massacre of all the characters, there remained well-publicised doubts that all were dead, alongside the hint that future one-off episodes might reveal the outcome.

The pace of storylines is another distinctive feature of the genre. Events are worked through in an environment and a timescale which are not dissimilar to those of the audience. Episodes will rarely cover more than one or two days and are often framed by breakfast at the beginning of the show and the evening's events at the end. As far as possible (Australian imports being the exception here) real-life celebrations such as Christmas and Bonfire night will be featured on the actual day and pregnancies follow a realistic gestation (although events are regularly sped up by the discovery of the pregnancy being made several months into it, thus reducing the time left before birth). The structure of episodes is designed to encourage the audience to believe that, between episodes, characters lead an "unrecorded existence" (Dyer et al. 1981).

The interweaving of several storylines necessitates a structure which, though seen increasingly in those dramas which form hybrids between soap opera and 'serious drama', such as *Casualty* and *The Bill*, is unique to the genre. Constant switching

between storylines enables the real-time element to be reinforced and to keep a number of characters on-screen in each programme. This interweaving is such an accepted part of the genre that it is neither disruptive nor laboured for the audience, and by moving the action around a variety of spaces the effect is created of a real and continuing world with the viewers as privileged observers or “silent, unseen witnesses” (Kilborn, 1992).

A key feature of the soap opera is that it is designed to encourage continued and sustained viewing by the use of the ‘cliffhanger’ as a tease device, which leaves the audience in suspense and encourages viewers to attempt predictions of future developments. A variety of strands will be set up in order that several outcomes may be viable and, whilst the storylines are rarely original or complicated, the enjoyment comes in the identification of narrative ‘clues’. This speculation about false trails and red herrings set up in the storyline is then developed, not only in the programmes themselves, but often in other media in an intertextual relationship which is conducive to all involved. Women’s weekly magazines such as Woman and Woman’s Own use cover stories about current soap storylines which hint at outcomes and ‘interview’ the characters, whilst the world-wide interest in who shot J R Ewing was fuelled by items on television news broadcasts and newspapers. The benefit to all is the increase in audience across the media.

The specific narrative structure of soap opera, combined with the regularity of broadcasts and the length of time they increasingly remain in production, enables the audience to get to know the large cast of characters fairly intimately. This is achieved by not only watching them in action over a long period of time during which their personalities and motivations develop reasonably realistically, but also by

eavesdropping on conversations about them. This, in turn, enhances the sense of community evoked, which is so central to the genre, by continually making connections and by moving from house to house or street to street. Viewer familiarity with characters is the core of soap opera experience. These figures come to be as well-known and loved as friends and relatives (and in some cases more so), and the large numbers of regular characters vital to the genre means that most viewers will find at least one with whom they can engage and sometimes relate:

In our house watching *EastEnders* is like going to church. We all sit down for half an hour and there is peace. I like this because it deals with everyday life. I live in a widowed family, so we relate to the programme. (Rebecca Swinfield quoted in Day-Lewis, 1989:116)

These central characters are framed in relation to family groups which form the basis of the genre (Geraghty, 1992a:60) and which, in turn (in British and Australian soaps) create the illusion of a strong community, threats to which become the staple source of drama and plot-line.

Community and Family in Soap Opera

Geraghty suggests that all soaps are about family although in *Coronation Street* the community becomes a wider family which sustains individual members whether they have their own families or not:

The model of an imperfect family working towards an harmonious ideal has important consequences for the way in which social issues identified by the programme makers have been dealt with. The notion of the family at the heart of the new soaps implied the existence of deviants from that model. These deviants divided into two groups – those who could be part of the family but have chosen not to be, and those who can never be. (Geraghty, 1995:70)

Jordon considers that the task of communicating community values and ensuring their survival relies ultimately on personal and familial relationships. *Coronation Street* has always attempted to equate one set of relationships (familial) with another (within the community) and to set them within a tough world:

Much of the skill of [*Coronation Street*] can be seen in the way in which it omits what is sociologically the normative grouping of mother, father, two children, while still managing to assert that it is about just such groups. (Jordan quoted in Dyer et al, 1981: 32).

In other words, soap opera is essentially about families and the family values of loyalty, support and patriarchal control whilst, at the same time, containing few traditional, nuclear families within it.

The family provides the model by which community relationships in *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* can be understood and expressed. (Geraghty, 1992: 96)

In a wider context, the model of the family positioned within the genre reflects the ideology of family values perpetuated by the State:

Although the conventional nuclear family is no longer statistically the norm, its image has repeatedly been invoked by politicians seeking a return to more traditional moral values ... the kind of moral and religious authoritarianism represented by figures like Mary Whitehouse, with their belief in the essential sacredness of family life, has increasingly come to set the agenda for debate, and to inform legislation. Meanwhile the dismantling of the welfare state has led to growing pressure on working class families and in particular on those which may be classified as 'deviant' such as single parent families. (Buckingham, 1987: 87)

Whilst Buckingham himself looks at such families in the context of how audiences construct meanings around characters, there is also a need to explore how families are created and presented for our entertainment and as a measure by which we can identify traits of our own and others' family experiences, particularly where those experiences are different to those deemed as 'normal' (the traditional nuclear family).

McMahon and Quinn argue that the plot-lines of soap operas offer some insight into the cultural beliefs of the society in which we live and that television's perception of its audience as the family group leads it to develop narratives around the perceived beliefs and preoccupations of the nuclear family:

It matters little that the nuclear family is an almost mythical entity because television acts as if it were a reality. (McMahon and Quinn, 1986:177)

Television uses the family group as a basis not only for realistic family situations in comedy and drama, but for creating discourses of normality and deviance. Thus even groupings of non-related characters will begin to develop familial characteristics and a character like Emily Bishop in *Coronation Street*, for example, has assumed a maternal relationship with a number of characters including Curly, Spider and, more recently, Tracy Barlow.

We might argue that the family in soap opera becomes a metaphor for the security most audience members are believed to desire. Even 'bad' characters are often redeemed through their family loyalty. JR Ewing's motivation was, essentially, the future of his family and its fortunes. Les Battersby, the *Coronation Street* character who has tricked, deceived, stolen from and reported other characters to the police and press, cried when his daughter, Leanne, lost her unborn baby, and grieved for the grandchild he would never know. It is from within this dynamic unit that characters operate and reveal themselves to the audience. Geraghty suggests that the family tensions are a product of the pressure put on the family unit by the "external forces of unemployment, financial difficulties and changes in society" (Geraghty, 1992:83), rather than the right to be in the family unit itself.

Thus, the simple fact of being a family member can be seen to be the overriding qualification in a character's delineation, and those who are framed as being outside the family unit are more harshly, and sometimes more stereotypically characterised. If the family represents the good in social and cultural experience, then outsiders, by definition, challenge established values and groups, which inevitably must be defended

in order to repulse or integrate external threats. For the soap family, internal relationships may cause vulnerability but the threat itself is often instigated by outsiders. So clearly defined are the distinctions between insider and outsider, that in some British Soap operas the defining factor can be as simple as accent. In *Coronation Street*, for example, characters such as Mike Baldwin, with his Cockney twang, and Des Barnes, with his Geordie tones, were never truly integrated into the Lancashire community despite being regular characters for many years; and in *EastEnders*, the ex-police officer (and therefore, mistrusted) Eddie Royle was quickly forgotten after his murder at the hands of local thug, Nick Cotton.

In soap opera it is the characters that predominantly drive the plot-lines in the genre. Standard drama, as the name implies, relies on a narrative of event and action through which the audience learns about the nature of the protagonists and supporting characters. In the closed narrative of drama, whether it is filmic or televisual, the development of character comes solely from response to a variety of plot points, whether that be the discovery of a murder in the thriller genre or the discovery of love in a romantic comedy. In soap opera, however, the luxury of time and an open-ended narrative structure allows the development of a narrative based around the relationships between the large ensemble team which makes up the fictitious community. This is partly the result of the genre being predominantly aimed at women who traditionally prefer character-driven to action-driven narrative (Ang, 1985) but also due to the open-ended nature of the text:

Because of their very nature, with plotlines planned months in advance, and proceeding at their own special stately pace, nothing happens that is not grounded in character. More important, nothing happens without the repercussions echoing through the serial for weeks and months. (Buckman, 1984: 170)

Characterisation is strongly female orientated with standard 'types' prevailing over internal and external threats to the families and communities they hold dear. Geraghty believes that the "centrality of women in soaps has the effect of making them the norm by which the stories are understood", arguing that, unusually in a culture in which women are usually represented as "opaque and enigmatic", soap women are "transparent and understandable" (Geraghty, 1992:50). In my own research, young women revealed that they had experienced male friends and relatives learning about women's issues through the thoughts and behaviour of soap characters:

My brother keeps asking me and my mum if women really get that mad through PMT. Laura, 17. A: 1998 (talking about a character in *EastEnders* whose Pre-Menstrual Tension caused her to attack her partner on a regular basis).

My mum and dad had a big row after Bianca had her abortion in *EastEnders* Katy M, 16. D: 2002

There was a general agreement between the teenagers that soaps somehow valorised normal female behaviour and attitudes. Their acceptance of the conversations and arguments generated by the mediated experiences of soap characters with whom they engaged on a regular basis suggests that the genre has naturalised and mythologised women's experiences for audiences.

The key to this naturalisation comes out of the methods used to embed characters within the public consciousness. Soap operas rely on familiarity and involvement with characters and the situations in which they find themselves.

The Relationship between Soap Opera and its Audiences

The writers devise long and detailed biographies of characters to give them depth and realism in order that audiences will find them credible, plausible and, perhaps most

importantly, identifiable with themselves and their lives. Hobson describes how, on *Crossroads* the writers would each take charge of a storyline in order that they could have “more overall control over the characters” (Hobson, 1982: 55). She includes, in her detailed description of how the show was constructed, a section of an outline of a storyline introducing a new character, which shows how other characters’ personalities would affect it. Buckingham explains how, prior to the launch of *EastEnders*, the biographies of the original characters were tested in small discussion groups in London and Manchester. The research confirmed that much of the appeal of soap opera revolves around the characters and their familiarity to viewers.

Viewers liked to feel that they knew the characters well and could predict the ways in which they would react to situations, although there was also a danger of characters becoming too predictable.
(Buckingham, 1987: 17)

Regular viewers, observant and knowledgeable, are quick to pick up on mistakes or discrepancies in characterisation. When Ena Sharples, having declared eight years previously that she could not abide chocolate éclairs, was seen eating one in an episode of *Coronation Street*, her action instigated a flood of letters from confused fans (Podmore and Reece, 1990: 46). This familiarity with characters enables viewers to assess the realism in their actions and behaviour, and it was noticeable in the episodes watched by my sample group, that several of the young women commented on the disparity between characters’ previous behaviour and later storylines. It is this familiarity that underpins audience reactions to what happens to soap opera characters and that enables the genre to take on the patriarchal and moralising form that makes analysis of text so important to theorists like Brunsdon and Geraghty.

However, there has tended to be a marked difference between the genders in soap opera. Kilborn offers the opinion that whilst the range of female characters is striking

and liberating through the depiction of women as not only strong, wise and resourceful but also free-spirited and independent, male characters have traditionally tended to be cast in “quite stereotypical roles: as joke-cracking pub landlord, irascible family father, eligible bachelor and the like” (Kilborn, 1992:48). Even storylines featuring male characters are generally developed from the female point of view. Geraghty uses the love triangle between Den Watts, his wife and lover in *EastEnders* to show how, at all times, the women’s motivations and feelings were explained to the audience, leaving Den to be baffled and confused alone:

Our understanding is invoked by the process of going through the narrative with them. (Geraghty 1992:51)

Initially male characters were portrayed from the female point of view, in the way that writers of the nineteenth century woman’s novel on which the first American radio soaps were based, had done before, and this gave females the stronger story lines and character development. Modern soap operas have filled out the personalities and roles of the male characters as increasing numbers of men have joined the viewing audience, but, storylines continue to employ the traditional, issue and relationship-based conventions which have been aimed at women throughout the genre’s history. Rather than introducing the more action based narratives of ‘men’s fiction’, themes concerning men and masculinity may still be seen to be constructed in ways, and around subjects, close to women’s hearts. Thus issues around patriarchy in general, and discourses about paternity specifically, whilst not new to soap opera narrative, may now be seen to be directed at men and women equally using strategies designed to appeal to women alone. The issue of fatherhood, and particularly lone fatherhood, is dealt with in more detail later in this study, but it is pertinent to consider that, for soap opera, paternity and fatherhood may not always be the same thing. Examples of lone (and sometimes married) mothers being unsure of their baby’s father are plentiful: *EastEnders* is

currently following a story in which any one of three men might be the father of Laura's son, despite one being married to another woman and another having had a vasectomy! Similarly, men frequently take over the parental role for children that they have not fathered as a result of another actor leaving the series or to follow a storyline in which relationships have become entangled. Again, this is no longer unusual in real-life relationships either. Of the girls I interviewed, several were being brought up by stepfathers, did not see their biological father or had never met him:

My family tree is so complicated that when we did them in school, I was given a different task to do! Kiya, 16 . D: 2002

I call my stepdad dad and my real dad by his name because I spend most of my time with my stepdad, who's more like a proper dad, and I just see my real dad and his new wife and family for a couple of weekends a year. Louise T, 18. D: 2002

Geraghty considers the idea that questions about paternity have been central to most soaps because it is through childbirth that patriarchal power can best be challenged:

Behind all these situations lies an uncertainty about paternity and a fear that if a woman moves outside marriage for sexual satisfaction she throws the fatherhood of her children into question and threatens the father's control of the family to which she 'belongs.' (Geraghty, 1992: 69)

The emphasis on women as central to the soap opera and its fictitious communities has brought with it media recognition that real women's lives do not end with the declarations of love and marriage of most romantic fiction, but carry on into motherhood, work, divorce, illness and widowhood. Within a patriarchal discourse, women are seen to cope in spite of men not because of them. Putting women at the heart of the family and the community has brought with it problems for producers and writers since, when actresses choose to leave a show, it is unrealistic to develop a storyline where a community rooted character walks out of her family and community.

This is one of the reasons why female characters are more likely to die than simply to walk away from their soap surroundings:

It is simply too unrealistic to expect a character whose whole life is wrapped up in the people and places around her to suddenly decide to leave home. We'd be insulting the intelligence of our viewers if we tried that. So we have no choice but to kill them off. (John Yorke, executive producer of *EastEnders* quoted in Smith and Holland, 1987)

This in turn leaves a disproportionate number of fathers left literally holding the baby. Statistically just one percent of families is headed by a lone father, in soap operas the number of lone fathers, at any time, is as high as twenty percent. Indeed, during the last few years *EastEnders* has featured Phil Mitchell, Beppe DiMarco, Ian Beale, Patrick Truman, Charlie Slater and, most recently, Ricky Butcher as single fathers. Significantly only two of these characters were involved in storylines directly concerned with their status as single fathers. In contrast, and over the same period the series featured just three single mothers: Sonya Jackson whose child was adopted; Kat Slater, whose daughter had been brought up as her sister for seventeen years and Laura Beale, abandoned by her husband when she became pregnant by someone else. In each story there is an element of judgement. Sonya is 'punished' for losing her virginity to a one-night stand, having told her loyal boyfriend that she wanted to wait to sleep with him; Kat has punished herself over the years by sleeping around and conforming to a stereotype of uncontrolled sexuality, and Laura is generally despised by other characters (apart from Pat Evans, the matriarch of bad mothers!) and by the audience for whom she is presented as whining, manipulative and deceitful:

I hate her. She's ruined Gary and Lynne's marriage. I can't think why he'd go with her in the first place! Polly B, 17. E: 2002

She's a horrible character, you can't feel any sympathy for her even when she's upset. Kelly T, 19. E: 2002

It is clear that in most cases single motherhood is treated as a melodramatic narrative device whereas lone fatherhood is presented as a normal experience which rarely needs developing within the context of the narrative. This differing treatment of lone fathers and mothers reflects the moral and ideological perspective which seems intrinsic to the genre and the way meaning is constructed within it.

The construction of the genre makes it more 'open' and 'indeterminate' than others and therefore able to appeal to larger and more diverse audiences, yet this has not discouraged academics from considering how meaning is produced and understanding gained by individual viewers (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987; Gillespie, 1991). Indeed, it is the expectation of something good or bad happening, plus the intrigue of when and how it will happen, that fuels the "addiction" for soap watchers and which is:

One of the hardest things to explain to non-addicts...To them knowing the answer means there is no challenge. But what they miss is the beauty of seeing the sum being worked out. (Buckman, 1984:201)

Buckingham offers a rather more sophisticated explanation for the basic appeal of soap opera in his suggestion that viewers "are actively engaged in negotiating meaning" and that those meanings may not always be the same as those intended by the producers (Buckingham, 1987:203). For Kilborn, the pleasure of soap opera is encapsulated in the "knowing relationship, if not binding contract, between viewer and programme maker as to the nature of what is being offered and how it is presented" (Kilborn, 1992:16).

In essence then, the attraction of soap-viewing is being clearly aware of those conventions which define the genre. We know that the mention of a long-lost relative, or the arrival of a lone character, will inevitably bring related characters at some point;

we understand that camera movements will suggest that the viewer knows more than the characters, and we conspire to predict outcomes which are all the more enjoyable for their predictability. But there is more for the audience than these overt devices to keep viewers hooked. There are also the covert messages, usually moralistic in tone which give comfort and promote consensus. It includes the sense of social cohesion gained from watching as families and discussing issues and stories with friends which can take the form of a 'uniting ritual' (Simpson, 1982; Hobson, 1992). Soap watching also provides the opportunity for safe intimacy with characters not too far removed from ourselves combined with the pleasure of escaping from our reality into someone else's far more horrible reality. It is a process that enables us to 'connect with parts of our fantasy lives that other fictions may not be able to reach' (Hobson, 1992:67). There is even, within the act of watching soaps, the offer of fulfilment of certain individual needs: company, a launch-pad for social and personal interaction and education about a whole range of contemporary issues and problems (Bates, 1987). As Gunter and MacAleer note:

One early observation, made during the 1940s, was that women who were lonely or socially isolated, or who experienced more anxiety or frustration in their lives would listen more to soap operas. These serials compensated for social or emotional vacuums in their own lives. (Gunter and McAleer, 1990:133)

It is this relationship between the genre and its audiences which has fascinated researchers and critics of soap opera, from the 1930s when Dr Louis Berg likened soap opera fans to the peasants watching the French Aristocrats being executed at the guillotine and "slavering" over the misfortunes of others, up to the modern National Listeners and Viewers Association which sets itself up as the arbiter of public morals and regularly attacks the content and values of prime-time drama.

The Storylines in Soap Opera

Within the genre storylines operate around three standard 'levels'. There are the basic plots which centre on the family and focus on the day-to-day problems which all families experience. Work, marriage, childbirth, domestic relationships between generations and genders, illness and specific concerns such as looking after the aged, coping with divorce and bereavement, and unemployment provide staple storylines with which viewers can identify and relate to. As Abercrombie suggests:

When people talk about what they have seen on tv, they frequently relate events or characters to their own lives. For example in discussions of soap opera, viewers will interpret the behaviour of one of the characters by noting his or her similarities to someone they know. (Abercrombie, 1996: 191)

The second level presents the viewing audience with fantasy and melodramatic storylines which are significantly less likely to occur in reality. This is where the community element of soap opera kicks in and stories tend to revolve around issues which threaten the community and the families within it. Kidnappings, sieges, affairs, long-lost relatives returning, murders, even alien abductions, in some American soaps, are subjects regularly covered. It is these subjects, combining fantasy material with the realism of acting and *mise-en-scène*, which have been seen as the main reason for the stigmatising of the genre as low quality, escapist rubbish (Alasuutari, 1992), and, in turn, led to several studies into how audiences work with texts to construct meaning and to challenge the denigration of the genre (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987; Liebes and Katz, 1990).

The third level at which soap opera operates is by representing macrocosmic issues within the microcosm of community life. It is here that cultural and social values are attached to subjects which may be of topical interest or which have engendered public debate in a wider social context. Thus issues like abortion have been dramatised as soap

opera storylines, both around the time of the 1967 Abortion Act and, more recently in *EastEnders* and other soaps when the 30th anniversary of the Act brought unresolved arguments about abortion to prominence again. The nature of the genre means that such issues may be developed over time at a natural pace and enable viewers to discuss and experience, albeit vicariously, points of view and outcomes similar to and different from those in their own lives. One major example of this level of soap storytelling is the *EastEnders* portrayal of Mark Fowler as a man living with HIV as opposed to dying of AIDs. His struggle to live a normal life with the virus has formed a large part of the series over a number of years, and the writers have been careful to stick closely to a realistic representation of how his life would be altered and affected by such a condition. The choice of the subject came out of a desire by the production team to counter the prevalent and government-inspired campaign of the mid 1980s which sought to label HIV as a 'gay epidemic' and to brand those suffering with the virus as promiscuous and doomed (both literally and morally).

Such issue-based drama has formed an increasingly important part of modern British soap opera, pulling it away from its melodramatic traditions and making it the foremost medium by which many people learn about contemporary developments in the fields of the law, medicine, education, ethics and social change. These issues are presented as life experiences of familiar characters and are considered, by the creators of both *EastEnders* and *Brookside* to be integral in the planning of storylines:

Issues, like everything else in a realistic soap, must come naturally out of the characters and community. (Smith and Holland, 1987:204)

As a contemporary dramatist, I'd always wanted to examine social issues. A social issue is only such because it affects a great number of people. (Phil Redmond, 1987:3)

It is at this level that soap opera is often attacked for going beyond its remit as mass-produced, formulaic entertainment and taking on an educative role, despite the fact that it is also criticised for the pure entertainment and escapism it provides. Emotive and complicated subjects are packaged into half hour drama, often with didactic or moralistic overtones, which, critics have suggested, oversimplify and make value judgements about issues for which there are no easy answers.

John Fiske attacks such arguments as simplistic themselves, claiming that audiences construct meaning not only through the text itself but also in terms of the social ideologies which have formed attitudes, values and beliefs, and moulded interpretations. He suggests that ideological and hegemonic theories of popular culture overestimate the power of the message producer and underestimate that of the viewer since television offers not a set of “do-it-yourself” meanings or “readymade” answers, but a polysemic experience in which the viewer constructs an individual, though culturally constrained interpretation (Fiske, 1989:59).

Similarly, Buckingham argues that many critical approaches to television literacy assume that meanings are somehow contained within texts and can be recovered by a process of analysing readings produced by readers. He suggests that viewers’ readings are a constituent element or even the ultimate ‘seat’ of meaning (Buxton, 1990: 18).

Within the soap opera genre viewers are invited to construct meaning within a frame of reference of their own lived experiences or the experiences of their friends and neighbours. While this rather simplistic point can reasonably be considered to be

applied to any media text, it relates specifically to a genre defined by its verisimilitude and social realism (Kilborn, 1992).

Single Mothers in Soap Opera

What is interesting, as far as this study is concerned, is the way in which the subject of lone mothers may be carried through all three levels of soap opera storytelling and the way that audiences construct meaning from them that may at the same time be individualised and socially determined. At the first, family-orientated, level are the women who become lone mothers through being widowed or abandoned and whose subsequent stories may involve changes in existing family dynamics or new sexual relationships. At the second, more melodramatic, level are the lone mothers who are positioned as sexual predators, breaking up marriages and using their progeny to threaten established structures, and conforming to the stereotypical media image of the untrammelled monster mother. Finally soaps occasionally construct single motherhood as a social issue although it is almost inevitably subsumed within other storylines which jump on the bandwagon of current moral panics and tabloid scare stories. Topics such as teenage pregnancy and 'home alone' children are packaged as warnings for young women who fall pregnant outside of marriage in storylines which are often heavily 'teacherly' and laden with moral judgements for both audience and other characters. I would now like to consider these different representations of lone motherhood in more detail.

It would seem that, in soap opera, single mothers are rarely 'allowed' to be shown successfully bringing up their children without the benefit of a male partner. Where families are regularly headed by lone fathers without this becoming a defining element of the family structure, lone mothers continue to be stereotyped as highly sexualised or deviant in some way. Some women are positioned as victims, becoming single mothers through rape, bereavement (a popular fate of young women in Australian soaps who lose boyfriends and husbands shortly before or after discovering that they are pregnant) and abandonment. These storylines enable viewers to experience their suffering without being required to make judgements and usually, as in the case of Michelle Fowler, seduced by Den Watts but 'rescued' by Lofty's proposal, or Lisa in *Coronation Street* abandoned by Terry Duckworth but finding love with Des Barnes who took on both her and the baby until her death shortly after they announced their engagement. It should be noted that, on a mythical level, each woman is 'rescued' by a hero and that the stories of these seduced girls are as much about the characters of the men who rescue them as about the ways in which the young women cope with their situations. For example, Michelle's story was more to do with how her family and friends reacted and the mystery of the father, than about her own predicament. Lisa's story led to a further plotline about the fight for custody of her baby between Des and the baby's grandparents.

Such stories operate on several interwoven levels. They usually present the woman's predicament as a problem for the family, either her own or that of her baby's father. Lone pregnancies bring families together or split them apart depending on the closeness of the family and the role of the single mother herself. Thus, in *Coronation Street*, Sarah Louise's pregnancy at thirteen pulls her family together to try to solve the problem of a

teenager going through first pregnancy and then motherhood. Ironically, her stepfather Martin has been on the verge of abandoning his own family, forcing his wife, Gail, to become a single mother herself. Sarah Louise's pregnancy becomes an intergenerational, family problem which draws in her grandmother, Audrey, herself a teenage mother who gave up her son for adoption, as well as the immediate family unit. Indeed, the Platt family, which, until that point, had been seen to be as dysfunctional as families go, spent several weeks held together by the secret of Sarah-Louise's pregnancy which Gail was determined would not become the property of the neighbourhood:

I'll be damned if I'll see my family gossiped about by people with nothing better to do.

For both Michelle in *EastEnders* and Sarah-Louise falling pregnant was a terrible mistake resulting from teenage innocence and curiosity, and, as such we are invited to share their torment rather than moralise over their failings. Perhaps more importantly, coming as they did in a climate of political rhetoric against young mothers apparently using pregnancy to claim benefit and council housing, the stories localised the issue and centred it as essentially a personal drama for both the girl and her family. However, while Michelle's story is presented as a piece of soap opera melodrama, the *Coronation Street* storyline is more clearly a piece of didacticism aimed at pointing out to teenage girls the reality of underage pregnancy and birth (and used as such in a number of young women's magazines). Sarah-Louise is sidelined from an active role in her school play because of her condition and threatens to have the baby adopted when her parents tell her she may not go to the after-show party because her due date is too close. Both soaps use their slow pace to show the weight of responsibility which develops or is foisted upon the teenage mother, a process which adds to claims that the genre's form allows a more realistic and complex approach to treating such topics (Kilborn, 1992;

Buckingham, 1987). Michelle, slightly older at sixteen, enters into a loveless marriage to give her child a father and a name, whilst Sarah-Louise watches as her friends begin the process of dating and partying in which, by rights she should also have been involved but from which she is now excluded. As her mother, Gail, constantly reminds her:

You're going to be a mother, Sarah-Lou, your priorities are different now.

In these sententious storylines we can detect a blending of soap opera levels of storytelling, between the personalised family theme and the wider allegorical social issue narrative.

Audience Responses to Storylines

When stories about single mothers come out of solid, or apparently solid soap families, we are invited to look beneath the surface for reasons and explanations. Michelle claimed that she turned to Den Watts for “affection” because she did not get it at home from her own father. While we as viewers are privy to the whole range of motivations and actions, Michelle’s reasoning is enough to create ongoing ripples within the family (which ironically are now, in 2003, being revisited with the reappearance of Michelle’s daughter, Vicky in Albert Square who has announced her own pregnancy). Sarah-Louise was shown, in the build-up to her pregnancy bombshell (dramatically, too late for a termination in order to eradicate abortion as a possible solution), as being confused and withdrawn in the wake of her parents’ bickering. Martin’s affair put strain on his and Gail’s marriage and was, as in *EastEnders* presented as a reason for Sarah Louise’s transgressions. In both stories and in several others developed in Australian soaps, the girls are framed as betrayed not only by their seducers but by their dysfunctional

families, lonely even when they are not physically alone. It was a theme eagerly discussed by the young women and the young single mothers with whom I worked:

I think it's true that feeling like you don't really belong anywhere can make you more keen to have a full-on relationship. Kelly T, 19. E: 2002

I know girls who've got pregnant and couldn't tell their mums because they were having problems themselves. Like marriages breaking up or their mums were on their own as well. Michelle, 18. D: 2002

I sometimes think that I wouldn't have slept with Dean if I'd been spending more time at home, but I couldn't stand my stepdad, and him and my mum rowed all the time. Sally, 18. SM: 2001

I didn't have that problem. My mam guessed really quickly because I was worried and crying a lot. But she was great, really nice about it. Marcia, 19. SM: 2001

It was also noticeable that the young women used their own experiences as a basis for their reactions to discussions about soap stories and then applied these to their knowledge of the genre:

I felt sorry for Sarah Louise when she had to tell her parents that she was pregnant. When my friend's sister got pregnant when she was 16 they threw her out and she had to stay at her boyfriend's mum's house until they calmed down and let her back. Mel, 18. D: 2002

It would have been a good storyline wouldn't it if Sarah had been thrown out too and she'd had to go to Eileen's. Kerry Ann, 17. D: 2002

But that wouldn't have happened because they [the programme makers] wouldn't want Gail and Martin to come over too badly. Katy M, 16. D: 2002

I thought Sonya's pregnancy [in *EastEnders*] was done better. I really felt for her when she found herself pregnant. It was great. Me and my mum cried! Kiya, 16. D: 2002

I was like Sonya when I got pregnant. I thought they did the bit about whether she should give the baby up for adoption well, but the actual bit about her getting pregnant by Martin was a bit too soap opera-ish I thought. Siobhan, 17. SM: 2001

Yeah that's what makes single mums look like sluts I think, 'cos they're always made out to be sleeping around in soaps so there can be confusion about who's the father. Lucy, 17. SM: 2001

The group of single mothers frequently referred to their own experiences as a means of positioning the soap plots in terms of realism and drama, but were, at the same time, aware of the generic devices used to create both realism and drama. Many of the other young women were able to relate to friends or relatives who had gone through similar experiences but, without the primary understanding of lone motherhood themselves, were less inclined to comment on the artifice of storylines. Their responses support Buckingham's earlier work with young people's responses to *EastEnders* as a text:

They were aware that *EastEnders* is constructed, and did not confuse its representation of the world with reality. Although they were prepared to grant a degree of credibility to this representation, they were also highly critical of what they regarded as its partiality and implausibility. (Buckingham, 1987:200)

For Buckingham the accuracy of observation was less important than his respondents' ability to display a critical distance. My research enabled me to evaluate not only this critical distance but also the young women's ability to process fictional material in the light of other information being presented as truth and their own lived experiences.

The treatment of such stories enables audiences to rehearse responses to family problems and juxtapose screen experiences with their own and those of the people they know. Gillespie found that even issues of culture and race can be discussed using soap opera texts (Gillespie, 1995) and I discovered that the Asian girls in the groups with whom I worked during this research were more likely than other girls to have soap opera texts used as a reminder of 'otherness':

My mum thinks that white girls are all easy and irresponsible. She says that we have more respect for ourselves in our culture and that I should learn from what happens to these girls who sleep around. Aneela, 16. C: 2000

My dad doesn't like me watching the soaps because he thinks they encourage us to behave without respect for ourselves. He hates them! Shobnan, 17. B: 1999

They're not really relevant to us. The main stories you get about Asian families still tend to be about arranged marriages and having secret affairs with unsuitable boys. Ramandeep, 17. B: 1999

The sense of 'otherness' is an important one for soap operas. Both *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* have run storylines around other teenage mothers but in each case they were clearly positioned as 'outsiders', a crucial factor in the way their characters and stories would be developed. Mary Smith, the punk single mother of little Annie, was a character in *EastEnders* when it was first broadcast, but her circumstances were such that she existed outside the close-knit community. Illiterate, unstable and barely tolerated by the other residents of the square, she attempted unsuccessfully to seduce several married or attached men in Walford, and when this failed she became a stripper, prostitute and drug addict. David Buckingham suggests that Mary was developed as a foil to Michelle. For Michelle, becoming a single mother within the strong family network meant that she would never have to sink so low as to go on the game – although Michelle's marriage to Lofty might be seen by feminists as an example of soap 'selling-out' to patriarchal ideals of masculinity and rescue. Mary's story was also presented as a contrast to that of Sue Osman, the wife and 'good mother' who lost her baby to cot death and whose jealousy of Mary, whom she saw as an inadequate mother, caused a number of conflicts between them (Buckingham, 1987: 73). Eventually Mary's lifestyle resulted in her leaving the child alone whilst she went soliciting, and Annie almost lost her life when a cot blanket near an electric fire started a blaze.

Every aspect of Mary's character conspired against audience identification with her. Her wild punk appearance signified a connection to a subculture with connotations for audiences of the time as being irresponsible and unattractive. Her Stockport accent marked her out physically as an outsider to the East End neighbourhood in the way that

soap characters with 'foreign' accents and dialects are regularly framed, and her actions defined her as a 'bad mother.' Whether plausible or not, she was presented as deviant and unfamiliar to older viewers in terms of their own friends and neighbours and passé to younger viewers for whom punk rock was almost a decade out of date. Her 'otherness' thus established her as a character who could be more easily stereotyped, stigmatised and judged. Buckingham suggests that her circumstances are a mitigation of her moral failings (ibid: 81) but it might also be argued that her moral failings brought her to this set of circumstances.

Before developing the issue of moral judgements of single mothers in soap opera we might also usefully consider *Coronation Street*'s other teenage mother, Zoe, whose first appearance was as a heavily pregnant sixteen year old whose boyfriend robbed the amusement arcade in which Judy Mallett, desperate but unable to fall pregnant, was working. She went on to inveigle her way into the close-knit community creating havoc within several families and destroying a number of relationships before becoming involved with a religious cult and moving away. Zoe's character was, like Mary's before her, both stereotypical of media representations of teenage mothers and presented in opposition to the family orientated occupants of the Street. Zoe, too, was homeless and unstable, ensuring that she would require help and support from the community, despite being an outsider, as her pregnancy developed, and during her time in the soap she astonished both characters and viewers with her duplicity and her ability to wreck lives. She sold her unborn baby to the Malletts for £2,000, a sum which she had drunk and smoked away before she even gave birth. She later stole the baby back from Judy and Gary, leaving them bereft, and taking it to a squat where we saw her sleeping on rags surrounded by candles, leaving the crying baby whilst she went

clubbing. Finally she moved into Ashley Peacock's house and later his bed, which led to the break-up of his 'honest' relationship with Maxine. When Zoe's baby died of Meningitis (whilst she was out clubbing having claimed that motherhood was driving her mad) she appeared to lose her mind, claiming that nobody actually cared about her before succumbing to the brainwashing of the strange cult members who ironically targeted her in a club.

It was difficult to feel sympathy for Zoe because her actions directly invited criticism. In the tradition of flawed characters and 'bad mothers', she was doomed to suffer (in the loss of the baby she loved despite being incapable of caring for it), and in the tradition of malevolent outsiders she brought misery to the more familiar and better understood members of the community. Whilst being framed as a sad and pitiful character (we were given little insight into her motivations and background), she provided a contrast to the multidimensional and strongly developed regular characters, coming across as the vengeful harpy of Greek mythology and the 'Destructive Mother' of traditional melodrama (Basinger, 1993).

Unlike Sarah-Louise Platt and Michelle Fowler, who are presented as normal girls suffering for their mistakes but surviving through family unity and support both Zoe and Mary Smith, are characters who invite viewers to make moral and ideological judgements about them. We are encouraged to make sense of their behaviour, which is manifested as deviant and alien to that of 'normal' people, through a set of discourses positioned within cultural, moral and ideological frameworks from our own lives and through familiarity with generic conventions.

Buckingham suggests that a serial like *EastEnders* enables viewers to discuss and criticise the behaviour of soap characters:

As a vehicle for working out their own ideological perspectives, or for giving voice to their own needs or desires. Their judgements may often extend beyond questions of morality to address broader ideological or political issues, even where these are not made explicit within the programme itself. (Buckingham, 1987:174)

The teenagers with whom he conducted his research into the serial could not agree over whether Michelle's pregnancy taught other teenagers about appropriate behaviour or not. However, they too were able to apply their own moral and ideological frameworks to the programme and develop the issues further using the tools of debate which 'in the case of the older children, was often extremely sophisticated':

[Michelle]'s going to have this baby and she's too young to have a baby anyway.

Her mum's got a lot of burden, right. She's not taking her mum into consideration. Her mum has to go through a lot.

She won't listen to anybody's advice.

Now, when she wants to go to parties who's going to look after her child?

I think it was wrong that she didn't tell her parents who the father is ...I think that the father should have the right to know. (Buckingham, 1987: 172)

Buckingham infers from this that the girls' concerns with the moral validity of Michelle's behaviour imply that the much lauded theory that viewers of soap opera will automatically identify with characters who are like themselves is "perhaps an oversimplification" (ibid: 173).

He uses this inference to develop the idea of referential and critical framing also explored by Liebes and Katz (1993:103) in their analysis of *Dallas*, and by Marie

Gillespie (1993:96-98) in her investigation into how young Punjabis use *Neighbours* to better understand the relationship of their cultural community to the mainstream culture. Essentially the idea of referential and critical framing refers to the combination of subjectivity and objectivity used, often simultaneously, by soap opera audiences to make sense of the texts. Viewers use referential framing to relate what they see on television to their own lives and also, according to Abercrombie (1996: 191), to relate their own life experiences to televisual stories. Critical framing takes place when audiences apply their understanding of general television and specific generic conventions. Thus viewers can identify themes, messages and issues, deconstruct narrative, plot and characterisation, and remain aware of their own involvement in the creation of meaning, whilst still being able to enjoy and escape into the storyline and characters. Hobson was able to apply this to *Crossroads* and its fans:

Viewers bring expectations to a programme which are determined by their knowledge of that programme and its genre and they do not make hostile comparisons across other programme types. (Hobson, 1982: 120-1)

In the same vein, Buckingham's work shows that the viewers of *EastEnders*, including children, easily slide in and out between referential and critical frameworks, using their own lives to evaluate the realism of what they see on television. On the subject of lone parenting, and single motherhood particularly, the young women with whom I worked were fully cognisant with the artifice of soap working to create the realism for which the genre is, in this country at least, recognised:

I don't think that Sonya would really have slept with Martin or given the baby up but it makes a really good storyline. I like the battles between Pauline and Sonya over the baby. Sarah F, 16. D:2002

Have you noticed how girls *always* get pregnant when they have sex for the first time? I don't know anyone who's got pregnant after their first shag [to laughter], do you? Mel, 18. D: 2002

I don't know though, a friend of my sister went with this guy for ages before she slept with him, but then she got pregnant straight away, and he didn't want to know after that. Louise T, 18. D: 2002

Abercrombie develops the idea further to suggest that television is “a supremely postmodern form which appeals to a new postmodern, audience, for whom television defines reality” (Abercrombie, 1996: 193). His views do not seem to be sustained by the girls' own perceptions of soap opera; they were clearly able to differentiate between their own realities and the mediated reality of the genre.

Thirteen years on from Buckingham's work with young adults, and with the benefit of the increased sophistication in viewers' abilities to read texts, particularly in soap opera (Abercrombie, 1996), the groups of 16 and 17 year olds that I studied were easily able to identify the didactic and moralistic strain running through storylines centred on young pregnant and unmarried mothers. They applied semantic perception to the Sarah-Louise storyline in *Coronation Street*, effortlessly identifying the message (that 'teenage pregnancy ruins your life' and that 'even trying sex once can get you pregnant') underpinning the entire storyline. Their ability to interpret such messages from the text encouraged cynicism of the moralistic tones taken by other soap narratives and the ways in which drama was constructed by developing some aspects of realistic situations whilst ignoring others:

You'd expect them to use that sort of angle on teenage pregnancy. They're hardly going to show the good bits of it. Clare, 16. C: 2000

Well there probably aren't many good bits, are there? Angie, 16 C: 2000

I know girls who've got pregnant at 15 or 16 and, although I wouldn't want to do it, they seem to be alright. Polly S, 17. E: 2000

It's quite a good storyline though because you can tell they're going to keep it going by her [Sara-Louise] and her mum arguing over whether to keep the baby. Aneela, 16. C: 2000

I think she'll keep it and they'll show how hard it is to bring up a baby when you're only a kid. Angie, 16. C:2000

Like in *Hollyoaks* with Cindy. Clare, 16. C: 2000

Yeah, but even in *Hollyoaks* they've sort of made Cindy a loser, haven't they? First Stan died because of her wanting an abortion, and now she can't get a bloke because they don't want someone with a baby. Amanda, 17. C: 2000

But loads of single mums find boyfriends don't they, so it wouldn't be that hard – especially looking like Cindy! Polly S. C: 2000

Cindy, the single mother in *Hollyoaks* (Ch4 1995-present) is another character whose situation operates at the first level of narrative in soap opera. She is a young woman who conceived after a one-night stand with Stan. Her decision to terminate the pregnancy was hotly contested by Stan, whose despair at her refusal to change her mind led directly to the drinking binge after which he wrecked his car and died of his injuries. Feeling guilty about his death, she then changed her mind about the abortion and was then shown to struggle to bring up the child. The young women I interviewed had noted that the storyline around Cindy had been framed in terms of her inability to get and keep decent boyfriends once she had a child, thus reducing the opportunity to open a discourse around lone parenting, instead simply recycling dominant, and negative, attitudes to lone motherhood (Phoenix, 1991):

They hardly show the baby anymore do they? It's just about her wanting to get a boyfriend now. Sarah F, 16. D: 2002

It's as if they just want to show the worst bits of being a mum as being that you can't get a boyfriend. I don't think that's true anyway. Michelle, 18. D: 2002

The young mothers were more disdainful of the depiction of Cindy:

I hate the way they make out that the baby is just a nuisance to her and that all she cares about is getting another boyfriend. Lucy, 17. SM: 2001

You don't really see her doing anything nice with the baby. I'd rather spend time with Chloe [her baby] than with some bloke, wouldn't you? Carol, 19. SM: 2001

One of Cindy's boyfriends refused to acknowledge the baby and eventually ran off with money intended for the child, indicating poor choice in boyfriends ('she'd rather have any bloke than none at all' Lucy). Later the storyline had concentrated on the negative elements of being young and a mother by using the issues of going out and boyfriends to signify the lost joys of normal teenage life. It is a theme used by *Coronation Street* in much the same way, and one which was identified by the young mothers as being unrealistic and unfair. However, what came out of my discussion with these young mothers was their perception that 'everyone else thinks that's what single mothers are like. Going from bloke to bloke and sleeping with anybody' (Sally, 18). There was a general agreement amongst the women that they felt themselves to be judged by the media as a whole through stereotypical portrayal in soaps such as *Hollyoaks*, with an acknowledgement that positive images of successful single mothers (a category they considered women like me to represent) might help them to consider the choices available in their own lives.

In my interviews with the young female students in my groups over a period of five years one response seemed to override other reactions to single teenage mothers in soaps. Whilst they expressed sympathy for the characters who found themselves pregnant and alone they were convinced that the same thing would never happen to them:

It's a good storyline – typical of a soap opera – but I'd never let myself get into that situation. Clare, 16. C: 2000

I can't believe these girls just get pregnant- just like that. They must be stupid.
Angie, 16. C: 2000

Their responses were interesting given other, apparently contradictory views about the misfortune of friends who had become pregnant in their teens. It initially suggested that the girls themselves were expressing a moralistic view of single motherhood and my early findings indicated that the sympathy they had expressed for friends and relatives in a similar situation, was perhaps false or hypocritical. In later sessions, however, I began to question their views more closely, asking for elaboration or definition of the views being expressed. What I discovered was that the girls' attitudes were confined to the behaviour and actions of soap characters within the discourses set up by the series themselves. Familiarity with soap conventions gave the girls a cynicism of these particular storylines:

The thing is, you just know that if a girl has sex in a soap opera she's going to end up pregnant. It's like they're really trying to ram home the message to use condoms or something. Sophie L, 18. E: 2002

I know [the media] are always saying that young girls don't use condoms but I'd tell a guy to get lost if he didn't want to use protection. Kelly T, 19. E:2002

Once again these young women were demonstrating an engagement with the genre described by Buckingham as "a complex and shifting combination of different responses":

While the pleasure of passing moral judgment on the characters is to some extent premised on a belief in the psychological coherence and plausibility of their actions and motivations, the pleasure of questioning and even ridiculing the artificiality of the programme is clearly based on an awareness that it is, precisely, a fiction. (Buckingham, 1987:200)

Willis suggests that young women judge soap content continuously, reworking the material in relation to their own lives and enabling them to "facilitate a dialectic between representation and reality" (Willis, 1990: 36). It is only when the serial and

the characters within it are realistic for them that they accept storylines which they feel to be heavily skewed or didactic:

I can believe that a young girl like Sarah-Louise might get pregnant accidentally without even knowing what she was doing [*to general sniggers and laughter*] but I don't think someone like Cindy would make that kind of mistake unless she was really drunk. Kerry Ann, 17. D: 2002

The intrinsic moralising, which frames single mothers as problematic and dysfunctional, comes across clearly in Phil Redmond's introduction to *Total Brookside: The Ultimate Guide*. He predicted that future *Brookside* storylines would concentrate much more on the "major concerns of society" rather than the minutiae of sexual activities. He admitted that:

until recently we'd been looking at a lot of the dysfunctional issues in society – single parents, second time marriages and so on. (Tibballs, 1998: 8)

If programme makers perceive the issue of single parenting in such a light, then it is hardly surprising that the programmes they produce reflect such perceptions. Buckman suggests that television offers the opportunity to find material which "sticks to the burrs of prejudice with which all our minds are cluttered" and considers that television "reinforces those prejudices rather than creates them" (Buckman 1984: 172).

Melodrama in Soap Opera

Myth and prejudice may be visible in the domestic portrayal of single mothers but it appears to be paramount in the second level of soap storyline defined earlier in this chapter. The key narrative convention of the threat to family and community from an outsider is frequently translated into two of the most stereotypical soap characters of all. Firstly, the sexual predator who arrives from outside and creates havoc within the traditional family set-up, and secondly, the vicious, rejected, illegitimate child who reappears to the mother who gave him/her up years before seeking recognition and

revenge. These storylines are heavily moralistic, following the lines of Greek tragedy, and containing traditional codes of good and evil. They are also easily understood by audiences who recognise in them cultural mythology and fears that transcend the sophistication of the serials into which they have been placed.

Sexual activity and relationships have always been integral to the genre of soap opera, and the themes of unplanned pregnancies, abortion and unmarried mothers stem directly from the melodramatic tradition from which it developed. I will be considering the paradigms of melodrama in my chapter on film but there are clear associations between the melodramatic in film and soap opera and it is useful to explore the methods by which melodrama, and the use of its stylised conventions, transcends the realism on which British soap opera (if not American) prides itself.

Gledhill suggests that the staple fodder of melodrama has always been subjects such as the secret, the illegitimate child, the rejected woman, the seduction, the silent love (1987:89). She suggests that stories followed similar lines: the woman seduced or involved in an adulterous affair would inevitably fall pregnant. She would then give birth to an illegitimate child who would be separated from its mother. By this time, the woman would have lost her lover in some way, and “thus punished in motherhood the woman begins a downward trajectory which is often paralleled by a geographic odyssey toward the bottom” (Gledhill, 1987:89).

By the late twentieth century the main elements of melodrama had become reduced to parody and cliché, and those film, television and literary products which still made use of it as a basis for narrative and meaning, were pilloried by many critics and academics,

although some feminists have given credence to the genre and its relationship to the lives of their audience members (Cook and Bernink, 2000:164). The essentially feminine coda behind the form in melodrama consigned it to a lower status in media output. Mills and Boon novelettes, 'tearjerker' films made for television on subjects such as custody battles, infidelity and other storylines which placed women firmly in the victim position, and soap operas became stigmatised as a nadir of cultural texts, reaffirming female powerlessness both on and offscreen (Modleski, 1990: 91). Early feminist analysis of the genre was "dismissive and denunciatory" and soaps were seen as a "privileged site" for the reproduction of stereotypes (Brunsden, 2000: 52). Storylines ignored the Women's Movement's fight to have women taken seriously and issues of female powerlessness and women's treatment by men were reduced to traditional narratives of women being seduced and abandoned, women being falsely accused of crimes and abandoned, women being betrayed by loved ones and abandoned. Yet, as Laura Mulvey pointed out in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Structure* (1977), in the narrative film, and indeed most televisual genres, the audience is required to identify with a "main controlling figure" who is inevitably male (Mulvey, 1977 :420). In melodrama and soap opera the themes, however old-fashioned, centre around women and, more importantly, around women as, often isolated, individuals. The popularity of texts based around the elements of melodrama, women's weekly magazines and television talk shows which increasingly use stories of women overcoming terrible tragedies and traumas, suggest that these, rather than the issues of feminism, are what appeal to women and reflect their own experiences – or perhaps offer consolation for the tedium they perceive in their own lives. However, it might equally be possible to construct an argument which validates such texts operating on an emotional rather than a political level and offering women the chance to use the conventions of melodrama in

a set of discourses designed to enable women to triumph over adversity on their own terms using the codes of femininity traditionally devalued by discourses of patriarchy.

The popularity of such themes and underlying values with women mean that it is unsurprising that they can still be seen repeatedly in modern soap opera. They often occur through stories of seduction or separation, when the long-lost adopted child returns to seek out its mother and wreak havoc on the family from which it has been separated. The image of the revenger and the flawed hero/heroine harks back to the Greek tragedy tradition which means that key characters may from this point be doomed to lose the happy family network they have previously enjoyed, or at least to be threatened with such loss. Stempel Mumford offers an example of this in the American soap *All My Children* (ABC 1970-present). Erica's daughter, Kendall, given up for adoption at birth and embittered by her natural mother's apparent rejection, tracked her down and demanded that she recognise her as her daughter. The shock of her daughter's return reminded Erica of the rape at which Kendall was conceived and caused her to suffer nightmares and guilt over the secrecy with which she shrouded the birth and subsequent adoption. Erica's family life was jeopardised as she struggled to explain the circumstances of the birth and her reasons for keeping Kendall's birth a secret, whilst Kendall wreaked destruction by attempting to ingratiate herself within the family and intimidate Erica's other daughter, Bianca, whom she saw as a usurper in Erica's affections. Kendall's existence is a threat to the family's happiness and security and Erica is punished further for the rape which she had tried to forget (Mumford, 1995: 102). A more recent but similar example of this melodramatic theme was the sudden appearance in *EastEnders* of Kathy Beale's daughter, Donna, given up for adoption after Kathy's teenage pregnancy, the result of a rape. Both the revelation of the rape and

the vindictiveness with which the disturbed Donna attempts to punish her mother for her abandonment position Kathy (a good mother to her son, Ian) as the victim of circumstance as clearly as were *Stella Dallas* (USA 1937) and the heroines of other pre-war melodramas. The story signals a situation in which the audience is asked to both sympathise with the dilemma in which she earlier found herself, and also to stand in judgement on the, 'unmotherly', decisions she has been forced to make, not once but twice. Donna, rejected once again by her natural mother, turned to heroin and prostitution, cheating on the members of the Walford community who attempted to help her. When she died the following year of an overdose in squalid surroundings, alone and unmourned, Kathy was shown to feel guilty but unrepentant. Yet the same year Kathy was raped again, this time by her boss at the wine bar, Willmott-Brown, whose public school accent and behaviour set him apart from the regular members of the community. For the rest of her time in *EastEnders* Kathy was to become "an icon of suffering as one marriage after another collapsed in recriminations and alcohol" (Radio Times "Behind the Scenes *EastEnders* Anniversary Special", Feb/Mar 2000) until she left the series to start a new life in South Africa as a single mother to her youngest child, Ben.

More recently, in *EastEnders*, a story about secret motherhood revealed Kat Slater to be the mother of her youngest 'sister', Zoe. Kat's pregnancy had been result of incest and her rape by her uncle at the age of 13. The revelation of the truth was exposed in the full melodramatic tradition of the genre and a number of episodes broke with soap opera conventions and concentrated on the interaction between mother and daughter. Zoe then ran away from Walford and the truth leaving Kat to slide further downhill until Zoe's return and subsequent forgiveness. It is the element of forgiveness that both separates

modern storylines from their melodramatic predecessors and conjoins them.

Forgiveness may be possible within a scenario of rape where the mother has been given no choice, and once forgiven by her child the mother is 'freed' to achieve happiness.

Without it the mother remains stigmatised and stained, she remains a victim of her own bad judgement or bad luck. In the case of Kat Slater, both mother and daughter are 'insiders' and may be treated with sympathy, whereas in Kathy Beale's situation, Donna, the 'outsider' remains a narrative tool and is treated with little sympathy by characters or viewers.

In the representation of women like Kathy Beale as 'mother types' - good, bad, dominating, dominated and often destructive – soaps echo the kinds of mother figures who roamed the melodramatic Women's Movies of the 1930s to 1950s, identified by Basinger as 'Unwed', 'Perfect', 'Sacrificial' and 'Destructive'. Basinger contends that each mother type served a particular purpose and no matter how many categories a mother fitted into during the process of the story, her options were most clearly defined by societal evaluation and her fate predetermined by value-laden parameters (1993:392). Unwed and destructive mothers were presented as wrong but not without the possibility of redemption through self-sacrifice and atonement (this particularly applied to unmarried mothers), and each category reflected specific attitudes towards the woman's role, the children involved and toward the men who fathered them.

In Basinger's detailed analysis of women's movies between 1930 and 1960 she finds unmarried mothers to be the most common mother type in these films and suggests that there may have been three reasons behind the popularity of this subject. Firstly, she suggests that there may have been, in the war years and beyond, more babies being born

out of wedlock than had been realised. As such screen representations of unmarried mothers and their tribulations might have been used to serve as cautionary tales for women contemplating sex outside marriage. Secondly, the heavily emotional storylines were designed to appeal to the deepest fear of motherhood, that of losing one's child. Basinger's third suggestion was that these texts allowed beleaguered women, weighed down by responsibility and lack of options, to experience vicariously the way their lives might have developed, in much the same way that George Bailey gets the opportunity to "live" life without him in it in *It's a Wonderful Life* (USA 1946).

In classic melodrama unmarried mothers were normally victims of bad luck – they were seduced or lost husbands just before or after the wedding, and often married or gave up the child following its life from a distance without the child's awareness of the link. In modern soap opera such themes persist, particularly when the unmarried mother is a cherished family and community member and her pregnancy is presented as a challenge to the stability of the family. Young girls seduced and abandoned, families are forced to deal with stigma and gossip, young mothers have to choose between adoption or abandonment, and single mothers end up married to a 'hero' or forced into prostitution, degradation and poverty.

Modleski suggests that soaps are less about individual characters than about the "underlying moral process of the world" and that this constitutes the spectator as the ideal mother whose existence is so rare in either melodrama or soap opera (1979:12 – 15). Her argument is rather simplistic both in terms of viewer and character. I would suggest idealised mothers are less rare in soap opera than in real life, and that the spectator engages with both the 'good' and the 'bad' mother equally, recognising her

own limitations in characterisations and enjoying the fantasy of the extreme representations and actions within the narrative.

For the young women with whom I worked, the issue of idealised motherhood was crucial to their reception of messages. Throughout the years of research their responses to maternal choice and behaviour remained remarkably consistent in soap opera as it did in other genres we studied. To them, the issue of choice remained paramount.

Characters who became mothers as a result of rape or seduction, and who were forced to give up their babies, were always viewed sympathetically:

I think that now we know that Kat was raped by her uncle and that Zoe is her secret daughter, we can understand why she behaves as she does with men. She feels ashamed of herself, although it wasn't her fault. Rosie, 17. D: 2002

She was only 13, I feel really sorry for her. Emily, 16. D: 2002

I wanted Sonya to fight to keep her baby but she was emotionally drained. You can't imagine what it must be like giving birth when you don't know you're pregnant. Kerry R, 18. E: 2002

There was, however a significant difference in their attitudes to the arguably more realistic stories of young girls experimenting with sex or choosing to keep their babies. Sarah Louise, for example, attracted sympathy but also a great deal of criticism, suggesting that the negative themes and messages they had detected in the programmes were succeeding in influencing their attitudes on certain levels, despite the fact that they consistently denied it. The moral codes underpinning the actions of these characters were accepted and understood within the girls' personal frames of reference.

Laura Mulvey's exploration of the work of directors such as Vincente Minelli and Douglas Sirk in the 1950s argues that melodrama operated as a "safety valve" to allow out the frustrations and inconsistencies of middle class family life of the time which

worked by “touching sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration” and by producing conflict not between enemies but between people tied by blood or love (Mulvey, 1987: 75). Geraghty takes this further and applies Mulvey’s thinking to soap opera, suggesting that the style of melodrama ‘fits in with a certain didactic quality that soaps have, the testing out strategy which allows audiences to speculate what should be done for the best (Geraghty 1992a: 61), once again, in the privacy of the domestic domain.

The relationship between soap opera and melodrama, and the way it is interpreted by audiences, is important in the discussion about the representation of single mothers in the genre because it helps to understand how cultural values differ in a genre which remains inherently the same around the world. American and Asian Soap operas are more clearly aligned to the melodramatic tradition and the straightforward depiction of good versus bad and right versus wrong. In series like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* the key characters are carefully delineated as heroes and heroines or as villains. Doe-eyed women like Pam Ewing and Krystle Carrington could be used and abused in the same ways as their predecessors on the big screen of the 30s and 40s. The eternal victim, Sue Ellen Ewing, driven to drink by her villainous husband and deprived of the child she loved, was repeatedly accused of being “a drunk and an unfit mother” until the line became a catchphrase for the amusement of stand-up comedians around the world. In many Asian and South American soap operas, the genre maintains key elements of melodrama. Sophisticated seducers and innocent virgins, within whom the traditional oppositions of masculinity and femininity are firmly entrenched, maintain the deeply institutionalised value structures of the cultures, which these soaps play their part in validating and maintaining.

Sexuality and Soap Opera

But melodrama in the context of soap opera is not just about narrative convention and characterisation; it is intrinsically linked with the concept of female sexuality and its representation in concrete form. In soap opera as with so many other media products, female sexuality is presented as a force at odds with the model of femininity promoted by patriarchy. The representation of the sex act has become a metaphor for illicit relationships and the ensuing pregnancy or child born out of wedlock, the metaphor for the result of such illicit behaviour. For, as with the age-old question of whether the tree which is not heard to fall makes a noise, the couple who are not seen to have sexual relations can not truly be seen to be having an affair. Married couples may be shown in bed but sexual activity is rarely indicated in such scenes. It is much more likely that the use of the bedroom setting is intended to depict marital problems or issues unrelated to the physical aspect of the relationship. Indeed, the scheduling of both daytime and primetime drama before the 9 o'clock watershed and often when small children may be part of the viewing audience severely curtails what may be shown or even suggested.

Brookside was directed by the Broadcasting Standards Council and the Independent Television Commission to broadcast an apology for showing brother and sister, Nat and Georgia Simpson in bed together in the show's omnibus edition shown on Saturday afternoon. The scene was ruled to be in breach of family viewing requirements of the ITC Programme Code.

In a genre aimed primarily at a female audience and containing as many strong female as male characters, female sexuality has become a defining characteristic of a particular type of woman. Predatory females who notch up several husbands and many lovers are

a staple of soap opera. In *Coronation Street*, women like Elsie Tanner and, more recently, Natalie Barnes, whose reputations were formed by and dissected through gossip, are positioned as slightly dangerous because of the sexuality by which they were defined. Their frequent and turbulent love affairs were judged both by their fictional neighbours, and by the viewers, who witnessed the apparent complexity of their motivations and emotions in much more detail than those around them. The same can be seen in a character like Pat Wicks (Beale/Butcher/Owen) in *EastEnders*, whose reputation was revealed to us by other characters before she actually arrived in Walford using the narrative device of gossip and storytelling. These three women, and others who include Liz MacDonald in *Coronation Street* and Kathy Beale in *EastEnders*, are examples of mothers who are defined in terms of their sexuality and sexual relationships and presented as predatory and threatening. Interestingly each woman is not only a lone parent for at least some of the time, but they all have adult sons, and, whilst incestuous relationships between mother and son, have, as yet, been avoided by even the most daring of script editors, there is a strong oedipal suggestion in the representation of these rapacious women and their wild, often deviant sons.

Fiske suggests that women's sexuality in soap opera does not cause her to be objectified by males. Rather, it can be used as a source of pleasure within a relationship, or:

as a means of her empowerment in a patriarchal world ...it is a form of power not legitimated by the dominant ideology, and can thus exist only in the continuous struggle to exercise it. (Fiske, 1995: 344)

Modleski agrees that soap villainesses use their sexuality for their own ends, not for 'masculine pleasure'. They do so by rejecting traditional femininity and the entrenched values of the ideal mother specific to the patriarchal family which require women to sacrifice their own pleasures (including that of sexual pleasure) for the benefit of the

family members. The sexually active lone mother is thus a prime candidate to be depicted in this “negative image of the viewer’s ideal self” (Modleski, 1990: 94), and presented in opposition to the ‘good mother’ image which Modleski contends is central to the positioning of the spectator. This may also account for the regularity with which unmarried mothers in soap opera (as indeed in Melodrama) are forced into prostitution as a way of earning money to support the child, since the sexual connotations of prostitution are, alongside those of degradation and punishment, central to the moralistic ideology of the genre.

The arch-villainess of American soap opera, accessible to British audiences through her status as British expatriate, was lone parent, Alexis, in *Dynasty* who combined masculine business sense with sexuality reminiscent of the femme fatales of Film Noir. In the patriarchal American ‘supersoaps’ of the 1980s where women were designated as foils to the overt masculinity of characters like J R Ewing and Blake Carrington, Alexis’ motivations were those of a mother and ex-wife rather than as a business woman per se. Geraghty suggests that it is the struggle over the family home and the (grown) children which underpins the feud between the two families (Geraghty, 1992a:70). Whilst this may be seen to be a common framing of the businesswomen represented in newspapers as well (“Young Mum a Real High Flyer”, Chronicle and Echo 4 May 2000, “City Supermother reveals the anguish of losing her eldest child”, Daily Mail, 16 January 1999), Alexis was the personification of the ungoverned energy found in mythical monster-mothers such as Medea. Geraghty talks about a “combination of fierce (if calculating) maternal affection and business” (Geraghty, 1992a:71) which she uses to lure her children from Blake in the fight for possession of the children as if they were still minors, and this determination “consistently provided the motivating force in her

complicated plots” (ibid: 71). There is a clear contrast between the ways in which the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers of American soaps related to their children and the world around them – ‘good’ mothers like Miss Ellie, Pamela Ewing and Krystle fight for their children within the family set-up, usually through marriage and often fighting all odds and outsiders to protect their family unity. ‘Bad’ mothers like Alexis and, in her alcoholic state, Sue Ellen Ewing, use any tactics possible to control or gain access to their children, often employing their sexuality to do so. In Sue Ellen’s defence, her real crime is shown to be her passivity and weakness in the face of the machinations of J R – and few are able to succeed where she fails – but when she fights from outside the family structure she is shown to be impotent against the might of familial force. Alexis is a stronger, if more crudely drawn character, but for her the family home becomes a metaphor for family. Whilst she is occupying the family mansion, which she takes over in great triumph and in which the children continue to reside irrespective of which parent heads the household, she controls the family. Alexis’ huge popularity with audiences was largely due to her transgressions of patriarchal domination and her elevation to “ultimate paradigm of the independent woman as seen by US primetime soaps” (Geraghty, 1992a:135). Her structural position in *Dynasty* as equal to the men in power and deviousness enabled women to both ridicule and admire her bravura and style.

In *Coronation Street* the character of Natalie Barnes was treated in a similar, if less crude, manner. Natalie first appeared when she arrived to take over the running of the local garage, as Kevin Webster’s partner, when her marriage broke up and her son ran away from the Street (after accidentally killing someone in a hit and run accident). Initially she was portrayed as a sultry stereotypical divorcee who made a play for the

much younger Kevin and was the reason for his solid, traditional marriage breaking up. As a result of this affair she was positioned as an 'outsider' to the well-established residents of the Street and labelled by both on- and off-screen observers of her behaviour as a man-eating immoral temptress. As with Alexis and other she-devils of the genre there was little exploration of her motivations and thought processes, and even less evidence of a real relationship between herself and her son, Tony. When Kevin finally ended the relationship and moved out of the house - which was itself a representation of her upmarket status and a contrast to the family home of Kevin and Sally, the earth mother – she established her place in the street, eventually taking over the pub. In the matriarchal tradition of *Coronation Street* Natalie's role as pub landlady has allowed her to become a mother-type to many characters, offering advice and support when necessary and enabling the audience to gain knowledge through her 'counselling sessions'.

However, she is still, first and foremost, framed as a sexual woman and a 'bad' mother. Tony's involvement in drugs cost her her new husband, Des, who was murdered by a gang looking for Tony, and led her to send her son away to his own death. A year later, when the body under the street turned out to be Tony's, her neighbours' sympathy was short lived when the revelation that she had slept with Des' brother on the night of Des' funeral swept the pub:

Vera: I always said he was too good for her, the two-timing slut

And, whilst we saw her grief as being real and her inability to cope with two bereavements in a year as evidence of her deep emotion, it was noticeable that throughout the storyline Natalie's nails were always manicured and newly varnished and her clothes were always tight fitting and revealing. Thus her sexuality was

constantly on display and her maternal role subjugated to that of a temporary narrative device in the same way that Elsie Tanner had been depicted twenty-five years earlier.

Like Sue Ellen in *Dallas*, Natalie's sexual adventures are defined as a threat to traditional families and her own role as a wife and mother. Her behaviour is more masculine than that of other mothers in the genre and she is regularly positioned against them either through her own or her reactions to other people's behaviour. However, unlike Sue Ellen and the single mothers of American soap, Natalie is framed as a sexual predator responsible for her own actions whilst the American characters are essentially reacting to male actions:

Whilst the women's departure from the family [through affairs] is seen as a cause of trouble it cannot be unproblematically condemned since the reasons for their action can be found in the male behaviour within the home. (Geraghty, 1992: 67)

Janice Radway discusses sexuality and promiscuity as issues in romantic fiction, citing the results of research which found that readers of romantic fiction generally disapprove of promiscuity in heroines because it:

makes explicit the threatening implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal domination that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage. (Radway, 1984: cf 169ff)

Similarly, Palmer's analysis of the portrayal of mothers in soap opera reveals that 'evil' characters behave in non-traditional ways for women whilst good characters behave according to traditional stereotypes of women's roles:

Mothers are overwhelmingly portrayed as benevolent and knowledgeable about personal and domestic matters; non-mothers as far less knowledgeable, and equally likely to be non-benevolent as benevolent. (Palmer, 1991: 159)

In soaps like *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* a further distinction can be made. Non-mother characters such as Rita Sullivan, Rachel Kaminski and even the transsexual

Hayley Cropper display the benevolence, understanding and knowledge of traditional mother-types, whilst a variety of single mothers are represented with non-mother traits. Hence women like Elsie Tanner and Pat Wicks were originally depicted as tarty, promiscuous and vicious, although Pat Wicks was 'rescued' from both single parenthood, and its accompanying negative connotations, when she married Frank Butcher and developed into a desexualised matriarch.

Geraghty suggests that the early Pat Wicks was an example of soap's female equivalent to the male 'bastard' character and that soaps establish boundaries as far as sexual behaviour is concerned so that 'tarts' are part of a distinction between "those who are taken unawares and those who make themselves available, who are aware of sexual possibilities" (Geraghty' 1992: 104). Pat's brazen appearance and behaviour, her vindictiveness to her ex-husband and his new wife, her crude language and her flirtation with prostitution placed her outside the family structure despite her being the mother of the wayward Simon and David (both of whom fathered illegitimate children themselves). Geraghty further argues that Pat's move into respectability, which, as with Natalie in *Coronation Street*, began with her taking over as landlady of the Queen Vic pub, required her also to move into respectable monogamous relationships with first Frank Butcher and later Roy Evans.

Similarly, Geraghty describes Elsie Tanner as a 'tart' figure whose "sexuality challenged the mores of the Street" (ibid:105), but whilst Pat was generally unpleasant, Elsie was portrayed as weak rather than vicious and she was shown to be often slovenly and untidy with a private life public to all. Her sexuality "opened her up for criticism and caused dissension in the community" (ibid: 106) suggesting that a strong woman

with overt flaws represented a threat to family and community values. And, whilst Elsie Tanner might arguably be defined as a relic from the social realism of 1960's *Coronation Street* her modern equivalents still roam the soap opera streets in the form of characters like Cindy Beale and Liz MacDonald.

Victim Single Mothers

Alongside the tradition of the 'tart' mother are two other staple characters which co-exist in film melodrama and soap opera and which carry with them moralistic and value-laden overtones. Both the stereotypical 'unmarried mother', impregnated and abandoned by her lover, and the villainess who attempts to entrap her man by feigning pregnancy or by actually falling pregnant, are regular additions to soap opera narrative which further disrupt families, engage viewers in moral and ideological debate, and juxtapose emotion and ethics.

Victims of seduction are becoming increasingly rare in modern soap opera, suggesting that viewers are no longer as interested in the traditional, passive victim unable to detect or detract sexual predators. Indeed, a current storyline in *Coronation Street* features the middle-aged Martin Platt and his relationship with an eager 17 year old. She has pushed the relationship and encouraged their covert meetings, and despite the fact that Martin is her first lover, she is clearly the sexual aggressor in the relationship. However when seduction storylines occur they are based around characters who are still clearly innocent sexually, or who are vulnerable for some other reason and used to frame a male character as a complete villain. In *EastEnders*, Michelle's seduction was more

about Den Watts' lack of principles than about her 'mistake'. More recently, Dan Sullivan entered the series as an outsider and villain, marked by his opening storyline in which he was revealed as a former lover of (the then underage) Bianca. This storyline was given a modern twist in that it was not the teenage Bianca who became pregnant as a result of the liaison, but her mother, Carol, who later chose to abort her pregnancy when she found out about Dan and her daughter. The intensity of the storyline, which won awards for both actresses and the programme, reworked the traditional melodramatic theme but increased the level of suffering to both female victims. In doing so, the show raised an interesting issue of illegitimacy, since Carol had already mothered four children by different fathers and all out of wedlock. Her decision to terminate her pregnancy by a man who had deceived her creates the paradigm of choice around her previous pregnancies. This, in turn, both emphasises the positive reasons for keeping the other four babies, and validates Carol as a single mother, and, in doing so, brings the issue of maternity and maternal choice into the public arena for both married and unmarried women.

When asked their views about this particular storyline, those girls who had watched it demonstrated awareness of the need for dramatic entertainment and the themes that underpin it:

I thought it was a great twist to have Dan sleeping with both mother and daughter, my boyfriend said it's a man's fantasy to do that if they're both horny!
Mel, 18. D: 2002

Yeah, but it was a bit of 'like mother like daughter' wasn't it. Except that Carol seems to have spent her whole life getting pregnant. Bianca seemed a bit more sensible. Kerry Ann, 17. D: 2002

The girls' reactions to the storyline tended to be more sympathetic than moralistic because they considered the women to have been duped and preyed on by Dan. In

placing mother and daughter at opposite sides of a romantic triangle, the programme employed the melodramatic devices used in the 1950s to construct stories around the roles of mother and daughters within families and to subvert them with the outsider, in this case, the male transgressor. Stempel Mumford suggests that pregnancy is used in soap opera as a method of presenting female passivity, and that abortion is generally presented as “immoral” (1995:104-5). However, in this case the girls perceived Carol’s decision to terminate the baby as a practical solution to the problem of her apparent betrayal by her boyfriend and daughter.

Hobson discusses a similarly melodramatic storyline in *Crossroads* involving the character of Alison who lived with her religious and bigoted uncle who had led her to believe that the birthmark on her face was punishment for the sins of her dead mother. She began to mix with other women only when Benny found her a job at the motel and paid for her to have the scar removed. Despite Benny’s obvious feelings for her, Alison fell for David Hunter’s unscrupulous son, Chris, who seduced her and left her when she discovered she was pregnant.

Hobson suggests that the pregnancy was a tool for dispensing information and advice:

Here the programme introduced an interesting story which enabled an exploration of the possibilities for abortion, and managed to give information about the possibilities for obtaining an abortion as well as including arguments for and against such action. (Hobson, 1982:127)

Alison’s decision not to terminate was then made a non-issue when she eventually suffered a miscarriage thereby ending the pregnancy without controversy.

Miscarriage is, in itself, a device often used in Soap opera to move out of a storyline with maximum suffering and melodrama. Stempel Mumford suggests that it is

“unrealistically frequent” in soap opera (1995:104) and it is certainly a more popular choice of cliffhanger than the decision to have an abortion, which is almost always either prevented or refused at the last minute. Miscarriages generally occur as a result of a traumatic event in the mother’s life, enabling her to be framed as a passive victim, something that happens to her. Abortion implies that a woman is in control. Lisa’s miscarriage in *EastEnders* brought Phil Mitchell back to her and persuaded him to try for a baby together, while Carol’s decision to abort her baby signified her control over her relationship with Dan; she sacrificed one child to prove her love to another. Earlier, in *Coronation Street*, Gail’s decision to have an abortion led to her marriage to Martin and the birth of her son, David.

The death of either mother or baby is a classic melodramatic device which allows huge emotional turbulence but rarely any investigation or development of issues around the death. The intensity of the *Coronation Street* story in which Alison’s baby died a few hours after birth and Alison, deranged by grief, then threw herself under a lorry was such that Radio Times television critic, Hilary Kingsley was moved to ask whether it was all just too much for viewers to bear. The reason for the baby’s death was, however, explained away by his distraught father, Kevin Webster, in just one sentence:

He just had a really bad infection, but they could’ve saved him if they’d known about it, just an injection of antibiotics before he was born and he’d have been alright.

This engagement with emotions which is so heavily featured in soap opera and the melodramatic tradition is, according to Palmer, a result of the ambiguous relationship between audience and text. The storylines and characters are fantasy but the emotions aroused by the events are real and underrepresented elsewhere in a secular society. He

argues that melodrama enables us to translate emotional values into personal activities and attributes when it:

uncovers the domain of operational spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality ...By doing so, melodrama reassures us that the universe is in fact morally legible, that it possesses an ethical identity and significance. (Palmer, 1991:166)

Villainess Single Mothers

With motherhood occupying a central space in the soap opera genre, and pregnancy and childbirth within marriage always seen as “the supreme state and...ultimate achievement” (Rogers, 1995:326), the charade of pregnancy is the ultimate sign of villainy in a female character. At times the motivation is presented in a simple, rather pathetic, way, as an attempt to ‘hook’ a man for support (as in the case of Sammy Rogers in *Brookside* who thought that telling Max she was pregnant by him would secure herself and her daughter a meal ticket). More often, Modleski suggests that the American soap villainess is happy to “make pregnancy work for her” by taking advantage of a man’s vulnerability and seducing him:

And if she doesn’t achieve the hoped-for pregnancy, undaunted she simply lies to her lover about being pregnant. The villainess thus reverses male/female roles: anxiety about conception is transferred to the male. He is the one who had better watch his step and curb his promiscuous desires or he will find himself burdened with an unwanted child. (Modleski, 1990: 95)

She develops this idea by using a complicated storyline from *The Young and the Restless* in which a character, Lori, discovered that her sister had fallen pregnant after a one-night stand with Lori’s husband, whilst her father was forced to marry one of the serial’s villainesses, Jill, who became pregnant after seducing him. For the soap villainess pregnancy and children are weapons with which to control and manipulate

men by breaking generic 'rules' of passivity, and faking pregnant becomes symbolic of transgression against the most gender specific act – that of motherhood.

Similarly, Stempel Mumford argues that women who lie about pregnancy or paternity in order to trap or trick a man, are defined by the genre as “evil” and “manipulating”, highlighting soaps' equation of 'proper femininity and passivity (1995:106). Maternity is the bedrock of the soap opera woman, thus a woman who pretends to be pregnant transgresses fundamental ideologies of the genre in her violation of the nobility of maternity.

An equally melodramatic storyline recently featured in the British soap *Coronation Street* when Asian shopkeeper, Dev, was pushed to the limit by an apparent ex-fiancée who turned up in the street and told everyone that she was expecting his baby. His constant refusal to believe her story alienated the respectable people of the Street, whose sympathies were so strongly aimed towards Amy and her apparent rejection that Dev became the outsider and the newly arrived ex-girlfriend – soon ensconced in the 'insider' position of barmaid – became the victim. It took several, increasingly dramatic, episodes before Dev was able to prove that Amy had lied about her situation. For, although the audience was able to predict Dev's innocence using a combination of subtle clues and intrinsic understanding of generic conventions, the suggestion that he had abandoned a pregnant woman was shown to be more significant to the community than the instability and manic behaviour of the woman herself.

Currently, the same theme is recurring, this time with villainess, Tracy Barlow, claiming to be pregnant by Roy Cropper. The audience is able to enjoy both Tracy's

duplicity and the chance to predict an outcome to the story and issues of maternity will once again be raised when Roy and his transsexual wife, Hayley, who are desperate for a child of their own, will decide whether to buy the baby. Selling babies is another traditional melodramatic story for soap operas used to emphasise the ideology of the deserving (respectable, married couples unable to have children) and the undeserving (single mothers pregnant through stupidity or cupidity).

Stempel Mumford suggests that such storylines enable issues of power and money to be raised and explored. Women can marry into money by falling or pretending to be pregnant by a rich man, or they can be paid to remain silent about the father's identity (1995:107). In this version of the story currently being played out in *Coronation Street*, the issue of money is likely to arise when 'monster' mother, Tracy, aware that her victims are unable to have children of their own, offers to sell her unborn baby to them. In this way she flaunts both her sexuality and her fecundity, she is a 'real woman' capable of performing a woman's most basic function – reproduction – while the wife (a transsexual) is clearly unable to prove her essential 'femaleness.' In this way maternity is offered as a key credential of femininity, and the villainess is positioned as another 'monster' mother using fertility as her weapon.

Since motherhood is revered in soap opera, the semblance of it forms a transgression which both merges sexuality with fertility and brings to the fore male fear of entrapment. Such is the cultural condemnation of using pregnancy to trap a man that the young lone mothers I worked with condemned such behaviour out of hand, using their own experiences to judge their mediated ones:

I went mental when people assumed I got pregnant on purpose to get Rob to marry me. As if I'd do a thing like that. Carol, 19. SM: 2001

It's like girls who say they've been raped when they haven't – they give us all a bad name, don't they? Lucy, 17. SM: 2001

What I hate about soap operas is that they make us [unmarried, teenage mothers] all out to be stupid or devious. I don't know which I think is worse. Sally, 18. SM: 2001

It was very noticeable that these women felt conscious that media representations might be applied to them as well. They applied the realism of soap opera in general to their own situations, arguing that in emphasising the negative aspects of lone motherhood and the devious nature of lone mothers, soaps offered a representation of their own lives that might well be believed over what they felt to be the truth:

You never see it like it really happens. Nearly all the girls I know like me, fell pregnant accidentally and then got dumped by their boyfriends when things got too heavy. It's not interesting enough I suppose. Rachel, 19. SM: 2001

Yeah, I thought we were in love, and we'd stay together with the baby, but he obviously didn't think so. But you don't see that on telly, do you? I don't think they like to make the boy seem to be to blame. So the mum looks like a slapper! Shanice, 18. SM: 2001

When I asked them for an example of a realistic representation of a lone mother they were agreed that the story of Sonya in *EastEnders* most mirrored their own experiences, although they argued that the way the story developed, into a battle for the baby between the girl herself and the boy's family (headed by matriarch, Pauline Fowler) made it increasingly unrealistic to them. Interestingly, they were keen that soap operas should show 'real' experiences of a single mother, good and bad, as a way of 'showing what it's really like for us' and to this end they felt that the portrayal of schoolgirl mother, Sarah Louise in *Coronation Street*, had the potential to be more honest and educative:

A lot of Sarah's experiences are like mine – living with my mum, trying to finish school and stuff, but they only show the bad bits with her, they don't show the good bits too. I still love being a mum. It isn't all hard work, and my mates love playing with Alice as well. Lucy, 17. SM: 2001

Single Motherhood as a Social Issue

If the subject of lone mothers is a staple of soap opera, single motherhood as a social issue is not. The use of social issues forms a central core to many British soap opera storylines to the extent that producers and writers regularly liaise with experts from medicine, law, charity organisations and pressure groups, and even series as derided as *Crossroads* have been the indirect instigators of, often major, social debate and initiatives: the Crossroads Care Scheme for the disabled was established as a direct result of that show's portrayal of the pressures of caring for relatives with severe disabilities, and several soap court cases have led to debate at House of Commons level. Producers of soap opera insist that taking on the role of national social conscience is not the primary function of the genre:

We don't do everything on Brookside to expose a social issue – sometimes we just want to enjoy the drama. To say that we are trying to push back the boundaries of what can be shown on television suggests we have some kind of social agenda. It is not like that at all. Our primary aim is to create good drama. (Phil Redmond quoted in Tibballs, 1998:190)

Yet issues as diverse as incest, racism, bringing up babies with Down's Syndrome, HIV and even child abuse have run seamlessly into the more traditional soap storylines of love, infidelity and, occasionally, murder. By scaling down the larger social issues of the day into personal crises for characters grown familiar over time the themes can transcend culture, race and class until viewers are as able to identify with and believe in an oil baron's family in Dallas, USA, as with a depressed unemployed working class man's family in the East End of London or Liverpool or Manchester.

Long before *EastEnders* raised the issue of Peggy Mitchell's breast cancer, Miss Ellie went through a mastectomy in *Dallas* and suffered the repercussions for over twenty

years (Ang, 1985:67). Her situation was used in British women's magazines to highlight the concerns of breast cancer sufferers and to bring the subject into the public domain for women. Ang refers to the dramatization of the issue as "a metaphor for a form of 'life's torment'" (1985:67) but it might equally serve as a moral reminder to women that wealth and power do not protect from illness and death. Gripsrud takes it further suggesting that soap operas operate around 10 key roles (father, mother, son, daughter and male rival, duplicated into a good and bad version of each), and that characters are simply paradigms of particular issues and moral dramas (1995:232-3). He uses *Dynasty* to demonstrate the ways in which basic themes and concerns are endlessly reworked on a personal level, identifying issues of oedipal incest and homosexuality as examples of melodramatic treatment of universal issues.

Gillespie suggests that it is audience identification with issues and subject matter that becomes more important to viewers than the backgrounds of the characters themselves. In her research into how young Punjabis in Southall interpret the text of Australian soap opera, *Neighbours*, she notes:

They link and connect aspects of the social world of *Neighbours* with their own and attempt to accommodate and integrate their perceptions of the soap world into their own and vice versa. In this process, it is in fact characters per se that provide the essential point of identification, but, on the other hand, a perceived social world seen as a generational entity – the social world of teenagers – and on the other hand, the very processes of narration involved in 'reading' the soap, in talking about it, and in talking about their own social experiences and aspirations. (Gillespie, 1995:148-9)

Moreover, the response to the use of issue-driven storylines from the young women in my groups, suggested that the use of 'serious' subjects and culturally referenced themes both imbues the genre with a large part of its realism and at the same time embeds in the subject matter a gravitas that might not ordinarily be assumed:

You know that if *EastEnders* has a story about some kind of illness, like AIDs for example, they'll research it to make sure you get the truth. Katy T, 16. B: 1999

Into such issue-driven storylines lone parenting (by either mother or father) does not sit easily as a subject for dramatisation in itself. This may be for one of three reasons.

Firstly, the subject itself is too familiar to too many people in the audience to make it worthy of development in its own right. Secondly, the representation of lone mothers is governed by the moral positioning discussed earlier which makes stories other than the overly didactic ones setting out to warn of the dangers of unprotected sex (Sarah-Louise in *Coronation Street*) difficult to present with the verisimilitude on which Soap operas pride themselves. Thirdly, it is very possible that the true issues of lone parenting – poverty, social isolation and stigma – are not easily made dramatic unless they form part of a larger story. Thus, in *EastEnders*, Mary's descent into prostitution was a direct result of her inability to earn sufficient money to support herself and her daughter.

However, her unemployment was more closely related to the fact that she was illiterate (which in itself created another social issue storyline) than to her position as a single mother. Michelle's decision to marry Lofty – a man with whom she was not only not in love but with whom she had only a shared community in common – was her attempt to 'do the right thing' by her baby daughter and to give her the sort of father who would provide them with security and social credibility. It was an act which at once positioned Michelle as a true melodramatic heroine and juxtaposed her maternal 'goodness' in sacrificing her own happiness for her daughter's security with Mary's maternal 'badness' in getting herself further and further into trouble until she left her child alone in the flat, a decision which caused the child to almost burn to death. Geraghty argues that whilst most characters are presented as people with problems, some characters (she talks specifically about the use of black characters in the 1980s) are presented as

“standing for” the group they represent. For example ethnic minority groups are “represented by one or two characters and are presented in isolation” (Geraghty, 1992: 147). Thus a bad black character, or indeed a single mother, may behave no differently to a bad white, or married mother, but it becomes easy to read the character as representing all black people or single mothers. Geraghty acknowledges the double bind over representation of social issues, whereby if “different” characters are integrated into the soap community, treated positively and well loved, the accusation that soaps ignore social realities is raised, but if such characters are treated differently, the soaps are accused of marginalizing and stereotyping. The key difference between the treatment of social groups based on ethnicity or sexuality, and the treatment of a group such as lone mothers seems to come from the issue of choice. One cannot choose to be born black, and these days it is conceded by most that there is little choice made in one’s sexuality, only in the decision to be open about it, but there is still the assumption that pregnancy and birth, even out of marriage, involves free choice (even if that choice consists of the decision to terminate a pregnancy or not). Mary’s situation is seen to be directly linked to her bad choices, whereas Michelle’s choices are framed around her commonsense and her decision to do what is right for her baby even when it overrides her own happiness and desires.

More often the day-to-day hardships of lone parenting are re-packaged into more marketable storylines. The predatory lone mothers already discussed leech off vulnerable men: in *Coronation Street* Zoe almost ruined Ashley’s life, and both Jackie and Tricia caused havoc for Curly Watts as they attempted to take over his home, the former as a squatter and the latter as an unwanted live-in lover. *Brookside*’s Sammy Daniels first attempted to secure Max Farnham as a meal-ticket for herself and her

child by pretending to be pregnant by him (immediately positioning her in a 'bad' mother role) and later, during the tabloid frenzy of 'Home Alone' stories, she left her toddler (albeit accidentally when the babysitting arrangements broke down) at home on her own when she took off on holiday with a man she had recently picked up in a nightclub and to whom she had lied about the existence of her daughter. In court, accused of child neglect, Sammy was forced to admit that not only had she left the child alone but that she had failed to telephone home once over the entire week of the holiday to speak to her daughter or to check her welfare. Sammy's behaviour defines her as a bad mother and her relationship with the viewers who will ultimately judge her as harshly (if not more so) than the fictitious jury, is set by her apparent selfishness.

Coward talks of a "libertarian 'me first' society", spawned by the 1960s and used by both American and British writers to explain why mothers neglect, abuse and even murder their children (1997: 114). She describes ways in which single mothers are constructed by the media as "evil" as though the explanation for any attack on innocence must be seen as "an outside force" rather than evidence of the actions of desperate women, traumatised and lacking support, whose decisions are often paradoxically based on a misguided belief that they are doing what is best for their children.

Out of the moral panic then being constructed over a handful of women accused of leaving their children 'home alone,' soap stories such as that of Sammy Daniel's not only kept the issue in the public domain but magnified it as a social concern and irredeemably connected lone mothers in general with the mindset which privileges sexual relationships over maternal responsibilities.

Indeed Phil Redmond, executive producer of *Brookside* at the time, speaking about the complaints made about *Brookside* showing, in another storyline, a brother and sister in bed together during the Saturday omnibus edition of the soap, argued that the audience:

wasn't bothered. We got far more letters at the time about Sammy Daniels leaving her baby, because incest isn't a part of every day life for most people. (Tibballs, 1998: 190)

It is likely that child abandonment is not an everyday part of viewers' lives either but as the cultural and moral expectation of maternal love and responsibility is as real to most people as lone parenting, this issue is relevant enough to inspire letters expressing concern and anger about Sammy's behaviour. Two of the single mothers in the group I interviewed had followed this particular story on *Brookside*, and made reference to it when we talked about 'typical' representations of single mothers. One noted the way that Sammy's character had changed over a period of time and argued that her earlier self would not have behaved so selfishly:

She definitely changed character, and then she left the programme and when she came back she was complete bitch. It was like she had turned into the sort of person you'd expect a single mother to be. Carol, 19. SM: 2001

Her friend agreed, and named other single mothers from other soaps who had also been shown going out and leaving the child alone (Mary, *EastEnders*, Zoe, *Coronation Street*):

It's like they just assume you spend your whole life out on the town when you've got a kid. I think I've been out once since I had my baby. I get too tired, and I can't be bothered to go out anymore. Not clubbing anyway. Sally, 18. SM: 2001

The group as a whole agreed that the depiction of young single mothers endlessly looking for ways to escape their maternal duties (they cited Sarah Louise as another example) was unfair and inaccurate but felt that as a result of such representations, other

people expected them to be willing and able to leave children with parents or siblings and go out:

My mates don't really understand how different my life is now. They're always nagging me to come out and get someone to babysit. Like I can afford to do that anyway! Siobhan, 17. SM: 2001

The young women's responses to these representations suggested that while they were able to distance themselves from the implied characteristics of the social group to which they find themselves belonging (using the criteria described earlier to construct deviance and subversive behaviour in groups), they were acutely aware and clearly embarrassed that others might not.

Morality in Soap Opera

However, whilst it might be easy to accuse soap opera producers of pandering to popular stereotypes in order to create simplistic and controversial storylines,

Buckingham suggests that there is a more subtle form of construction taking place.

To a certain extent, *EastEnders* conforms to Wolfgang Iser's model of the 'counterbalancing text', in which the qualities and deficiencies of the various characters' perspectives are graded in a definite hierarchy – a phenomenon which Iser argues is common in didactic or propagandist texts such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*... (Buckingham, 1987:80-81)

He offers the character of Mary Smith as an interesting example of this phenomenon suggesting that on the one hand, Mary has clearly violated a number of moral norms. she has been a stripper and a part-time prostitute, she has neglected her child, and been discovered stealing from local shops and from her workplace. Her often surly manner and alienating punk appearance are not designed to endear her to others. As a result she inevitably attracted negative judgements, not merely from gossips like Dot Cotton, but also from characters like Pauline Fowler, who have more authority both as matriarchs and as members of the community that has, in effect, let Mary down. Yet Buckingham

also argues that Mary had been led astray and exploited by “bad influences” – small-time crooks, other single mothers and strippers. For him, the most crucial aspect of Mary’s situation was that her circumstances clearly mitigated her moral failings. He suggests that her status as a single parent, living in a cramped bedsit, with no prospects and very little money conspired to prevent her being able to cope. In addition, Mary’s illiteracy means that on the one occasion when she managed to get a ‘proper’ job, she was forced to resign when she was given more responsibility and was required to read:

As a result of this, Mary has been able to fight back against her critics, accusing Dot of hypocrisy and the Fowlers of complacency....The text has thus made available two distinct sets of criteria on which the viewer’s judgement of Mary might be based – criteria which are broadly moral or political. On the one hand, we can conclude that Mary alone is to blame for her actions; while on the other we might choose to blame ‘society’, or the government. (Buckingham, 1987:80-1)

Buckingham’s approach suggests that Mary’s situation is handled with some sympathy due to her problems. My own reading of the way she was represented, and her descent into poverty and degradation, in conjunction with the treatment of other similar characters like Zoe in *Coronation Street*, is that she is largely defined as a narrative tool, less fully developed than other characters, designed as a foil to some and as a melodramatic metaphor for making the wrong decisions in life. In a soap opera like *Brookside* that emphasises social issues within storylines, Mary’s illiteracy might be constructed in terms of a didactic story around the subject, with telephone numbers displayed in the credits to encourage viewers to find out about literacy classes. In *EastEnders* the emphasis is on the melodramatic framing of the character and her effect on others. Interestingly the series has recently produced another melodramatic character in the form of Janine Butcher who has also descended into the murky underworld of drugs and prostitution and who is also positioned outside the community of Walford. Her criminal activities and Machiavellian plot-lines have constructed her as a doomed

character in soap opera conventions, yet she has not yet used pregnancy or been abandoned as a single mother in the way that Mary was in the '80s. This may be a sign that the story writers are looking to create a more street-wise villainess who does not need to resort to such measures to achieve her goals, but it is more likely that she is being positioned as a juxtaposition to the more passive character of Nathalie and the psychotic Laura whose pregnancy has destroyed at least two marriages.

Gripsrud suggests that melodrama transfers political and social issues to a personal metaphorical realm in a world governed by moral, emotional and psychological values and forces, which are easy to understand. However, along with theorists such as Waldecrantz, Brooks, Elsaesser and Joyrich, he argues that melodrama's political meaning relies on the ending, "whether 'happy' or not" (Gripsrud, 1995:246), which means that the open and unending narratives of soap opera are unable to produce melodrama's "symbols and moral lessons" (Gledhill, 1992: 113). Thus Gripsrud contends that:

no moral lessons can emerge – the never ending serial can never make a definitive 'statement' on anything. It can thus hardly be didactic and hardly 'democratic' in either Brooks or Elsaesser's sense. (Gripsrud, 1995: 246)

I would suggest that while we can argue that soap operas present a more life-like approach to situations and issues (real experiences tend to open to continual interpretation and negotiation), the argument that their structure precludes moralising or 'preaching' is simplistic. While the overarching narrative is designed to continue indefinitely, individual storylines have clear resolutions and within these resolutions lie, often overt, value-laden messages.

For Buckingham, the didacticism of *EastEnders* was rarely identified by the youngsters he interviewed as having implications outside the storyline. Whilst discussions showed

them to be both aware of issues and able to articulate their awareness, they did not choose to consider how the show made points relevant to life outside the storyline (Buckingham, 1987:163). Yet for the young single mothers to whom I talked the opposite seemed to be true. They considered themselves to be alienated from the rest of their community as much by the negative constructions of single mothers in media texts, as by lack of money and status:

I feel embarrassed when I see things about scrounging single mothers in newspapers or in soaps. I think that people who know I'm a single mother but who don't know me as a person will think I'm a scrounger or a bad mother too. Siobhan, 17. SM: 2001

On the other hand the non-mothers in the other groups I interviewed were not particularly convinced by the representations they observed in soap operas, often as a result of comparing the experiences of friends and relatives to the mediated and dramatised stories they observed on television:

When my sister had her baby, she stayed at home like Sarah did in *Coronation Street*, but my mum never moaned like Gail. She just helped her look after the baby and babysat when she went out at night. Louise T, 18. D: 2002

It seems that objectivity of viewing experience is closely tied to an active involvement in the production of meaning. Where a set of experiences is presented within one paradigm of interpretation, viewer responses become closely aligned to a process of comparison with their own lived experiences and values.

Livingstone believes that soap operas such as *EastEnders*, with its “inevitably unequal distributions of unhappiness, misfortune and injustice” cannot help but contain latent and complex messages about motherhood in general:

In 1987 this programme featured as central characters, a traditional working class matriarch whose power is waning, 2 teenage single-parent mothers, one of whom finds refuge in prostitution and the other in an unhappy marriage, a woman whose baby dies of cot death and is subsequently infertile, an alcoholic mother of an adopted daughter, a health visitor (official mother), a black woman

whose ambitions break up her family, a woman who has had adopted the child born from a rape attack, the religious mother of the local criminal and so forth. (Livingstone, 1989:60)

Mothers may make bad choices or decisions but their position within or outside the family frames them as respectable, and therefore respected, or disreputable and open for moral censure.

Respectable soap mothers, married and widowed, hold their families together against all kinds of threats and problems, unlike the divorced and single mothers who actively destroy other families and see their own fall apart as a result. Meg Richardson, Vera Duckworth, Pauline Fowler and Sheila Grant have different motivations and values to women like Natalie Barnes, Suzanne Farnham, Pat Wicks before she married Frank and Audrey Roberts before she married Alf. Whilst younger mothers are less clearly defined in terms of stereotypical traits, they are still defined within their current relationship or relationship status. Thus, characters like Sally Webster and Gail Platt who start out as wild and sexually provocative young girls are depicted at various times as traditional wives and homemakers when they are married, as neurotic and passive victims when they are single and as slightly de-sexualised, nonentities once they are safely remarried. The women who operate outside marriage are generally mothers and almost always challenge the traditional solidarity of soap women which has been developed on the assumption that women have common attitudes, problems and perhaps most importantly, values.

Geraghty believes that there is an interesting comparison to be made between the patriarchal control exercised within the families in *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and the matriarchies of British soaps such as *Crossroads* where both Meg Richardson and, later,

Nicola Freeman combined the patriarchal role as head of the family business and the matriarchal role of moral touchstone, which effectively put “a strong mother in charge” (Geraghty, 1992:76). Both were widows, one working with her son and daughter, the other with her stepson and daughter bringing a combination of business acumen and moral authority which reduced the internal battles seen in US soaps and turned them into battles against outside threats. As widows they were able to be strong women deflecting challenges not only from the business world but from the familial changes going around them.

A possible reason for this clear delineation of motherhood into good and bad, strong and weak comes from the cultural background and audience preferences of the genre.

Livingstone suggests that the soap opera viewer has a considerable role to play in the construction of meaning which is “unusual amongst highly popular culture genres”, since the knowledge and experience of viewers forms a relevant contribution to the text, and their perspectives “may be as valid as any portrayed” (Livingstone, 1998:52). She proposes that soaps contain the:

moral polarization, strong emotions, the personalisation of ideological conflict, interiorisation, female orientation and excess of melodrama, and the impulse to both imitate and transcend daily life of romantic fiction. British soaps contain in addition the social realism which emerged during the 1950s and 60s and which dominated British theatre and television of the time. (Livingstone, 1998:53)

Again, issues of motherhood in general, and single motherhood specifically, can be reflected in both the issue based modern soap operas like *Brookside*, and the more traditional melodramatic, domestic soaps like *Coronation Street*, encouraging viewers to identify with the ‘good’ and distance themselves from the ‘bad’. Despite Phil Redmond’s contention that *Brookside* covers “so-called difficult subjects of social issues” (Redmond, 1987:5), Kilborn accuses soap operas of rarely tackling important

social issues, arguing that when they do they rarely move outside the consensual view. He feels that soaps deliberately refrain from committing themselves to change, preferring to reflect “social integration and value consensus, albeit imperfectly” (Kilborn, 1992:96-97). Given that controversy is, by its nature divisive, and since television aims to build rather than lose audiences, issue based storylines must be tackled carefully and with ‘the audience’ in mind. Inevitably, therefore, the stories and the way they are handled will involve moral perspectives which will almost undoubtedly emanate from the dominant and consensual ideology of the culture. This means that even if the issue of single motherhood is presented sympathetically, which generally translates as a ‘single mother as victim’ scenario, there will be a moral element which positions the single mother in a negative light. Thus lone mothers are shown to be depressed and unable to cope (Fiona, *Coronation Street*, Cindy, *Hollyoaks*); weak and unable to cope (Sammy, *Brookside*, Zoe, *Coronation Street*, Mary, *EastEnders*) or selfish and unwilling to cope (Cindy, *EastEnders*, Pat Wicks, *EastEnders*). Even when single mothers are treated more positively, as might be argued to be the case with Eileen Grimshaw, assertive mother of two sons (in *Coronation Street*), the representation resonates with cultural stereotypes and assumptions. Eileen struggles for money and works hard to support her sons (positive image), yet her two sons are mixed race, supporting the popular conception of black men impregnating white women, and by different fathers (negative representation). Eileen is shown to be more than happy to live alone and support her family herself, but storylines involving her family include thieving sons and noisy arguments with other street residents, and recently Eileen herself was accused of stealing money from her employers to pay off loan sharks, resulting in her spending the night in jail. Thus Eileen’s assertiveness was read as being loud-mouthed and her strength as aggression by several of the young

women who expressed the opinion that they would be embarrassed to have her as a parent:

I think she means well but she's very Umrough, isn't she? I mean, she never really listens to other people's points of view and she's very big and scruffy. Like, she doesn't really make any effort, does she? Sophie L, 18. E: 2002

She's more realistic than the other characters, though, I think. She's more like people you actually see. But I wouldn't want her as a mum, she's so moany and rude to people. Rachael, 17. E: 2002

She makes out she really cares about her sons (like getting Todd the computer for his exams for example) but really she can't be a good mother because they both break the law. Michelle, 18. D: 2002

Indeed, Michelle's comment makes reference to the way in which the mythology of inadequate single parenting transcends soap storylines. It is common for the offspring of single mothers to also be presented in a light which, if not didactic, certainly opens up a moral discourse. Audiences are continually shown how lone mothers are unable to control their teenage or adult offspring (which, as I have already pointed out, are usually male). Both Dot Cotton and Natalie Barnes have sons who live through criminal activity. Nick Cotton was a murderer who had so little respect for the mother who brought him up single-handedly, that he tried to murder her on one occasion. Tony Horrocks was murdered when he found himself involved with, and unable to pay his debts to, a drugs gang. Both of Pat Wicks' sons were womanisers, fathering children who would grow up not knowing their real dads, and Elsie Tanner's son, Dennis, was depicted as a wayward, petty criminal. Even widowed mothers find themselves unable to control their sons. In *EastEnders*, Martin Fowler's brush with delinquency may have been connected to his age and the need to create dramatic storylines, but his mother, Pauline, was heard to say, several times, that she couldn't cope and that she wished his father were still around to sort him out.

Soap Realism

But how realistic are the portrayals of soap opera lone mothers and their children? For characters to work they have to have motivations and feelings about their actions which the audience members can understand even if they cannot accept, in the light of their own experiences or beliefs. How realistic is it, for instance, that an intelligent, career minded, reasonably hard-nosed business woman like Fiona in *Coronation Street* would find herself unable to cope with the prospect of single motherhood to the extent that she becomes depressed, agoraphobic and unable to make even the most simple decision? Like most soap 'unmarried mothers' she is almost continually miserable from the time she gives birth, rallying only temporarily when she moves into another relationship with a man who is keen to take on the role of father for the baby. Whether the moral subtext is deliberate or not, the theme, of being punished for falling pregnant and failing to hold on to the natural father, is standard soap opera material.

Whilst the point of that particular storyline might be to show how the break-up of the relationship during Fiona's pregnancy affected her emotionally, the portrayal of her subsequent slide from typically strong *Coronation Street* woman to abandoned single mother cannot really be considered realistic in the sense that Christine Geraghty suggests is crucial to British soaps and their justification of their characters and storylines:

Lying behind the claim is an assumption of the nature of reality which has underpinned much tv drama. (Geraghty, 1992:137)

Charlotte Brunsdon suggests that soap operas employ two kinds of realism: an "external realism" which is created through reference to the outside world using elements such as

sets, dress and discussion of contemporary events to position and anchor the serial, and an “internal realism” whereby characters conform to our knowledge and expectations of them, and which is derived from having watched the show (Brunsdon, 1987:27). Both Brunsdon and Geraghty suggest that in *Coronation Street*, which is regularly derided for being less realistic than its rivals, the female characters are able to be stronger and more independent *because* the external realism of the soap is less than in *EastEnders* or *Brookside*, and that “the social power of sexual difference” which pulls women in the real world down is deliberately ignored in favour of less plausible but more woman-centred storylines (Brunsdon, 1987:28). Thus we might reasonably question why the opportunity to depict a strong woman coping with giving birth and raising a baby after her partner abandons her was effectively ignored in favour of a storyline which pandered to the patriarchal line that single motherhood is a poor option. Perhaps the answer lies in Brunsdon’s observation that soap realism is created, not so much through a direct comparison with the real world but, through the ways in which soaps are involved in the different ways we make sense of the real world:

Soaps are dependent on already existing discourses - in the papers, on the news, about law and order, about young people – to represent the real world to us.
(Brunsdon, 1997:27)

These representations, however simplistic and stereotypical, may help us to understand how that world works. In other words, such subjects as Fiona’s inability to cope with lone parenting have come out of the constructed reality of the dominant ideology of our culture, and, whilst both Brunsdon and Geraghty assert that a distinction needs to be made between the subject positions that a text constructs, and the social subject who may or may not take up these positions, “the individual woman viewer may reject the positions and pleasures offered by soaps” (Geraghty, 1995:221), the repeated polemic

across the range of mass media, sooner or later, becomes embedded in cultural mythology and acquires the veneer of truth.

Soap's Enduring Popularity

While the question of why soap operas consistently manage to capture the public imagination, despite the low cultural value with which they have been stigmatised, continues to occupy the thinking of both academics and reviewers, two things become clear from the study of the genre and its relationship to the millions who regularly engage with it. Firstly sustained and regular access to the characters and storylines enables viewers to identify with them in a relationship unique in television output, and secondly that the messages embedded in the programmes, both overt and covert, are carried from the intimacy of the home out to the community at large, both in attitude and action. Phenomena such as wrongful arrests and convictions provide staple material for tabloid newspapers and women's magazines to debate, whilst issues such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancies and affairs form agendas for teachers, parents and the media to establish moral discourses in a more objective manner, using a platform which removes barriers between generations and ethnic groups.

What we found in our interviews over and over again, was that soap opera texts are the products not of individual and isolated readings, as it were, of small social groups such as families and friends... It seems that the soap opera, not least because of the strong need it creates for collaborative readings, has considerable potential for reaching out into the real world of viewers. It enables them to evaluate their own experiences as well as the norms and values they live by in terms of the relationship patterns and social blueprints the show presents. (Seiter et al, 1989:233)

Certainly it was noticeable in my research that the sharing of perceived messages and themes between the young women enabled them to articulate common interpretations built upon the real world around them.

The morality of soap opera is hidden beneath the surface of the, often controversial, themes and storylines which, it is claimed by the programme makers, are acceptable because of the depth of the relationships built between characters and viewers, and the widely publicised responsibility of those who create them. Livingstone claims that, since soaps are primarily “absorbing human drama”, the moral judgements are hidden beneath the “realness” of the characters, who, after years of “life” on television, move beyond simple stereotypes (Livingstone, 1990: 58), and Brunsdon suggests that the ability to make moral and social judgements about characters is part of the process of being positioned as a soap opera viewer (Screen, 1981:34). However, moral judgements are firmly entrenched within the genre – particularly in Britain and Australia – and underpin both the construction and the reading of texts. “Moral issues feature prominently in family discussions about soaps” and bring “alternative sets of social behaviour and moral values into the heart of domestic life” (Gillespie, 1995: 96). Buckingham found that the young viewers he interviewed enjoyed the invitation to sit in judgement on characters because they were able to:

apply their own moral and ideological frameworks to the programme without feeling that it was encouraging them to adopt different ones. (Buckingham, 1987:177)

although Gillespie’s research suggested that in the Punjabi community of Southall, parents worried that the values of their cultural and religious beliefs were in danger of being undermined by soaps like *Neighbours*:

The only virtue of such programmes in their eyes is that they alert them to the temptations and traps that their children may fall into. Those commonly mentioned are squandering money in games arcades, smoking, drinking or taking drugs, dating and getting pregnant, and running away from home. (Gillespie, 1995: 98)

For Gillespie’s soap viewers television represents a social experience embedded in family life, and family relationships are expressed “in and through the viewing

situation” (ibid:98), with soaps themselves offering alternative sets of social behaviour and bringing moral values into the centre of family experience.

Peter Buckman suggests that it is the pursuit of popularity and high audience figures which pressurises soaps to commit many ‘sins’ – “including acts of moral cowardice” (Buckman, 1984: 146). He claims that the genre encourages a “different notion of ‘balance’” from that which is understood in the real world, and that it is this balance which requires that good must triumph over bad, which is why religious and political topics must be avoided since casting a particular viewpoint as good would mean “its opposing viewpoint being seen as ‘bad’” (ibid: 146). One area where this notion of balance is clearly on display is in the treatment of sexual behaviour, where gendered discourses are held up for public debate.

Pietro Alasuutari suggests that criticism of the genre may serve as a reverse strategy of communicating one’s values. His research into the act of viewing identified that a programme’s value was determined by its relationship to reality and that soap operas tended to be seen as the least realistic of television output because they offered the audience a highly problematic association with the real world. Viewers are generally aware that they are watching fictional (and often highly unrealistic) narratives despite the artifice employed to create a high level of realism (Alasuutari, 1992:572). However, within the framework of the realism by which they are defined, soaps also include an ‘ethical realism’, presenting moral and ethical issues from a consensual and patriarchal standpoint and binding television morality to general social and cultural ideologies of morality. For viewers, the construction of meaning within the narrative requires a tacit, though unstated, assumption that characters’ behaviour and fortunes will be bound to

their adherence to or deviance from social and cultural norms. Viewers, including the young women in my sample, *expect* soap characters to suffer and be punished for their mistakes (although they are not required to be rewarded for their good qualities!), and can distance soap opera reality from their own experiences, allowing soap worlds to exist parallel to and separate from their own.

Alasuutari offers the supposition that fictitious stories should have a moral and should be able to teach us something about reality. He refers back to the Aristotelian belief that the poet is a moral teacher whose work must fulfil a higher purpose and that art's function is the revelation of morality, arguing that the study of television morality is essential to the understanding of the process of television viewing (Alasuutari, 1992:561-82). For him, as for Geraghty and Livingstone, the viewer's relationship with the morality of their soap operas is crucial to the validity placed on the programme (and subsequently the genre as a whole):

Thus soap opera serves some of the same functions as cultural myths connecting with basic human concerns, explaining complex social phenomena, providing categories for thought and moral precepts to live by. (Livingstone, 1990: 59)

However, my own research suggests that viewers are well able to separate soap opera morality from the knowledge and experiences they acquire first hand. In discussions about lone mothers in soap, comments were often made about soap opera 'rules':

Well I don't suppose they can really show [Sonya] having a baby and living happy ever after in case it encourages other girls to get pregnant to get a man. Clare, 16. C: 2000

You just know that if two people have sex in a soap opera, something bad will happen. Either the girl'll get pregnant or they'll get caught or someone'll catch something. Michelle, 18. D: 2002

Yeah, you're waiting for it aren't you? Mel, 18. D: 2002

It's like in programmes like *The Bill* or *Casualty*, where you know that people who go up ladders will fall off them or that people who commit crimes will get caught, you just know, don't you? Laura L, 17. D: 2002

In the same way that viewers understand and accept the entrenched moralities and conventional closed narratives that create the false realism of television and HStanwood films (McMahon and Quinn, 1991; Maltby, 1996), these young women acknowledge the structural and ideological conventions inherent in the genre of soap opera. They are familiar with a set of ethical precepts that are inevitably applied to fictional communities to create idealised worlds in which moral lessons may be applied.

However, it would seem that when soap opera realism strays too far from the actual reality of the viewer (for example, in the case of the single mother and her treatment in soap opera), the moral lessons are recognised as artificial and, in some cases, inappropriate. While the young mothers believed that others would judge them by the fictitious creations in soap opera, the responses of the other young women interviewed suggested that this was an erroneous belief.

Soap Mythologies

In their preoccupation with everyday human concerns, soap operas align themselves to the myths and ideologies which have traditionally fulfilled the "social functions of justification for and celebration of conventional wisdom and practise in the face of challenge or uncertainty" (Livingstone, 1990: 56). For Livingstone these texts are designed to clarify the message and their purpose is to embody cultural truths and to reveal the simple wisdom on which we can rely. Thus, she suggests, soap operas are like "myths and folk tales, conventional, conservative and moral" (ibid:56),

personalising moral and political issues by applying individual solutions to general human problems.

However, when the mythology of the single mother is applied to the soap opera text, it would seem, from the examples already discussed, that the moral 'problem' of illegitimacy and the stereotypical representation of 'the fallen woman' are selected as dramatic devices in preference to the more realistic and everyday issues of an increasing, and increasingly acknowledged, human situation. Single mothers are defined in terms of failed relationships, poverty, and desperation, when the reality for many single mothers is about coping strategies, informal support structures and a determination to provide their children with the best opportunities they can achieve for them (Phoenix, 1991).

Within such parameters, the issue of moral and ethical perspectives, especially as they apply to the subject of illegitimacy, may be seen to sit precariously among the modern, real-life experiences of the audiences who consume the stories and, with them, the underpinning ideologies.

For the single mothers of my sample there seems in modern soap opera to be little correlation between the simplistically drawn characters who find themselves bringing up babies alone and their own experiences. Several of the teenage mothers commented on the way that teen pregnancy tends to be linked to first experiences of sex and two suggested that pregnancy is portrayed as a punishment for experimental, drunken or manipulative sex:

If people, like, believed soap opera storylines they'd think that everybody gets pregnant on their first time, wouldn't they, 'cos nearly all the kids I can think of

in *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Hollyoaks* have done. Kerry-Ann, 18. D: 2002

I think they do it as a warning to stop kids trying sex out, don't you? I don't think it works though, 'cos kids'll have sex if they want to, won't they, what ever they see on telly. Angela, 17. E: 2002

Ironically, at the time of my discussions with the one of the student groups, *EastEnders* was running a story line about 15 year old Sonya's first sexual encounter with Martin, a mistake since she was actually in love with Jamie. The students were convinced that she would discover herself to be pregnant, especially as she was worrying over a missed period shortly afterwards. They commented on the duplication of storylines between *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* which suggested that both might be running plots about schoolgirl pregnancies and the soaps were "laying it on with a trowel" (Sally K, 16. C: 2000) in order to ram home the message. In fact the Sonya pregnancy came to nothing at the time, suggesting that we had perhaps maligned the soap writers and storyliners. However, several months later, Sonya gave birth, following an excruciating and frightening labour, to the baby girl she did not know she was expecting. The birth alienated Jamie, who felt that she was using him, and caused Sonya to reject the baby and sink into a depression.

The relationship between the text and the audience is deliberately multi-faceted within the soap opera genre. Storylines are designed to offer viewers different life experiences to connect to different perspectives in the series, and characters are a blend of the realistic (that is, they contain fairly lifelike amalgamations of 'type' which have over the years become defined and sophisticated until they are no longer obvious stereotypes or two-dimensional caricatures) and the fantastic. Soap opera characters are honed over years to behave in reasonably life-like ways and to react to situations within well-defined personality predispositions. Yet, they remain strangely unrealistic. Their fates

are sealed by the whims of scriptwriters, producers and the actors and actresses who play them and their lives are defined by the need to create and maintain large audiences.

Spence suggests that it is this “tension between the ordinary and the out-of-the-ordinary” that forms the key to our relationships with the genre. She suggests that soap characters have lives that are very concentrated, simultaneously ordinary and outrageous (Spence, 1995:183-4). For the young women with whom I worked, this tension between real and fantasy enabled them to connect and empathise with the predicaments of characters whilst, at the same time, to remain distanced ideologically from the moral judgements they perceived to be intrinsic to the text.

As far as the depiction of mothers in general is concerned, soap operas, with their strong matriarchal representations, offer a range of types enabling viewers to watch women be subjected to the full gamut of experiences as mothers. Yet, where single mothers are concerned, the range is considerably less extensive. For the genre that defines itself in terms of its realism, conventionality and adherence to traditional family values are the keys to acceptance. Unless they can be ‘saved’, constrained or integrated back into the family unit, single soap mums are mad, bad and most definitely dangerous to know!

Chapter Five: POPULAR FILM AND THE MOTHER AS 'OTHER'

When the nomination list for the 2001 Oscar Ceremony was announced in February 2001, Sarah Ebner of The Guardian noticed that four of the five nominees had played single or widowed mothers (Guardian, February 22, 2001). While Julia Roberts went on to win the Academy Award for her portrayal of Erin Brockovich, the real-life single mother who uncovered a pollution scandal while working as a legal secretary, Ellen Burstyn was nominated for her role as a widowed mother in *Requiem For A Dream* (2000), and Juliette Binoche and Laura Linney, as single mothers in *Chocolat* (2000) and *You Can Count on Me* (2000).

The inclusion of so many screen lone mothers may be significant, a reflection of contemporary society and women's lives¹⁷, but the use of single mothers within the medium of film can be traced back to the era of silent film and the earliest days of cinema

In this chapter I intend to look at the ways in which discourses of the single mother have been woven into the narratives of popular modern film, and to analyse the methods used by audiences to interpret and construct meaning out of film texts. I have chosen as my case studies films that might be described as 'women's films', and which fit into genres specifically aimed at female audiences, although, as I shall argue further into the chapter,

¹⁷The website www.Singlemomsonline.com lists 120 American films made since 1960 that feature lone mothers

they are also designed to be viewed by male spectators and, to this end, present women as sexualised (and, inevitably, fetishised) objects of the male gaze alongside their maternal roles. I shall first present a brief history of the single mother in popular film and show how the depiction of motherhood outside of the marriage paradigm was presented in melodramatic fashion with the mother as ultimate victim. I shall then offer the suggestion that modern films continue to present lone motherhood as sexualised and transgressive behaviour that must ultimately be contained through some kind of punishment (*The Good Mother* [1988], *The Piano* [1993], *Stella Dallas*[1937]) or ‘repaired’ through marriage to the man who will both rescue and be rescued by his adoption of his new family (*Jerry Maguire*[1996], *The Accidental Tourist*[1988]). This chapter will also contend, through the responses of the young female viewers, that, whilst depictions of lone motherhood are increasing in line with demographic changes both in the United Kingdom and the United States, the representation of the state of lone motherhood is not an accurate reflection of the realities experienced by so many audience members, and that the sexualising of lone mothers in popular film persists in conferring on them a status which is at the same time different to and less dignified than that traditionally afforded to mothers in Hollywood cinema.

For feminist film theorists the position of women is generally one which they find problematic. Mary Ann Doane argues that Hollywood cinema, constructed around male desire and subjectivity cannot address women’s pleasure except where such pleasures are complicit with patriarchal constructions of femininity. She cites the maternal melodrama as using themes of masochistic sacrifice and passivity to create “contours of female

subjectivity and desire within the traditional forms and conventions of Hollywood narrative” (Doane, 1987:13). Psychoanalytic theory has enabled feminists to unpack meaning from spectacle and film narrative in terms of how women create space for themselves within film texts that are essentially created by and for a male audience¹⁸ It seemed to me pertinent to use psychoanalytic arguments to suggest that films featuring lone mothers awaken Freudian fears of castration, signified most clearly in the removal of Ada’s finger in *The Piano*, and with them, a “reaffirmation of the Oedipus complex” in the mother’s position as a patriarchal function (Mulvey, 1977-8:54-6), and develop this point by introducing some analysis of the ways in which lone fathers are treated in popular film, as strong, ‘double parents’ who learn to incorporate the feminine alongside their masculine qualities – who absorb the maternal into the male identity.

Finally I will offer a case study of the exception that appears, paradoxically, to both follow and to break the ‘rules’ and consider the ways in which the film *Erin Brockovich* (2000) both utilises and subverts the male gaze and the conventions of the sexualised lone mother.

The Concept of Motherhood in Popular Cinema

The study of popular film can be problematic. The *New Yorker*’s film critic, Pauline Kael, complained that Hollywood film-making should be free from academic analysis and allowed to be “great trash” for which the pleasure of viewing is “that you don’t have to take it too seriously, that it was never meant to be any more than frivolous and trifling and

¹⁸ It seems no coincidence that year after year my film studies classes are made up predominantly of young males whose enthusiasm for the medium and whose confidence in their knowledge and understanding of film convention and structure appears to intimidate female students who often give up the subject despite their often superior academic skills.

entertaining” (Maltby, 1995:3). This view of mass entertainment and its relationship to academic study is one used regularly to denigrate attempts to position and codify all forms of popular culture within a dominant capitalist ideology, and as such has been criticised heavily by Marxists and Post-Modernists for whom the relationship between ‘trash’ culture and the ideologies that permeate the everyday life and beliefs of the mass audience is too important to simply ignore or trivialise.

The motif of lone motherhood cuts across film genres and narratives. The widow in Westerns whose family needs protecting from outside forces; the unmarried mothers of British Social Realism films of the 1960s and the fallen women of melodrama, may be created from different ‘realities’ and cultural ideologies, but they are all positioned in some way to enable the audience to construct meaning from and make judgements about other key features of the text. The key difference is that modern representations may be beginning to employ more varied approaches to characterisation from the traditional stigmatised single mothers of previous decades.

Hollywood has portrayed single mothers as prominent characters since the era of silent film, but for almost as long as they have been portrayed, they have been characterised as socially deviant or at least responsible for their kids’ troubles. (Barry, 2001: 2)

The development of the feature film, established as the mainstay of cinematic output from 1927 when the coming of sound reduced the need for support features such as vaudeville and live music, has often been written as a history of technological development and the financial vagaries of the Hollywood majors (Turner, 1996:11). Underpinning this development however, was the realisation by mainstream film-makers that the recognition and success of the feature film was based on the assumption that it should be as ‘realistic’

as possible. French critic, Andre Bazin, claimed in a 1946 article, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” that:

The guiding myth...inspiring the invention of the cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. (Maltby, 1996:147)

For some film academics, the increasingly realistic reproduction of society offered in film is embedded in the ideological and aesthetic systems of the nineteenth century. This idea may usefully be viewed alongside the perpetuation of fairytales and myths discussed earlier, as a method of determining how cultural value is placed on images and messages inherent in modern popular film. It might also be extended in order to consider why the hegemony established by Hollywood extends to the preferred interpretation of motherhood in general and lone motherhood in particular in feature film output.

Mast and Kavin point out that “particular cultural conditions influence, if not dictate, the particular qualities and quantities of films in any given era” and that “any history of the movies must both take account of and account for ...cultural shifts and conditions” (Mast and Kavin, 2000: 4). Althusser and Barthes have been amongst the many theorists who have analysed the assumed cultural values of films:

values that seem so obviously true for that culture that they are accepted as inevitable, normal and natural rather than as constructs of the culture itself. (Ibid: 6)

These values underpin the plots and narrative structures of the movies we consume and drive audience expectations of outcome:

Movies... have happy endings because part of their cultural function is to affirm and maintain the culture of which they are part. That cultural function was, for

instance, inscribed in the industry's Production Code, which regulated the content and treatment of every Hollywood movie between 1931 and 1968. The fact that 85% of Hollywood movies feature heterosexual romance as their main plot device needs to be seen in the context of this regulatory framework. (Maltby, 1996: 8-9)

Comolli and Narboni describe film as a "particular product" manufactured within a given system of economic relations and involving labour to transmit it into a commodity "possessing exchange value" on the one hand, and on the other, becoming "an ideological product of the system":

Every film is political, in as much as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing). (Comolli and Narboni, 1996:45)

They suggest that cinema reproduces reality but clarify that 'reality' is in fact "nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology" (ibid: 46), making cinema just one of the "languages through which the world communicates itself to itself" (ibid: 46). Thus every film, from the very first shot, has to reproduce images and ideas, not as they really are but as "they appear when refracted through the ideology" (Easthope, 1996:46).

And it is within the ideological framework of film narrative that the representation of mothers both within and outside marriage must be considered.

Motherhood as a concept is everywhere in film texts. E Ann Kaplan argues that the mother is "an absent presence" in most narratives from the earliest days of cinema to the present (Kaplan, 1992:xi). The Mother, when she appears, represents all that is 'good' and natural, to the extent that, on the rare occasions, when mothers turn bad the repercussions are enormous (evil mothers tend not to be main characters but vehicles who push heroes and

heroines to particular actions, *Now Voyager* [1942] being just one example of this). Indeed the mythologies of motherhood are so entrenched in popular culture that audiences feel more comfortable if the 'bad' mother is actually not a mother at all, but a stepmother (hence the 'evil stepmother' paradigm that underpins so much of our cultural output). Kaplan suggests that the ideologies surrounding motherhood are strong enough to be accepted as natural and therefore are rarely questioned or foregrounded in film texts. However, the reverence traditionally applied to motherhood and maternity (epitomised by scenes around the bed as the recently delivered baby is clutched to its mother's breast while the father looks on in awe and admiration!) is noticeably lacking in the representations of lone motherhood in popular film, and this has also been the case since the earliest days of cinema.

In early Hollywood cinema, 19th Century value systems predominated in themes and representations of femininity and female behaviour. Unmarried mothers were stigmatised and isolated without support, and subjected to criticism and blame. Films such as *Way Down East* (1921) and *East Lynne* (1925) cautioned against maternity outside the sanctity of marriage, and without the support of a husband "to rescue them from the travails of independence" (Wexman, 1990: 11).

However, the medium of film brought with it significant changes from the literary tradition from which its subject matter was collected. Heroines continued to be seduced and abandoned, but their suffering was often tempered with a new boldness more suited to the newly emancipated woman of the 1920s. In *Way Down East* Lillian Gish as Anna, attacks

her seducer, defending herself against his actions and challenging him with her threats to name him, before rushing tragically into the storm. Her mix of vulnerability and strength would be reflected and developed in the fallen woman genre through the decades, humanizing the heroines of melodrama and culminating in the blend of sacrifice and self-preservation of the American TV movie of the 1980s and 80s.

The combining of traditional stories with the new technology and processes involved in film-making created highly dramatic and visual narratives that captured the public imagination and made *auteurs* out of, among others, D W Griffiths, FW Murnau and King Vidor. It quickly became clear that, rather than constantly reinvent the process, the film industry could work most efficiently by categorising its output into genres aimed at particular audiences and containing similar elements that would appeal over and over again.

Genre films privilege convention and collective meaning, and conform to a pre-existing set of conventions. Where *auteur* films exhibit the common attributes that make an individual director's films unique, genre films identify the common attributes that define a particular group of films. Familiarity with genre films enables the spectator to predict and anticipate how the narrative will unfold. Expectations of outcome will, in most cases, be met allowing the spectator to enjoy the processes by which the outcome is achieved without having to first gain understanding of why and how the narrative develops. Pleasure is gained from the way in which hopes and promises are fulfilled and from the recurring themes and patterns that are integral to them. In a romantic comedy, for example, the assumption that the male and female protagonists will eventually overcome the difficulties that keep them apart, either physically in the case of films like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) or through a series of

mishaps and misunderstandings in films such as *Bachelor Mother* (1934), underpins and influences all the events within the narrative.

In this way the genre film may be considered to be satisfying for audiences in that the formulae adopted tend to reflect basic problems, questions, anxieties, difficulties, worries and values of a culture, and the way in which members of the culture attempt to deal with them. For many, the genre film has become, in many ways, a mirror held up to contemporary society to embody and reflect shared problems and values.

Importantly for audiences, these films also offer solutions that may not easily be found outside the cinema in the real world. Nice people find their perfect partner, good overcomes evil, equilibrium is restored and chaos resolved. The solutions may be idealistic and highly romanticised but the offering of imaginary resolutions to real problems presents not only entertainment but often also hope. The fact that such films prescribe a preferred set of solutions, steeped in the dominant ideology of the culture, means that a collection of values, endorsed by the dominant structures in society, are constantly reflected, bringing in their wake an emphasis on individualism, capitalist ideology, nuclear family life and restricted opportunities for women, both within and outside marriage. By presenting hope as a Utopian ideal, film-makers are able to capitalise on formulae that construct meaning in particular ways and with particular (often female) audiences in mind.

Melodrama and the 'Woman's Film'

The genre of melodrama has been extensively studied, particularly from a feminist viewpoint. Christine Gledhill (1987), Jackie Byars (1991), Mary Anne Doane (1987), E. Ann Kaplan (1987, 1992), and Barbara Klinger (1994), are just some who have considered a range of melodramas from the 1930s, '40s and '50s, and examined the genre in terms of text, audience, representation of women and as examples of specific directors' work. As a genre, its importance seems to be in the part it plays in dealing with moral issues and conflicts, and the role it takes in clarifying ethical choices, often between good and evil, within the personal and domestic spheres of everyday life.

The key features of melodrama can be clearly delineated. Firstly they foreground women in the narrative and story line, creating victims out of the central female characters. Secondly they make moral conflict the main theme, particularly when the conflict is created by the patriarchal values of society. Thirdly the narrative is driven by chance events and coincidences, and incorporates secrets as central to the plot, with sharp twists and unexpected reversals of fortune in the story line (Jacobs, 1991).

As with many genres, melodrama can be divided into a number of more narrowly focussed sub-genres containing specific narratives and formulae. Within these sub-genres, which include the paranoid woman's film and the melodrama of the unknown woman, Lea Jacobs has identified 'the Fallen Woman film', which:

Concern[s] a woman who commits a sexual transgression such as adultery or premarital sex. In traditional versions of the plot, she is expelled from the domestic space of the family and undergoes a protracted decline. (Jacobs, 1991: x)

Jacobs explains how the transgressive nature of these texts meant that censorship became the major influence on how they were shaped and defined. Thus the narrative, and its cause-effect style of construction, was heavily constrained and controlled by the conventions dictated by the censorship laws of the time.

To this end, films like *Blonde Venus* (1932), which centre on women who commit adultery or who conceive outside wedlock, were forced to omit the very scenes upon which the story was constructed. The cause-effect logic of such films had to be distorted to get past the censors, in order that information could be depicted without actually being shown.

Under the 'New Deal' ideology of the 1930s which underpinned filmmaking, the moralistic interpretations of the fallen woman drama were divided into two ideological codes of judgement that Christian Viviani identifies as moral and social. The heroine's fall is

traceable to her adultery, committed in a moment of frenzy and expiated in lifelong maternal suffering, (Viviani, 1980:8)

and her misery is presented as the opposite of the standard Hollywood vision of success and visibility. The theme of sacrifice became re-articulated in relation to themes closer to American social values at the time, where moral sin was re-identified as social error. This enabled film makers to present the heroine's struggle to survive as being due to the values of the society in which she was forced to exist rather than to her own personal failings.

She is set up as antagonist to a hoarding speculating society, repository of false and outworn values. (Viviani, 1980: 12)

This approach might be considered to be more progressive than its predecessor but the change in perspective, angled as it was away from the heroine's moral lapse, did not challenge social values to the extent that modern film might be expected to do. In *Stella Dallas*, for example, Stella, for all her sacrifice and inherent goodness, is still faced with the "essential female tragedy" (Rich, 1977: 240) - the loss of her daughter. As much as Stella wants only to be a mother to her daughter, she is forced by her recognition of her social lacks – money, status and education – to act out "a patently false scenario of narcissistic self-absorption" (Williams, 1987: 313).

For Viviani, the Fallen Woman film is about creating narratives that readily summon up feelings of intense emotion through the complexity of "baroque incident" and coincidence. He suggests that, for male spectators, the fallen woman carries a charge of "Oedipal eroticism" whilst, at the same time, the sexual transgression of the mother is capable of evoking not only a moral but a class register, for the variations in moral attitude to her speak different class ideologies:

A woman ...separated from her child, falls from her social class and founders in disgrace. (Viviani, 1980: 7)

E Ann Kaplan suggests that the fallen woman theme is closely linked to the idea prevalent in nineteenth century American literature that "only the bad mother is sexual – indeed her sexuality often defines her evil" (Kaplan, 1987: 117). She breaks the representation of the subject down into two film forms. The first is the "maternal sacrifice melodrama", dealing

with motherhood within the narrative and appealing to both male and female audiences. In such texts the mother often gives birth out of wedlock and thereafter sacrifices herself for the welfare of her child. She looks to elevate the child in society either by giving it up to 'better' parents or by returning it to its noble lineage (through the father) while debasing and absenting herself. In these texts mother love supersedes the woman's bond with the father or lover, giving the male spectator the vicarious satisfaction of having the mother sacrifice all for his needs. The maternal sacrifice paradigm created heroines such as Stella Dallas and Mildred Pierce but is rarely used in modern texts intended for an audience that does not expect women to give up their children no matter what the personal circumstances or difficulties. Films like *Little Man Tate* (1991) and *Kramer Vs Kramer* (1981) are the closest examples of maternal sacrifice that I found in the texts I studied, although *Erin Brockovich* and *One Fine Day* (1996) utilise the sacrifice theme to show the children of lone mothers being temporarily 'sacrificed' to their mother's ambition or crusade.

Kaplan labels the second melodramatic form the 'Monstrous Mother' who forms the underside of the self-sacrificing ideal mother (Kaplan, 1992: 13). Using examples such as *Now Voyager* and *Marnie* (1956), she argues that:

The angel and evil mother paradigms that Freud articulated were an easy and useful tool for re-presenting deep unconscious fears of falling back into the horror of the mother's being, where boundaries are elided. (Kaplan, 1992:118)

Kaplan questions the hypothesis that melodrama explicitly addresses women and deals with issues pertinent to women, arguing instead that "women, like everybody else can function only within the linguistic semiotic constraints available to them" (Kaplan, 1992: 16).

I would suggest that the films discussed as part of this thesis might reasonably be defined as belonging more closely to the 'woman's film' genre than to the straight melodrama.

Jeanine Basinger defines the woman's film as being:

A movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman. (Basinger, 1993: 505-6)

She identifies the key elements of the woman's movie as featuring a central female figure caught between the demands of home, work and romance, often with a female best friend to support and confide in, and some element of punishment for wanting too much. Within this definition it is clear that many melodramas can be considered to fall into both the categories identified by Kaplan. *Mildred Pierce* (1945), for example, is a melodrama that contains all the features of the woman's movie, and its themes of the clashing demands of women's lives were repeated in many films made in the 1930s and '40s.

Basinger's analysis of women's films from the 1920s to the 1960s identifies that there were four types of mother commonly represented. They consisted of perfect mothers, who were few and far between; sacrificial mothers, who were "faced with more reasons to give up their children than can easily be imagined"; and destructive mothers, whose evil behaviour delighted audiences. The fourth group, and amongst the most common representations in such films, were unwed mothers (Basinger, 1993: 392). Each category performed a particular purpose and each type of mother's options were most clearly defined by societal evaluation in terms of reflecting specific attitudes to the woman's role, the children involved and towards the men who fathered them. Unwed mothers were considered to be wrong, but not bad, and not without the possibility of redemption.

Basinger offers three reasons for the popularity of “unwed mother” films in the 1930s. She suggests that possibly there were more women giving birth outside of wedlock than was realised at the time. Seeing the scenario played out on screen provided a ‘cautionary tale’ for women contemplating sex outside of marriage. A second reason for the preponderance of these mothers might have been to create a highly charged emotional experience that would allow women to vicariously ‘experience’ such traumas, and a third, centres around the expectation that mothers made up a large part of the audience. For beleaguered women struggling in a society on the brink of war, the ability to identify with a suffering heroine provided a ‘what if’ scenario that may have helped such women to cope with their own lives. Certainly the war provided a useful stage for unwed motherhood. Women were more prepared to risk pregnancy and sleep with the men they might soon lose, and temporary, but intense, relationships with visiting military and naval personnel were not uncommon. In the films that reflected and magnified women’s situations and problems, men disappeared and lost their memories (although they rarely died – a strategy designed to enable the happy resolutions that audiences preferred) leaving women to cope alone. As Basinger pithily notes:

In movies about women, all important historical and natural events are translated into the terms of a woman’s daily life. World War I is not about the Allies against the Kaiser. It’s about how unmarried women become pregnant when they have sex. (1993: 14)

These lone mothers, whose social status could be presented as more acceptable due to the unusual and emotive situations in which they found themselves, often became strong and successful, ultimately rewarded, rather than rescued, by the return of the child’s father.

The popularity of such films continued through the forties and into the 1950s when films like *No Man of Her Own* (1950) and *Three Secrets* (1950) followed the stories of unwed pregnant women and lone mothers in their searches for happiness and a family for their babies. In *No Man of Her Own*, Barbara Stanwyck plays a woman who, finding herself abandoned and pregnant, tricks a family into believing that she is the widowed daughter-in-law they have never met. Basinger sums up the attraction of this story as being the time constraints inherent in the narrative:

A woman who is expecting a baby is under time pressure; she can't keep her problem a secret forever. This type of story is perfect for a movie story, in that it visualises a dilemma and places it in a highly motivated context that requires the plot to move forward rapidly. (Basinger, 1993: 400)

Indeed, such is the enduring attraction of this particular scenario (which ends with the heroine falling in love with her dead 'husband's' brother) that the film has been remade twice; as *I married a Shadow* in 1982 and *Mrs Winterbourne* in 1996 with Ricki Lake playing the 'widow'. In this film the heroine's social salvation is achieved as a result of the redemption she brings to the bereaved family. She is both rescued by and rescues the individual family members for whom her arrival signifies a basic need to address the issues they have been struggling to hide from one another. The heroine is 'allowed' redemption because her situation is a result of her misguided but genuine belief that she will be marrying the father of her child, and because her consequent actions are designed to protect rather than to cheat (hence the scene where she refuses to allow her 'mother-in-law' to write her and her child into her will).

In *Three Secrets*, three unmarried mothers come together to claim a child who might be the son of any of them. Each brings with her a story about making mistakes. The women are depicted as both victims *and* women making choices and, although always on the side of the women involved, the stories “brutally warn what will happen if women stray where motherhood is concerned” (Basinger, 1993: 402).

There seems to be a paradox within Basinger’s analysis of these films. She comments that they are among the most specific films in criticizing the men and society of the time and questioning the limitations that the roles of wife and mother placed on women:

The movies themselves present the women as ideal examples of sacrificial motherhood, with the concept defined as an appropriate way for a woman to live her life if she has no man. (Basinger, 1993: 431)

Yet the framing of the stories was designed to provide dire warnings of life as a single mother rather than to offer an alternative view of lifestyle. The women were always lone parents as a result of circumstances outside of their control and their suffering and sacrifice was generally depicted in proportion to the way they approached their situations. Basinger calls women’s movies “strange and ambivalent” with contradictions that “abound”. She suggests that this is less to do with carelessness or “commercial nonsense”, and more about:

An integral and even necessary aspect of what drives the movies and gives them their appeal. These movies were a way of recognizing the problems of women, of addressing their desire to have things be other than the way they were off-screen. (Basinger, 1993: 7)

Two films that clearly illustrate this contradictory approach to lone mothers in earlier films, are *Stella Dallas* and *Mildred Pierce*. The enduring image of Stella Dallas, forced to watch her daughter’s triumphant entry into society, remains a motif of alienation and isolation,

brought on by her refusal to tone down her lifestyle and her sexuality to 'fit' with the life she wants for her daughter. Linda Williams suggests that Stella's strength of character throughout the film, temporarily superceded by her pathetic image as she struggles to get a last glimpse of her daughter while the policeman tries to move her on, is reinstated as she "marches triumphantly" (Williams, 1987: 300) towards the camera. Her pride and her self-acceptance are reflected in the swell of the music and the close-up shots of her face (although later in this chapter I will be arguing that her 'triumph' is bittersweet and ironic). Similarly Mildred Pierce is presented simultaneously as successful (in her business life) and as victim to her relationships.

For feminists *Mildred Pierce* is an interesting contradiction of female strength and patriarchal control. Post-war films contained discourses aimed at driving women back into the home to make way for men returning from war. Strong women were now depicted supporting their men and performing as wives rather than as independent single women, and the actresses, like Ginger Rogers who played them, were replaced by Doris Day and other wholesome stars. Mildred Pierce makes the point that she seems to have spent her whole life in the kitchen and even her business involves kitchens and cooking. It is when she moves away from her maternal responsibilities that she is 'punished'. For both Stella and Mildred, motherhood is the most important responsibility in their lives and both knowingly sacrifice the chances of a better life to support the daughters they love to the point of obsession. In a recurring theme, motherhood and sexuality are shown to be incompatible, indeed Mildred's sexual transgression with Monty is 'punished' by the news of her younger daughter's death when she arrives home. Like so many similar films of the

period, women's roles are clearly defined and the punishment for trying to move outside them, equally clearly explained both didactically and diagetically.

It is interesting to note at this point that Kaplan makes similar observations about contradictory images in films of the 1980s. She points out that career is shown as secondary to the domestic, motherhood sphere and that women are regularly shown as being unable to cope with combining both roles, although men are.

It is clear that in the late 1980s choosing the child over career ... represents the new ideal. (Kaplan, 1992: 199)

The key difference between discourses of maternity in the 1940s and 1950s, and the 1980s comes in the way the paradigm shifts are treated. In later films comedy is used to defuse the anxiety underlying themes in the family sphere; anxiety suggested by Kaplan as deriving from issues such as fears over AIDs and the strength of the anti-abortion crusade that were impacting on and influencing late 1980s pro-family sentiments. With this resurgence in the traditional mythology of the family as a cultural priority, there was an inbuilt requirement for lone parents to be shown as struggling within a dystopian world.

The maternal sacrifice motif as a melodramatic convention has largely disappeared in modern film narratives as the woman's genre has been 'relegated' to the lower budget tv movie where lone parents are staple protagonists. The heavy-handed approach to tragedy tends now to be tempered with humour in recognition of audiences' increasingly sophisticated understanding of texts. Erin Brockovich, for example, battles with elements of an uncaring society but she does so from the position of a survivor rather than victim;

while teenage mother, Novalee Nation (*Where the Heart is* [2000]), finds herself homeless and alone with a newborn baby and has to deal with death, violence and betrayal, yet emerges as a survivor. Pam Cook suggests that the mother is used as an ideological tool because of the “powerful emotion she calls on in the viewer” (Cook, 1996: 79). It is interesting that several of the young women, with whom I watched the film, noticed that several of Erin’s most emotive scenes were played out with her baby in her arms. For them, the baby was almost a visual metaphor for the case itself that had become, to Erin, a second ‘baby’, to be nurtured and protected as she would her natural children.

Modern films about lone mothers tend to conform more closely to Kaplan’s definition of the “woman’s film”, written and directed, in the main by men, to appeal to female audiences, and dealing mainly with issues considered to be of interest and relevance to women. This genre of film tends to be acknowledged as inferior to male genres by audiences and critics in its emphasis on themes such as love and female friendship. In the modern ‘woman’s film’, lone mothers are usually rewarded at the end with status (*Erin Brockovich*, *Chocolat*), love (*One Fine Day*, *Jerry Maguire*) and the promise of ‘proper’ family life, complete with father-figure (*Where the Heart Is*, *Baby Boom* [1989]).

At face value these modern texts appear to be more progressive than early ‘woman’s films’ in their apparent acceptance of women’s status as mothers and, at the same time, as sexual beings. However, the patriarchal themes running through them continue to deny the validity of the lone mother as a status in its own right. She is either ‘rewarded’ with a man or presented as ‘not quite complete’ in her inability to maintain a relationship, as we can see in

films like *Erin Brockovich* and *You can Count on Me*. Only *Little Man Tate* offers an alternative family set-up to the conventional in its resolution to the central question of who is the better mother, the biological mother with little to offer but love, or the 'surrogate' mother with status and education, with an alternative family constructed from both mother figures (and conforming more closely to director Jodie Foster's own family structure).

In Kaplan's view, changes in society expose changes in the way that the woman is constructed within patriarchy. Adjustments only occur within a "basic positioning of woman as lack" (Kaplan, 1992: 15). For her, woman remains absent in the cultural dominant:

To put it more clearly, mythic changes embody patriarchy's adjustment to new threats that emerge from changes in the social formation. (Kaplan, 1992: 15)

It was noticeable that when I discussed the film *Little Man Tate* with the group of young women, they were as interested in the rumours about Jodie Foster's sexuality, and her real-life role as single mother of two boys, as her performance in the film. This might be explained, using Kaplan's argument, as a media attempt to reframe Foster within a patriarchal ideology and place a modern emphasis on an older fascination with the taboo subject of female sexuality outside marriage but it might also be a reflection of the unusual structure and resolution of the film which chooses to explore female relationships and minimise conventional heterosexual ones.

The Sexualised Mother

Barbara Creed considers that the unspoken question within women's melodramas is about the taboo subject of female sexuality. Her study of Hollywood melodrama suggests a pattern in which the female protagonist, faced with punishment as a result of transgressing the female role accepts a "more socially desirable role" largely as a result of the entry of an "exceptional male" (Creed, 1977: 28). In early melodramas the problematic moral status of an unmarried mother was resolved through the reappearance of the husband whose death had been assumed but never proven. By introducing a legally established father the illegitimacy of the child was nullified and the suffering of the mother could be replaced by a happy ending. Another common ending was the offering of the child to the wealthy lover who had fathered it or to marry well but without love. In each of these scenarios audiences could be assured of a long and lonely punishment for the heroine's transgressions.

For psychoanalytical theorists like Laura Mulvey, such judgements are centred on the Male and the paradox of the phallocentric world offered on film. She argues that it is the function of:

The castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies. (Mulvey, 1977: 6)

For Mulvey the role of the female is to symbolise the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly to raise her child into the symbolic. As a psychoanalytic critic, Mulvey's view of cinema leans heavily on the woman as Mother who "stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other" (Mulvey, 1989:34). Where the mother is clearly

alone the paradox of phallocentricity becomes still more obvious for an audience. Whether the woman is represented as a metaphorical 'ball-breaker' (*Erin Brockovich*, *How Stella Got her Groove Back* [1998], *One Fine Day, You can Count on Me*) in her independence and her dealings with men, or whether she is shown to be 'incomplete' or 'flawed' (*Jerry Maguire*, *As Good As it Gets* [1997], *Tootsie* [1982], *Mrs Winterbourne*, *One Fine Day*, *About a Boy*[2001]) the Lone Mother is defined by her lack of penis until, inevitably, she is 'rescued' by the hero. In Freudian terms the Lone Mother becomes the ideal since, through the depiction of a sexually available form of motherhood and mother figure, she theoretically enables the male viewer to entertain notions of a sexual relationship with the Mother figure. Yet in a medium that has traditionally sought to de-sexualise the Mother, the message is that the sexualised mother is a flawed motif.

In *Fatal Attraction* (1989) Glenn Close as Alex takes the concept of the sexualised mother to its extreme. Her pregnancy (which is never actually questioned or verified in the film and might well be perceived as another attempt by the 'deadly female predator' [Warner, 1994:3] to take control of her victim) becomes a metaphor for her sexuality outside the confines of marriage. In the same way Ashley Judd's character, in *Where the Heart Is*, is defined by the child she conceives every time she gets involved with a new man. In this she is defined as a perennial victim – at best she gets dumped, at worst she is beaten up and her small daughters attacked by a paedophile whom she, in her lack of judgement has deemed to be a suitable boyfriend. Alex, however, is depicted as the aggressor, a sexual predator as dangerous as the velociraptors in *Jurassic Park*.

Sexuality untamed is also a key element of *Erin Brockovich*. Played by Hollywood icon, Julia Roberts, much has been made of Brockovich's strength and resilience. Yet we might question whether her story would have attracted the budget and interest of Hollywood's top names as director and star had the script not portrayed her as a poverty-stricken, ill-educated single mother from an apparently working class background and living on a trailer park. In fact Brockovich's upbringing was lower middle class; she was the daughter of an engineer and a teacher, and she herself went to business college in Dallas before marrying twice and finding herself struggling to support herself and her three young children. The 'against all odds' success stories of 'respectable' middle class American women are more regularly represented within the 'TV Movie' genre, a genre which, like the melodrama and the 'weepie' has tended to be stigmatised as 'Women's Movies', "Hollywood's lowliest form" (Gledhill, 1987:11).

There is an overt sexuality to lone mothers in film that is noticeably absent in the representation of fathers bringing up children alone. Lone mothers are frequently portrayed as being sexually active, while lone fathers are almost invariably shown as unable to maintain a sexual relationship with a new partner as a direct result of their involvement with the child. In films like *Kramer versus Kramer* and *Sleepless in Seattle* we see Hoffman and Hanks meet and date women but have their chances of a sex life destroyed as they find themselves having to choose between sex and the happiness of the child. The sex lives of lone mothers in film are rarely shown on screen but they form a key element in the storyline of almost every film text containing a lone mother. In *How Stella got her Groove Back*, Stella's erotic relationship with her much younger lover is presented as a

contradiction to her role as lone mother of her teenage son. The similarity in age between her lover and her son is pointed out to her on several occasions although she chooses to ignore what she sees as interference. Michelle Pfeiffer/Mel in *One Fine Day* ((1996) appears to sense the opportunity for a sexual relationship with George Clooney/Jack at the end of the film only to find that while she is taking time over preparing herself for sex, he has fallen asleep. The chasteness of their relationship will be due to his exhaustion (presumably after a single day spent caring for his daughter) and not to any circumspection on her part. The closing of the bedroom door on the two small children, busy watching *The Wizard of Oz* (a less than subtle reference to getting what we want), becomes a signal that she is ready to spend some 'adult' time alone with Jack.

Lone mothers in films rarely question the ethics of allowing men they hardly know to stay over in the houses in which their children are sleeping. The narrative structure of formulaic films makes it difficult to show the development of a relationship at the pace that might better reflect reality, but the 'reality' of Hollywood cinema privileges lone mothers' sexual frustrations over their good sense, or, some might argue, good parenting. Zellweger's character, for example, allows Jerry Maguire to stay at her house after their first date and smiles happily as he breakfasts with her small son, and it is Anna's sexual relationship with Leo that enables her ex-husband to claim custody for Molly in *The Good Mother*. In contrast, the viewer is shown a much slower paced development of the relationship between Sam and his girlfriend in *Sleepless in Seattle* and Ted Kramer and the woman he eventually begins to date in *Kramer Vs Kramer*.

The young women who watched the films were keen to discuss this aspect of maternal behaviour. They commented on the difference between film realism and that of the women they knew who were bringing up children alone, and contested the filmic notion that lone mothers were sexually active so quickly after meeting new men. Typical comments included:

My sister never allows boyfriends to stay over. Even when she's been seeing them for a long time she makes them go home so her kids don't see them in the morning. Rebecca, 18. A:1998

I don't think most women would feel right about letting a boyfriend just sit at the table with their kid in the morning, like nothing's happened. I think she's been a bit stupid. Emma J, 16. A: 1998

The overt sexuality of lone mothers is presented in clear contrast with the de-sexualising of maternity in most popular film texts. The mother is a sacred object available only to her husband and son within the language of patriarchy. Lapsley and Westlake suggest that Hollywood cinema particularly is primarily about "romance and the promise of romance it brings" and that the "omnipresence of romance points to the absence of the sexual relation" (Lapsley and Westlake, 1996: 180). They argue further that there is a "widely shared scepticism" about the possibility of successful relationships being formed out of sexual relationships using films such as *Pretty Woman*, (1990), *White Palace* (1991) and *Mildred Pierce* as examples of texts where sex precedes the relationship in storylines criticised as unrealistic and unlikely due to the mismatched backgrounds of the central protagonists – millionaire/hooker; middle-aged burger bar waitress/much younger advertising executive; (Lapsley and Westlake, 1996: 180). The notion of sex within romantic relationships has begun to infiltrate popular film over the last decades, as sexual freedom has become embedded within popular culture in all arenas (even Mills and Boon novellas now include

reference to pre-marital sex between main characters). However the idea of sexual activity *outside* the focal romantic relationship still seems to present problems within an ideological construct that values the appearance of chastity. Lone mothers, whether they reach their situation through death, divorce or accident, tend to be indelibly stamped with the evidence of prior sexual activity. This, inevitably positions them outside the ideologically acceptable framework of heroine as chaste, awaiting the promise of a sexual awakening by the hero, legitimised and sanctified through love and romance.

It is worth noting that two of the three films mentioned by Lapsley and Westlake as examples of texts where relationships form despite the emphasis on initial, casual sex, feature lone mothers as central, sexual characters. In each case they are punished for their lifestyles by the loss of their children, one through death and the other through the daughter's desertion and deceit. The concept of punishment for transgressing from the 'natural order', and cultural emphasis on love as being more important than sex, can be found, to some degree, throughout film texts featuring lone mothers. For some (*The Accidental Tourist*, *As Good As it Gets*) this is represented by sick or weak children whose conditions impact on the quality of the mother's life. For others it is the mothers themselves who have issues with alcohol (*Tootsie*, *White Palace*), depression (*About A Boy*) or the loss of a treasured job. Both Stella (*How Stella got her Groove Back*) and Claudia (Holly Hunter in *Home for the Holidays*[1995]) are sacked, Erin Brockovich fights throughout most of the film to keep her position in the lawyer's office and even JC Wiatt (*Baby Boom*) loses her high powered job when she is shown to be unable to cope with both baby and work. For a lone mother to be successful in all areas of her life would not only make it

difficult to construct any kind of dramatic narrative but also suggest the possibility that fathers are disposable, unacceptable within the confines of a patriarchal culture based on capitalist ideologies of role determinism:

In Western Society the social position of mother is crucial to the perpetuation both of capitalist social relations and patriarchal dominance, demanding the subjugation of female sexuality in social and cultural life. (Cook, 1996: 78)

Griselda Pollock believes that women's point-of-view movies and male oedipal dramas have one thing in common - the relocation of the woman as mother, "a position that while fathers may disappear, be rendered silent or impotent, dominates the conclusion of these films" (Cook, 1996:78).

However, she also argues that such relocation faces the problem of:

The extraordinary and disruptive role played by the woman's contained, withheld or frustrated sexuality in the dynamic of the narrative. (Cook, 1996:78)

It is a role which includes female sexuality outside familial roles and the continued sexuality of mothers. For Pollock, the 'feminine' represents a psycho-sexual position, hypothetically available to either sex but "foregone and repressed in the reproduction of sons in the patriarchal, masculine position and daughters as mothers" (Cook, 1996: 78).

Pollock's picture of de-sexualised and, perhaps, tamed, femininity through the role of motherhood, can be clearly seen in the films *The Good Mother*, *The Piano* and *Stella Dallas*.

The Good Mother, a Disney film made in 1988 as an adaptation of the Sue Miller novel of the same name, is, in theory, an exploration of lone motherhood made at a time when the issue of lone parenting was breaking into film and television alike. Diane Keaton plays a divorced woman who finds sexual fulfilment for the first time in her life but who, in doing so, jeopardises her chances to raise her daughter. Her relationship with her lover leads her ex-husband to claim in court that she is an unfit mother and to fight for and win custody of the little girl. The ad-line for the film read "Every Passion has its Price" and critics at the time pronounced that "It's one Hollywood movie that will genuinely provoke discussion" (Haas, 1995:198). The loss of the daughter is directly related to Keaton's new-found sexuality and her move from wife and mother to lover. Kaplan claims that the movie:

Exposes the degree to which traditional mother images and myths remain deeply embedded within the United States' laws, legal institutions and their representatives. How these codes in turn constrain what the heroine is able to become – how they force her into traditional maternal positions that she has, in some ways, moved beyond – is made clear. (Kaplan, 1992: 194)

This echoes the view of the Director, Leonard Nimoy, who told newspapers that the film was:

about motherhood and sexuality in the same individual and our society's discomfort with that. (Lambert, 1988: 16)

Nimoy's apparently radical intentions produce no surprises in the outcome of the story, which becomes little more than a modern update of the classic melodrama. The story is concerned with the social ramifications of a mother choosing also to have a sex life. Her sexuality is highlighted and exposed for debate both by the other characters in the film and by the audience through the process of referential framing, spotlighting in contrast to the

privacy of traditional marital sex. For a single mother, attempting to be fully sexual becomes a 'problem' that attracts criticism and ultimately restorative action from the State.

Liberatory discourses about single-motherhood, female sexuality, child custody and the state are evident here. But they exist in complex relation to what I am here calling a renewed sentimentalising motherhood discourse. Even the novel assumes that mothering is woman's only satisfying activity. (Kaplan, 1992: 195)

Anna's 'transgression' is punished. When she loses custody of her daughter, Molly, she leaves her lover and does not resume her career. The message is clear and bleak: the mother role is incompatible with passion. Anna's passion is replaced by passivity. Her acceptance of her fate and her new obedience idealises the mother/child relationship and shows us, the audience, that passion outside the traditional marital bed is unacceptable.

As with so many patriarchal discourses dealing with the emotions and concerns of women, *The Good Mother* is essentially a cautionary tale. Indeed the film begins with Anna's voiceover telling us the story of her Aunt Babe whose sexual promiscuity led to pregnancy and who later drowned in an accident caused by drink. The tale foreshadows what will happen to Anna but explains why she feels the need to seek out and experience passion in her own life: "I wanted to take risks. I wanted to be a passionate person." The ironically named Babe teaches Anna about sexual and sensual pleasures yet her apparently uncontrolled passions will cause the downfalls of both women. In the book from which the film is taken, Anna learns about her body not simply from Babe, but also through masturbation and in the sex act with Leo, her lover. She makes it clear that her passion has been dormant throughout her youth and her marriage to Molly's father and that it is forces outside wedlock that drive her search for physical pleasure. In the film, the masturbatory

element is removed and the emphasis put on Leo for awakening Anna's sexual desire.

However this will eventually require her to make a choice between her sexuality and her ability to be a good mother in the eyes of a patriarchal society:

The boundary that is tested in the film concerns the female body – not whether it can be transcended by a woman - but whether the body can be pleasurable for a woman who is also a mother. (Haas, 1995: 199)

The film questions Anna's choice of lover and presents her ex-husband as a more solid and trustworthy father to the child. We are told little of his 'faults' as a husband other than his inability to invoke passion in Anna, and the loss of his daughter is presented as the fault of his wife and not due to any actions of his own. This enables the text to remain judgemental from the outset, we watch Anna's 'mistakes' unfold in front of us and while she never does anything that can easily be classed as 'wrong', we are able to see her life fall apart through bad choices, a staple discourse applied to lone mothers in film.

Although the narrative encourages an identification with and sympathy for Anna, it is also embedded with reasons to judge her 'mistake'. (Haas, 1995: 200).

Even Keaton judges her character's decisions:

I think she fell too much in love in a way. She went too far. (Lambert, 1988: 16)

Anna's passion is ultimately traded for the passivity she has tried to reject, but her punishment is that she has now lost the things that mattered most to her - her child and her sexual desire. She is persuaded to blame her lover in her fight to win custody of the child, and is encouraged to believe that the court is not yet ready for a 'truth' that involves openness about sexuality, particularly outside marriage. For Kaplan, Anna's acceptance of her fate from a higher authority, and her overreaction to the outcome of the case, "do not

provide good role models” (Kaplan, 1992: 195). She makes the point that the film chooses not to analyse why Anna has become caught in the dilemma she faces in terms of the dominant ideologies that govern institutions like the law courts. Kaplan’s point might also be developed into a question about how ‘bad’ a mother needs to be in order that a court will award primary custody to the father in a society that generally acknowledges the Mother to be best suited to the task of childcare. For Anna to lose custody, the audience is being asked to accept the scale of her ‘crime’ and the justness of her punishment. Like the heroines of early film melodrama signified passivity and an acceptance of their fates, Anna is isolated from action. She reassures us that female sexuality can be tamed and subdued. Interestingly, we do not even see Molly plead to stay with her mother. Like Billy, the son in *Kramer versus Kramer*, she appears to prefer her father to her mother as a carer.

In Freudian terms, Anna depicts the human subject caught:

between an excessive, self-destructive preoccupation with pleasure and a practical realistic knowledge of the potential consequences of pleasure if the quest for it is unrestrained. (Cook, 1999:346)

Anna’s body and her sexual “awakening” become:

the spectacle on which the narrative turns. She is under visual and auditory surveillance (by the many men in the film – Leo, Brian, the male psychiatrist, her lawyer and the court), and she always responds as expected. She is never therefore inaccessible to definitive male interpretation; she accepts the limitations of her place, her time, and her desires, and this constantly resecures her as a male construct. (Haas, 1995: 200)

For Kaplan, the film “slyly” re-establishes the definition of woman as ‘mother’ and nothing else:

Anna stands for impassioned, extra-marital female desire (a desire only released outside marriage); and for a sentimental self-fulfilment in mothering alone. If the

terms have changed since the nineteenth century, the maternal sacrifice paradigm may be glimpsed returning beneath the narrative of a film like *The Good Mother*. (Kaplan 1992, 195)

I would suggest that a film like *The Good Mother* presents a modern fable, as potent as the narratives of the early melodramas but more insidious in the hegemonic assumptions underlying the consequences of Anna's choices and decisions which affect her relationships with those around her. The film presents a message as stark as those delivered to women during the war: that choosing sexual pleasure over responsibility will inevitably result in disaster and sacrifice.

It is interesting to contrast *The Good Mother* with *The Piano* made by Jane Campion in 1993. The clearest difference is perhaps in the way the subjects are positioned. In *The Good Mother* Anna is viewed and judged by a patriarchal ideology and society. In *The Piano* Ada, a 19th Century Scottish woman "of formidable and eccentric intelligence" (Fox and McDonagh, 1999: 616) is sent with her daughter Flora to the wilds of New Zealand to marry the farmer, Stewart. Ada, mute since childhood, communicates her passions through her piano playing and finds her sexual awakening with the Englishman-turned-native, Baines, when her husband refuses to give houseroom to her piano (and her 'voice'). While Anna is presented in terms of the Lacanian Other, constructed to confirm woman as 'not-man' (Johnston, 1991:26) and therefore as passive, powerless and an object of desire for the male, Ada presents us with an image of female sexuality driving her relationships with the two men in her life. Her punishment for her passions is her 'castration' by Stewart when he cuts off her finger to prevent her playing the piano, and thus communicating with the outside world, but she fights back and maintains the passionate state into which she has

moved, choosing ultimately to reject the piano and stay with Baines. For the most part, Ada, though an object of sexual desire and fetishism for both men and the audience, directs our point of view. It has been suggested that her lack of voice can be seen as a symbol of her withdrawal from patriarchal society (Nelmes, 1999: 300) and her expressionless, passive face gives the impression that it is she who is in charge of the gaze.

Ada's sexuality is exposed not only to the audience but also at times to her daughter (who spies on Ada and Baines as they explore their mutual attraction), and husband who also watches (and gets aroused by) their love-making. This use of the scopophilic drive eroticises and fetishises Ada's sexuality but, unlike in more traditional (and phallogentric) constructs, her obvious sexuality and passion are separate from her role as a mother. Ada and Flora have a symbiotic relationship based on Flora's role as her mother's voice and are regularly shown in tight shots together. Their closeness is threatened by Ada's relationship with Baines and Flora plots with Stewart to break their affair in a union that will result in the 'punishment' of her mother by her husband. Like Anna, who is seen in a moment of closeness with Molly reading a book on human anatomy with her, Ada and Flora share intimate moments that remind us of Ada's sexuality and sexual persona: Flora is in her mother's bed whenever Stewart visits, and she watches her mother's sexual liaison develop with Baines. Her jealousy may be Oedipal but more importantly she is being introduced to the 'dangerous forces of sexuality' (Nelmes, 1999: 303), and, like Anna in *The Good Mother*, her introduction to passion derives from the 'misjudged' actions of another woman who will suffer as a result. The difference, however, is that, whilst Anna is punished through the patriarchal court system, Campion chooses to subject Ada to the laws of nature,

a 'trial' by water. In a scene reminiscent of the dunking of witches in the Middle Ages, Ada is pulled underwater with her beloved piano as it falls into the sea. Here again, she is active rather than passive and her voiceover thoughts tell us that she chooses life over death and passion over marriage.

The film has been described by its director, Jane Campion as a Gothic romance, "an attempt to expose the entire process including the erotic aspect by telling it from the inside out in a psychological way" (Mellencamp, 1995:177). I would suggest that the character of Ada herself is a metaphor for female sexuality, its strength silenced by a society that expects women, particularly mothers to be desexualised and compliant. Ada's sexuality is only released at the point at which she has a real choice, to live or to be dragged to her death by the piano that has, till now provided her only source of liberation and control. Some feminist writers have accused Campion of selling out by appeasing American audiences with the 'happy' ending rather than a more realistic one. I would argue that where Campion is more culpable is in her use of the traditional family construction at the end of the film. Thus Ada and Flora, reunited by their need to escape Stewart, end up with Baines as their protector, in a conveniently re-formed family group. Like *Thelma and Louise*, another film about women making choices, I would suggest that Ada's choices are all inspired and forced by men's actions until the climax of the film; from 'Today my father married me' to her final decision to live and to stay with Baines and Flora: 'My will has chosen light.'

Ada the woman is consistently presented to us alongside Ada the mother in a way that distances its messages from those of *The Good Mother*. In *The Piano*, Ada's sexual needs are fulfilled by a man who is not her husband, and, for a time, it drives a wedge between mother and daughter, but ultimately Ada's bond with her daughter is reinforced when Flora is the agent by which Ada is able to escape from her loveless marriage. It is her daughter's acceptance that enables Ada to move into another relationship, yet, I would suggest that in doing so, Campion offers us little alternative to the traditional filmic perception of the need for women (and particularly for lone mothers) to be positioned within heterosexual relationships and patriarchal family structures.

This apparent reluctance in film makers to question or present alternatives to traditional representations of 'fallen women' can be illustrated in the decision to remake the melodrama *Stella Dallas* as *Stella* in 1990. In the same way that the original starred actress Barbara Stanwyck, known for her strong female characters, was remade, the protagonist in the later version was Bette Midler, a singer turned actress most famous for her loud blowsy roles¹⁹ and her unconventional appearance by Hollywood standards. It is the story of a mother who sacrifices her relationship with her daughter, "a woman so disenfranchised by life that she feels she's not even entitled to her own child" (Basinger, 1993: 421). Basinger suggests that Stella ends up losing everything "because she is a woman", I would suggest that she loses everything because of the social pressures put on her as a single mother.

In the original version, Stella chases and marries a man from a privileged background who

¹⁹Midler had previously starred in *The Rose* in 1979 playing a dissipated rock singer and *Ruthless People* (1986) playing a woman so unbearable that her husband refuses to pay her ransom when she is kidnapped.

has had to work because his millionaire father went bankrupt and killed himself. The differences in upbringing make the marriage incompatible from the start and it drifts apart when Boles (the husband) takes a job in New York leaving Stella and their daughter, Laurel, behind in New England. In the remake, Stella chooses not to marry the father of her daughter, making her one of the very rare unmarried heroines in modern popular film. The updated Stella is brash and assertive, works behind a bar and is seen performing a mock striptease to amuse her customers. Immediately then the difference between the two Stella's becomes clear, the original is an honest if rather tarty woman who wishes to better herself, the remake is a woman who appears to make choices, for good or bad. She refuses Steven's marriage proposal when he discovers that she is pregnant by arguing: 'I have two hands, I can do it myself'.

In each film, Stella is shown to be a responsible and loving mother, although the 1990 Stella concentrates less on the bonding scenes than the original. It is clear that we are not intended to see Midler's Stella as the passive victim that Stanwyck portrays, and it makes it easier to judge her through her flamboyance and unorthodox behaviour. Indeed, Stanwyck's Stella tells her friend and would be lover Alan Hale that she has no room for feelings for anybody but her child whereas Midler's Stella is seen to concentrate on her own enjoyment while the audience sees a key relationship being built between Jenny, the daughter, and her father who plays an active role in his child's upbringing from the age of three and who eventually takes over full care when Stella's liveliness becomes too embarrassing for Jenny to bear.

Despite their differences, both Stellas come to the decision to let their daughters go at the point at which they lose their self-respect, and in each case the loss of self-respect is mainly due to social stigmatism and judgment. Stanwyck's Stella is believed to be having an illicit relationship with Hale and is shown to embarrass her daughter with her loud and raucous ways. She is unable, as Midler's Stella is unwilling, to conform to society's views of how mothers should look and behave. Haas suggests that:

Stella's inability to continue her own self-definition is like the limited subjectivity conferred upon the roles of many women in classical cinema; and like those women, her identity becomes the effect of masochistic misrecognition, propelling the female viewer into a negative narcissism. (Haas, 1995: 203)

In other words, the mythology of good versus bad motherhood is so strong in the film tradition, that it is not enough that society judges Stella and forces her to lose her self-respect, she herself must be the one to come to the conclusion that she is a bad mother who is letting her daughter down, and she must choose to pay the ultimate price: the permanent loss of her daughter and her sense of self, the two things by which she has defined herself as a woman. The final scenes of each film, where Stella is reduced to being a spectator at her daughter's wedding, moved along by the police officer like a vagrant, is a savage indictment of her transgressions against the social norms of married motherhood, and a punishment from which she will never be allowed to escape. Moreover, Laurel/Jenny, the daughter is required to disconnect herself from her mother if she is to create a respectable life for herself. In Lacanian terms, Stella is the mirror image that her daughter must reject. In the 1937 film, Laurel is seen looking at her mother in a mirror twice and seeing her differently to how she did before. She first compares her mother to the idealised mother that is Boles' former sweetheart, now widowed (thus conferring victim status upon her) and

the respectable mother of three boys, and later sees her mother as others see her when she sees Stella reflected in a drug store mirror as her friends laugh at 'Laurel's horrible mother'. Stella's daughter is presented with the stark choice of a future in which she becomes her mother, or takes the path of redemption by joining the society that rejects Stella.

I showed the students both versions and asked them to make comparisons between the two texts. Interestingly, they were more affected by the original (once they overcame the initial antipathy to black and white 'old' films) and were horrified by Stella's treatment by society in general and, more particularly, by her own daughter. The girls who have been brought up by lone mothers were especially shocked:

I'd never let anyone insult my mum, she's always been there for me and that's all that's important to me. Samantha, 18. A: 1998

I think that girl is a real bitch to treat her mother like that. Even if she is a bit tarty. Rachael, 17. E: 2002

In answer to the question of whether Stella does the right thing in giving up her daughter, however, they were not in agreement, and it was noticeable that the girls with personal experience of family break-up were more inclined to argue that Stella should have fought to keep her daughter, while the girls from more traditional nuclear families were more likely to suggest that Stella is doing what is best for her daughter:

She's just trying to give her the things that she can't, like a better home and nice things. Rebecca, 18. A: 1998

But nice things aren't as important as being with your mum. Emma J, 16. A: 1998

For these young women the modern experience of women bringing up children successfully on their own made it difficult to identify with Stella's inadequacy, and, not surprisingly this was especially the case for the girls whose own mothers were raising them alone. The notion of maternal sacrifice, it seems, is not perceived as a modern issue, both as a result of personal knowledge and because of the strong media message that lone motherhood is a status that modern women actively choose.

They also noticed that in the original version, the sacrifices made by both Stella and Laurel are designed to reinforce that Stella is essentially a good and loving person who makes her decision based on her desire to do the best for her daughter. In the later version, this clarity is blurred by the stronger involvement between Jenny and her father. While the original focuses on motherhood and the depths of love it inspires (when Stella asks Boles' former sweetheart to marry Boles and bring up Laurel as her own, the other woman replies 'Oh, no! I'm a mother. Do you think I could deprive a mother of her own little girl?'), the remake places the father more firmly into the equation, setting mother and father against one another until Stella crumbles. Jenny's development from child to woman is seen in her relationship with her father rather than her mother:

I think that [in the 1990 version] we are supposed to see Jenny's dad as a more sensible choice for her to live with. Like that other woman was in the first *Stella Dallas*. Kelly S, 19. B: 1999

Both Stellas are presented to us as women who have paid for their mistakes (choosing to raise their babies alone) by losing not only their daughters but their strong self-esteem.

Haas suggests that working-class women are portrayed through film as self-sacrificing and

accepting of their inadequacy, but this comes across most clearly in these texts about the lone mother paradigm:

Stella's inadequacy – except through erasure – is relayed to the mother who watches. Our inability to be 'good mothers' unless we masochistically accept our place seals the closed theatre of female subjectivity. (Haas, 1995:204)

Stella's overt sexuality is intertwined with her apparent inability to be a good mother and although she is not promiscuous there is the constant suggestion through both versions of the film that she is a woman judged in terms of her sexual flamboyance and relationships with men. Yet she is judged less harshly in the 1937 film than in its 1990 update where her actions and attitudes, transposed into a modern representation of lone motherhood, are defined within the modern paradigm of choice and selfishness. Midler's Stella chooses to raise her baby alone, she makes unwise decisions and she has a self-awareness from the start that Stanwyck's Stella does not have.

Films like *The Good Mother*, *The Piano* and *Stella* may be framed within modern culture but they retain the innate qualities of the melodrama and continue to use the ideologies of 19th Century belief structures. Kaplan suggests that in 19th Century American fiction: "only the bad mother is sexual – indeed her sexuality often defines her evil" (Kaplan, 1987: 117).

Surrogate Mothers

In Hollywood film narrative motherhood is a sterile business in which both the sexual activity and the pain that precede it, and the quintessentially feminine experience of the maternal that follows are impossible to position within the voyeuristic spectacle that relies on the (male) pleasures of spectatorship. For a mother-type to be easily recognizable and

non-threatening whilst remaining sexually available and appealing to the male spectator she must be de-sexualised through marriage or distanced from the primal essence of motherhood by not actually being the birth mother of the child. In the same way that film fathers are treated with sympathy and presented as stoically taking on roles that are apparently unnatural, women who find or are given babies can be positioned outside the maternal paradigm.

Two films, made half a century apart from one another present lone mothering from a different maternal position. *Baby Boom* and its predecessor, *Bachelor Mother*, offer a view of motherhood separated from any sexual activity by creating a narrative around babies that are found (in the case of *Bachelor Mother*) or 'inherited' (*Baby Boom*). In *Bachelor Mother* shopworker Polly Parrish, played by Ginger Rogers, about to lose her temporary Christmas employment and worried about how she will support herself, finds a baby on the steps of a Foundling Hospital which everyone assumes belongs to her. Concern about her situation and later her apparent indifference to her responsibilities leads her boss's son, playboy David Merlin, to prolong her contract and take it upon himself to keep an eye on 'mother' and 'son'. By the time they fall in love, Merlin's father believes the child to be his grandson, and although it is clearly illegitimate, he attempts to welcome both 'mother' and child into the family. *Baby Boom* is a movie about how an abandoned small girl 'rescues' J C Wiatt (Diane Keaton) from her sterile life in advertising and enables her to flourish as a woman, mother and member of the community (with success in her cottage industry as an added extra!). Each woman is 'rewarded' at the end of the film with a marriage proposal or the promise of love from a man with high status and the ability to look after both mother and child.

For each heroine the issues of sudden motherhood are similar. Initial shock and the desire to offload the baby lead Polly Parrish (Ginger Rogers) to make several unsuccessful attempts to return it to the foundling hospital, and J C Wiatt (Diane Keaton) to put it up for adoption. Their reluctant acceptance of the responsibility with which they have been landed is due partly to their recognition that the babies may end up being mothered in a less than satisfactory way by some other 'mother'. But while J C Wiatt's actions appear more altruistic than Polly Parrish's (who realises she can only keep her job by keeping the child) they are both shown to learn some salutary lessons in parenting, a comedic device used also in lone father movies and a suggestion perhaps that motherhood is not a natural skill but one that is more difficult to learn if one is not the natural parent of a baby.

In both films the women quickly change their lives to accommodate the baby, and early scenes of domestic chaos progress to harmony as they grow familiar with the chores of motherhood. This domesticity is rarely shown in films about lone mothers; they are either depicted doing other things, neglecting the needs of their children or there is an implied expectation that looking after children is an obvious maternal activity that does not need to be emphasised on screen. In comparison, films about lone fathers, such as *Sleepless In Seattle* and *Kramer Vs Kramer* use images of domesticity to emphasise the 'unnatural' element of lone parenting for a male. The duality of the role, suggesting that a lone father is, in fact, a 'Double Parent' can be shown most clearly through activities stereotypically classed as belonging to the maternal domain.

For movie lone mothers such duality comes at a price and the dichotomy between home and work is emphasised negatively. Wiatt loses her job and her relationship as a result of her implied absorption in the baby since she is shown to be unable to cope properly with both. She neglects her work and is quickly replaced by a younger male. This inability to hold down a high-powered job and look after a child on her own is a recurring motif seen in other films like *One Fine Day* and *Home for the Holidays* as well as in television soap operas and situation comedies, both of which show the female protagonists either losing their jobs or struggling to hold on to them. Yet lone fathers, even those who have fatherhood thrust on them (*Three Men and a Baby* [1990], *Jack and Sarah* [1995], *Sleepless in Seattle*), generally keep hold of their, usually high-powered, jobs, and find support from colleagues. All three of the 'fathers' in *Three Men and a Baby* take the child to work with them, even when the job involves tramping around building sites! In contrast, mothers like Mel (in *One Fine Day*) and J C Wiatt take their children into work out of desperation but are punished through the chaos their children create in the workplace, and the naked scorn of their workmates. Indeed, at the start of the film J C's boss Fritz states "A man is lucky. A man can have it all," to which J C replies, "Is that what you're worried about? I don't want it all." Ironically, at this point, her response is in relation to choosing her professional over her personal life, and the first ten minutes of the film establish her as the parody of the '80s career woman, rejecting domesticity for take-out food, and intimacy for sex slotted in between reading reports. Even her name, reduced to the stark initials J C, is a rejection of her femininity.

The unravelling of women's professional lives while they try to care for an infant is presented as a descent into chaos that can only be resolved through a return to the traditional values of home and husband. Yet these representations of women like Mel and J C Wiatt, desperately trying to organise work around childcare, and their frustrated awareness that they are unable to network in the same way as male colleagues because commitments compete with after-hours socialising, are more realistic than their later incarnations.

MacDonald suggests that *Baby Boom*, while seeming to mock the "codification of 'superwoman' as able to combine motherhood, career, leisure and sex-life", in fact conspires to promote the stereotype (McDonald, 1995: 146). The intelligent, hard-working successful woman shows herself to be incapable, first of basic child-care skills, and later, of the juggling skills that working mothers require. Her ineptitude reminds us that these skills are not innate to women, nor are they more easily learned by educated middle-class mothers. In contrast, Polly Parrish's life begins to improve when she reluctantly takes on the maternal role. She is given her job back and finds herself the object of her boss's newly discovered philanthropic impulses. Unlike the representation of J C Wiatt, and unusually for a film made during the New Deal years, the issue of unmarried motherhood is treated in a positive and non-judgmental manner very different from the representation of lone mothers in the popular melodramas and 'women's film' of the time. Polly Parrish is depicted as a "spunky working girl" whose "intelligence, forthrightness and careerism" (Corliss, 1974: 67-8) enable her to slip easily into her new role, further convincing those around her that she is the true birth mother of the baby. Her landlady is not only accepting

of her tenant's strange situation and the sudden appearance of the baby, but she goes so far as to babysit when Polly needs to go out, and to help her to hide from Charles Coburn when he tries to snatch back the baby he believes to be his illegitimate grandson. The audience's knowledge of Polly's true innocence enables the film to be as non-judgmental as it is, and censors only stepped in to change the last line in the film. When Polly asks David if he still believes her to be the mother of the baby and he says, yes, she mutters 'Then you're in for a surprise', a comment so clearly referring to her virginity, that it was replaced with the sardonic laugh she uses elsewhere in the film.

Kaplan suggests that the second part of *Baby Boom* "almost accidentally" offers a "critique of single motherhood" (Kaplan, 1989, 197). She points out that J C's idea of an idyllic country retreat turns into a nightmare when she and the baby end up marooned in a ramshackle house in the severe winter up in an upper New York state. In no time she is climbing the walls with loneliness and boredom. Indeed the deteriorating house may be seen as a metaphor for her increasingly disorganised and uncontrolled life which only improves when she meets the man who will ultimately 'complete' her family. Her lack of a sex life is particularly emphasised in her rant to the local veterinary surgeon to whom she is taken when she collapses, another irony for a woman who has earlier been shown to time her sexual activity in order not to miss the opportunity to work before sleeping.

In both *Baby Boom* and *Bachelor Mother* the baby provides the narrative tool for the heroine's ultimate redemption. Polly's reward will be to become the wife of a rich man and to provide her child with a more than suitable father. J C's reward is to find a man who is

comfortable with her daughter while she finds personal satisfaction in the new career she has built around her status as a mother, 'Country Babyfoods'. For the (female) audience the reward is an outcome that allows each woman to combine work and motherhood in a clearly utopian resolution. In each film the hero's ability to bond with the baby is pivotal, suggesting that any achievement by the female, either in the domestic or the work realm, is measured against her ability to create a worthwhile relationship with the lead male. In addition in each case there is the suggestion that the heroine's success is a direct result (or reward) for taking on the mantle of single mother to a child she has not conceived herself. J C's business is a result of the baby food she makes out of the glut of apples in her orchard, while Polly Parrish's relationship with the boss's son is due to his involvement with the baby he believes her to have tried to abandon. The narrative conventions of the romantic comedy genre, once again dictate the outcome and identities of the female protagonists, suggesting that the fantasy of control offered by identification with a male protagonist may present women with something denied to them in their 'real' lives. Mulvey's view of the relationship between female spectator and male protagonist may equally be applied to the female protagonist:

She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides.
(Mulvey, 1981: 29)

In the same way that Dorothy decides that Jerry Maguire is the right man for her when she watches him with her son, J C falls for Jeff as she sees in him the father she wants for her daughter. It is more likely however that the generic conventions of the romantic comedy encourage the female spectator to identify with the utopian *ideal* of the hero and what he represents in terms of female desire, than with his masculinity and actions.

By the end of the film J C has achieved both business success and personal success seemingly on her own terms, directly as a result of being a mother forced to provide for her child. Given the confines of the romantic comedy genre we are invited to believe that J C and Jeff will form a relationship around her domestic situation, but her primary relationship is with the child. This radical departure from the convention is demonstrated in the closing shots of the film. J C moves from the embrace with her lover (the expected usual ending for a romantic comedy) to an embrace with baby Elizabeth, whose final words, “Mama” signify the primary role to which J C has committed. This ending symbolises the primacy of the mother-daughter dyad and relocates the resolution of the film within the central narrative theme of motherhood.

Writing in the late 1980s, Kaplan suggests that these discourses about family life in its many guises are both complex and contradictory. She offers the idea that comedy is used to defuse the anxiety underlying paradigm shifts in the conflicted family sphere and that the perceived threat of AIDs and the virulent anti-abortion crusade of the 1980s impacted on late ‘80s family sentiments:

It is clear that in the late 1980s choosing the child over career ... represents the new ideal. (Kaplan, 1992: 199)

Kaplan uses the motif of Alex in *Fatal Attraction* as femininity run riot to illustrate the validation and encouragement of women returning to the home and domesticity. Sexual promiscuity and extra-marital affairs (often through work) were highlighted as key issues

in the fight against family breakdown, an idea repeated throughout the media, and reflected in texts that demonised sexually active and work orientated women.

Certainly there lies, within the range of film discourses produced throughout the late '80s an implication that sex, work and motherhood were once again being polarized within popular culture. Single, working women were represented as ambitious, masculinised and frequently unpleasant; a consequence of sacrificing a more 'natural' pathway in life. In a climate dominated by a media backlash to feminism, 'errant' or misguided mothers returned to the safety of the home and family or risked losing everything to their ambitions. Fathers began to take on issues of parenting previously restricted to the maternal, a move that enabled film-makers to explore fatherhood in a way denied to mothers:

One can only assume either that the cultural assumption of there being only one, universal way in which to mother remains, or that motherhood is simply still too deep and problematic a topic to be given similar treatment. (Kaplan, 1992, 200)

For Kaplan the whole issue of motherhood in popular culture was that of "an absent presence" (Kaplan, 1992: 3), always visible but rarely recognised in her own right. Twenty years on and in a new century, mothering and motherhood continue to be positioned in respect to other issues.

Lone Fathers

Whilst the focus of this research has been on the ways in which single mothers are represented as cultural objects of meaning, it seems pertinent in this chapter to give some mention to the different methods employed to position lone fathers in Hollywood movies, since the difference sets up an important discourse of gender within a paradigm of lone

parenting. Kaplan's view that modern film narratives strive to re-establish patriarchal values and priorities within a changing framework that has somehow to incorporate changing attitudes to family structures, can be seen in the increasing number of films dealing with lone fathers. Achieving prominence with *Kramer Vs Kramer* in 1981 and proliferating through the 1990s in every genre, men were seen to be taking on the role of both father and mother as what might best be described as 'Double Parents' and seeming to make a much better job of it than women. In an overt attempt to humanise masculinity (and perhaps also to challenge prevalent nature/nurture assumptions), Action Adventure movies such as *A Perfect World* (1993) and *Leon* (1994) featured gangsters who found themselves responsible for children. The addition of a paternal role to their other, more, violent activities, allowed a softer side of their characters to be explored and developed. Romantic comedies began to use lone fathers to create a new style of heroine, one who could cope with the demands of a man who came as part of a father-child package. *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Overboard* (1987), *Milk Money* (1994) and British film *Jack and Sarah* (1995) all explore the added advantages for a woman of falling for a man who has been widowed and left to bring up a child alone, without the awkward issue of an ex-wife in the background. As the onslaught of patriarchal backlash continued through the 1990s, a third type of film father appeared, creating an altogether less attractive representation of modern women and the apparent effects on men of the 'having it all' paradigm: the abandoned father, forced to resort to radical actions in order to maintain contact with his children, as a result of the behaviour and attitude of his ex-partner. In these films mothers are represented as harsh, judgmental and malicious in their control over the relationship between the children and their fathers. In films such as *Bye Bye Love* (1995), *The Accidental Hero* (1992), *I'll do*

Anything (1994), *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) and British film *The Full Monty* (1997), the driving thrust of the narrative is concerned with the attempts of the hero to remain in contact with, and close, to his child or children. In each of these films, and indeed the majority of films dealing with divorced fathers and their relationships with their children, the mother is shown as already settled into another permanent relationship. Her apparent ability to 'move on' is juxtaposed with the increasing desperation of the father to prove himself both as a worthy parent and a respectable citizen. For men, the threat of being usurped hits the very core of masculinity. The perceived inability of a father to care for his children is shown to be the most valid reason to go to such extremes as dressing as a woman or becoming a male stripper in order to make money to pay to the ex-wife. *Mrs Doubtfire*, *The Full Monty* and *The Accidental Hero* are just three of a number of films that focus on setting the hero against his ex-wife and her new partner, and requiring him to go to increasingly desperate lengths to win back his children's respect.

Anne Roiphe calls this re-discovery of fatherhood a "Modern Urban Myth" (Roiphe, 1996:137), and suggests that it is the bottom line for such films. She points out that some feminists considered *Kramer Vs Kramer* to be a backlash movie portraying the mother, trying to find herself, as selfish and the father as self-sacrificing and nurturing.

Kramer Vs Kramer is the story of a marriage breakup and its aftermath. Wife and mother, Joanna Kramer, walks out on her husband and child in order to 'find herself'. The frustrations she feels within the confines of her socially prescribed role force her to leave the situation that constrains her and to experience life alone. Left to fend for themselves,

Ted Kramer and his son, Billy, develop a close relationship, particularly after Ted loses his job due to his new responsibilities and priorities. When Joanna decides to return to collect Billy, Ted is forced to fight for custody of his son and to prove to a court that he is the better parent in order to do so. The film foregrounds an argument that has formed a key agenda for men's groups since the 1970s and continues to insist that "the contention that women are inherently better nurturers is wrong" (Bob Geldof writing in The Sunday Times, 7 September 2003).

Myra MacDonald's analysis of *Kramer Vs Kramer* considers the way in which Joanna Kramer is positioned within the film. She is initially framed in lighting suggestive of a Madonna image as she stares at the son she is about to leave. From then on however, the narrative builds on "the pathos of the abandoned father and son" as the centre of interest while other concerns are pushed into the background (MacDonald, 1995: 149). Joanna is suggested throughout the movies as a shadowy figure lurking around to gain glimpses of her son in the playground or as the writer of a letter Billy turns up his radio to avoid hearing. While fathers excluded from their children's lives and depicted as lonely outsiders are positioned as victims with whom the audience is intended to sympathise, Joanna is the villain of the piece, the unnatural mother leaving her child for her own selfish reasons.

The voice that we are asked to identify with in *Kramer Vs Kramer* is, emphatically, that of the husband and father. It is his plea in court for gender equality that resounds with most passion and conviction. (MacDonald, 1995: 149)

Ted Kramer's impassioned question to the court, "What law is it that says that a woman is a better parent, simply by virtue of her sex?" is the climax to a film that morally, if not legally, presents the mother as unsatisfactory. She pays the penalty of being judged unfit by

being deprived of living with the child she loves. We might also argue that Billy is also 'saved' from becoming the child of a single mother by remaining with his 'double parent', the father whom we have seen take on the everyday role of both parents:

Kramer Vs Kramer concentrates on vignettes of idyllic father/son bonding at bedtime, or during cycling lessons in the park. (MacDonald, 1995: 150)

When Ted Kramer is advised to calculate the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing the custody case, the disadvantage list fills up quickly as he identifies that cost of lone parenting as: "No privacy, work affected; no social life; no let up". However we are then invited to share the benefits of parenting as the director, Robert Benton, cuts immediately to Ted and Billy curled up together as Billy sleeps. It is hard not to contrast this scene with a similar sleeping scene in *One Fine Day* when Sammy climbs into Mel's bed and prevents her from sleeping. For Mel, this is an extra inconvenience preventing her from getting the night's sleep she needs, while for Ted, it is a valued moment to treasure. Such scenes can be found in *Sleepless In Seattle* and *Bye Bye Love* as men come to terms with their roles as carers, symbolised in the sleeping forms of their children, but are rarely found in films featuring lone mothers.

James Monaco suggests that *Kramer Vs Kramer* was the film that showed "the most sophisticated understanding of sexual politics" of the seventies and eighties, arguing that Streep's character was "if not actually the villain, then certainly the source of the problem." For Monaco, the film represented a "classic feminist-inspired situation of the seventies", with its focus on the "sensitive and painful reaction of the man" (Monaco, 2000: 271). Nevertheless he considers that no other film has managed to also present the woman's point

of view with such sensitivity and concern (Monaco, 2000: 271-2), a notion that may be due more to Meryl Streep's interpretation of her role, than to the intentions of the writers and director. What he ignores is the unstated assumption in this, and other backlash films, that men can only truly relate to their children once the mother is removed from the family unit, the fear of castration made physical by the mother, must be eliminated. Monaco is happy to blame the feminist movement for the family breakup *Kramer Vs Kramer* appears to explore, and motherhood is framed for the spectator as a shadowy influence determined to destroy the closeness between the (male) child and its father.

In the film *Mrs Doubtfire* the apparent backlash against mothers in favour of fathers is taken to extremes when the father is driven to take on the persona of a woman in his desperation to spend time with his children. In doing so he ends up mothering his ex-wife as well, suggesting how she should dress and behave with her new partner. Once again the mother is shown to be inherently childlike, unable to control her own life, manipulated by her sophisticated boyfriend and more interested in her personal and work life than in the welfare of the children whose vulnerability she fails to notice as she flits between boyfriend and work.

Roiphe accuses such films of using the focus of good fathering to disguise a "long riff on maternal guilt" (Roiphe, 1996:138). Fathers fill a void left when mothers look outside the home for fulfilment. She asks:

Where are the mothers and what are they doing? Implicit in these movies is some reproach to women who have indeed abandoned their traditional role. But these movies also reflect a genuine social concern. Who is bringing up baby now? (Roiphe, 1996: 138)

She argues against the suggestion that such movies are trying to force women back into the home but finds within the texts “an anxious rumble, an end of the century tremble” (ibid:138), a feeling that women yearn for good fathers for themselves as well as for their children. Her views can certainly be seen in films focusing on men forced to take on parenting after their partner dies. When, for example, Tom Hanks as widower Sam, in *Sleepless In Seattle*, expresses his vulnerability and fears on national radio, he becomes the most desired male in the country and an icon of modern masculinity. Yet his attraction is presented on two levels: to the women within the film text he is a sensitive and grieving husband, but to the spectator his appeal is developed through his relationship with his child.

Kaplan makes a comparison between *Baby Boom* and *Three Men and a Baby* suggesting that the three fathers are treated differently from J C Wiatt in terms of their careers:

Men cannot be truly invested in a baby and their yuppie city jobs are never in jeopardy; this would deny their masculinity, their virility still, it seems. (Kaplan, 1989: 198)

It is only in *Kramer Vs Kramer* that the paternal role proves incompatible with work. Ted Kramer struggles to cope with parenting a child clearly traumatized by his parents' separation whilst working in a job from which he is getting little satisfaction. His dislike of his job is important here because it carries with it a set of ideological interpretations that are relevant to the representation of mothers and fathers. Ted's attitude to his job means that, once the initial shock has worn off, he is able to devote more quality time to his son. This places him in stark contrast to mothers like Erin Brockovich and Polly Parrish who get their jobs back, or J C Wiatt who runs away in an apparently naïve attempt to recreate her

nostalgic and sentimental ideas about childhood. However, the depiction of Ted struggling to combine work and parenting in a similar way to J C and Mel (*One Fine Day*), is significant in its realism and the symbolic foregrounding of his suffering and the commitment that has been forced on him. Where the women are shown struggling to fit motherhood into their working lives, Ted Kramer sacrifices his career for his child.

Kaplan suggests that films like *Kramer Vs Kramer* and *Baby Boom* originate from a broody 'Yuppie' generation that has pushed North American culture to struggle to critique materialist drives without returning to earlier American myths about nature as better than the city, the family as better than single life.

These films play out unconscious fantasies of abandonment (the bad mothers in these films who drop off their babies), of unrestrained libidinal desire ...and end with the old values; in that the *mother* has to be re-instated at the end even if we are left with a slightly unconventional 'family'. (Kaplan, 1989:198)

For Kaplan, such movies attempt to incorporate family values within a materialistic society by examining the mother and maternity. Families are pulled apart through the mother's abandonment and re-formed in a new, fuller sense when she returns. I would suggest that it is actually the *father figure* that is reinstated in films about lone mothers. The culturally 'unacceptable' notion of such films that women might raise children alone, is rendered acceptable through the clear indications we receive throughout the narrative that the hero will make a good father once the 'new' family is formally acknowledged. David Merlin brings round the baby care book for Polly Parrish; Jeff feeds Elizabeth the morning after he has stayed over with J C; George takes over the care of Erin Brockovich's children so that she can continue to work; Macon defends Muriel's child when he is bullied; Jerry Maguire

discusses sport and other masculine subjects with Ray - the actions of the male protagonists in films featuring lone mothers underpin the fundamental ideology of American film. In other words, in a set of texts that purport to examine women parenting alone, romantic comedies and 'women's' films conclude that it is men who are more likely to engage with the basics of caring for a child that is not their own. These films develop a theme identified by Tania Modleski in her essay on *Three Men and a Baby*, and speak to:

a legitimate desire on the part of women for men to become more involved in interpersonal relationships, to be more nurturant as individuals, and to assume greater responsibility for childcare. (Modleski, 1991: 88)

Female audience members, as well as female characters are warned by the sight of men bonding with children who are not their biological progeny and disregard issues of male appropriation of female roles in the process.

Modleski argues that films like *Three Men and a Baby* not only ignore issues of motherhood, but also actively reinforce the historical notion that mothers' rights are virtually non-existent. She suggests that *Three Men and a Baby* presents a "relatively benign version of a father's right scenario since it does, literally, 'make room for Mommy' at the very end of the film." Yet:

her return is experienced by the audience as an unfair intrusion, and the men's inclusion of her in their menage, a generous (if pragmatic) gesture. (Modleski, 1991: 76-7)

For Lizzie Francke, the issue in films like *Three Men and a Baby* and *Baby Boom* is more about the value and status of motherhood and mothering than about the mother herself. She points out that despite the derision of *Baby Boom* in reviews at the time it was released, the film is one of the few baby films to centre the predicament of parenting on a woman.

Francke records that, for the film's critics, babyhood and motherhood took on the associations of "dirty and primeval, their otherness trivialised in a glib one-liner". But the ideas articulated within the narrative tapped into "a powerful and emotionally satisfying fantasy, in which women could 'have it all', in spite of a society that denies them this possibility in real life" (Francke, 1994:150).

The fantasy that women *can* 'have it all' makes sense within the romantic film because it generally enables even the single mother, finally, to be 'complete'. She may be capable of holding down a demanding job whilst also experiencing the fulfilment of motherhood, but there is an implicit recognition that, within the patriarchal cultural constraints of the genre, a woman wants and needs a man to be complete. Thus, while women like J C Wiatt, Polly Parrish and even Erin Brockovich appear to succeed within a feminist fantasy paradigm of independent motherhood, the reality is grounded in the support and nurturing they receive from their men. This paradox is made still clearer in a film that centres on what happens to women who attempt to 'have it all' without allowing men to support them, *One Fine Day*.

I chose to watch *One Fine Day* with the groups of young women because I was interested to find out how they interpreted a text which, unusually, centres on both a single mother, Mel (Michelle Pfeiffer), and a weekend father, Jack (George Clooney). It was a text that was familiar to several of the girls and it was clearly one that they enjoyed as a piece of entertainment, largely due to the appeal of the leading actors. The story follows one day in the life of the two single parents, stuck with their children after Jack's tardiness causes

them to be left behind on a school trip. Both parents are about to have a pivotal day in their careers (Mel is an architect, Jack a journalist) rendering them unable to look after the children themselves or to find anyone else who might be able to help them. Eventually, after an amount of bickering reminiscent of old Spencer Tracy/Katherine Hepburn films, and a disastrous attempt to leave the children at a 'holding centre' in the city, the two agree to child-share during the day, and the film shows how each copes with both childcare and, in Jack's case, the exposing of a major local government fraud; in Mel's, the presentation of a new leisure centre model to prestigious clients.

One Fine Day is an interesting text to deconstruct because underneath its deceptively simple romantic-comedy plot there lies a complicated subtext of assumptions about single mothers and fathers that appear to have become naturalised over a period of time.

In terms of character, the two protagonists are delineated from the start. We see Mel carefully packing lunch for her son before she goes to bed where she works through a list of the things she needs to prepare for the following day. The film cuts to Jack, the 'irresponsible father', being told off like a small boy by his ex-wife who is about to go on her honeymoon with her new husband. The theme of mothering men runs through the entire film. Jack is constantly talked to as if he is a child by all the women with whom he comes into contact. Even those who find him physically attractive mother him:

Receptionist: Don't bother with the cute face. I've got five sons. You look at me at me like that, I make a pot roast!

Female colleague: My mother always used to say: 'Love your guy like a little boy and he'll grow into a man.'

Jack's boyish charms vindicate his irresponsibility. It is he who causes the children to miss their trip and he who is described by his ex-wife as a 'good-time father for whom responsibility is a dirty word'. Yet he is also presented as being fun. We see him fooling around with his daughter throughout the film and when, at one point, he is unable to persuade his daughter, Maggie, to leave a basket of kittens, he simply buys her the kitten, later using the kitten as a reason for Maggie spending more time with him in the future (a hint that he is prepared to be a more responsible parent).

Mel is presented as uptight and neurotic. She issues Jack with lists of instructions before she allows him to take care of her child and she is seen to be over-controlling and aggressive throughout the film. At one point she delves into a capacious bag and brings out the eclectic range of items she needs to create two superhero costumes for the children while Jack looks on in awe, asking later where he might get hold of a similar bag as though the key to efficient parenting lies within the artefact rather than in the meticulous planning and organisation we already know to be a feature of Mel's life. The song that accompanies the scene is "Mama Said", a non-diegetic confirmation of Mel's need to control her environment. Indeed, Mel's own reference to her ability to cope is based on her acknowledgement of her juggling skills²⁰:

Mel: I have all these little balls up in the air and if somebody else caught one for me I'd probably drop them all.

This line is key to the whole narrative. Mel ultimately does drop all the balls: she messes up

²⁰ The juggling metaphor was one used constantly by women writing about whether women could actually 'have it all' in terms of career, family and personal life and referred to the fragility of the modern woman's existence.

her presentation, loses Maggie (while she is confessing to her mother on the phone that she feels attracted to Jack), and is finally forced to put her job into perspective. From stating early in the film that:

I would definitely jeopardise my career and by extension my entire life if I pick up the children now,

she is forced to admit by Jack that 'I can't do everything alone'.

There is a misogynistic quality to the film that seems to reflect the backlash against single mothers during the 1990s and which offers the (essentially female) audience pleasure in watching Mel 'tamed' by Jack. Indeed there are many similarities between this film and Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* as Jack continually dominates Mel and eventually coerces her into admitting that she cannot do everything herself. Throughout the film there are various references to the gender battle:

Jack: Say it for your kind, the kind with all the balls in the air. Say 'I can't do everything alone' and restore my faith in women.

Jack: I forgot to call you this morning because I, as opposed to you, am not used to doing everything on my own

Mel: I'm a single, working mother. I do things the way I like them

Jack: Women like you have made me the man I am

Jack's suggestion that women like Mel have ruined his life can be seen to be repudiated in his dealings throughout the film. He uses his female colleagues to run his errands while he complains to a psychiatrist that he doesn't understand women, and his exposé of the City Hall scandal is successful due to his charming first Mel's mother and later Mrs Lieberman, estranged wife of the local councillor suspected of taking bribes. From an Oedipal point of

view, Jack uses his sexual charms on women old enough to be his mother but he shows himself to be either too tired or disinterested to become sexually involved with suitable women.

Mel on the other hand finds herself thwarted by men throughout the film. Her boss hates children and she is forced to deny her relationship to her son; her clients (a father and son team who stare impassively as she conducts her presentation) make demands on her that, in trying to meet, cause her to almost let her son down; Jack humiliates her (and later fails to deliver when he falls asleep waiting for her to change) and her ex-husband tells her that he will not be able to look after Sammy during the school holidays. Mel, it would seem, has made her single-mother bed and is forced to go it alone until Jack rescues her emotionally through the promise of romance and support, and physically when he carries her over a large puddle in a gesture that becomes the cinematic highlight of the movie, used on the posters and video covers to sell the film.

The film's overriding message is that lone parents cannot function alone and that even adults are as vulnerable as children at heart. Mel, for example, is seen three times to spill drinks and food down her front (once she changes into a child's tee-shirt emblazoned with dinosaurs) and her boss orders her drink for her as though she is incapable of doing so herself.

Thus both Mel and Jack are seen to represent the male fear of castration. Jack is castrated emotionally by his ex-wife who replaces and belittles him, but ultimately redeems himself

through his developing relationship with his daughter and his ability to rescue Mel. Mel represents the stereotypical 'ball-breaker', as Jack himself points out to her. She attempts to emasculate Jack throughout the film by issuing instructions and denigrating his parenting abilities, only to find herself requiring his help and support at the end.

The young women found the film easy to discuss, and once they had moved on from discussing the attractions of George Clooney, they were able to offer some interesting insights into their readings of the movie. I asked them what they thought of the characters and found that they used the word 'typical' a lot:

Jack's a typical single dad isn't he? All fun and messing around but not really very responsible. Lauren, 16. A:1998

I think that Mel is more like a typical single working mum's supposed to be. All work and no play. Emma P, 17. E: 2002

It's kind of like a typical romantic comedy story, I think, the characters would be really irritating in real life but in a film they're great. I mean, I wouldn't like Mel in real life but she's a typical heroine in this sort of film, isn't she? Angie, 16. C: 2000

When pressed as to whether, by typical, the girls meant true to life or true to movie representations, they decided that it was the latter, that such characters really only existed within film texts and that their belief, for example, that single working mothers are like Mel, was as a result of magazine and newspaper articles and other media representations.

As we talked, it became clear that each of the groups with whom I worked did not initially read any more into the text than that of a simple love story about two attractive but opposite characters. I was careful not to lead the girls into giving answers that would fit my own interpretation of the text and it was only on one occasion that a girl pointed out the

underpinning misogyny of the text, that the woman has to be punished for trying to 'have it all':

Have you noticed how Mel is constantly stressed and that Jack keeps having to rescue her? It's like she can't cope even though she's very organised but he can appear disorganised and yet do everything for them both. Rebecca, 18. A:1998

The girls general inability to read any patriarchal messages into the text did not surprise me but their tendency not to question the covert misogyny was more unexpected. As with other texts they related events in the film to real-life experiences which included getting separated from parents in busy streets, missing school trips because of ill-prepared parents and having to go to hospital to with things stuck up their noses (as Jack is required to do because Mel forgets to tell him that Sammy has a proclivity for sticking objects in his nose). However, when I asked them if they thought the characters were realistic they eventually decided that they were not:

Mel is too controlling. Did you notice how everytime she organises anything it goes wrong? I don't think she'd be so high powered if she was that clumsy and disorganised. Sophie L, 18. E:2002

I don't think it's realistic at all, but then these sorts of films [romantic comedies] aren't meant to be realistic are they? That's why they're popular. Kerry S, 19. E:2002

Several of the girls noticed that while Jack is successful in his professional quest, despite having to find the daughter that Mel mislaid, we are left unsure as to whether Mel will have won her commission:

The men say they like her but they don't say whether they will employ her do they? Emma J, 16. A: 1998

Yes, but you get the impression that she isn't sure if she wants the job anymore. Lauren, 16. A:1998

The general discussion that followed this observation centred on debates about whether mothers should work or not, and when I tentatively offered the alternative view that many single mothers are criticised for not working, there was agreement that ideologically we are presented with contradictory messages about maternity and paid employment.

Linda Williams suggests that the actual mother is juxtaposed to the ideal of motherhood, the abstract is used to debase and devalue the reality (Williams, 1987, 230), while Modleski suggests that in films such as *Three Men and a Baby* women are used to “legitimate and guarantee the men’s appropriation of the maternal” (Modleski, 1991: 88). I would suggest that this is the case in *One Fine Day* as well, where the apparently simple message of the narrative - that men and women need one another - contains a more insidious idea: that it is much easier for a man to ‘have it all’ and still to effectively manage every aspect of parenting (from the responsible adult to the fun-loving child) than for a woman.

Mothers as Other

Having considered the means by which single mothers have traditionally been positioned in popular film as victims and as inversions of the ideal mother, there is a third paradigm of the single mother that foregrounds the male Oedipal desire to sexually possess the mother:

For the male hero, the female protagonist becomes an agent within the text of the film whereby his hidden secret can be brought to light for it is in the woman that his ‘lack’ is located. She represents at one and the same time the distant memory of maternal plenitude and the fetishised object of his phantasy of castration – a phallic replacement and thus a threat. (Cook and Johnson, 2000: 233).

In modern films the 'exceptional' male is to be found in the hero who takes over the paternal role in much the same way as his predecessors did in the early melodramas. The key difference is that, rather than use the relationship to further punish the lone mother, the male becomes her 'reward' and an identifiable pathway back into a 'conventional' relationship, with the implication that such a pathway is both natural and 'good', while the hero is literally placed in a position where the mother is available to him sexually.

There are a number of recent films that have employed the lone mother as a tool for empowering and humanising the male protagonist. These films seem, without exception, to seek to create a new type of hero, one recognised through his ability to bond with someone else's child and to take on the task of caring for the mother. In a form reminiscent of early melodrama, the women in such films have become cinematic shorthand for a female type constructed from a number of symbolic characteristics designed to reinforce patriarchal prerequisites in movie relationships. They are presented as sexualised, passive enough to be rejected by the hero or other male characters at will, and often needy or with some problem that they are unable to resolve alone. Thus Julie in *Tootsie* is portrayed as a woman with a drink problem and an unsatisfactory relationship with the director of the soap opera on which she and Michael/Dorothy work. Muriel has a sick child in *The Accidental Tourist* and is dumped by Macon when he decides to try to rebuild his marriage. Carol also has a sick son in *As Good As it Gets* and is treated badly by Melvin as he struggles to make changes to his life. And in *Jerry Maguire*, Dorothy marries Jerry only to discover that her feelings for him are not reciprocated and for him to leave her. These

'damaged' single mothers recognise their own 'inadequacies' and their 'need' to commit to a relationship with the idealised man they detect within the character presented on screen.

From *Tootsie* to *About a Boy*, the relationship between the protagonist and the single mother becomes a process by which the hero develops from an initial position of incompleteness, to a new position in which his 'lack' has been replaced by his ability to bond with and look after both mother and child²¹.

In these films, the family unit of mother and child becomes the Lacanian Other by which the hero (and, by extension, the spectator) is able to participate in the act of self-recognition and identification. In most cases, the man's paternal relationship with the child comes first, re-creating the father's role (it is noticeable that real fathers are almost always absent from the text) before developing a sexual one with the mother.

Thus, in *Jerry Maguire* Dorothy's son Ray is constantly framed in between Dorothy and Jerry, a physical barrier between the adults that must be surmounted before any other relationship can begin. Jerry and Ray spend time together talking 'man-talk' about science and sport while Dorothy looks on as the spectator to their bonding, excluded from their conversation, apparently by her gender. Similarly, in *The Accidental Tourist*, Muriel watches the relationship build between Macon and her son even as he prevaricates over whether he can cope with an adult (sexual) relationship with her.

²¹ Although, as a British film (funded largely by American money) *About a Boy* is not one of the sample I chose to study in close detail, it should be acknowledged perhaps that the storyline and themes of the film reflect this particular point.

Each of the men in this group of films has been metaphorically 'castrated' through actions over which they have had no control but which have affected their perceptions of themselves and their masculinity. Macon's son was shot dead in a drive-past shooting and he has been unable to console his wife; Jerry Maguire has been sacked for writing and circulating a mission statement of his vision of a fairer workplace and he is unable at first to get work in an industry he has disparaged; and Will has never worked, as a result of the royalties he receives from his father's Christmas song. In *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey is unable to find work despite his self-belief that he is a good actor, and Melvin is rendered incapable of normal behaviour by his mental and emotional inadequacies.

The single mothers, with whom they become involved, are visual reminders of maternity and enable the male protagonists to search for self-knowledge. In doing so they 'allow' the hero to act out Oedipal fantasies of salvation and physical mother-love, and reconstitute the "distant memory of maternal plenitude" (Cook and Johnson, 2000, 233), and forcing him to confront his fears of castration:

It is in her that he is finally faced with the recognition of 'lack'. Woman is therefore the locus of emptiness; she is a sign which is defined negatively; something that is missing that must be located so that the narcissistic aim of the male protagonist can be achieved. (Cook and Johnson, 2000: 234)

By acting out the paternal role, however briefly, fears of castration are exorcised through the creation of a persona that transcends sexuality and sexual difference. In *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey goes to the extreme of doing so in the guise of a woman. The same is

symbolically true for Macon in *The Accidental Tourist*, Jerry Maguire and Will in *About A Boy*. For each man the single mother becomes the Lacanian 'mirror' in which the 'other' can be seized upon as 'the other which is me'.

In psychoanalytic terms the concept 'imaginary' is more complex than the word would immediately seem to imply... In the imaginary relationship the other is seen in relationship to oneself. (Cook and Johnson, 2000, 236)

In orchestrating the salvation of the lone mother and, albeit, sometimes unwittingly, rescuing her from her position outside of the nuclear family network, the hero allays the fear and circumvents the threat of castration.

In *Tootsie*, Dorsey's physical metamorphosis into a woman exposes him to the realities of the objectification of women by men but enables him to 'mother' Julie and in doing so to present a contrasting (and, by implication, better) image of motherhood. In a cynical play on a perceived female desire to be mothered, the real mother comes to rely on a caricatured representation of mothering (in much the same way as Miranda in *Mrs Doubtfire*) and is 'rescued' by 'her'. Where Julie is presented as a weak woman who relies on unsuitable men, Dorsey proclaims himself to have been "a better man with you as a woman than I ever was with a woman as a man", a view derided by Judith Williamson as being less about him overturning the ideological privileges enjoyed by men, and more about men being better feminists than women as well as being better at everything else! (Williamson, 1987)

I would suggest that Dorsey as Dorothy Michaels is the exception to the general rule in this group of films in that he is the only man to be portrayed as *not* being capable of taking over the care of the child for short periods of time. Macon, Jerry Maguire, Will, and even

Melvin are able to pacify and perform the traditionally perceived paternal roles of talking sport and teaching the children to stick up for themselves that the mothers are unable or unwilling to do. In *The Goodbye Girl* (1977) Richard Dreyfus as Elliott Garfield, forced into sharing an apartment with single mother, Paula McFadden, calms her daughter, Lucy, when she is sick (as a result of her mother's overindulgence), despite having known the child only a short time. Later on in the film Paula works while Elliott takes over the babysitting role for Lucy, and Paula's renegotiation of her relationship with Elliott is due in a very large part to his relationship with her daughter which 'permits' her to move from dislike to friendship and later to a sexual affair. In this film, as in so many of this ilk, the natural father is positioned as a 'bad' father (he sublets the apartment and assumes his ex-wife and daughter will simply move out), in order that another father may take over. In other words, in all these films, the hero does not have to take on another male in order to form his relationship with the mother; the natural fathers are either already dead, or they are revealed as thoughtless, uncaring and selfish 'non-fathers' who choose to neglect their children's emotional needs, leaving the way clear for the 'new' enlightened father to instate himself at the head of the family (*One Fine Day*, *Jerry Maguire*, *As Good As it Gets*). In this reworking of the Oedipal myth, the man is not required to kill the father to bed the mother and thus his framing as a hero remains intact.

The film *Jerry Maguire* is about the redemption of a shallow sports promoter who loses his job when he circulates a mission statement suggesting a more ethical approach to promoting sports stars. Humiliated, he is encouraged by a lowly accountant, Dorothy, a young widow, to set up his own firm and practise his new methodology. His subsequent

relationship with Dorothy and her small son, becomes an interwoven issue for him as he struggles to regain the client list he has lost, and his growing commitment to her (which comes after rather than before he marries her) is a metaphor for his salvation as a person. The depiction of Dorothy in *Jerry Maguire* provided a range of responses from the young women who watched the film with me, and from the young mothers, all of whom had seen the film on television in the recent past. For some of the young women, students and mothers, Dorothy was a strong character who is set against the strident voices of her sister's 'feminist' group:

Those other women are all man-haters aren't they? But Dorothy isn't scared to want a man in her life. I think that that makes her a strong person. To ignore what the others are saying. Kelly S, 19. B: 1999

I think Dorothy's a nice character. She's normal, like real women. The other women in that group. They're bitter and divorced. I don't think they're very realistic at all. Sophie R, 18. B:1999

Others found her irritating:

She's a bit whiny I think. She doesn't really seem like she'd be able to get a man like him. Lauren, 16. A:1998

I don't like the way she makes out like Jerry will be a good dad just because she fancies him. She seems a bit desperate to be honest. Samantha, 18. A:1998

The young women who found the character attractive tended to place her in contrast to the women's group (the point of which is never made clear to the audience since their only function seems to be to criticise men and enable the audience to see Dorothy in a more positive light). The message seemed to be that feminists don't like men and stay single and bitter while gentle, supportive women like Dorothy will ultimately end up 'rewarded', a discourse that the young women were happy to accept. Thus their interpretations of

characters such as Dorothy were based on judgments about how they might react to situations themselves rather than in terms of how circumstances and sets of beliefs affect women's lives and decisions:

You can tell she fancies Jerry from the first scene when she's watching him on the plane, and then she leaves her job to be with him. She must like him a lot to do that. Lauren, 16. A:1998

Yeah, but how could you not like Tom Cruise, he's gorgeous! I'd give up my job for him. Kerry B, 16. A:1998

Her sister's a bitch though isn't she? She's really against Jerry from the start but only because he's a bloke, not because he's actually done anything wrong to Dorothy. Rebecca, 18. A:1998

The film was popular with the single mothers largely due to a scene between Maguire and his only client, Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding Jr), where Tidwell chides Maguire for not being fair to Dorothy:

A real man will not shoplift the pooty from a single mother.

The West Indians in the group explained that the term referred to casual uncommitted sex and that the comment was reminder to Maguire that:

Single mothers don't date. They've been to the circus, they've been in the puppet show and they've seen the strings...A single mother, man, that's a sacred thing...

Gooding's character, Tidwell, is portrayed as the son of a single mother whose strong, loving relationship with his wife and children is central to the narrative and presents a clear contrast to the hesitant, fragile fledgling relationship between Maguire and Dorothy (a relationship that is also undermined by the paternal bond he quickly establishes with her son who responds enthusiastically to this new male presence in his life). The young single mothers, particularly the black women, found his character and his words to be the most

positive they had come across in a film with relation to single mothers and several expressed the opinion that the film was a favorite for this reason. Dorothy's role is that of nurturer; she nurtures her son and tries to nurture Jerry:

I love him for the man that he wants to be and I love him for the man that he almost is.

If Dorothy is a strong woman her strength lies primarily in the support she gives the men in her life, but her function as a character is primarily as a vehicle by which the overtly masculine Maguire finds redemption as a human and moves closer to the 'perfect' family man represented by his black client. In doing so the film offers a discourse about both gender roles and race. Jerry Maguire is a strong white man forced to rely on a black man and two women (one white, one black), all of whom will control his destiny in some way. His relationship with the child is posited as his most pure and unproblematic, and there is a sense in which the more difficult relationship with the child's mother grows out of the father/son bond established from the earliest moments of the movie. If a man can get on so well with another man's (albeit a dead man's) son, the central question asks, then how can we not believe in him as a hero?

Moreover, if this relationship is the dominant one in Maguire's redemption, then it can be argued that Dorothy is secondary to her son in importance (Maguire tells Tidwell that he loves Ray when he can only admit that he and Dorothy have "been seeing a bit of each other"). Despite the sex scenes, Dorothy is positioned as non-sexual; a mother rather than a sexually available woman²²

²² There is a clear indication of this in the contrast presented between the wild sex scenes that take place between Maguire and his ex-girlfriend at the beginning of the film and the more gentle scene with Dorothy.

Re-framing Representations of the Single Mother

In rare instances the paradox of the sexual mother is used to suggest that a woman can be a heroine *despite* her apparent flaws. One example of this is the film *Erin Brockovich*, the true story of a single mother who took on a multinational corporation despite opposition from the establishment in the form of the local authorities and even the law firm for which she worked. I would argue that the appeal of the story lay, for Hollywood, in the visual opportunity it presented for an excessive woman (in appearance, behaviour and, based on the fact that she is the single mother of three children living in a trailer park) to be framed in a positive light unusual in the popular movie and acceptable largely in the choice of Hollywood star, Julia Roberts, to play Erin, and because the real-life Erin presented for audiences the kind of rags-to-riches success story that forms a fundamental element of the 'American Dream.'

In physical terms, Erin Brockovich might easily be compared to Stella Dallas in that they are both presented as women who subvert traditional values of femininity and moderation. William's analysis of *Stella Dallas* includes her suggestion that one basic conflict of the film revolves around the "excessive presence" of Stella's appearance:

She increasingly flaunts an exaggeratedly feminine presence that the offended community prefers not to see ... But the more ruffles, feathers, furs, and clanking jewellery that Stella dons, the more she emphasises her pathetic inadequacy. (Williams, 1987: 311)

Stella uses her appearance as her key weapon in her battle for recognition within a hostile society that values an idealised and refined femininity. For Erin, however, who also refuses to tone down her appearance for the sake of other people's perceptions of how professional women should look, her *excessive presence* becomes a visual metaphor for her actions.

Outlandish and over-the-top, her clothes represent a woman at ease with herself and her place in the world.

In a film like *Erin Brockovich*, where the narrative emphasises Erin's uncontrolled and emotional responses to the patriarchal world of law suits and law firm employees, the camera directs the spectator not only to her unrestrained behaviour, but primarily to her as a visual object through the lingering shots of her breasts in low-cut tops and dresses:

Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. (Mulvey, 1975:25)

Using Mulvey's argument we may find ourselves asking whether the story of Brockovich's battle for the people of Hinckley would ever have made it onto celluloid had she not dressed in a sexually provocatively manner so at odds with her surroundings. For Mulvey the question would be central and in tune with her assertion that film-going is necessarily about "subject-positioning", "at once pruriently male ... and, because of the regression claimed to be involved, divested of critical intelligence" (Cook, 1996:350). Erin Brockovich is positioned in terms of her aggressive sexuality and demeanour that at once raises the spectre of castration and the excitement of possession by the male spectator.

Erin appears to be typical of the fetishised woman. Her overt sexuality and the emphasis on her low-cut tops and high skirts seem designed to appeal to the scopophilic desires of the male audience. Yet the character appeals equally to female audiences. For the young women in my sample she represents independence and an impressive lack of concern about other people's opinions of her:

I love the way she doesn't give a toss about those old bags in the office. Laura S,
17. C:2000

I don't think people should have to dress a certain way just because they do a
certain job. Especially if they haven't got much money like Erin hadn't. Shontelle,
17. E:2002

For these girls, Erin's appearance at once liberates her and identifies her as different. She is both sexualised and classified in terms of her place in the social order and it is this essential difference that enables the audience to identify with and distance themselves from her.

Williams offers the suggestion that fetishism works in cinema by deflecting attention away from what is "really" lacking by directing attention to - and "overvaluing" - other aspects of woman's difference, revolving around her "lack" (Williams, 1987: 312).

Much has been made of Erin's attitude and appearance, and its effect on her relationship to other characters and the viewing audience, but there is an important distinction to be made in the way she is positioned in comparison to Stella Dallas. While both women use their appearance to make a statement about self-image and to defy 'normal' perceptions of motherhood, Stella's clothes and make-up become more clownish and grotesque as she loses her control of her daughter and her world. Erin, however uses her appearance to exert control and to help her gain the information she needs. She is able to get into restricted offices by using her sexuality, and into the confidence of the townspeople in a way that the traditional lawyers are unable to do.

An important difference between the two women lies in their perceptions of themselves. Stanwyck's Stella knows and accepts that she is inadequate to the task of raising her

daughter in the way she would like her to be raised. Roberts' Brockovich never has any doubts about her own strengths, and her ability to succeed both as a mother and in her chosen profession. Indeed, her appearance is defiant to the end; she refuses to tone down her style of dress when asked, and there is an amusing scene when she compares her own appearance to that of the conventionally dressed and uptight lawyer, Theresa, later in the narrative.

Stella and Erin also differ in the ways in which they are framed with reference to the presentation of idealised motherhood. Stella gains our sympathy but remains powerless throughout, while Erin gains in both personal and professional power. Where Stella's sacrifices are set within the context of her implied lifestyle and the success of her daughter, Erin's success is set above any sacrifices she may have made within her personal life. She may have missed her child's first words and lost her lover as a result of her single-mindedness, but she accepts that the case is as important to her as these other things.

Mary Ann Doane argues that the only way a female spectator can keep from losing herself in over-identification with women on screen is by negotiating a distance from the image. The image is then read as a sign rather than as an icon that needs no interpretation in order to create meaning. Within the context of a film such as *Erin Brockovich* it might be argued that this distancing takes place through the use of the star. For the young spectators in my sample, Erin Brockovich and Julia Roberts remained interchangeable. At no time during the movie did they forget that they were watching Julia Roberts *playing* Erin Brockovich:

She [Roberts] is probably a lot more glamorous than the real Erin. Her clothes look much more expensive than Erin's would have been I think. Emma P, 17. E:2002

Robert's interpretation of the role sparked lively debate about the real Erin Brockovich, with the young women employing a sophisticated understanding of filmic conventions and codes to analyse how far the reality would be stretched to create an entertaining and engaging text. They questioned how far the real Erin would have behaved and dressed as she does on the film and expressed surprise when they later watched an interview with Erin on the DVD that seemed to confirm the truth of Robert's representation of her flamboyance.

Erin Brockovich is the object of 'The Gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) on two levels and for three specific types of spectator. Within the narrative she is constantly viewed by the other characters, a fact to which she frequently refers:

"I feel you looking at me" (to Brenda in the office)

"What are you looking at?" (to a court official)

Her apparent sexuality pervades the text and initial impressions of her are counterbalanced and undermined by the woman we come to know. Ed Masry, attempting to explain why she is unsuitable for a job in his office, states: "You look like someone who has a lot of fun" (meaning that he thinks she looks like a hooker), and Erin herself comments later in the film, "All I've ever done is bend my life around what men want."

In addition, camera shots continually show other people's reactions to her visual appearance – court officials, office workers and townspeople. She is subjected to 'The Gaze' from both men and women, and her screen persona is subjected to constant renegotiation by both onscreen spectators and the cinema audience. We come to see Erin as

a good person (and implicitly, a good mother) despite her fetishised appearance once we have been forced by her actions and her attitude to see beyond the visual.

The spectator of the film also observes Brockovich, but males and females are encouraged to do so in different ways. Despite Claire Johnston's assertion that women are negatively presented in cinema as "not-man" and that the idea of the "woman as woman" is absent from film texts (Johnston, 1991: 26), *Erin Brockovich* incorporates the fear of castration with the pleasures of scopophilia for both men and women. While the scopophilic pleasures for men come almost entirely through the visual exhibition of Erin as a fantasy sex object, despite her attitude and behaviour, the pleasures for women are more complicated and diverse. Essentially Erin Brockovich is a rare creature in Hollywood film construction, a mother represented as a subject in her own right rather than as an "(unquestioned) patriarchally constructed social function" (Kaplan, 1992: 3). Her strength is in her appropriation of male characteristics and role which, whilst remaining almost a caricature visually of sexualised woman, gives women generally, and single mothers specifically, a role model to value:

Lots of films portray single mothers as not coping or desperate to get back with their husbands. In this film, Julia Roberts was strong and independent. That's what single mothers have to be like. We have to be incredibly resourceful and learn to push like hell if we want something. We're not victims. (Annie Oliver from the Single Parent Action Network, quoted in The Guardian, Feb 2001)

Brockovich is always accessible to the male spectator through fetishism, if not scopophilia. Her appearance positions her as a sexual woman despite her activities bearing little relationship to standard female behaviour. Despite the preferred reading of the film which shows Brockovich to be an intelligent woman who rises above her situation and problems

to help a community and prove herself a talented litigator, she appears to be available to male spectators in the form of a heavily sexualised woman.

In *Erin Brockovich* we can see a female who is, in some ways, the embodiment of psychoanalytic theories of castration. She is a woman who not only rejects the masculine environment in which she works and the patriarchal discourses that control the processes by which the legal system operates, but she might also be seen to emasculate her male colleagues. From the adjustments she makes to Masry's clothes to the scene in which she places the child's tiara on George's head, she physically and psychologically intimidates almost every man with whom she comes into contact. Her energy renders the male characters virtually passive. From George, who is shown sitting around with the children in so many of the scenes, to Masry who is metaphorically castrated by legal processes, *Erin Brockovich* subverts Mulvey's theory that gender in cinema operates on an axis of activity and passivity, with male characters representing activity and female, passivity. For the female spectator the film offers the liberating visual pleasure of having an image with whom identification becomes both positive and powerful.

Thus in *Erin Brockovich* we are presented with a female protagonist who subverts the standard 'phallic woman' in her, almost caricatured, portrayal of sexualised woman. She offers the female spectator an object of identification which is different from that suggested by Mulvey when she talks about women finding themselves "secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with the hero provides" (Mulvey, 1981, 29). *Brockovich* is set up as an

antagonist not just to a corrupt organization but also to a patriarchal society that requires women to adopt the values of masculinity in order to succeed in the male dominated world of the law. Her success is offered to the female spectator as a diegetic validation of femininity and female strength, and the knowledge that the film is based on 'truth' creates a second dimension to the validity.

Erin's appearance, however, is not simply a means by which she can be fetishised as a sexual woman, it is also a method of categorizing her initially as a dysfunctional member of society. In the early scenes of the film, Erin is clearly presented almost as a stereotype of working class single motherhood, a representation that then sticks in the mind of the spectator throughout the rest of the film. The *mise-en-scène* locates her as a woman living from hand-to-mouth through her clothes, make-up and hair, through her impoverished environment and in the beaten-up old car she drives.

The initial impression we get of Erin as a woman firmly entrenched, and defined by her lowly status, within a patriarchal society, is apparently confirmed by her behaviour in court at the beginning of the film. She reveals to the court, and to the spectator of the film, that she has managed to marry and divorce twice and is now bringing up three young children alone. Her defensive and hostile behaviour and overreaction to the jury's responses to her allows the court (and the film viewer) to come to the conclusion that she is irrational and untrustworthy. We are led to believe that it is their perceptions of her that cause them to believe the story of the doctor (immediately positioned by the jury as middle-class, reasonable and honest by dint of his professional status) over hers. This impression is

further encouraged by the use of cross-cutting to show her face from a number of angles, breaking the normal 'rules' of shot framing and creating an effect that makes Erin's face look as though she is being shot for a mugshot photograph.

The relationship between class and sexuality is a much stronger paradigm in modern maternal films than issues of morality. In films such as *Erin Brockovich*, *Where the Heart Is*, and *Little Man Tate*, the heroines' characters are as strongly defined in relationship to their backgrounds as to their sexuality and, in the case of *Erin Brockovich* and *Little Man Tate*, especially so. In each of these films, the class issue becomes the major cause of conflict, between Erin and her colleagues, and between the two women who each wants to mother Fred in her own way and within the parameters of her own value system. The key difference between them is that Erin's self-concept and self-esteem are consistently strong despite the way she is perceived by others while Deedee Tate develops a stronger self-concept as a result of being forced to fight for her son.

In *Erin Brockovich*, as in *Little Man Tate*, class issues are represented through the actions and attitudes of the mother, and issues are resolved, not through any social change but through attitudinal changes on the part of the protagonists and those around them. Thus, in *Little Man Tate*, Wiest's and Foster's characters are able to build a new relationship with each other as well as with Fred through a renegotiation of themselves and their positions in his life. And Erin Brockovich not only wins the respect of her colleagues on her own terms but she too begins to display a less judgmental attitude to those around her.

Erin's self-concept is evident from the beginning of the film, covertly imprinted on the early presentation of her personality. Even as we are judging her on her appearance and attitude as she looks for work in the opening scenes, we should be noting the type of job for which she is applying. There is an interesting irony present in the diner scene, in which the real Brockovich plays a cameo role as a waitress opposite Julia Roberts, since the film portrays her as setting her sights much higher in her job search. Rather than search for work in the areas traditionally associated with working class women – waitressing, cleaning or factory work – she continues to make applications for clerical jobs more likely to be associated with the lower middle classes. This suggests a level of education not indicated in the outset of the film although actually evident in Brockovich's own background.

Brockovich as a mother is central to the whole film and the spectator is rarely allowed to forget that she is a mother as well as an increasingly-high profile public servant. The film begins with her talking about her children and how she has lost jobs as a result of having to take time off work to look after them when they have been sick. Her dreams of becoming a doctor or geologist have been cut short due to maternal responsibilities and we are quickly made aware of her material and personal sacrifices. She eats cold beans from cans and has little control over her life – represented visually in the parking ticket she receives as she is attending yet another interview, and in her futile attempts to make contact with Ed Masry after the court case.

The narrative structure of *Erin Brockovich* is relatively conventional, following a formula tried and tested through a range of social problem films. The preferred narrative of

Hollywood film is centred on the passage from one equilibrium to another which is similar but never identical to the first (Todorov, 1977:111) with an emphasis on the “presumption ...that problems can be overcome, can, indeed, be resolved” (Hill, 2000: 206). The movement from disequilibrium to equilibrium is patterned through a linear and causal chain of events and, typically, uses individual characters who function as agents of this causality. Throughout film genres, from action adventure to social problem, the narrative inevitably centres on “personal, psychological causes: decisions, choices and traits of character” (Bordwell and Thompson, 1980:58).

In the same way that social problem films are seen as a problem *for* society rather than *of* it, films centering around lone mothers are not shown as social problem films per se. Rather, they offer individuals with problems arising as a result of their situations. For John Hill, even the issue of class is presented as “primarily an individual, rather than collective, experience, a moral, rather than socially and economically structured condition” (Hill, 2000: 208).

Brockovich is a woman who is ultimately rewarded in a material sense within a patriarchal and masculine environment when she is given the huge cheque at the end of the film. There is a sense, however, that her real reward comes in the small scene when her son looks at the dying child's file and begins to understand why his mother is working so hard. This, in some small way, may be viewed by a female spectator as some recompense for the loss of the lover. Her validity as a mother is restored although, in some sense, her validity as a woman is lost. Brockovich sacrifices her sexual life for her success within the masculine

world of the law. Once again a woman is depicted being unable to 'have it all'. Masculine fear of castration is, to an extent, appeased by Brockovich's failure to maintain a normative heterosexual relationship – the cost of her triumph in a 'man's world'. It is perhaps worth noting here, as a postscript to the story of the real Erin Brockovich, that she is currently on her third marriage, confirmation to the male spectator, if such is required, that women who succeed in business often do so at the cost of their personal lives.

The emphasis on happy endings in the popular film requires some element of inspiration and hope. Erin Brockovich is rewarded ultimately with the confirmation to the world (both within and outside the film) of her ability and equality to her peers. She succeeds on her own terms without having to sacrifice her appearance or her values to do so.

For women to take on more power within the narrative (that is, becoming the one who drives the action forward) is to risk being seen as masculinised – the so-called 'phallic woman'. For women to resist acting as the object of male desire is also to reject most of the codes and conventions which structure them as attractive, sexual beings. (Turner, 1995:82).

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes that feminists have argued that representation of the 'feminine' as positive, rather than 'non-male', was impossible within the framework of classic Hollywood narrative, and adds that 'masculinity' still constitutes the only knowable heroic norm, producing acute contradictions in the production of active female protagonists (Cook, 1996: 78). In *Erin Brockovich* we have a heroine who subverts the standard representation of the female in that she appears to highlight the *difference* between the masculine and the feminine within a patriarchal construct, and, in so doing, to break away from conventional modes of representation.

In modern women's movies, women are still fighting for real independence in the home and workplace but are often presented as being stronger and uncompromising. Erin Brockovich loses her lover as a result of her single-minded determination to bring a corporation to justice, but the emotional struggle of earlier films is largely absent. Her home life is played down in order to concentrate on the issues of her work, except to show her dependence on George for childcare and the effects of her crusade on her family. Yet her persona and actions are firmly rooted in the feminine to the extent that the cause for which she fights so hard is rooted in an emotional campaign against the destruction of nature and the environment. In the same way that, in *Baby Boom*, JC Wiatt's conversion to motherhood requires her to physically leave the masculinised environment of the city, and to relocate within the verdant and fertile countryside of Vermont, Brockovich's fight with the corporation that has poisoned the water of Hinckley and made its inhabitants sick, creates an alliance between the maternal and the natural.

Erin Brockovich's success comes through overcoming patriarchal obstacles and she does so using qualities traditionally associated with women. She is highly emotional throughout the film, mothering not only her own children but also the people of Hinckley and even her boss, Ed Masry, when she ties his tie for him and comments on his eating habits and lifestyle. We may see scenes where she is excluded from her own family but her instinctive reactions and emotional responses enable her to win the confidence of the townspeople. Masry accuses her of being too involved, 'You're emotional, you're erratic, you say any Goddam thing that comes into your head. You take it personally', but it is this involvement and 'feminine' emotion that paradoxically brings her success within the patriarchy of the

legal system. Where Anna in *The Good Mother* is punished for her transgressions against social convention, Erin is ultimately rewarded for hers. And when Erin gets sick the case begins to fall apart.

What is missing in a film like *Erin Brockovich* is the convention typical in 'the woman's film' of self-sacrifice. Erin's oldest child learns to understand why his mother is working so hard, and her breakup with George is shown to be amicable enough for him to return to care for the children as the case draws to a climax. In a subversion of maternal melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce*, *Stella Dallas*, and even its modern remake, *Stella*, where the mother is left to suffer alone at the end of the film, Brockovich is rewarded through her acceptance into the patriarchal and masculine world of law despite her apparent rejection of traditional maternal values and romantic aspirations. Indeed it is perhaps ultimately this masculine quality in Brockovich and her acquiescence with patriarchal ideology that sets her apart from other Hollywood single mothers.

It would seem that there is an inherent conflict in the way that Hollywood chooses to position 'heroine mothers'. Where traditional mothers (from the Madonna-like mother in *Little Women* [1933; 1994] to the pregnant Marge in *Fargo* [1996]) can be generally framed as desexualised, reliable, sensible and 'good', and sexualised women can be depicted as essentially flawed in some way (even if they can be ultimately 'rescued'), lone mothers present something more of a problem. In a society where so much of the cinema-going audience will be represented by lone parents or children growing up in lone parent families, the subject cannot be ignored, but there seems to be a paradox in the way that lone

motherhood is depicted. It is interesting to note that it is almost impossible to find examples of 'true' single mothers. The majority of female protagonists depicted as single mothers are widowed or divorced. The perceived stigma attached to the unmarried mother appears to be alive and well in Hollywood films, and the father, however inadequate or absent he may be seen to be, has almost always been married to the mother at some point prior to the opening of the film narrative. In a culture that has taken an increasingly unsympathetic and punitive attitude to single mothers over the last twenty years, the popular film is designed to conform to the ideology of the traditional family even while it acknowledges the reality of marriage breakdown; and the hierarchy of treatment of single mothers from widows (*Jerry Maguire*) down to unmarried mothers (*Where the Heart is*; *Tootsie*; *Mrs Winterbourne*) is articulated as a set of moral discourses through the hegemony of Hollywood narrative. Thus women and women's issues remain marginalised and gender differences increase as discourses of hegemonic patriarchy continue to gain in popularity. Films like *The Family Man* (1999) and *What Women Want* (2000) depict men as essentially sensitive and caring beneath their masculine qualities of ambition and business acumen. Indeed, the latter, goes as far as to offer the notion of a man who can become a perfect lover, friend and father by not simply learning how to read women's minds but, more crucially, by then learning to think like a woman. It seems that, despite the apparently positive messages in a film like *Erin Brockovich*, for Hollywood and the cultures it serves, there is a covertly political agenda to popular film which asks audiences to not only condemn strong, independent women for their 'unnatural' behaviour but to embrace their male counterparts for the same thing.

Chapter Six: SITUATION COMEDY: PUTTING THE FUN IN DYSFUNCTIONAL

The third form of media product that I wish to analyse in terms of representations of single motherhood is the situation comedy, considered by some to contain messages of defiance and by others to do nothing more than support dominant ideologies of attitude and behaviour and to support the status quo gender and class relationships.

In this chapter I will be considering how the genre of situation comedy has developed alongside television as a primary source of cultural and social information about how we determine roles within the family and what happens when sitcoms attempt to create alternative paradigms of family relationships. I will then consider four sitcoms featuring single mothers in more detail; one, the American series, *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-98), in terms of the impact it had on political agendas in the United States, and the other three: *Sex and The City* (HBO 1998-2004), *Grace Under Fire* (ABC 1993-98) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC 1992-present) as texts that are both familiar to and resonant with meaning for the young women with whom I worked. I will consider how they make sense of such texts in terms of their own experiences and those of their peers, and how they interpret the messages contained within them both as discourses of unorthodox lifestyle choices and as having positive or negative cultural resonance.

I will aim to show that my groups made a number of important assumptions about single mothers in situation comedy that were very different to the views they held of single

mothers in film and soap opera. Their views were based on factors which included the perceived realism of the show, the beliefs they already held about class and single motherhood, and their ability to distance themselves from the narrative requirements of the genre based on familiarity with its codes and conventions.

Definitions of Television and Situation Comedy

Television comedy, and particularly the genre of situation comedy, is often ignored in analyses of text and audience. As far back as 1979 Mick Easton suggested that this is, in part, due to the emphasis of theorists on aspects of realism and the verisimilitude of television texts despite the sustained enthusiasm that audiences have for the situation comedy genre (Easton, 1978/9), and it would seem that his view is borne out in the relative dearth of texts about the genre in the intervening years. With the exception of a handful of detailed explorations of sitcom in the United States and Britain (Crowther and Pinfold, 1987; Marc, 1989; Neale and Krutnik, 1990; Jones, 1992), the genre, much loved by viewing audiences since the earliest days of American radio²³, is given scant consideration by academics. It may be as a result of the sheer diversity of form, history, organization, aesthetic characteristics and modes of address by which television comedy is defined (Neale and Krutnik, 1990:1), but analysis of sitcom tends to be confined to chapters in books on television and popular culture in general (Bennett et al, 1981; Goodwin and Whannel, 1990; Fiske, 1994; Hartley, 1999; Burton, 2000; Creeber, 2001).

²³ Taflinger cites *Amos 'N' Andy* (1929) as being the first successful American radio situation comedy followed by others including *L'il Abner*, *Baby Snooks*, *Blondie* and *The Goldbergs*, during the 1930s and 40s many of which simply transferred to television in the 1950s (Taflinger, 2003)

Feminist research has ignored the genre even more steadfastly over the years. With the exception of Rowe's analysis of Roseanne as "unruly woman" (Rowe, 1996), Mellencamp's examination of Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball within a feminist and Freudian framework (Mellencamp, 1986) and, more recently, Walkowitz's exploration of how television shows can become politicized using *Murphy Brown* as her example (Walkowitz, 1997), feminist television criticism has focused almost entirely on the genres of soap opera, police series and the talk show.

This paucity of attention may well be due to the perception of comedy as "an art of the middle" rarely reaching the "psychological or political extremes" of other comic (and indeed other television) genres (Marc, 1989: 26), a "mythopoeic loss leader in the supermarket of national consciousness" (Hans Enzenberger, quoted in Marc, 1989: 160). However, in the study of family and family discourses within the media, it would be wrong to ignore this potent source of ideology and its consumption by audiences. The television comedy, as this chapter will demonstrate, has, since its earliest days in the 1950s, offered a continued framework of representation of family life and values that can be seen to be at least as pervasive and entrenched as those already discussed in the soap opera genre.

Most recently Richard Taflinger (1996) has attempted to consolidate other research into the genre and has identified three types of situation comedy: the action comedy, the domestic comedy and the drama comedy, all of which share style, form and character types, but which vary in narrative and plot. Crucial to Taflinger's theory of sitcom is that it is rooted in idealized middle class morality and lifestyle. Series choose to represent it, or a version of

it, or to depart from it and viewers, he argues, start out already familiar with underpinning ideologies:

Expositions which establish the societal norms against which to measure the incongruity in humor may be greatly condensed, the norms already being known to a majority of the audience. (Taflinger, 1996b: 3)

While he acknowledges that situation comedies do not necessarily advocate the positive side of middle class life (characters often make decisions to 'opt out' either temporarily or permanently) and middle class mores may be shown to be "stifling, opinionated or just wrong," nevertheless, it is middle class life that serves as a foundation and springboard for the narrative. In this chapter, I will be suggesting that this foregrounding of bourgeois and middle class values includes the nuclear family headed by traditional married couples, and that the use of lone parent families in sitcom is a comedic device used to heighten audience acknowledgement of the 'normal' family values by which alternative family structures are judged.

Further, Taflinger identifies six key elements to television comedy, without which, he argues, the comedy does not work. First he considers that comedy is an intellectual activity rather than emotional. In the same way that Freud earlier positioned the use of humour as the ego's method of protecting itself from attack and violation, Taflinger believes that humour distances the audience from underlying emotions by creating extreme situations which require extreme reactions and that humour requires the ability to intellectualise the connotative content of material. Secondly, he suggests that humour is mechanical, arising out of characters' inability to respond flexibly to new situations as they arise. It is the inappropriate response to stimuli that creates the comedy. Thus, in the same way that

audiences in the 1950s laughed at Lucille Ball's slapstick comedy, we laugh when Edina in *Absolutely Fabulous* staggers out of a cab and misses the pavement because she is simply reacting to an event without considering how the situation might have changed as a result of her drunken state.

Taflinger's third criterion for comedy is that it is inherently human. Comedy is funny only in so far as it relates to human behaviour or thought. The humour in a series such as *Mister Ed* (CBS 1961-66), the talking horse, for example, was in the animal's ability to think and act like a human with human emotions and reactions.

Fourthly, comedy is derived from an established set of societal norms and fifthly it is incongruous, creating humour by attacking those societal norms in some way, and producing sets of oppositional discourses to those considered normal and obvious.

Taflinger identifies the internal norms of the comedy show as operating against the external norms existing in the society for which the show was written

For comedy to work there must be an established set of cultural, human and societal norms, mores, idioms, idiosyncrasies, and terminologies against which incongruities may be found. (Taflinger, 1996a:2)

In early sitcoms the incongruity of a bachelor bringing up children provided enough comedy for several different sitcoms²⁴; more recently, in a society where males are increasingly involved in childcare, audience's perceptions of what is incongruous have become more subtle and sophisticated. Thus, the comedic element of a series such as *Ab*

²⁴ *The Bob Cummings Show* (NBC 1955-9); *Bachelor Father* (CBS 1957-62); *Family Affair* (CBS 1966-71) and *My Two Dads* (NBC 1987-90) are some examples of American comedy shows based on this premise.

Fab comes in the representation of Patsy: drunk, drug addicted and promiscuous, but also impeccably dressed and apparently editing *Vogue* magazine with its connotations of class and sophistication. Taflinger suggests that incongruity in sitcom can be divided into distinct categories: literalisation (where characters take things literally), reversal (where norms are reversed) and exaggeration (where norms are blown out of proportion). However:

the greatest incongruity is the violating of societal taboos. This violation can provoke the greatest laughter. In American society the greatest taboos are discussions of sex, death and biological functions. These are all subjects which society has decreed should be discussed seriously, discreetly and euphemistically, if discussed at all. It is from these taboos that much humor is derived. (Taflinger, 1996a:4)

Using this criterion as a basis for analysis of lone parent and other alternative sitcom families on British and American television, it is possible to construct an argument that it is out of the apparent incongruity of alternative family structures that much television comedy is derived.

Finally Taflinger considers that comedy is about action that is perceived by the audience to be painless, causing the participants no actual harm. If a character is hurt emotionally or physically, they must be seen to recover in order that it can be found funny. Thus, no matter how difficult situations become for characters like Grace (*Grace Under Fire*), Lucy (*I Love Lucy*) or Edina (*Absolutely Fabulous*) we can be sure that they will ultimately triumph through superior verbal dexterity or by remaining oblivious to and untroubled by their circumstances.

In order to deconstruct the narrative structures and messages existing within television comedy, it is first useful to consider the genre of situation comedy as a form, and to chart its development as a chronicler of family life and purveyor of family values, before exploring the ways in which challenges to family life and values have also been presented as sources of, and vehicles for television humour.

Eaton attempts to define the situation-comedy (or sitcom as the genre is more commonly known) as consisting of a situation (either home or work) with easily recognizable parameters within which a set of familiar characters attempt to cope with the absurdities of everyday life (Eaton, 1978/9:68-71). He suggests that a key feature of sitcoms is their contemporaneity: their focusing of attention on an assumed “reality” of a sociologically assumed “audience”, whose predominant ideological concerns centre around questions of the family or of work (ibid: 70).

Situation comedies use family life as part of the ‘situation’: treating the family as an insular unit and establishing it as an index of an ‘inside/outside’ structure. As in soap operas, threats and crises come from outside the family group, from other people or from situations that create instability inside the family. The comedy is constructed out of the, often unorthodox strategies adopted by the family unit to deal with perceived or real threats, and the attraction of the genre is located in the processes by which the status quo is generally restored by the end of the episode. In this way a circular structure is created which allows the narrative order to be disrupted and resolved on a regular basis.

The ideology held by the institution of television is that the family is a sufficiently stable situation, settled enough to be able to bear repetition and to deal with the onslaughts of the outside in a recognizable, characteristic way. (Eaton, 1978/9: 73)

I will consider later in this chapter the way in which the lone parent in sitcom has been subsumed into this ideology as well as set into a paradigm of anti-family sentiment.

Early sitcoms tended to rely on repetition rather than the temporal development used so successfully in soap operas. Neale and Krutnik suggest that they encouraged viewers to actively *forget* events of previous episodes and series (1994: 235), and that familiarity with the characters and the unchanging situation from which each episode derived formed the basis of the genre's appeal to audiences. Modern sitcoms have tended towards a more open soap opera style narrative structure that allows character development based on the, often close, relationships viewers acquire over a period of time. For example, in *Grace Under Fire*, a comedy series about a lone mother and her three children, we see Grace progress over time from a recovering alcoholic into a confident woman who is able to support her family and forgive her violent ex-husband. In *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) the continuing popularity of the series about six close friends in New York has enabled the characters to change and mature as they acquire life experience and move from relationship to relationship. Similarly the protagonists in *Sex and The City* use birthdays to actively consider how far they have progressed over the year.

It is worth noting from the outset that the term 'situation comedy' is deemed by some critics to carry similar pejorative connotations to the term 'soap opera'. Humour is essentially a personal quality which differs from individual to individual and attempts to

explain or define humour are constrained by the polysemic nature of its subject matter. Not only is there immense variety in the range of its forms but there is also the relationship established between the producer of the humorous message and the recipient of the humour. Thus two people may witness the same comic moment or hear the same joke and experience completely different reactions in terms of their perception of its humour. It is the subjectivity of humour, then, that renders the genre of the situation comedy particularly vulnerable to criticism, since those who do not find either the premise or the form of a sitcom amusing will inevitably disparage the show rather than question their own sense of humour. This may go some way to explaining why producers of comedy shows for television often prefer to call their work by other titles – ‘character comedy’ or ‘comedy drama’ – considering the conventional sitcom to be steeped in traditions of slapstick and stereotype. This negative view was further embedded when a 1988 BBC1 *Network* examination of the genre included a comment by former Chief Executive of Channel 4, Jeremy Isaacs, that:

It is a form in which it is impossible to bring in new work. It is the most conventional form in British television. (Neale and Krutnik, 1994: 236)

Isaac’s description of sitcom can only be accurately applied to the formalized structure of programmes and the ways in which material is generally treated, since, throughout its history there are clear, if fairly rare, examples of shows that have successfully attacked taboos and tackled social and political issues using humour and pathos as a method for raising consciousness and challenging established beliefs and attitudes. From the troubled relationship between Harold and Albert Steptoe in *Steptoe and Son* (BBC 1962-74) in the 1960s, through the cynical approach to war in *M*A*S*H* (CBS 1972-83) in the ‘70s to the,

often discomfiting recent spoof documentary *The Office* (BBC1 2001-03), devices such as the inclusion of tragedy²⁵ and other darker issues occasionally shock us out of laughter and into less comfortable responses. In this context the use of the lone parent in television comedy therefore can be identified as a means whereby the norms of family life and values may be explored and, in cases like *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Steptoe and Son*, subverted and ridiculed.

Clearly, therefore, the emphasis in some modern television comedy series to invoke humour out of the darker side of life is not entirely new. The use of comedy to address and subvert ideological truisms and beliefs has formed an important weapon for critics and observers of cultural standards throughout history, and certainly since the coming of television²⁶. In 1978 Norman Lear, the producer responsible for early American family-orientated sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (NBC 1954-60) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS 1961-66), spoke at the Edinburgh International Television Festival of the taboos that were toppled in his shows:

For the first time we saw married couples in the same bed. Our stories dealt with death, infidelity, black family life, homosexuality, abortion, criticism of the economic and foreign policy, racial prejudice, problems of the elderly, alcoholism, drug abuse, menopause, the *male* mid-life crisis. Such health issues as heart disease, hypertension, breast cancer, lung cancer, mental retardation, depression, manic depression, plastic surgery and more (MacTaggart lecture, 28 August 1978).

Yet Lear was aware that taboos surrounding the state of family life in the 1950s were not so

²⁵ The BBC comedy series *May to December* (1989-94) featured the aftermath of miscarriage and the popular *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC 1981-present) ran a storyline in which Rodney's wife gave birth to a stillborn baby.

²⁶ In his book *Taking Humour Seriously* (1994) Jerry Palmer asserts that humour is part of the human condition and a fundamental part of the processes by which we negotiate the social and cultural rules which govern our behaviour in different situations.

easily 'toppled'. Issues within marriage might be addressed within a humorous context, but marriage itself remained sacrosanct for several decades. The original plans for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS/MTM 1970-77) in which Mary was to have been a divorcée, were changed as a result of the Network's fears about audience reaction to her status. When the show aired in 1970 Mary was a single woman in her thirties and her relationships became a central concern of the series. Yet despite this apparent surrendering to social convention the show tested the boundaries of acceptable subject matter and acknowledged the major changes being addressed by women in the '70s. That Mary was sexually active, for example, was alluded to in an episode where Mary accidentally revealed to her mother that she was using the oral contraceptive pill (Crowther and Pinfold, 1987:89).

As far as Lear was concerned, his responsibility for airing larger social concerns through humour was clear. In his view, television series that neglected to deal with "the real problems of life" were, in effect, denying the existence of racial, economic, political or social concerns, and suggesting by implication that "all the mothers and fathers and children live in absolute harmony" (Lear, 1978). His views that comedy and humour create an environment in which norms may be challenged, can occasionally be recognised in modern sitcoms dealing with issues such as lone parenting and family break-ups. Thus it becomes apparent that any study of the genre needs to take into account the need to distinguish between the hard-hitting social satires of shows like *M*A*S*H* and *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965-75), and those that prefer the safety of stereotype and consensus.²⁷

²⁷ Taflinger defines the former as DramaCom and the former as either ActCom or DomCom depending on whether the comedy is structured around action or character, and the subgenre will determine how narratives are established and humour created. (Taflinger, 1996).

The issue of lone parenting does not fit neatly into either style, and, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, the use of alternative family structures is a staple element of modern sitcom, both traditional and subversive in form and narrative. Thus, a show like *Grace Under Fire* follows conventional patterns and can be closely compared to *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-97), while *Absolutely Fabulous* uses sitcom conventions to ridicule and subvert family values and structures. Similarly the short-lived British sitcom, *Life After Birth* (ITV 1996) attempted to create comedy out of the depressing living conditions of a young single mother in a council flat but failed because the situation was simply too depressing to justify its definition as a sitcom (Graham, 1996:13).

For Eaton, Lear's position on situation-comedy assumes that society and television are two parts of the same realm:

One concerned with 'reality' - the domain of the 'real problems of life' – the other somehow concerned with reflecting that reality, whilst being part of it. (Eaton, 1978/9: 81)

He asserts that in fact, television exists "outside society" and is answerable to society only to the extent to which it satisfactorily reflects its concerns. While this argument is accurate in its contention that television is judged by viewers in terms of its realistic reflection of audience's perceptions of the world (Alasuutari, 1991), it is also extremely simplistic. Eaton's assertion that the realms of society and television are distinct ignores the fact that viewers take much of their world view of the first realm from their exposure to the second, and that, for much of the viewing audience television is a medium that can be trusted (Morley, 1980, 1992). For this reason we ignore the ideological messages tucked inside light entertainment at our peril. In a genre such as sitcom, where it might be assumed that

messages wash over viewing audiences more interested in escaping from the 'real' into the 'imaginary' and often surreal worlds of characters for whom the problems and concerns of life are contained within a framework marked out by canned or live laughter, Eaton's two realms are both clearly separated and, at the same time, intrinsically ideologically connected. Thus sitcom becomes a site of struggle using the hegemonic model of resistance and acceptance. Sitcom audiences are, effectively, spoon-fed ideas and values within a paradigm of entertainment that disguises the ideological messages more effectively than in any other genre. Where the girls with whom I worked were quick to point out methods used in both soap opera and popular film to enable them to identify with characters, they considered sitcom characters to be less realistic and therefore less likely to embody familiar qualities.

I think a lot of comedy characters are more like cartoon characters. They don't seem at all like real people. Katie L, 18. A: 1998

I don't believe women like Edina exist. They'd never be able to act like her and still have the job and the money she's got. Or Patsy. She's worse. Samantha, 18. A:1998

Lear was clear about the parameters of comedy as social commentary:

Actually I don't think any television show can do much to unseat deeply held attitudes. I'd be a fool if I thought for a moment that my little half-hour situation comedy can, in 8 years, accomplish something in the area of bigotry that the entire Judeo-Christian ethic hasn't been able to effect in a couple of thousand years. (Lear, op cit)

However, what television comedy has been able to do with varying amounts of success is to focus upon, and sometimes to challenge, traditional views of family values. In addition, by presenting alternative forms of family life, sitcoms may have helped to incorporate an ideology of difference into perceptions of what is normal and acceptable in society. Thus, it

may be possible to argue that the humble sitcom has forged for itself a key role in the subversion of dominant ideologies surrounding the family by presenting families that deviate from the norm and the nuclear, and that its lack of recognition as a site of resistance masks its potential to add to our understanding of the complexity of relationships between text and audience.

History of the Family Sitcom

The history of comedy on British television begins in 1955 with the arrival of Independent Television, a channel designed to wrest audiences away from the BBC through an emphasis on pure entertainment. In response the BBC began to develop a more entertainment-driven approach to its own programming on the new medium of television. Many comedy shows simply transferred from radio to television allowing already familiar characters to become visual to the large audiences the genre generated. Other shows were imported from the United States, introducing British audiences not only to an unfamiliar style of production values but also to a set of cultural values previously only accessible through literature and film.

From the beginning, television comedy made full use of the domestic nature of the medium and used the family as its thematic foundation. Shows focused on the conventional family structure and the potential for humour contained therein. Early shows centred on nuclear families in traditional roles, their friends and neighbours, and the forces that week by week wreaked havoc on the predicament in which the family found itself. It was a successful format that is, by and large, still used today in the genre. The concept of family and family

values of loyalty, support and authority were, as in soap opera, central even where the 'family' was in fact constructed of unrelated individuals. The key difference is that, while in soap opera, threats to the family unit tend to arise from outsiders, in early situation comedy particularly, chaos arising within the family tended to be wrought by the actions of wives and mothers.

The first American situation-comedy to be screened on British television was the popular *I Love Lucy Show* featuring American comedienne Lucille Ball and her real-life husband, bandleader, Desi Arnaz. An established entertainer already, Ball developed her scatty persona as Lucy Ricardo (later becoming Lucy Carmichael and Lucy Carter), a wife and mother who dreamed of breaking into show-business in a range of guises, each as unsuccessful as the last. Week after week audiences watched her rebel against her situation only to find herself placed firmly back in the confines of her role as homemaker through a combination of circumstance and ineptitude.

The *I Love Lucy Show* represented the changing nature of the housewife in the 1950s and 1960s, from the homebodies persuaded to leave the jobs they had taken on during the Second World War and return to domesticity, to frustrated dependents looking to develop professionally and as women.

Freud stated that:

Persons become comic as a result of human dependence on external events, particularly on social factors, (Freud, 1960: 196)

His assertion that the human need to make sense of the world around us is a product of the ego's attempts to impose order on its environment, enables comedy narratives to build on the possibilities for humour that emanate from this inherent human condition. Sitcoms work from within a framework of realism, creating absurdity from the simultaneous application of plausibility and implausibility of motivation and behaviour (Palmer, 1994:117), and the success of shows like *I Love Lucy* and *The Burns and Allen Show* (Syndicated 1950-58) derived primarily from creating discourses of femininity from female behaviour which deviated significantly from that prescribed in other media of the time.

For women in early television comedy roles were defined by the limited parameters established for wives and mothers. Much of the comedy in *The I Love Lucy Show* derived from her unsuccessful attempts to break away from the confines of her home and into the world of entertainment. Lucy's ingenuous behaviour and responses to her situation, which regularly resulted in her being spanked by her husband and, on occasion, by other men as punishment for her efforts to gain her independence, reduced her to the status of a helpless child. It was a status reflected in many comedies of the time where women were portrayed as helpless and childish, in a narrative structure that, for Patricia Mellencamp embodied "a political determinism in which women find a subordinate place" (Mellencamp, 1986:91).

Similarly Gracie Allen, star of *The Burns and Allen Show*, regularly reduced the world around her to chaos leaving it to George Burns, her husband on and off-screen, to put things right. Allen's humour was verbal rather than the slapstick comedy of Lucille Ball, but her inability to function independently of her husband created similar havoc. For these

women, powerful and idiosyncratic stars in their own right, there was an irony in their depiction of naïve and child-like housewives so far removed from their own experiences. Yet for audiences the use of the “humorous rebel or well-dressed, wisecracking, naïve dissenter” (Mellencamp, 1986: 81) allowed both men and women to vicariously experience the ‘dangers’ of allowing women to venture out of the home environment. It was an object lesson in the ‘logic’ of female subordination that established a discourse of gender restrictions acted out and demonstrated through comedic narratives and resonant with ideological messages and hegemonic controls. For Graeme Burton, such messages relate to power relations:

The way that television may ‘talk about’ women within the discourse of female gender takes an ideological position on women, on their place within society in terms of power or lack of it. (Burton, 2000: 31)

This view may be widened to consider the way that television has developed, particularly through the genre of situation-comedy, a set of discourses around the issue of motherhood and lone parenting. The positioning of women as mothers remains fundamental to television comedy even as discourses of female roles begin to fragment and evolve.

Patricia Mellencamp suggests that the hegemonic messages being directed at men and women in the 1950s through the ideologies of domesticity and gendered responsibilities fitted the general zeitgeist:

That TV and particularly situation comedies would, like radio, both serve and support the new, imaginary, blissful domesticity of a ranch-style house, backyard barbecue, and a bath and a half seems logical. (Mellencamp, 1986: 81)

For her, comedy is “a powerful and unexamined weapon of subjugation” in which narrative is used “offhandedly” as currencies of “audience exchange” (Mellencamp, 1986: 90-1). Her view is certainly borne out in the early representations of women and motherhood in television comedy shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *The Burns and Allen Show*, *Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC 1952-66) and *Father Knows Best* where motherhood was constructed around discourses of patriarchy and masculinity, and women were treated in the same way as the children in the narrative, to be humoured, chastised and instructed. Mellencamp’s views of comedy are more problematic in terms of modern sitcom and need to be further discussed later in the chapter.

A second strain of family comedy in the 1950s concentrated on the role of fathers within the household. The sitcom *Father Knows Best*, a “whiter than white comedy of bourgeois gentility” (Marc, 1989: 77), defined normality for American television viewers by providing the audience with a “model family living a model life in a model environment” (Marc, 1989: 77). Despite the apparent irony in the title (by modern standards), the show took itself extremely seriously and “flung itself into the task of demonstrating proper family conduct with all the ingenuous confidence of a Sunday school film” (Jones, 1992: 97).

Evolving from its radio origins, *Father Knows Best* featured the Anderson family, firmly but fairly ‘ruled’ by Jim Anderson within a patriarchal framework of strict role division that depended for success on audience familiarity and identification with a structured set of beliefs that men were completely in control and their women agreed unequivocally.

Crowther and Pinfold suggest that Jim Anderson reflected the paternalism of American society and “focused it down into family size for easy digestion” (1987:61). His influence on the ‘domesticom’ was great and established a norm from which modern sitcoms, both with and without the nuclear family structure, strive to free themselves with varying amounts of success. The show ran from 1954 until 1960 and every show contained a moral – a convention still employed by its successors, reflected in shows like *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-92), *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC 1990-96) and *The Bernie Mac Show* (CBS 2001-present), and parodied in *Malcolm In the Middle* (Fox 2000-present) and, most successfully, *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989-present)²⁸.

Jim Anderson’s authority was affectionately applied, the women were feminine and submissive, the son “a chip off the old block”, and viewers loved them. As a family unit they shared and solved problems in a way that would be parodied by the *The Brady Bunch* (ABC 1970-74) several decades later:

Father Knows Best preached many basic lessons: fulfil your promises; respect others; don’t lie to your parents; always do your best work. But if it had one driving theme, it was this: learn to accept your role. (Jones, 1992: 98)

The message was both amplified and underpinned by the contrived plots, another key element of the sitcom genre, which only increased its popularity. As the show climbed the viewing charts it affected and influenced the rest of the genre in the United States, as the didactic element became both accepted and expected, “even when the content didn’t seem to justify it” (Jones, 1992: 102). Comedy was about imparting American values, and the result, according to Jones, was “centrist, ambitionless harmony” (ibid:102) and audiences

²⁸ A show which is so clearly based on *Father Knows Best* that both are set in a town named Springfield, have a female lead called Margaret (Marge) and three children, two girls and a boy (Bud/Bart).

loved it for its mythologized representation of family life, and the benign paternalism of Jim Anderson who was presented as a metaphor for corporate America.

The series was also popular with network sponsors who felt that shows like *Father Knows Best* (and there were many variations) offered the kind of unit at which products were being aimed and reinforced the family-centred messages dominating advertising.

In the climate of the 1950s, dominated as it was by the ideology of the family unit and values associated with it, it is not surprising that there were no shows about women raising children alone. In the United States *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* came closest to breaking out of the rigid framework of the family by focusing on a never-married single woman in her thirties, becoming an early example of a new and important female role: the independent woman. Mary Tyler Moore had come straight from the role of Laura Petrie in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to play Mary Richards, forbidden by CBS to be a divorcee (“‘nobody divorces Dick Van Dyke’” [Jones, 1992: 194]) and refusing to be a widow. Her eventual role as a newly single woman fresh from a broken engagement enabled her to introduce viewers to a new social phenomenon using the familiarity of sitcom in a form that would in time develop into characters such as Ros in *Frasier* (NBC 1994-2004), Murphy Brown and the iconic representations of modern New Yorkers seen in *Sex and The City*.

However, while *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was seen as breaking the mould for women in the late 50s and early 60s, what is rather more surprising is that there were several sitcoms dealing with lone fathers, albeit men who had ‘inherited’ rather than borne

children. In what might be seen as a precursor to the multitude of lone father films produced by Hollywood in the latter part of the twentieth century, this “twist on the family formula” (Jones, 1992: 128) became:

a curious sub-genre of domestic comedy ... built around the principle of synthesizing suburban-esque Anderson-like family situations into urban bachelor households. (Marc, 1989: 78)

In shows such as *The Bob Cummings Show*, *Bachelor Father* and *Family Affair* unmarried uncles take on the role of parent to orphaned relations. In each case the new father is a thirty-something playboy who accepts his responsibility out of sense of duty and love, and learns in doing so, that raising children makes no real demands on his bachelor lifestyle. Indeed “raising children is shown to be not only compatible with a swinging lifestyle but in some ways indispensable to it” (Marc, 1989: 78). In Marc’s opinion these were shows that allowed fathers to know best whilst still being able to go on dates with gorgeous women:

In a strange and subtle way, they predicted or even helped to precipitate the historical age of single-parent households that was just around the corner, (Marc, 1989: 78)

although his comment fails to explain exactly how this was the case when the “age of single parent households” to which he refers is headed mainly by women.

Jones believes that there was a deeper purpose; an attempt to instruct adults in preparation for the role of parenthood and to ‘tame the “Playboy Man”’ (Jones, 1992: 128). While the reasons for such shows may well have their roots in the new opportunities arising for men in the 1950s that were resulting in role conflict and insecurity, they may equally have been an attempt to reassure family men that the grass was not necessarily greener on the other

side and that their parenting skills and experience was of equal value and importance as the lifestyles of the playboy bachelors who featured on television and in the movies.

In the same way that films featuring lone fathers have always been keen to present them as fun and sexy, television comedy has created attractive heroes from men trying to raise children alone. Most recently a British series, *Holding the Baby* (ITV 1997-8) has presented a view of vulnerable but capable fatherhood struggling to look after a young baby when the mother runs away with another man, and in the 1980s *My Two Dads* walked a fine line trying to depict a young girl being brought up by two fathers who regularly dated a string of young women in an apparent attempt to convince audiences that they were not a gay couple. Welding bachelor stereotypes to the comedic treatment of paternity enabled the message of *Father knows Best* to be re-packaged and applied to the father or surrogate father operating outside the sphere of the nuclear family, with the reinforcement that even attractive, trendy, womanising fathers knew as much, if not more than mothers.

By the end of the 1950s suburbia and situation comedy were synonymous with one another and the city became a place where the 'abnormal' family set-up could be found, the "habitat of emphatically exotic persons grouped in abnormal living arrangements" (Marc, 1989: 78). The city was deemed to be a place where a viewer might look for quirky families and childless couples but not for white, all-American middle-class traditional nuclear families "in which father knew best and everyone else knew he knew it" (ibid: 81). It was a principle that remains true to this day. In both British and American sitcoms, lone parents raise their children amongst the eccentricities of city life while nuclear families are placed

in the suburbs or in the country. Roz in *Frasier*, Murphy Brown and more recently, Miranda in *Sex and the City* live and work as single mothers in New York and Seattle surrounded by single and childless friends for whom the child is a strange and discomfoting addition to egotistic lifestyles. Likewise in the British sitcoms *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Second Thoughts* (1991-94) and *Faith in the Future* (ITV 1995-98), Edina and Faith live and work in cities. In these sitcoms, the city may be seen as a physical representation of the anomalies of lone parenting. Sometimes lonely and isolating, other times lively and made up of a large and extended network of friends and acquaintances, the city might be considered to signify cultural definitions of the very nature of lone parenting and its place in society.

In the 1960s, when world events and social changes impinged on every aspect of culture and many aspects of family life were being irrevocably altered, the American situation comedy remained a bastion of traditional family values and structures. Shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* may have borne little resemblance to real families of the time but their themes continued to resonate with audiences who saw in the characters the same qualities of good looks and integrity that they admired in the Kennedys (Crowther and Pinfold, 1987: 62).

The sitcom, the living room within the living room, the mirror of family life, the barometer of the normal thing, remained aloof from the battles outside, that were raging. Drugs, sexual deviance, poverty, violent criminality, and the denial of constitutionally agreed rights could be shown ...in crime shows, in movies or on The News, but such things were not to cross the family threshold of situation comedy. (Marc, 1989: 127)

For women in 1960s sitcom, the boundaries were clear. Despite the changes beginning to be wrought by the Women's Movement, they remained ensconced within their families, acting as stooges for the humour of their husbands, and traditional home-makers for their children. Even in British sitcoms of the 1960s, in which traditional representations of family life were beginning to give way to a new sub-genre of dysfunctional family life, it was men rather than women who led the way. In *Till Death Us Do Part* Dandy Nicholl's portrayal of the put-upon and down-trodden Elsie was a key component of the show's success but her character was insubstantial enough to be relatively unmissed when she was written out of later series.

Indeed, the 1960s saw the beginnings of one of the most popular situation comedies of all time, and one that focused very heavily on the relationship between a lone parent and his son. *Steptoe and Son*, first broadcast in 1962 and running throughout the 1960s and 1970s, created humour out of the fact that the Steptoes were anything but an average normal family. Their setting, their jobs as rag and bone men, and their relationship with each other marked one of the first attempts by television comedy writers to present family life "isolated from the norms of middle-class existence and only occasionally and reluctantly visited by ...representatives of the bourgeoisie" (Neale and Krutnik, 1994: 251).

The Steptoes' relationship displaced the 'normal' father/son relationship, supplanting it with that more commonly found in dysfunctional marriages. It was a formula that not only made the series enduringly popular, but which has been repeated in other series, including *Only Fools and Horses* in the 1980s, *Frasier* and, most recently, *Absolutely Fabulous*. Such

sitcoms distinguish between the 'normal' and the dysfunctional family, and use the conventional and familiar sitcom format to further remind audiences how such forms of comedy:

operate as vehicles for dealing with and making acceptable that which is aberrant or potentially threatening. (Neale and Krutnik, 1994: 261)

Indeed, the separation from the apparent normality of the traditional sitcom family localises and intensifies the deviations of such lone parent families, and the fractured relationships within them serve to highlight unspoken warnings about the consequences of breaking with convention. Shows like *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Stephoe and Son* presented family life as claustrophobic, suffocating and inescapable. The characters were depicted as grotesques, subverting the norms of family values and loyalties so steadfastly contained within American sitcom narratives. For the Steptoes and the Garnetts family life meant being locked into quiet desperation in which only ranting and malice towards one another provided any form of temporary escape.

While British sitcoms were locked into the social realist style underpinning so much of British culture, America looked to other ways of subverting the comedy of the previous decade. Interestingly, this did not involve challenging the fundamental values and assumptions of family discourses. Instead, American sitcoms began to embrace alternative life forms within the traditional middle-class family structure. Husbands and fathers like Darrin in *Bewitched* (ABC 1964-72) struggled to impose the suburban lifestyle on his witch wife Samantha (much to the chagrin of her mother, Elvira), and series like *The Munsters* (CBS 1964-66) and *The Addams Family* (CBS 1964-66) simply transposed the modern

American family into the bodies of monsters and ghouls! Samantha, Lily Munster and Morticia Addams may have looked and behaved differently to the traditional wife and mother, but their espousal of American family values and their roles as home makers was unarguable. Indeed the comedic value of such sitcoms often arose from the essential incongruity of their attempts to behave as normally as their neighbours. With the exception of *Bewitched*, a show that managed to unintentionally encapsulate the growing frustrations of women in the 1960s, these fantasy shows had a limited shelf-life and remained idiosyncratic of the decade in which they exist. (They are not alone in this; sitcoms are often testaments to the vagaries of a specific period and culture, and, viewed outside their designated time and place, either acquire cult status or come to be perceived as outdated, ridiculous or unfunny).

Such shows suggest that if:

the sitcom was not ready quite yet for the comprehensive reconfiguration of the American family, (Marc, 1989: 140)

it was certainly not ready to consider narratives based on women struggling to bring up children alone. Even widows did not appear in comedy series until the 1970s when shows like *The Partridge Family* (ABC 1970-74) and *The Brady Bunch* (ABC 1970-74) began to consider the narrative value of lone parenting in its 'tamest' form. In fact, motherhood itself became noticeably less significant on television as a whole as the 1960s drew to a close. The Women's Movement was urging women to move out of traditional roles and The Pill and The Abortion Act were beginning to give women a sense of being more in control over their fertility:

The ability to determine their own reproductive functions was critical in the shaping of women's status from the early 1970s; and this was reflected in the decreasing significance of maternity in television. (Cashmore, 1994: 117)

However, by the 1970s things were beginning to change within the cosy family-orientated narratives of the sitcom. Norman Lear, who had been responsible for some of the most successful comedy series of the 1960s, began to explore other family structures and ways of presenting humour within them. In 1972 he introduced *Sanford and Son* (NBC 1972-77), a black version of *Steptoe and Son*, and in 1975 he created *One Day at a Time* (CBS 1975-84), a series about a lower middle-class divorcee bringing up two daughters in Indianapolis. For Lear, the new social norms, assembled from massive changes to American society and culture, provided opportunities to show that families, united by love, are able to absorb the "shocks of constant or sudden change" (Marc, 1989: 185).

As social changes affected even the content of sitcoms about nuclear families (Marc describes them as "externally obsessed with race relations, the menopause, inflation and the defense budget" [Marc, 1989: 166-7]), the new style of sitcom rendered the traditional family "conspicuous by its absence" (ibid: 167). Mary Richards, surrounded herself with a 'family' of single people who provided emotional solidarity and, at times provided gentle digs at the pretensions of married neighbours. Mary became the template for single female characters in the first instance, and later for a new generation of lone mothers who would combine maternal responsibilities with the comedy generated by the enduring search for meaningful relationships.

Mary Tyler Moore's production company, MTM, produced a variety of sitcoms during the 1970s that moved the situation outside of the nuclear family and paved the way for the 'surrogate' family sitcom through series which included *Cheers* (NBC 1982-93), *Taxi* (ABC/NBC 1978-83) and *M*A*S*H*. However, the key principles of "unity, allegiance and obligation" (Neale and Krutnik, 1994:239) that underpinned all family comedy, were equally evident as the family began to break up.

In Britain, the sitcom of the seventies also moved away from the traditional family, recreating it in different structures within prisons, hotels and boarding houses.²⁹ The comedy of singleness dominated sitcoms such as *The Likely Lads* (BBC 1964-74), *Solo* (BBC 1981-82) and *Man About the House* (ITV 1973-76) and presented alternative narratives to those of the nuclear family. Even the subject of homosexuality was beginning to surface in comedy series, from the camp, effeminacy of characters in *It Aint Half Hot Mum* (BBC 1974-81), and *Are You Being Served* (BBC 1972-85) to the more realistic and non-stereotyped lovers in *Agony* (ITV 1979-81). Variations on the standard family paradigm were in evidence (although children were increasingly absent) on all channels and across all age groups, with one exception. Despite the introduction of the divorced woman (in the American series *One Day at a Time*, and the widowed father in the British series *Father Dear Father* (ITV 1968-73), the single mother remained a taboo yet to be broken.

By the 1980s sitcom's short-lived flirtation with alternative family structures seemed to be waning:

²⁹ *Porridge* (BBC 1973-77), *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 1975-79) and *Rising Damp* (YTV 1974-78).

Family and 'family value' shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes*, *The Facts of Life*, *Silver Spoons* and *Family Ties*, and later, *The Cosby Show*, *Who's the Boss?* And *Growing Pains* defined the state of the art. (Marc, 1989: 201)

In America, Reaganism encouraged the return to television shows that concentrated on the difficulties of raising families within a moral and ethical framework existing in Republican dreams and television network schedules proved both successful and enduring. Multiracial and intergenerational, the overarching message seemed to be that anything was possible in the oligarchic society of the United States so long as it was achieved from within the security of the nuclear family. As such families became increasingly scarce and the depictions on screen bore less and less resemblance to real households, viewers in America and Great Britain seemed to appreciate them more as escapist fantasy than as the moral arbiters of previous decades, despite the consistency of messages and morals prevalent within them:

If the Andersons had been an idealized version of a 'normal' American family, the Keatons of *Family Ties* and the Huxtables of *Cosby* were like families of gods in a nation of latchkey children. (Marc, 1989:217)

Campbell and Kean suggest that shows like *The Cosby Show* were successful not because of the way they addressed – or ignored – issues of race, but because of their adherence to the ideology of family ties (2001: 279), and Jones argues that the family orientated sitcoms of the 1980s provided easy solutions without even the "certain amount of compromise and sad, wise acceptance" (Jones, 1992: 258) with which solutions were reached in earlier times.

In such company sitcoms featuring lone parents stood out like the statements they seemed to be. Shows using variants of the nuclear family: single mothers, single dads, two fathers, grandparents raising children, appeared to recognize the changing nature of family life and superficially to explore different possibilities and opportunities. In fact these shows rarely challenged the 'norms' established in other shows, and tended to utilise the differences in family structure and norms to provide the source for much of the humour. It was the juxtaposition between normal and 'different' that aimed to remind and reassure audiences of their own normality:

All entertainment has hidden meanings, revealing the nature of the culture that created it. Sometimes the sitcoms don't reveal their secrets easily, for no other form has ever striven so energetically to please all parties. (Jones, 1992: 6)

In the successful series *Kate and Allie*, (NBC 1984-90) for example, the two divorcees and their children simply recreated the traditional family structure as *The Brady Bunch* had done a decade previously. Kate, the more forceful and outgoing of the two women, took on the father's role within the household, while Allie, the more domesticated and introverted of the two, became the traditional mother, dispensing succour and wisdom whilst relying on Kate to deal with outside threats.

For one, the self-assured Kate, a child of the liberal sixties, [divorce] is an opportunity to make a new life for herself, and she calls up endless reserves of drive and ability. For Allie, a traditionalist, it is a revelation of how totally dependent upon a man she had become. The relationship the two women have may be one of much-needed interdependence, but together they are formidably capable. (Crowther and Pinfold, 1987:102)

Capable they may have been, but the subtext of the show - that no man would be able to offer more than the friendship and security they built together - effectively kept the two women single and allowed a substantial part of the humour to be addressed through

unsuccessful relationships with men. For this reason it might be necessary to challenge the view of Neale and Krutnik that *Kate and Allie* was a post-modernist show that reworked and extended traditional areas of content (1994: 244). As unusual (and possibly even progressive) as it was to feature two *women* as key characters driving the comedy rather than supporting men while they did so, the show worked from within the framework of 'normal' family values, simply recreating the familiar while creating comedy out of the unfamiliar setting and family structure. Like *My Two Dads*, *Kate and Allie* operated within a heterosexual paradigm to reassure viewers that, no matter how successful the alternative living arrangements might be, there was always the implicit desire for the 'fulfilment' of a relationship. Thus, there was always a sense of 'making do' about the arrangement rather than one of acceptance. And while Kate's engagement to plumber, Ted Bartelo, collapsed, the less worldly Allie married sports commentator Bob Barsky in 1998, a move which threatened the basic premise of the show and which had to be resolved by a storyline which took Barsky away from home during the week, enabling Kate to move back in with her best friend. However these later storylines changed the nature of the women's relationship, and, in some ways, pandering to discourses of unequal status between married and divorced women; Kate's problems tended to focus on work, often ridiculous campaigns and short-lived relationships while Allie remained strictly family-focused but with the addition of a caring husband as a measure of her success as a feminine woman.

John Hartley suggests that sitcoms about fractured families have long been used to teach audiences about family tolerance and values, suggesting that by the 1990s the potential for addressing family issues through "the 'not-quiteness' of family life" (Hartley, 2001:67)

gave rise to a whole set of new fractured families. They included *Murphy Brown* about an ambitious and successful single working woman (later single mother); *Phenom* (ABC 1993-4), a single mother and her family, *Cybill* (CBS 1995-98), a menopausal and, by definition, often neurotic divorcee and her equally irrational friends; *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), a young witch living with two aunts; *Frasier*, a middle-aged professional living with his brother and his widowed father, *Grace Under Fire* and *Absolutely Fabulous*.

These shows were part of a new set of discourses that substituted the traditional family with alternatives. American shows like *Friends*, *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-98), *Sex and the City*, *Suddenly Susan* (NBC 1996-2000) and, most recently, *Will and Grace* (NBC 1998-present) transposed family values of loyalty and emotional dependency onto friendship and work groups. The recognisable and often stereotyped characteristics of sitcom characters remained but the emphasis on deriving pleasure from familiarity and identification with type and situation shifted sharply from within to outside the family using wit and irony to support characters in their attempts to cope with modern life and relationships. In Britain, series like *Men Behaving Badly* and *Father Ted* did the same thing although visual comedy and slapstick remained a primary source of humour.

Yet, whilst the traditional family faded for a time as a principal paradigm for television comedy, the homogeneity of representations remained reasonably constant. Every show contained a mother figure and most, although not all, created a father-like character to care for and support the more child-like members of the group. In *Friends* Monica nurtures and

cares for the others, even to the extent of working as a cook and revealing increasingly obsessive cleaning habits. The mise-en-scène of her apartment is cosy and homely, and she mothers her friends whether they are related or not. In *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV/BBC 1992-98) Dorothy is the mother figure, with her boyfriend Gary behaving more like a son than a lover throughout most of the episodes. She is responsible and sensible, the one to whom both Gary and Tony turn when they get into trouble and much is made of Gary's attempts to escape her apparent demands, demands that to the viewer seem natural and reasonable within a relationship.

The use of inherent values of the family, simply imposed onto friendship groups, has enabled comedy to develop outside the home without actually looking for new sources of humour within other spheres of life. Modern sitcoms have attempted to play around with conventions of naturalism and narrative, but the consolidatory function of the genre continues to be meaningful and attractive to audiences, using humour as a hegemonic tool to convince audiences that dominant ideologies of the family are natural and sacrosanct.

More recently, a number of successful new family series have emerged. *Malcolm in the Middle*; *My Family* (BBC 2000-present) and *The Royle Family* (BBC 1998-2001) have reverted back to a more traditional situation with nuclear families appearing to be more popular than short-lived shows about lone fathers (*Holding the Baby*) and teenage single mothers (*Life After Birth*) that attracted small audiences and poor critical reviews. While fathers are no longer expected to know best and family life is often held up for ridicule and even scorn, families still work together to resolve problems. In a clear attempt to present a

postmodern version of the sitcom, the BBC produced *All About Me* (BBC 2002-present), creating a family out of two disparate fragmented families. The result was a mixed race family combining a white father and his two sons with an Asian woman, her two daughters and a son who has cerebral palsy. Unable to speak in the series, his internal thoughts form the voiceover as the integrated family muddle on together. Interestingly, in its attempt to avoid stereotyping the characters or storylines, the show resorts to using traditional and conventional British comedy plot devices and sources of humour.³⁰

Thus it would seem that while situation comedy needs to remain in tune with the social and cultural transformations taking place in the real world, the real appeal of the genre remains in its reaffirmation of notions of conformity to and deviance from the norms of the family.

Sitcom Families

For Abercrombie, situation comedy, like soap opera, generally depends on assumptions about how families “implicitly *all* families” are constituted and how they work. “The course of the action is then worked out within those assumptions and ... makes no sense without them” (Abercrombie, 1996: 32). Even series’ titles reflect the emphasis on family values. *Father Knows Best*, *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-83), *Stephie and Son*, *My Family* and *2.4 Children* (BBC 1991-96) are just some examples of how the ideology of family life is expressed and accentuated through titular focus. Abercrombie identifies the world of television texts as therefore:

³⁰ At the time of writing, a second series has been cancelled mid-season by the BBC due to disappointing viewing figures.

a commonsense world in which much is taken for granted and the net effect is to exclude alternative possibilities and to present one meaning as the only real one. (op cit: 32)

In terms of situation comedy this 'one meaning' focuses on a common conception of the family structure so that whether a series features family members desperately trying to escape the confines of family responsibility (*Steptoe and Son*, *Absolutely Fabulous*) or seeking to recreate it from a disparate group of unrelated individuals (*M*A*S*H*, *Dinner Ladies* [BBC 1998-2000]), the fundamental underpinning ideologies of family values are riven through the text like the print through a stick of rock. This view certainly seemed to have resonance for the viewers in my focus group who tended to rationalise their perceptions of television comedy through reference to the traditional representations with which they had grown up. What was interesting was that the young women were, in the main, dismissive of many sitcoms, defining them as "boring" and "old-fashioned", or admitting that the cultural allusions held little significance for them:

I didn't like Roseanne when I was little, I didn't really understand what they were talking about a lot of the time. Gemma, 17. B:1999

I didn't like it either. It was so American and loud. Louise F, 17. B:1999

I hate it when my dad's got old comedy shows on, they're just not funny. But he thinks they're hysterical. Sarah H, 17. E:2002

There was a general agreement that family shows were pitched at an older generation and that the shows that had held real interest and relevance for them tended to be about unrelated groups of young people, such as *Friends* and more recently *The Office*. However, as the subject developed the group began to list favoured series that all related to traditional family structures and, often, contained well-worn family values. All the girls admitted to

enjoying *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a show about a young man sent from crime-ridden Philadelphia to live with his extended family in California. Each episode contains some kind of moral (an element the young viewers were quick to identify and, in some cases, ridicule), and like *The Cosby Show* before it, centres around an idealised family who ‘just happen to be black’. Racial issues are rarely mentioned but the “‘commonplace’ sense of family unity” (Neale and Krutnik, 1994: 243-4) prevails.

Other family shows mentioned included *The Royle Family* and *Malcolm In the Middle*, with *The Simpsons* rated most highly (although questionable in terms of generic credentials as a situation comedy). In each case the young women acknowledged that humour was created through the dysfunctionality of the family set-up, but were quick to point out that the families were ‘normal’ in structure (two parents living at home) and filial affections (family members were deemed to love one another despite their arguments and differing views of the world).

What came across most strongly however was the connection between definitions of the genre and the theme of family life. Several of the young women did not acknowledge that shows that did not centre around families could even be called sitcoms:

I wouldn't call *Sex and the City* a situation comedy. Sitcoms are more like *My Family* and *The Royle Family*, aren't they? Amanda, 17. C:2000

For these viewers it would appear that the family values and messages of the sitcom are integral to the genre. It suggests that the apparent simplicity of the genre masks its significant role in underpinning ideologies of the family and maintaining the political and

social status quo in which significance is actualized by both producer and consumer, and negotiation of ideology is minimal. Jones goes as far as calling the sitcom the “Miracle Play of consumer society” (Jones, 1992: 4), suggesting that:

Some shows hold up models of what our culture thinks we should be like ... Others enable us to dispel some anxiety by laughing affectionately at those who have even more trouble dealing with daily life than we do ... Both types reassure us that there are others out there like us, that we will always work out a way to get by. (op cit: 5)

Politicising Situation Comedy

Yet, within the sitcom genre lies an interesting paradox. While it can clearly be seen to support the ideology of the family, it is the genre most regularly used by politicians to demonstrate everything that is *wrong* with modern family values. George Bush’s famous comment that Americans should be more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons has never been allowed to be forgotten (largely because the creators of the Simpsons took their revenge by writing the Bush family into the animated sitcom and terrorizing them thereafter!), and in 1992 America’s vice-President, Dan Quayle, launched an attack on the show *Murphy Brown*, claiming that it promoted single motherhood over family values. In response, the writers included Murphy’s response to Quayle’s viewpoint in a subsequent season of the series. As a result the American media spent several months publicly debating the issue and single motherhood became a cornerstone of social and political policy both there and in the United Kingdom where the Conservative government was quick to jump on the ‘back to basics’ bandwagon.

The eponymous heroine of the American show *Murphy Brown* was a single woman, played by the respected actress Candice Bergen, working in a newspaper office and representing

the post-feminist independent single woman. In 1992, the show ran the storyline in which Murphy fell pregnant and chose to bring up her baby alone (much in the same way that Roz would do almost a decade later in *Frasier*).

When the writers of *Murphy Brown* made the decision to make the ambitious journalist pregnant they set up a mixed reaction amongst critics and academics in the United States. Some considered it to be part of a trend that sought to diminish the stigma of unwed motherhood while others complained that the show irresponsibly sent the wrong messages about male responsibility and the joys of single motherhood (Dow, 1996:150).

The situation was compounded by the plot device that suggested that Murphy was unsure for a time as to which of two men was the baby's father. Thus, while she was never openly depicted as promiscuous, neither was she sexually exclusive.

Quayle's reference to *Murphy Brown* came during an attack on a:

lawless social anarchy ... directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society. (New York Times, May 20, 1992)

He asserted that "Civilisation falls apart when the family foundation cracks" and that inner-city children need male role models, with marriage being "the best anti-poverty program of all" before calling for a return to the moral stigmatization of illegitimacy (ibid). *Murphy Brown*'s role in this moral decline was seen to be, if not actively worsening, then certainly not helping the matter:

It doesn't help matters when prime-time television has *Murphy Brown* – a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman – mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice. (ibid)

Quayle's over-riding point was that if professional, highly paid women refused to act responsibly, what hope could there be for impoverished women "bearing babies irresponsibly?" He considered that prime-time television was a major influence on inner-city mothers through its "trickle-down theory of values" (Pollitt, 1994: 74). In the same way that television becomes an easy target for so many of the perceived problems in society (from desensitization to violence to changing attitudes to religion) politicians were quick to blame the medium for what was a social trend already well under way when *Murphy Brown* fell pregnant. The use of a fictitious but familiar character created a metonym for the real professional women who were, according to Quayle and his supporters, undermining the institution of marriage and denying children of fathers.

As a result of Quayle's speech *Murphy Brown* responded in the next series by putting her point of view, and in doing so, appeared to speak for the women at whom the Vice-President's attack had been directed:

Glamorize single motherhood? What planet is he on? Look at me Frank, am I glamorous? ... And what was that crack about just another lifestyle choice? I agonized over that decision. I didn't know if I could raise a kid myself. I worried what it would do to me. I didn't just wake up one morning and say "Oh, gee, I can't get in for a facial, I might as well have a baby." (Dow, 1996: 153)

By the time the episode aired in September 1992, both the White House and the producers of *Murphy Brown* were enjoying the fruits of the publicity created by the clash. Quayle arranged to watch the episode with a group of single mothers and the programme enjoyed a

ratings boost. The story made the front pages of national newspapers and featured in America's most popular national television news programme, ABC's *World News Tonight* (21 September 1992).

Bonnie Dow has argued that, far from being the revolutionary text suggested by Quayle and his supporters, *Murphy Brown* contains a level of conservatism well-suited to a genre that makes its political points by:

masking social contradictions and problems, and presenting a portrait of life easily resolved and set in established roles and expectations. (Campbell and Kean, 2001: 276)

Dow's argument here is most relevant. In writing the story of Murphy's pregnancy and decision to bring up the child alone, the show's creators were in fact jumping on board a bandwagon that believed in the early 1990s that an increasing number of single professional women in their 30s were giving up the struggle to find a man to marry and giving in to their biological clocks. It was a myth that permeated through women's magazines particularly during the early part of the decade, and one that was used by the press on a regular basis to suggest that, for these women, men were rapidly becoming redundant ('Going It Alone: Women with everything but a Husband' Daily Mail 12 October 1994, 'Single Mothers by Choice, but Fathers foot the Bill' Daily Express 25 March 1996). Statistically there is little evidence of how many professional women choose to bring up children alone since statistics do not distinguish between these women and others who start out in relationships and then find themselves alone at some stage in the pregnancy. Thus it could be argued that, rather than promoting a lifestyle alternative at odds with dominant values, the show actually tapped into mythologies about professional

women in their thirties, too independent to find a man, who were choosing to become lone mothers.

Furthermore Dow points out that Murphy's child is given an aura of legitimacy when she discovers that its father is her ex-husband and that he chooses to desert her rather than stand by her (ironically citing commitment to political activism over fatherhood). She cites Murphy's decision not to abort the baby simply to avoid the inconvenience of single motherhood as another example of:

the way in which popular texts gain appeal from exploiting and reworking the cultural contradictions at particular historical moments. (Dow, 1996: 139)

In other words, it is easier (and safer) to produce comedy about single mothers than it is to blur the boundaries between humour and tragedy.

Dow argues that the media found it more interesting to highlight a tangible, though fictional, situation (Murphy's pregnancy) than to "grapple with the structural problems that contribute to inner-city poverty" (1996: 154). The attack on the show moved the spotlight from Quayle's "vicious attack on poor, presumably black ...women" into a debate about "Hollywood liberalism, middle class morality, and the constitution of the nuclear family" (op cit, 1996: 154). Quayle's accusations that poverty could be traced to a lack of moral fibre and that single mothers were inadequate mothers, whose poor mothering was directly responsible for inner-city problems, were overlooked in the media's fascination with *Murphy Brown's* apparent contribution to irresponsible parenting.

The opportunity for genuine debate on the issues of family values, the effects of poverty on childrearing and the 'stigmatized construction of the single mother' was lost in the media's obsession with the fictitious mother and the White House's desperate attempts to limit the damage done by Quayle's speech:

The Vice President wanted to give a serious speech about the urban problem and focus on the poverty of values. (Quayle's Chief of Staff, William Kristol, quoted in Walkowitz, 1997: 326)

Walkowitz points out that in choosing to bring up her baby alone, Brown had chosen life over abortion, and that this created problems for Quayle's spin doctors who were unable to decide whether to "embrace her decision as pro-life or reject it for its affirmation of unwed motherhood" (Walkowitz, 1997: 326).

Jones suggests that Quayle's attack on *Murphy Brown* dropped sitcoms back into the national debate which they'd been "sidestepping since the heyday of *All In the Family*" except that in his view, where the Bunkers had managed to generate heated public debate, the *Murphy Brown* furore was "calculated and half-committed on both sides" (Jones, 1992: 269).

What can also be seen in Quayle's reaction to *Murphy Brown* is that the depiction of a middle-class woman appearing to cope with a 'lifestyle choice' contrary to established norms, constituted a threat, not only to the established order of things but also to the entrenched supposition that only the working classes become single mothers. Quayle stressed in his speech that he was not attacking unmarried mothers per se, but the

‘glamorization’ of unwed motherhood, stating that marriage was possibly the best anti-poverty programme there was (Walkowitz, 1997: 333).

Yet for Dow, sitcoms like *Murphy Brown*, despite their relative conservatism, have been at the forefront of creating strong, feminist women. Lisbeth Goodman agrees that while women are generally silenced by a culture that chooses to ignore women’s voices, comedy allows for the breaking of taboos and the “unsettling of norms of gendered response” (Goodman, 1995: 289). This unsettling of norms can be seen across a range of series, from Lucille Ball’s subversion of the housewife stereotype in the 1950s to Roseanne Barr and Jennifer Saunder’s unruly femininity in *Roseanne* and *Absolutely Fabulous* in the 1990s. Several of the young women commented during our discussions that their male relatives and friends could not see the humour in many of the female dominated comedy shows that they enjoyed. It seemed that men found female centred comedy to be incongruous to them, and that this reaction to women’s comedy enabled the girls to create a gendered space into which male experience was excluded:

My dad hates *Absolutely Fabulous*, he says he can’t see anything funny in drunk ugly women trying to be young and trendy. I think he misses the point completely!
Emma J, 17. A: 1998

I love the fact that I can talk about *Sex and the City* with my mates for hours. We talk about their clothes and the things they say. My boyfriend thinks it shows that women are all pathetic!
Kerry S, 19. E:2002

My dad reckons that women aren’t funny. I say we find different things funny to men but he says that that means that men are good at comedy and women aren’t.
Rosie, 17. D:2002

There is a political element to women's humour that perhaps needs further exploration in a future piece of research, but what comes across from the girls' comments is that comedy as a means of expressing aggression, and humour as a form of communication are gendered concepts which serve to distance masculine and feminine constructions of the world around them. The emphasis put on *Murphy Brown* and its fictitious pregnancy by the media became not only a political issue but also one of gender politics. Middle class women seemed to be about to strike out and, like the velociraptors in *Jurassic Park*, to run rampant through middleclass America, reproducing at will and reducing men to sperm donors. Quayle's attack on the morality of single motherhood may not have been an attack on poor working class mothers as he argued, but it was certainly an attack on women's right to choose to give birth and raise a child without a male partner, and the perception of a new breed of 'Amazon' woman.

Television tends to naturalise and make assumptions about the world and television representations are simply a set of assumptions that become perceived as norms that define and shape daily life. The working classes and/or unruly single mothers discussed later in this chapter may be explained away as unnatural and unrealistic (how many real-life Edinas do we meet after all?) but successful, intelligent middle-class single mothers are more difficult to explain away as aberrations or oddities.

Walkowitz' analysis of *Murphy Brown* suggests that it was not just the pregnancy that offended Quayle and middle America, but the "unruly behaviour [and] sexual autonomy unrestricted by marriage or conservative morality" (Walkowitz, 1997: 328). In contrast to

Jones' view that viewers were disconnected from the whole debate by their ability to see the artifice within the construction, Walkowitz argues that Quayle's references to Murphy Brown as though she was a real woman, began to blur the edges of fiction and confused people who were unsure whether Quayle's target was the show in general, Murphy Brown herself or the actress playing her:

For politicians, if Dan Quayle wasn't talking about real single mothers, and he insisted he wasn't, then they had to come to terms with the policy implications of 'family values'. Quayle defined 'family values' as those 'the real America' already possessed; they were universal, understood ... 'Family values' as an ambiguous ideology was a blueprint for an equally ambiguous policy as well. (Walkowitz, 1997:333)

Walkowitz points out that the story of Murphy Brown's pregnancy loosely paralleled that of Liz Walker, Boston's first black female news co-anchor, who was accused of setting a bad example for urban teenagers, among whom pregnancy was increasing in the United States. Attacks on Walker, her life choices and her morality suggested that her actions would provide a bad role model for minority youth in the country and thus, despite Quayle's original denial of links between the real and the fictitious:

The reproductive choices of a single woman journalist were, again, deemed responsible for the problems of urban poverty. (Op cit: 335)

However, these analyses of the show and its political repercussions have tended not to consider the impact of the programme in the longer term. *Murphy Brown* opened the doors for other professional single mothers on American television but, at the same time and perhaps unsurprisingly, has contributed to the naturalization of representations of such women as predatory and emasculating for the men in their lives. Roz in *Frasier* is still man-hungry and neurotic as a single mother, while the depiction of Miranda in *Sex and the City*

is of a woman, not only man-hungry and neurotic, but also incorporating many of the commitment-phobic and judgmental features traditionally associated with men. In an interesting subversion of the norm, the baby's father, Steve, is, from the outset, delineated as the more feminine of the two; it is he, for instance who is more keen to commit and live together, and he who buys a puppy as a child substitute. Miranda's pregnancy even occurs after a 'sympathy fuck' to reassure Steve that he is still attractive after he is diagnosed with testicular cancer and has to have a testicle removed. He is literally and metaphorically emasculated by surgery and by Miranda's refusal to let him take a prominent role in either her or her baby's life.

However Miranda is 'punished' by her own inability to cope with the baby, despite the help she buys in the form of a cleaner, baby nurse and nanny. Her affluence allows her to pay for other women to undertake the traditional feminine roles that she has rejected but she is finally forced to call Steve for help when the cat makes off with the baby's recently discarded umbilical cord stump and Miranda is too 'grossed out' to deal with the situation. In the fifth season, a tired and overweight Miranda is given storylines that depict her trying to get back to her original weight, trying to work out how she can date with a young baby (a concern shared by Roz and Murphy Brown who also want a single woman's life despite their new responsibilities) and missing the life she appears to have sacrificed to maternity. There is a message inherent in the narrative that suggests that being single is an undesirable situation but being a single mother is several degrees worse since men perceive such women and their lifestyles as unattractive, creating an element of didacticism that passes judgement on certain life choices. By the final series, in progress as I write this chapter,

Miranda has realized that she loves Steve and wants to find a way to get him back. Her epiphany comes as he jokes to the baby ‘Brady, stop mommy trying to hit daddy’(Season 6, episode 1 “To Market, To Market”). It is clear that his use of the terms ‘mommy’ and ‘daddy’ together trigger her sudden realization of her feelings and her immediate need to do something to rectify her situation and bring Steve back into the family. Again she appears to be punished when she tries to tell Steve how she feels only to have him preempt her announcement with one of his own:

Steve: You don’t have to worry about me and you anymore; I’ve met someone I really like. (Season 6 episode 1)

Later she tries to help him make cakes for the playgroup (another inversion of roles: Miranda has never baked while Steve is performing the maternal role that she has opted to give up) only to find that they are actually intended as a birthday surprise for the new girlfriend. While Steve’s business and his love-life appear to thrive, Miranda is constantly reprimanded by her bosses for her inability to juggle motherhood and work, and regularly deserted by men who are put off by her situation.

Miranda has paid the ultimate price for her independence, not only is her work suffering, she has lost her man to another woman, leaving her to cope with her baby (and her single life) alone³¹.

While the depiction of the frustrations of single motherhood might be seen to be understandable and realistic, there is an unremitting negativity to Miranda’s situation that is

unlikely to accurately reflect the experience of motherhood for middle class women like Miranda who can afford childcare, home help and who have the support of the child's father. Miranda nags, reprimands and criticizes Steve at every opportunity, and spends most of her time on-screen complaining about her life and her situation. Miranda sees herself as incomplete and her experience is almost entirely negative. Even when she finds that she can fit into the 'skinny jeans' she last wore in 1985, she explains away her success as:

I got pregnant, became a single mother and stopped having time to eat. (season 6 episode 4)

Graham Burton discusses how power relations are represented both explicitly in the ways that television programmes show men treating women, and implicitly through the hegemonic naturalization of certain ways of thinking (Burton, 2000:17). Thus middle class professional single mothers in comedy are 'naturalised' as being unattractively masculine and predatory in their organisation of their professional and sex lives, whilst also displaying the most extreme tropes of femininity, vulnerability and reliance on the men around them.

This style of representation that refuses to allow women on television to reflect the increasing financial and emotional independence of middle class women, whether mothers or not, may be seen to:

Illuminate the densely entangled processes by which women experience the 'double whammy' of ideological containment: identification and annexation. (Stempel Mumford, 1998: 121-2)

³¹ As a postscript, it should be noted that in the final series of *Sex and The City*, Miranda not only marries Steve, but takes on the care of his mother after she suffers a stroke. Miranda is 'rescued' by marriage and shows her gratitude by adopting the traditional roles of wife and mother.

It is no longer possible to analyse images of women as simply 'positive' or 'negative', there are now a multitude of complex meanings that:

Inscribe a position for women viewers that invokes the cultural skills associated with femininity. (op cit: 120)

Several feminist theorists have considered the tension that exists between the pleasures of consuming television texts and the concurrent absorption of patriarchal ideology (Feuer, 1995; Brunsdon et al, 1997; Stempel Mumford, 1998). They have mainly concentrated on television genres designed primarily for female audiences, such as soap operas, cop shows and daytime talk shows, but the sitcom remains relatively neglected as a site of gender discourse. Mumford maintains that there is a basic feminist assumption informing feminist television studies that there is a relationship between the representations of gender that appear on screen and the way gender operates in viewers' lives (op cit: 118). For the young women watching the selection of comedy shows, the masculine appearance and the alternately needy and overly independent behaviour of these single mothers, alienated and annoyed them:

I don't like Roz, she's too pushy. She never manages to keep a bloke, does she? It's not surprising though, she's too loud for most blokes, I think. Emma P, 17. E:2002

Miranda's my least favorite of the four women because she's too hard. She's always seeing the worst in people. Kerry R, 18. E:2002

I don't like Miranda either. I think she's ugly. She's like a lesbian. Especially the way she treats men, I don't think she likes them at all. Sarah H, 17.

I think she treated Steve really badly. Just because he's a barman and she's a lawyer, she thinks she's better than him. I don't think a lawyer would act like her anyway. Rachael, 17. E:2002

The ideologies that underpin television discourses create, alongside other social and cultural institutions, a reflection and reinforcement of the power-relations that determine issues of gender. For the young women, watching television shows which subverted standards of female behaviour and presented alternative family structures, part of the enjoyment of the experience was in the opportunity to pass judgment on lifestyles and the perceived irresponsibility of the behaviour of women 'who should know better'. To these teenagers, single parenting appeared to be more acceptable when the parent could be seen to be a victim: abandoned, uneducated, poor or trapped. It seemed that the girls were more critical of comedy narratives (where interpretations of conventional family life are used to create a framework out of which the anomalous situation can be derived) than they were of narratives of drama (such as soap operas):

I don't think a lot of these single mums are very realistic. Apart from Edina [*Ab Fab*] who we don't expect to be normal, I don't think they behave like real single mothers behave. Hayley, 16. C:2000

I don't think someone like Roz would risk her career for a baby, especially if she wasn't with the father. Kylie, 16. C:2000

Miranda wasn't going to keep her baby but at the last minute she decided not to have an abortion. I think that was done to make her seem more nice but really I think someone like her would have had the abortion. Emma P, 17. E:2002

Emma's comment about Miranda's decision not to terminate her pregnancy unconsciously pinpoints the ideological paradox of sitcom lone mothers. If being a single mother is not accepted or acceptable material for comedy for some, terminating a pregnancy is even less so. Campbell and Kean describe this "mediation of the home" as the way in which television:

Guards its own myths of family and resists any representation which is too extreme, problematic or controversial. (Campbell and Kean, 2001:275)

Marc goes further and characterises situation comedy as imbuing “the banal with potent allegorical force”, a structurally didactic genre that:

Functions as a light-hearted forgiving guide to the conscience for fans who remain unmoved by the book-thumping polarists of either the fundamentalist clergy or the secular humanist faculty...The sitcom rewards them with a morality that is gently taught as a series of lifestyle tips. (Marc, 1989: 161)

For the young women in my sample, the ‘lessons’ were certainly clear when they were presented with the middle-class lone mothers of television comedy shows in a way that was not apparent in other genres or in other representations.

It seems that, where soap opera representations of single motherhood play heavily on an assumption of shared beliefs about the nature of how and why women become single mothers, comedy mothers present slightly more ambiguous and open interpretations for their audiences. The girls seemed unable to identify narrative devices included in texts to create humour, interpreting them instead simply as unrealistic or silly. When, for example, I asked them why they thought the writers might have decided to create the pregnancy storyline in *Sex And The City*, there was general agreement that with all the sex the women had, it was not surprising that one would ‘have an accident’ (as one girl put it). When I asked them why they thought it was Miranda who was given the pregnancy rather than one of the others, they agreed that it was probably less likely that Miranda would get pregnant because ‘she’s the one who’d find it hardest to get a man’ (an answer that makes little rational sense but which seemed to satisfy the young women).

In her analysis of how women construct meaning and pleasure from the soap opera *Dallas*, Ien Ang argued that texts function only when they are read by readers who understand the specific conventions and codes (1985: 27). In the same way that the *Dallas* fans constructed meaning using a subjective understanding of the world, so the young women in my sample used subjective experiences to organize understanding and to judge the fictional experiences of characters like Miranda and Roz in *Frasier*.

When I asked the final group about an earlier unplanned pregnancy in the popular series *Friends*, when Rachel fell pregnant with Ross' baby, however, the girls were clear that the pregnancy was designed to finally get Ross and Rachel back together:

They've been on and off and on and off for years and they [the scriptwriters] needed a way to get them back together permanently. Polly B. E:2002

It is, thus, a combination of subjective experience and sophisticated understanding of convention and code that seems to determine how meaning is constructed in a genre that manages to shift smoothly between the real and the fantastic to create humour and, occasionally, pathos.

Issues of Class in Situation Comedy

In the same way that the young women identified issues of class in soap opera and popular film, without actually articulating their interpretations using such terms, the groups categorised single mothers (and indeed all the female characters we discussed) using a number of criteria. They tended to make initial judgments based on whether the text did

what it was supposed to do. Thus drama is expected to be dramatic and comedy is expected to be funny. Failure to 'deliver the goods' created the harshest response from the girls. This meant that, although Edina was deemed to be unrealistic as a character, her behaviour was considered by most of the girls to be entertaining and unproblematic because they understood the production values of a sitcom even if they could not define the genre. A second criterion was that of identification. If the woman on screen represented an element of life that they could relate to in some way, the young women viewed the character and her behaviour more sympathetically. Thus Miranda in *Sex and the City* elicited less sympathy than other single mothers simply because the girls did not generally find her as easy to relate to as other characters:

I'd have preferred it to be Carrie who got pregnant. She'd have been a lovely mother. Or Charlotte. Because she's so into babies. Sophie L, 17. E:2002

She behaves as though the baby's a real hassle for her even though she's not exactly poor like other single mothers is she? Rachael, 17. E:2002

Thirdly, the girls returned again and again to issues and ideologies of class although, in the same way that they did not recognize their views about women as being representative of a feminist perspective, they did not frame their observations in terms of class. They did not use terms like 'middle class' for characters like Edina and Miranda, choosing instead 'quite posh' and 'rich' to describe educated or professional women. The single mothers also distanced themselves from middle class characters we discussed (although we did not actually watch any texts together) by referring to characters' clothes, apartments and lifestyles to explain the key differences between themselves and the fictitious women on screen.

I wanted to explore further these issues and paradigms of class by showing them episodes of the American series *Grace Under Fire* a series that pitched working class single mother Grace Kelly against the rest of the world to try to find out how far cultural differences (Grace being American) impacted on their interpretations in comparison to class differences.

The American series *Grace Under Fire*, starring stand-up comic, Brett Butler, began in 1993 and featured a single mother struggling to combine work in an oil refinery, care of three young children and her dysfunctional personal life. Grace is depicted as an ex-alcoholic, struggling every day to stay off the bottle, with a violent ex-husband whose pushy mother interferes and constantly denigrates her attempts to make ends meet.

Unlike Murphy Brown and Edina Monsoon, Grace is a working class woman whose lifestyle is not dissimilar to that of Roseanne, albeit without a husband's support. Several episodes revolve around her money worries and concerns about unpaid maintenance by Jimmy, her ex-husband, and her apparent flippant attitude to life, shown through her witty one-liners, only half-heartedly masks her concerns for her family. Goodman argues that:

As the premises accepted and encouraged by cultural representations of women change, so does the role of women in comedy, and the relationship between feminism, power, gender and humour. Humour *is* a powerful weapon, and one which feminists have hotly grasped but have also learned to use in a variety of subversive ways. (Goodman, 1995: 300)

However, MacDonald argues that, for Grace, feminism, as well as maternal anxieties, is dispelled by humour (1995:144). In an unconventional approach to situation comedy, the humour and one-liners are not simply intended to amuse the viewing audience, it is clear

that other characters also enjoy Grace's jokes. She is positioned in relation to Nadine, her married neighbour trying unsuccessfully to conceive and start a family, and to her earnestly politically correct feminist colleague - the only other woman at work - as neither traditional homemaker nor modern trailblazer.

There is a knowing cynicism about *Grace Under Fire* that reflects not only the social discourses prevalent in early 1990s America around divorce and lone parenting, but also the relationship between women and humour itself.

Sigmund Freud defined humour as being "not resigned, it is rebellious" (Freud, 1964: 162-3) while Goodman contends that woman's humour "which relies on satire and self-deprecation" is a "legacy of the cultural objectification of women" (1995: 289). For a character like Grace Kelly, rebellion is restricted to wit and irony at the expense of others, as, in other areas of her life, she has limited control. Where other mothers like Edina Monsoon and Roseanne rebel through attitude and transgression, Grace attempts to conform for the sake of her children, if not herself. Thus her humour signifies the frustrations inherent in her situation: money worries, relationship problems, concerns about her children and a deeper restlessness suggesting a powerful spirit enmeshed in the daily fight to survive.

Freud asserts that:

humour is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt ... or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact that these are occasions for affording it pleasure. (1964,:164-5)

Grace's humour alternates between self-deprecation and self-defence but it is a good example of Freud's view of humour as a means by which we refuse to be brought down by external pressures and wounds. Palmer suggests that humour is conventionally presented as a source of power and prestige in men where it marks out a traditional division of attributes between masculinity and femininity and this division makes:

the attribute of a sense of humour on the part of a woman a threat to masculinity in its traditional form. (Palmer, 1994: 72)

He quotes Cantor's findings that both men and women prefer women to be the butt of jokes rather than the instigator of them, regardless of the theme, to suggest that while women prefer self-disparaging humour regardless of whether the self-mocker is male or female, men prefer humour to mock others – particularly women.

Within the maternal paradigm (or indeed any paradigm of femininity) funny women must therefore be presented as self-disparaging (Grace Kelly, Murphy Brown) or unruly and out of control (Edina Monsoon, Roseanne Connor) in order for them to be both funny and non-threatening to male viewers although in doing so they may be presented as extremely threatening to the male characters with whom they interact.

My viewing group of young women watched two episodes of *Grace Under Fire* and pointed out that both emphasised Grace's money problems and concerns about her family. In one, Libby, Grace's 10 year old daughter, suffers stress related stomach pains as a result of her mother's financial situation while Quentin, her 12 year old son, is forced to resort to

con tricks to get money from her boyfriend. In the other Grace's relationship with her mother-in-law causes her problems while she tries to come to some financial arrangement with her ex-husband Jimmy. The girls noted the heightened realism of the series in comparison to other comedies they watched. For most it was the first time they had seen the programme and their responses to content and character were cautious:

Is it always like this? It seems a bit depressing really, not like other sitcoms I've watched. Lauren, 16. A:1998

I feel sorry for Grace, she seems very real and you can tell that she hasn't got much money. Emma P, 17. E:2002

The girls identified the show's realism within the *mise-en-scène*, language and appearance of the characters:

They're all quite ordinary looking, aren't they? Usually you get some glamorous actress pretending to be dowdy, but these people seem real don't they? Lauren, 16. A:1998

She [Brett Butler]'s quite pretty though. Just more ordinary looking than normal. And she seems tired too. I think she's very realistic. Apart from the fact she keeps making jokes! Kayleigh, 17. A:1998

It appeared that the young women judged Grace less harshly than they did the middle class women of other series. They did not question her situation (ex-alcoholic, ex-abusive relationship), seeming to accept the rationale of her lifestyle against their perceptions of social norms:

I think she's trying to make the best of things, like you would in her place. She wants to get money for her kids and protect them from her problems. I think she's nice. Emily, 16. D:2002

She reminded me a bit of my friend's mum who's divorced. She seems quite loud as well, maybe a bit scary if you didn't know her, but really nice. I've always felt a bit sorry for her, trying to look after four kids on her own. But she always seems like she's having a laugh with her mates. Suzy, 16. B:1999

Grace's relationships with her friends drew comments from several of the young women who liked her close-knit circle of friends. They were less enamoured of her boyfriend, suggesting that he was a token love interest, but noting that Quentin's dislike of the boyfriend and loyalty to his father added further realism to the show:

I've known lots of kids who've refused to get on with their mum or dad's new partner. They think they're being unfair to their other parent. Sometimes it causes real problems. Jane, 18. B:1999

When my mum started going out with Alan, my stepdad, my brother behaved really badly whenever he came round. He was rude and a real pain in the neck. I didn't like him at first but I knew he was making my mum happy, so I just got to know him. I think he's alright now. Kerry S, 19. E:2002

To test their responses to different 'types' of single mother further, I decided to show the groups one episode of the short-lived British sitcom *Life After Birth* about a teenage girl who falls pregnant after her first experience of sex (a quick fumble at a party) and is now having to live with the consequences in a damp high-rise flat with a sex-mad friend, two nosy neighbours and the occasional visit from her critical mother.

The group responded more negatively to this depiction of lone mothering. They were critical of the quality of the show ("What a load of crap," Amanda, 17. C:2000) and did not like the way the girls were represented:

They're just stereotypes. One's a slapper and the other's pathetic. And I don't like their fake London accents. Louise, 17. A:1998

Yeah, the blonde one's even got a black boyfriend so she looks even more tarty.
Kerry B, 16. A:1998

I can't stand the neighbours, they're not at all realistic. Just somebody's idea of what council estate women are like. Amanda, 17. C:2000

It seems that the key difference to the girls' attitudes to representations of lone motherhood in shows like *Grace Under Fire* and *Life Before Birth* as opposed to other shows like *Sex and the City*, *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Frasier* came through its apparent verisimilitude and credibility based on their own experiences or perceptions. Here, unlike with their responses to the films and even the representations of soap opera mothers, the girls used social class and naturalized assumptions of feminine behaviour to judge the realism of the show and characters. Their responses to issues of mothering within the paradigms offered by such representations were subjective and based upon their own relationships and world view. The negativity of their reactions to *Life After Birth* (a title that one girl suggested ironically might better have been *No Life After Birth* reflecting the didacticism of soap opera storylines featuring teenage mothers) mirrored their beliefs that the media as a whole is dedicated to denigrating lone mothers, particularly teenage ones.

Thus realism in situation comedy, where it is employed to create a yardstick by which to identify with characters, contributed in some ways to the reactions displayed by the young women to the texts they watched and a series such as *Life After Birth* was discussed more critically as a result than the other British sitcom I screened, *Absolutely Fabulous*, a show that was clearly familiar to the girls in terms of both content and style.

Excessiveness and Badly Behaved Single Mothers

Absolutely Fabulous first aired in 1992, and was created by comedienne Jennifer Saunders out of a sketch from the successful television series she wrote and starred in alongside her partner Dawn French. In it Saunders portrayed a highly neurotic, trendily dressed mother trying to have a heart-to-heart chat with her down to earth and sensible daughter, offering condoms and drugs within the guise of maternal concern. This premise was expanded to form the sitcom in which she became, as Edina Monsoon, a caricature of the fashionista and an indictment of a generation of middle-class women for whom self-actualisation was more important than family or sexual relationships. The show soon attracted large audiences, earning cult status and critical acclaim. It ran for four series until 1995 and has since been resurrected in a couple of 'one-off specials', the most recent being shown at Christmas 2002 in an episode where Edina travels to New York to find her long-lost son, Serge.

Kirkham and Skeggs suggest that the appeal of *Absolutely Fabulous*, or *Ab Fab* as it is affectionately known, is in its basic structural gag about "a woman who refused to accept the need to behave appropriately" (Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998:288). They suggest that *Absolutely Fabulous* explores conduct and behaviour; responsibility; femininity and masquerade through mother/daughter relations, the relationship between female best friends and comedy based on "women's appearance, the body and ageing" (ibid: 287).

Edina's behaviour is truly outrageous and enables the show to ridicule the attitudes of a capitalist society that promotes materialism, self-centredness and hedonism. Kirkham and Skeggs cite one of the episodes I screened for the groups, in which Edina tries to import and sell Romanian orphans, as an example of the ways in which the show demonstrates both contempt for 'Third World Chic' and the fact that "nothing is sacred from comedy" (Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998: 289) if one is prepared to engage with and transgress culturally defined boundaries of "good taste".

The idea of the unruly woman did not start with Edina Monsoon, however. From Lucille Ball, with her idiosyncracies, reducing the world around her to chaos, to Roseanne Barr, for whom success was built on "an exposure of the 'tropes of femininity'" (Rowe, 1990: 84), female unruliness has been a force that has both intensified and undermined the popularity of the comedienne.

In these women the central element of their humour resides in their excessiveness.

Excessive behaviour that breaks the rules of femininity is combined with an excessiveness of language that creates laughter through its ability to shock and insult. Gracie Allen's garrulousness was used to foreground George Burn's commonsense and created temporary havoc in her home and surroundings. Lucille Ball's whining and conniving to get her own way was presented as a childlike representation of womanhood (Crowther and Pinfold suggest that her "Whaaa!" was the nearest the show had to a catchphrase [1987:2]).

Roseanne's verbal attacks established her intentions to offend and insult those people she considered to be hypocritical and bigoted, and Grace Kelly also uses language as a weapon

to position her as both unruly and out of patriarchal control. Her quips and one-liners are used as put-downs and control mechanisms in a world she observes as both difficult and unsupportive.

Edina is both vicious and disloyal to those closest to her. Myra MacDonald suggests that in *Absolutely Fabulous* “vituperation flows as freely as the champagne” (MacDonald, 1995: 56) and most of this invective is aimed at Edina’s immediate family. Edina may be presented as a grotesque but her attraction to audiences is in the way she articulates the feelings that many people have towards family members but are unable to express. In this her character is an example of modernized sitcom characters as defined by Neale and Krutnik that:

Tend to be marked by a ...disregard for realist motivation, in favour of idiosyncratic ‘alternative’ performance (1994: 246),

and the show itself focuses on hyperbole and distortion of family conflicts and hostilities recognizable to most of us.

Like Roseanne Connor, Edina Monsoon represents a key performer in the development of the unruly woman. Roseanne:

broke down many of the unwritten codes about the comic depiction of the behaviour of mothers and of women over thirty (Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998: 291),

and Edina subverts these representations still further. She makes it clear that she finds her daughter a burden, restricting her from the hedonistic lifestyle to which she feels she has a right. Her resentment is clear:

Edina: Yes, I know I had a Caesarian, darling. But how do you think it feels for Mummy to wake up every morning and look down and see her stomach smiling back up at her, um? You can't put a price on that.

Edina voices the emotion that any parents feel at times; parenthood inevitably curtails elements of personal freedom and choice, but, in her constant caviling and complaining, Edina becomes an archetype of the modern middle class mother depicted by the media as wanting to 'have it all' without taking into consideration the responsibilities of motherhood that last well into a child's teenage years. Newspaper reports of single mothers who go on holiday leaving children at home alone and stories about mothers who kill (Coward, 1997) are other examples of 'unnatural' mothering that ensure that Edina is perceived as an exaggeration but not a fantasy figure.

In television comedy as in so many cultural genres, mothers operate within a parameter of traditional values. They support, rescue and deliver commonsense homilies to other family members who are 'allowed' to be more eccentric. In the recent British sitcom *My Family*, for instance, Susan represents the face and voice of reason in a family consisting of a frustrated husband and several oddball children. Like Bill (Belinda) in *2.4 Children* (a show where even the title is an ironic acknowledgement of the norms of family life) and their American counterparts, Susan's main function is to restore the status quo and sort out the chaos by the end of the episode. Single and childless women are more likely to be depicted as quirky and obsessive; finding and keeping a man is the main preoccupation no matter how successful her career may be. Unfulfilled womanhood creates a vehicle for humour even in a series that claims to celebrate female success (and excess) such as *Sex and The City* (where interestingly it is the most emotionally confused and masculinised character,

Miranda, who has become the single mother in the series). Freud's view that jokes lie within the preserve of the male, and that women tend to be assigned to the place of object between male subjects, may go some way to explaining why the single woman per se, the woman without a man, is an easy subject for humour for both male and female audiences. In the depiction of unruly mothers (into which category single mothers are usually found in comedy series), both the subject and the object combine to create a situation where the woman is presented as a force which equally liberates and constrains through its emphasis on female frustration and social impotence. Both Roseanne and Edina, as Lucy and Gracie Allen before them, are presented as extremes in attitude, behaviour and appearance. Roseanne is fat, loud and disrespectful, Edina is ridiculous in dress and attitude, and badly behaved, and both are presented as opposites to the stereotype of the conventional feminine woman in the media who has reigned supreme in family-centred sitcoms since the 1950s. These women are also rare in the male dominated world of comedy in that they are all the "author of a self over which [they] claim control" (Rowe, 1996: 82), indeed, all but Saunders in her role of Edina, go so far as to retain their own given names: Lucy, Gracie and Roseanne, in a further blurring of boundaries between the real and the fantasy.

Campbell and Kean suggest that shows like *Roseanne* have enabled "a questioning of definitions of gender and sexuality, in particular around the female image" offering audiences a set of "competing visions of what have so often appeared as fixed and certain categories within American culture" (Campbell and Kean, 2001: 211). For female viewers there is inevitably a sense of solidarity with Roseanne and Edina's behaviour even while we distance ourselves from them physically; the young women in my sample described

Roseanne as 'fat and ugly', 'common' and 'hideous', while Edina, more recognizably carnivalesque, was dismissed as 'like a cartoon character' and 'mutton dressed as lamb.'

However, Roseanne, for all her attacks on the gap she perceives between the ideals of the Woman's Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the realities of working class motherhood in the 1990s, remains contained within the paradigms and mythologies of motherhood. She is fiercely protective of her family, even when she includes them within her verbal assaults. For feminists:

gender is a socially constructed phenomenon, a set of learned behaviours and attitudes, rather than some natural and therefore immutable conditions. (Mumford, 1998: 116)

Applying a similar definition to motherhood, that it too is a social construction created around a set of ideological mythologies, I would argue that Roseanne remains consistent within a framework of attitudes and beliefs about matriarchal roles. Indeed her persona is that of the exaggerated mother and her large slack body epitomizes the maternal body identified as grotesque and rebellious by Bakhtin (Rowe, 1996: 84).

Where Saunders' creation differs critically from her predecessors is in the positioning of Edina as a mother.

Like *Roseanne*, *Absolutely Fabulous* aims to subvert the norms of the sitcom genre and remove women from their stereotypical role-sets. Campbell and Kean suggest that *Roseanne* placed the nuclear family as a site where gender relations could be explored and challenged (2001: 209). In *Ab Fab* this site of resistance is extended to include the one-

parent family and family relations. Where *Roseanne* presented a realism of family life, complete with a mother who is “fat, slovenly, loudmouthed and who revels in the chaos wrought by her family” (Campbell and Keen, 2001: 210), *Ab Fab* presents a post-modern view of family life, complete with dysfunctional members and cartoon-like behaviour. In doing so, Saunders creates an overtly caricatured picture of middle-class motherhood and family relationships.

Where *Roseanne* is always defined in terms of her relationships as a family-centred matriarch whose excesses may mark her “in opposition to bourgeois and feminine standards of decorum” (Rowe, 1990: 84), Edina rejects and mocks her own daughter and mother on a regular basis. In the same way that *Steptoe and Son* created humour out of the love/hate relationship between father and son, Edina seeks constantly to distance herself from the sensible, dowdy daughter she cannot understand and the eccentric behaviour of the mother she cannot tolerate.

As representations, Edina and Patsy, who forms her primary relationship, are portrayed as grotesques. Indeed, when Saffy’s play about her life is performed in series 4, Patsy is played by a drag queen, a visual reminder, should we need one, of her increasingly unfeminine appearance and her camp parody of masculine excesses.

Edina’s behaviour marks out a transgression from the expectations of female, and more specifically, maternal, behaviour. She remains uncontained by the social forces of marriage (she has married twice: “one was too short, one was gay”) and motherhood and is

continually distanced from the values associated with both states. Jane Feuer suggests that it is Edina's radical behaviour and exaggerated excesses that appeal to audiences:

The fan culture that formed around *Ab Fab* would seem to indicate that many viewers identified with the bad mothers and therefore against the proper but dull daughter. (Feuer, 2001:69)

Taflinger's identification of the need for comedy to be linked in some way to humanity can be used to explain Edina's appeal. The viewer is invited to make comparisons between Edina's style of parenting and that which we associate with culturally determined discourses of the maternal. Her inability to perform as a mother, or indeed as a daughter, enables us to find humour in the incongruity of her behaviour and appearance. She neither looks nor acts as a mother is supposed to do.

Both views were borne out by the girls in my sample who watched a number of episodes of *Absolutely Fabulous* with me. They were both distanced from and sympathetic to Edina rather than Saffron, suggesting that the creation of both characters was designed to enable audiences to remain largely objective in their relationships with them.

I know she [Edina]'s meant to be based on a real person but I don't think anyone like her really exists, do you? Suzy, 16. B:1999

I suppose someone like her would be a horrible mum, but if you weren't like Saffy, if you were more like us, maybe you'd get on better with her... Gemma, 17. B:1999

Both Feuer and Rowe argue that excessiveness in appearance and behaviour in comedy can be seen through body shape (Edina is obsessed with her weight) and dress. Patsy's sophisticated designer-wear always ends up dirty and unkempt while Eddy's overindulgence with the more outrageous extremes of fashion render her ludicrous and

extreme. Both women drink and smoke to excess and there is a suggestion (rarely witnessed) that they are sexually aggressive and promiscuous as well, although this is suggested more strongly for the masculine Patsy rather than Edina.

Edina's failure to conform to paradigms of the maternal is seen most clearly in her home environment: a house clearly designed by a professional and containing few of the features that mark out the territory of the domestic. Edina is unable to use the gadgets that litter her kitchen and seems ill at ease in a room more regularly inhabited by her mother and daughter. In the competition for Eddy's attention between Saffy and Patsy, it seems appropriate that in series two, Patsy actually sets the kitchen alight with her cigarette:

Saffy: She's inhaled our kitchen

Yet, for all her discomfort, most scenes take place in the kitchen, particularly when Saffy is also in the scene. Edina is most comfortable when she is with Patsy or in one of the other rooms in the house (away from Mother or Saffy) and least comfortable when she is forced to be in the kitchen. Thus the room itself becomes a symbol of the elements of Edina's life that discomfort and trap her: her role as mother, as homemaker and as daughter.

Barry Took suggests that "all successful comedies have some trap in which people must exist – like marriage" and that the 'perfect' situation for a sitcom is a "little enclosed world where you have to live by the rules" (Neale and Krutnik, 1994: 253). This view has been used to describe the claustrophobic father/son relationship that constitutes the central comedic motif of *Steptoe and Son* and it can also be applied to *Ab Fab* in the relationship

between Edina and Saffy, and Edina and her mother. Harold's frustration with and sense of entrapment by a father to whom he feels himself bound by duty as much as affection, is present in Edina, a mother who feels personally affronted by her daughter's dowdiness and her mother's mere existence.

Edina: Gran! Gran! Mum and Gran. Mum and Gran. Mum and Gran. God, it's so depressing. It's like something out of *EastEnders*, darling, isn't it. Mum and Gran... Oh God! I'm sure you could find a more appropriate name for that thieving old person, couldn't you? Like Moomy or Nanu or old Kaka. (Saunders, 1994:109)

Edina sees herself as a victim, the free spirit trapped not only by the responsibilities laid on her by others but also by the physically unappealing qualities she perceives in her mother and daughter. Much of the slapstick comedy of the show is based around Edina's attempts to distance herself from the confines of her family and the indignities she suffers on a regular basis are, in Taflinger's view, designed to let her suffer and survive:

Their physical, mental, and/or emotional well-being may be stretched, distorted, or crushed, but they recover quickly and by the end of the performance they are once again in their original state. (1996a:4)

Saffron is the sensible, old-fashioned, nagging, hard-working member of the mother/daughter partnership in a role reversal that subverts the norm. Like Harold, Saffy worries about her mother's behaviour and habits, while Edina abuses and uses Saffy in a way reminiscent of old man Steptoe's treatment of his son. Yet in both shows, the thought of moving out and living away from the child-like parent is clearly difficult if not impossible. Harold's escape route came through marriage and upward mobility, while Saffy plans the more down-to-earth move to university. Each is unsuccessful in their own way: Harold is constantly thwarted and frustrated by his father's counter plotting and

manipulation, while Saffy is constrained by her feelings of responsibility for her reckless mother.

In the way that satire tends to involve ridicule and implied critique, *Ab Fab* asks audiences to simultaneously admire and condemn the behaviour of Edina and Patsy. There is much to admire in the depiction of two middle-aged women struggling to break free of the controls and restrictions conventionally placed around such women, but equally, Edina's attitude to her maternal duties, shocks and repels. In the first series, a plot-line involving the adoption of a Romanian baby which leaves Edina submerged under an unending delivery of baby after baby, turns out to be a nightmare, but the underlying panic that she experiences in the ensuing chaos, reflects her feelings about motherhood. Indeed much of the humour of *Ab Fab* arises from her total abrogation of maternal duties. She doesn't clean, cook or care for her daughter's physical, spiritual or emotional needs:

Edina: Well I just think it's my duty to guide you through your first sexual experience, darling. I mean you know the facts of life don't you – I did, I did tell you the facts of life, didn't I, sweetie?

Saffron: If you mean that time that you sat on my bed and shook me awake at two o'clock in the morning, stoned out of your brain, and then slurred into my ear 'By the way, sweetie, people have it off', then, yes, you told me the facts of life.

A number of the young women identified the relationship between Edina and Saffy as the element of the show that, for them, created the largest amount of comedy, with one or two suggesting that perhaps their own mothers might actually feel like behaving like Edina at times:

When my mum gets together with her friends she behaves really badly. They go out clubbing and get drunk and she stumbles home like Eddie in the programme. She

thinks I don't hear her but I usually wake up when she gets home because she's really loud and silly. Kayleigh, 17. A:1998

The ironic use of June Whitfield, an icon of British situation comedy, as Mother, signals Saunders' attempt to juxtapose the ideal within the subverted image of motherhood.

Whitfield plays the traditional mother figure associated with sitcom; she spends time at the kitchen sink, attempts to nurture Saffy (much to Edina's chagrin) and treats Patsy as the man of the house:

Mother: Patsy, there you are dear, I need a strong pair of arms. I've got a wardrobe stuck on the stairs.

Yet even this character is removed from reality in her eccentricities and strange behaviour, suggesting that the maternal destiny is to go mad!

Goodman suggests that it is:

possible for women to find support, and even rewards (in the form of laughter, if not money) for subverting expectation through humour: that is, so long as the subversion does not go 'too far.' (Goodman, 1995: 289)

We know that Edina is unlikely to change. One of the key conventions of situation comedy is that characters remain caught in a timeless continuum, and Edina is typical of such characters. It is unlikely that she ever has been or will become a loving or a responsible mother, although occasional clips show flashbacks of remembered incidents from Saffy's childhood and glimpses of Patsy and Edina as elderly women who continue to behave as outrageously as they have always done.

As a mother Edina constantly refuses to address maternal responsibility:

Edina: As your mother I cannot be responsible for your wellbeing.

Kirkham and Skeggs suggest that she defies the moral order that designates family obligations and nurturing as female duties, preferring instead the stereotypically male activities of drunken binges and the pursuit of pleasure. It is her total lack of shame or guilt that creates much of the humour (Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998:293).

Dysfunction and Disloyalty

Ab Fab stands alone in its portrayal of anti-family sentiment. Edina is at her most uncomfortable and vitriolic when she is surrounded by her extended family and ex-husbands. She is excited at the thought that her estranged son, Serge, may be gay, and therefore a status symbol, and seeks him out hoping to spend quality time clothes shopping together. Her disappointment when she discovers that he is not a homosexual is equally extreme and the audience is privy to yet more self-centred outpourings around her personal hardships. Her treatment of her children remains unspoken but self-evident in their responses to her, and locates the viewer as an uncomfortable witness of her caviling. While other single parent sitcoms play with generic formulae whilst continuing to assert family value systems, *Ab Fab*, like *Steptoe and Son* before it, creates its humour out of characters who express more dislike than filial love.

Took's view of entrapment within situation comedy applies as strongly to Edina and Saffy as it does to the Steptoes. Edina is ensnared by her obsessions with her body and her fear of

ageing, whilst Saffy is trapped by her perceived responsibilities and need to take charge of the world around her.

In *Steptoe and Son*, sentiment and femininity are replaced by a

comically aggressive 'masculine' conflict through which any problematic emotional and plot complications can be discharged, (Neale and Krutnik, 1994:256)

although they manage to masquerade the roles of a married couple with Harold performing the role of downtrodden wife and mother to his father.

The women in *Ab Fab* do likewise, creating aggression to foreground the instability of the relationships, but using issues of femininity and female roles to invert traditional values. However, where women present a threat to Harold and Albert's relationship, the threat to Edina and Saffy's comes from another woman, Patsy. Men are rarely evident in the series, and when they are, any sexual threat is removed through emasculation (hen-pecked husbands, Marshall and Max), homosexuality (first husband Justin, and Hamish) or irrelevance (most male characters have few lines or involvement in the storyline). Female relationships are paramount, and the mother/daughter relationship remains central although, in the same way that *Steptoe and Son* subverts the relationship, Edina and Saffy take on each other's prescribed role with Saffy the nagging, complaining mother and Edina the immature, demanding and complaining child. Yet, as *Steptoe and Son* also develops the frustrations of the married couple within the father and son relationship, so does *Absolutely Fabulous* play with notions of conventional gendered positions within marriage. Edina and Saffy enact the same discourses of marital discontent as Albert and Harold, while Edina

experiences the positive, albeit platonic, elements of a relationship through her solid, mutually supportive and egalitarian friendship with Patsy, who also transcends gender (having apparently changed from male to female at some point in her history – another strategy designed to play with discourses of gender and role).

However, while issues of motherhood in general are used as material for comedy, issues around lone motherhood are ignored. Edina does not dwell on her situation, but she constantly dismisses and belittles her husbands, the fathers of her children, blaming them for the fact that she has a son she never sees and a daughter she can't understand.

Edina thinks of herself as a single woman whose life is only slightly affected by the fact she is also a mother. There are no political points to make and no social commentaries to be enforced upon the viewing audience, a fact which was not lost on the young women who watched several episodes of the show. Interestingly they tended to make judgments about Saffy rather than Edina:

If I had a mum like Eddy I'd think she was a right laugh. I'd want to borrow her clothes. Emily, 16. D:2002

Saffy's so boring. At least Edina and Patsy have a laugh. Kirsty, 16. C:2000

Richard Taflinger's suggestion that a key element of television comedy is the violation of norms and the incongruity of behaviour against what we know to be real (Taflinger, 1996a) can be used as a yardstick to Edina's behaviour. The young female viewers of *Ab Fab* certainly detected a violation of normal maternal conduct and it was in this that the

essential humour of the show occurred, but the level of incongruity with their perceptions of real-life mothering decreased its realism and therefore its effect on them:

It's funny because the characters are so false and unreal. Lauren, 16. A:1998

I can't imagine anyone really behaving like Edina and Patsy. I know there are mothers who don't get on with their kids but I think Edina and Saffy are different from real life mums and daughters. Rosie, 17. D:2002

There was a general consensus that the humour in *Ab Fab* derives from the mother/daughter relationship but, when pressed, several of the young women considered that the nature and style of the series actively prevented them from judging Edina as a single mother:

I don't think you're meant to think about Edina as a bad single mother, just as a bad mother who is single because she's too awful to find a bloke. Katie L, 18. A:1998

So it would appear that the use of excess in a postmodern comedy series like *Absolutely Fabulous* which employs an understanding of sitcom codes and conventions to transgress boundaries of realism, enables viewers to distance themselves and thus reduce the 'need' to judge content and measure enjoyment by the yardstick of realism, a criterion already identified in my previous chapters.

Situation comedies like *Ab Fab* and *Steptoe and Son* make the lone parents so extreme in their behaviour and attitude to their children that the audience reacts intellectually rather than emotionally. We can forgive Edina for, in effect, neglecting her daughter, because she is too outrageous to be realistic. However, as one of the young viewers pointed out, there is a scene in series 4 when Edina, reminded about Saffy's kitten that disappeared mysteriously while in Patsy's care, presents her daughter with a new kitten, to the

appreciative sighs of the live audience. When faced with a rare example of good mothering, the audience is first moved, and then ready for the humorous denouement that will place Edina back in her, more recognisable, bad mother role.

For Taflinger, the humour depends on the audience being reminded of humanity and the inappropriateness of the behaviour of the characters (1996a). Edina's behaviour is mechanical throughout. She has no recognition of her treatment of Saffy or of the grotesque figure she cuts with her ill-chosen clothes and laboured mannerisms. Saffy, for her part, is not the passive victim she might appear to the audience because she distances herself through the dowdiness of her dress and the sulky body language she chooses to display.

Edina the mother is central to the incongruity of the show; Edina the lone mother is not. Her behaviour breaks rules, mores and norms, but in doing so she represents an individual and not a type. Edina is not presented as a typical single mother, rather the humour is facilitated around her distance from the norms of parenting whether it be alone or as part of a couple. The reversal of the traditional roles of mother and daughter create an immediate dissonance designed to shock and amuse.

In order to get the joke, one must therefore understand the social context in which it exists. Edina is a caricature of middle class, egocentric, parenting in which style reigns supreme over substance. Her very existence as a comic character relies on the audience's understanding of the reality she lampoons. The further Edina is distanced from 'normal' parenting, the more humour is derived from the show. Exaggerating what is normal and

taking it out of proportion is standard in comedy, and the radical excesses of Edina and Patsy deflect judgments about their conduct.

In the mainstream domestic sitcom, good parenting and filial concern are paramount providing models of conformity for bourgeois audiences. In alternative comedies such as *Steptoe and Son* and *Absolutely Fabulous*, the violation of good parenting and the bitter exchanges between parent and progeny, provide humour and, through their excesses, reassurance that no matter how badly we may behave, and how much dislike we may feel for another family member, we are still normal in comparison to the characters we see on screen taking their frustrations to extremes.

It is crucial for Saffy to be an inherently unlikeable character for the comedy to work in *Ab Fab*. Like Harold Steptoe, her behaviour and attitude are designed to keep audience sympathies alternating between parent and child, although this is more noticeable in *Steptoe and Son* where Wilfred Bramble used pathos and bathos to sway audience emotions. In *Ab Fab* neither character is particularly endearing and the audience is easily able to keep an emotional distance.

In series four, Saffy's play about her life is designed to be taken seriously by the theatre audience, but fails to achieve this and the actors playing Edina and Patsy take the opportunity to play the script for laughs. Saffy's attempt to right the wrongs of her upbringing and to articulate her pain, backfires and it is Edina who manages to steal the limelight.

It is clear that, in many ways, *Absolutely Fabulous* pushes the borders of the dysfunctional family paradigm to its extremes. A mother who drinks to excess, indulges in casual sex with a friend's husband and wilfully neglects her daughter to pursue her own hedonistic pleasures, and a daughter, old before her time, humourless and sanctimonious, ensure that the show is unlikely to achieve closure. We only rarely glimpse normality and know that the comedy is in its temporal nature:

We wait for Edina to be nice to her daughter but if we get such a moment occasionally it is only to have it immediately snatched away. (Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998:292)

I asked the young women in my sample the question, what makes *Ab Fab* funny and their answers were unequivocal. For them the humour came directly from the maternal paradox, the tension between culturally determined boundaries of behaviour and the choice made by Edina to actively ignore such pressures. They laughed primarily at the slapstick style comedy of two middle-aged women behaving outrageously, dressing ridiculously and breaking the rules, and they mentioned time and time again the enjoyment they got from watching television in which women created the comedy rather than playing second fiddle to men:

It's like *Sex And the City*, I love the fact that the men are just there to be boyfriends and sex objects who you can make comments about. Katy M, 16. D:2002

And I love the fact that it's alright to look at clothes and shoes and hairstyles and not feel silly doing it. Kerry Ann, 17. D:2002

Unless you're with a bloke! Mel, 18. D:2002

Ultimately, we are left unclear as to whether *Ab Fab* is subversive in feminist terms. Edina and Patsy are post-modern in terms of their appearance and attitudes to life, borrowing liberally from decades and lifestyles often held to blame for the apparent vicissitudes of modern life, and, like the equally fashion-conscious and post-modern characters in *Sex And The City*, arguably post-feminist too, in their acceptance of their essential freedom to live alternative lives to those traditionally prescribed to women. However, within this paradigm of *female* choice, we are reminded that attitudes toward the *maternal* role are altogether more culturally prescribed, and that the distinction made between respectable motherhood and the amoral activities of a woman for whom motherhood is an ordeal rather than a privilege, reminds us that, within the hegemonic ideology of maternal mythology, it is all mothers, and not just those who are single, who find themselves defined and evaluated in terms of a patriarchal ideal.

Freud's belief that humour is rebellious, designed to protect the ego from hurt and suffering, can be usefully applied to the role of 'unruly' women in sitcom (suggesting that the relatively scant attention it has received from feminist critics needs to be rectified if we are to gain a broad understanding of how women are represented generally in modern television). Back in the 1950s, the opportunity for women like Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen to break away from norms of comedy wives and mothers was "a rare and precious gift," a "tactic of survival" (Mellencamp, 1997: 73). In the early years of the twenty-first century women in sitcom remain, in the main, entrapped in roles of suburban motherhood, dishing out advice and sense with the meals they inevitably serve to a family who are too busy having fun to notice. It is only in the 'dysfunctional' families – those made up of

disparate friends, work colleagues and those in which the nuclear family has been replaced by alternative structures, that women become slightly more liberated in television comedy. Yet, while sitcoms appear to be more interested in presenting alternative discourses of parenting and family structure, than other genres, we should not get too excited. The paradigms of negativity exist as clearly in sitcom as they do in other forms of media representation, and while sitcom lone mothers entertain and occasionally shock us, they do not, on the whole, offer us positive alternatives to the dominant ideology of the nuclear family, complete with genial father! Indeed, in a genre where comedy is created from the absurdities of 'ordinariness', lone parenting can clearly be seen to be a fundamental example of how absurd ordinary life can be!

Chapter Seven: CONCLUSION

When I began to research the subject of lone parenting in the media and its relationship to the realities of modern family structures, the Conservatives were in power and fiercely promoting their 'back to basics' policies designed to re-establish traditional family values within the nuclear two-parent family. Seven years on, the Government is New Labour but the agendas appear to have remained the same. Prime Minister Tony Blair uses his own family to demonstrate the importance of the traditional two-parent family in the socialization of children into healthy, well-adjusted members of society, and newspapers like The Sunday Times continue to print articles suggesting that "single mothers are more prevalent in countries where the state provides plenty of benefit" (September 7th 2003).

Lone parenting is a feature of modern society that is not going to disappear in the twenty-first century. On the contrary, statistics indicate that, as general attitudes to marriage, divorce, abortion and sex continue to become more enlightened, largely in response to public acknowledgement that lone parenting is no longer the stigma it was, the numbers of lone parents will continue to grow. Single, separated, divorced and widowed parents bring up children, often on the lowest of incomes, carrying out the roles of two parents often more successfully than couples do, and it is now unlikely that anybody does not have some kind of dealings with a lone parent in any capacity at all.

Yet the mass media, while acknowledging the existence and proliferation of these new family structures throughout cultural texts, appears resistant to accepting such changes as normal and continues, in the main, to present lone parenting as either a deviant or

heroic activity, finding ways to create paradigms of difference and subversion within popular texts. In the three genres I have chosen to analyse in depth, lone parents, and particularly single mothers (a signifier of deviance, poverty and transgression) have been presented as alternative family structures that require some form of control or redefinition. Thus, single parents in the news are framed as a social problem, a folk devil that threatens to destroy the ideology of the family and the values of honesty, loyalty and self-sufficiency the (generally patriarchal) family traditionally incorporates. Young single mothers represent a rampant sexuality comparable to the predators in *Jurassic Park*: dangerous, uncontrollable and ultimately a threat to masculinity and the male, while magazine articles about lone parenting focus on the negative even when they purport to present a positive aspect to the subject ("A Survivor's Guide to Single Motherhood", You Magazine, 9th February 1997). The underlying mythology of the uncontrolled sexuality and deviance inherent in the 'manless mother' remains entrenched within media culture even where efforts are made to offer texts that are transgressive, alternative or even subversive, and the resulting representations are thus inevitably underpinned by the negativity of such 'truths'.

Popular modern film texts position single mothers as victims of themselves or others who require rescuing by the (male) hero. Of the films used for this thesis, only *Little Man Tate*, a film made by a lesbian director brought up in a lesbian household, avoids this scenario, although the single mother is still, in a sense, rescued by the woman who fulfils the masculine role of educator and who is in turn 'rescued' by the naturalised mother who works on intuition but ultimately welcomes her son's second mother into her home. Films operate by working with cultural mythologies to naturalise and embed them, thus the heroine is inevitably 'rewarded' with love and the promise of marriage

and a family by the conclusion. At the end of *Mrs Winterbourne*, when Shirley MacLaine's character is finally made aware that the woman she considered to be her daughter-in-law is in fact a penniless single mother whose child is not her grandson at all, she simply states: 'He will be'. In film language it is this simple to address the issues of poverty, abandonment and stigma that confront many single mothers around the world. Hollywood cinema has appropriated the American Dream of success and happiness to those who deserve and work for it, and adapted it to fit the Classic Hollywood Narrative, creating a realism based on expectation rather than on real-life experience.

Buckingham concludes his investigation into the ways in which young viewers interpret the text of and messages within *EastEnders* by noting that a whole range of broad anxieties and tensions can be displaced by blaming television, and he suggests that:

The major problem with such debates is that they tend to regard the relationship between television and its audience in isolation from the broader pattern of social relationships of which it is merely a part. (Buckingham, 1987:202)

Certainly my own research, working with groups of young female students and the group of single mothers, supports his contention that the relationship between viewers and texts is dependent not only on the understanding they have of how texts are constructed and 'work' on the viewer, but also on the personal knowledge and experience that even young audiences bring to the process of interpreting and making sense of texts. Interpretation of texts remains an intensely personal experience that requires negotiation on an individual basis using the understanding we have of the world as it affects ourselves and those around us.

I found that the young women read the texts we discussed (and therefore it is logical to surmise that they read all media texts in a similar way, even when they are not working in the formal environment of a structured session) on three levels. Firstly, they interpreted the texts using their understanding of generic conventions and codes. Thus they were able to discuss films, soap operas and situation comedies using different criteria and strategies by which to construct meaning. In the soap operas we watched there was a familiarity with characters, settings, storylines and themes that had clearly developed through sustained and regular exposure to the more popular series:

EastEnders, *Coronation Street*, *Neighbours* and *Hollyoaks*. This specific familiarity did not always extend to the situation comedies we watched, indeed very few of the girls had watched *Grace Under Fire*, which was broadcast late at night for only a few series, but the girls were able to use their understanding of the sitcoms with they were familiar to make meaning out of the unfamiliar texts. Thus even when the programme was new to them they soon identified the key themes and intended readings of character and motivation through awareness of generic code and convention.

In the analysis of film, the young women were able, not only to successfully predict the eventual outcome to each text using knowledge of genre and narrative, but also to describe how characters contributed to the narrative flow, identifying such characteristics as 'strong-willed', 'stubborn' and 'weak' with female protagonists, before suggesting that these characteristics were essential to drive the narrative to a conclusion in which the woman might be 'rescued' by the film's hero. They were clearly familiar with an overarching set of ideologies pervading Hollywood cinema that underpinned the texts we watched and discussed, and they could articulate why certain

themes (such as family values and gendered positions) were constantly and consistently addressed through popular film and television texts.

The second level of the process of interpretation and meaning construction occurred once the initial understanding of form and content was complete. This was the point at which the girls addressed the realism of the text in terms of its genre and the methods employed to 'sell' the messages to an audience. Thus, at this level, they would compare texts to other similar or different films or programmes, and judge them on the success of methods used to establish an element of credibility and believability for the audience. For example, the film *Erin Brockovich* was deemed more credible than others watched because the young women were aware that it was based on a true story, even though they understood the ways in which even true stories are adapted for film narrative. Similarly, soap operas were assessed by the girls in terms how they met the criteria of the genre and the ways in which the characters and storylines compared to others they had experienced in soap operas. In this way they made comparisons with the ways in which single mothers are portrayed in soap operas by considering a range of examples and looking for similarities and differences in construction.

Thirdly, the girls used their own experiences or their perceptions of the world around them to judge the texts against 'the real world'. It was at this level that the process of disengaging themselves from the messages and ideologies incorporated into the texts could be detected. Thus they were able to acknowledge the 'common sense' messages that warned of the dangers of unprotected sex, at the same time as they ridiculed the idea that every girl who has unprotected sex in a soap opera will fall pregnant, using their own, and friends' experiences as evidence. Some of the girls found it difficult to

understand that it is quite acceptable to enjoy a programme or film for its content and style, without having to find it believable or credible within the context of real life and real experience, and there was an element of judging texts based on their relationship to lived reality.

However, Buckingham contends that texts do not contain meanings that can simply be “extracted and defined” (1987:203) and that we need to consider how texts work to enable the viewer to make meaning out of them. My research suggests that there are, in fact, sets of meanings and preferred interpretations that audiences are invited to accept or reject, and that the issue of lone mothers is a good example of this relationship between producer, text and audience. There is no evidence to suggest that the people who make the television shows and the films discussed in this thesis have any strong political or moral axes to grind, and that their relationship to the messages inherent in the texts they create is as often objective and impersonal as it is subjective and political. Yet the repetition of form, content and theme creates familiarity and understanding, and enables such messages to be transmitted and naturalised, obliging individuals within the viewing audience to actively disengage from the beliefs and ideologies underpinning the narratives they consume. Where this process is underlined, by the agenda of ‘serious’ news agencies, to reaffirm the apparent deviance of single mothers and their offspring, it becomes much more difficult for such disengagement to successfully take place.

Throughout my research I have been aware that, in choosing to discuss the issues of lone parenting presented in this thesis, there have been others that I have, through the restrictions of thesis size and time rather than inclination, been forced to exclude.

Representation of lesbian lone mothers for example, though rare in mainstream cultural

texts has been foregrounded in comedy shows such as *Friends*, reinforcing my argument that sitcom frames non-traditional families to create humour out of alternative structures. There is also a whole separate thesis to be written around the representation of lone fathers, an area that I have merely touched on in my own research in order to present a comparison with lone mothers but one to which I have not been able to do full justice. Both subjects are fascinating and relevant, and reflect the different ways in which media texts are used to reinforce the patriarchal values of family structure that continue to be articulated throughout popular culture as a means by which dominant ideologies may continue to be reinforced.

It is also important to acknowledge the range of representations of lone motherhood that are now evident throughout media texts. The texts I studied often offered contradictory messages and ambivalent interpretations, something that was apparent in the responses that the young women constructed from their own readings. Several of the fictitious women analysed had strong and positive characters, and their apparent control over their lives and actions often impacted more on the young women than the messages of the implied incongruity of their situations and behaviour that I found implicit in the narratives and representations. The young women, for example, perceived Erin Brockovich and Grace Kelly to be 'survivors' attempting to take control over their lives, rather than foregrounding their apparent weaknesses as sexualised women and mothers as I did. Therefore it seems reasonable to offer up some degree of optimism in the representation of this social group by considering that despite the engrained mythology that undeniably continues to ensure that single mothers remain, on the whole, a stigmatised and problematised group within cultural texts, the way that audiences interpret such representations may not always buy into these myths and ideologies.

Ultimately however, it seems as though the question of how the media relates to a group it has chosen to problematise and stigmatise comes down to one thing. While lone parents (and particularly single mothers) are perceived as an economic drain on society; while they are consistently held accountable for so many of the social concerns that undeniably threaten established norms and structures, and while the nuclear family (as increasingly unusual as it becomes in a secular society that places less emphasis on lifetime commitment and relationships) continues to be upheld as the social, political, economic and cultural ideal, the dominant ideologies and mythologies that underpin cultural output will persist in reinforcing social differences rather than similarities. And while the mass media continues to operate within a social context which encourages a 'blame culture' over individual responsibility, it is likely that isolated and disenfranchised groups such as young single mothers will remain media scapegoats despite the increasing likelihood that audience members will find little resonance within the texts they consume, and little relationship between such texts and the lifestyles they lead in the real world.

APPENDIX 1a:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Before we begin to work together to discuss the programmes and films you are about to watch, I would be grateful if you would answer the questions below. Your responses will help me with my analysis and research and will be treated in confidence throughout my work, will not be given to any other interested parties and will be destroyed at the end of my research period.

Questions:

Name:.....

Age.....

Are you currently living (please tick appropriate box):

- Alone ☐
- Alone (with child/ren) ☐
- With a partner ☐
- With friend/s ☐
- With both parents ☐
- With mother ☐
- With father ☐
- With legal guardian/s ☐
- With adult/s (unrelated) ☐
- With mother and her partner ☐
- With father and his partner ☐

Please tick as many of the following as have applied to you at **some stage** in your life:

- I have lived with both my natural parents ☐
- I have lived with my mother but without my father ☐
- I have lived with my father but without my mother ☐
- I have lived with my mother and her new partner/s ☐
- I have lived with my father and his new partner/s ☐

Until the age of ten, was the largest part of your life spent living with:

- Both natural parents ☐
- Mother alone ☐
- Father alone ☐
- Mother and other partner ☐
- Father and other partner ☐
- Adults other than your natural parents ☐

Please note that for the purposes of my research 'living with' refers to your main home for a period of six months or more. If you prefer not to answer any or all of the above questions please feel free to hand the form back with areas unticked.

Thank you for your help

APPENDIX 1b:

QUESTIONNAIRE

The results of the questionnaire gave the following information:

Numbers of young women currently living:

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Alone | 1 |
| Alone (with child/ren) | 4 |
| With a partner | 2 |
| With friend/s | 3 |
| With both parents | 22 |
| With mother | 9 |
| With father | 3 |
| With legal guardian/s | 0 |
| With adult/s (unrelated) | 1 |
| With mother and her partner | 9 |
| With father and his partner | 4 |

Numbers of young women who have:

| | |
|---|----|
| lived with both natural parents | 56 |
| lived with mother but without father | 17 |
| lived with father but without mother | 4 |
| lived with mother and her new partner/s | 13 |
| lived with father and his new partner/s | 6 |

Largest part of life up till ten years old spent living with:

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| Both natural parents | 40 |
| Mother alone | 8 |
| Father alone | 2 |
| Mother and other partner | 4 |
| Father and other partner | 2 |
| Adults other than parents | 2 |

APPENDIX 2:

THE GROUPS

GROUP A

Met: November 1998

Group members and age at time of discussion sessions:

Rebecca, aged 18
Emma J, aged 16
Samantha, aged 18
Lauren, aged 16
Kerry B, aged 16
Katie L, aged 18
Jade, aged 17
Kayleigh, aged 17
Louise, aged 17
Laura, aged 17

GROUP B

Met: May 1999

Group members and age at time of discussion sessions:

Shobnan, aged 17
Ramandeep, aged 17
Katy T, aged 16
Kelly S, aged 19
Gemma, aged 17
Louise F, aged 17
Suzy, aged 16
Jane, aged 18
Sophie R, aged 18
Sam, aged 17

GROUP C

Met: March 2000

Group members and age at time of discussion sessions:

Aneela, aged 16
Clare, aged 16
Angie, aged 16
Amanda, aged 17
Polly S, aged 17
Sally C, aged 16
Hayley, aged 16
Kylie, aged 16
Kirsty, aged 16
Laura S, aged 17

GROUP D

Met: February 2002

Group members and age at time of discussion sessions:

Mel, aged 18
Kerry Ann, aged 17
Katy M, 16
Kiya, aged 16
Louise T, aged 18
Sarah F, aged 16
Michelle, aged 18
Rosie, aged 17
Emily, aged 16
Laura L, aged 17

GROUP E

Met: November 2002

Group members and age at time of discussion sessions:

Polly B, aged 17

Kelly T, aged 19
Sarah H, aged 16
Sophie L, aged 18
Kerry R, aged 18
Kerry S, aged 19
Rachael, aged 17
Angela, aged 17

GROUP SM (single mothers group)

Met: April 2001

Group members, age and number/age of child/ren at time of discussion sessions:

Sally, aged 18, one child aged 2 years
Marcia, aged 18, twins aged 9 months
Joanne, aged 19, one child aged 3 years
Lucy, aged 17, one child aged 10 months
Siobhan, aged 17, one child aged 14 months
Carol, aged 19, two children aged 3 years and 8 months respectively
Rachel, aged 19, one child aged 2 years
Shanice, aged 18, one child aged 3 years

APPENDIX 3:

‘PROMPT’ QUESTIONS

Films:

1. What did you think was the theme/main story of this film?
2. What were your impressions of the film?
3. What did you think of [insert character's name]?
4. What sort of person would you say [insert character's name] is?
5. Why do you think the writer made [character] a single mother/father?
6. Do you think [character] behaves in a realistic way?
7. Do you know anyone like [character]? How are they similar?
8. If you had been in [character]'s position how would you have reacted/behaved?
9. Do you think [character] is a good mother/father? (Question further to find reasons).

Television soaps:

1. What do you think of [insert character's name]?
2. What kind of a parent would you describe [character] as?
3. Do you know anybody like [character]? How realistic is s/he?
4. What do you think of this storyline?
5. Do you think it is realistic?
6. Do soap characters and storylines need to be realistic?
7. What do you think this story is saying about single parenting?
8. Do you agree with the messages in this story?
9. What do you think will happen to [character]?
10. How might you write the story if you were a scriptwriter?

Television sitcoms:

1. What did you think of the plot in this episode?
2. How would you describe [insert character's name]?
3. What did you think of him/her?
4. Do you think people like [character/s] really exist in real life?
5. How true to life was the show?
6. Why do you think people like situation comedies?
7. Why do you think the writers made [character] a single parent? What does it add to the show?

These questions were designed to prompt discussion and to ensure that all the texts had elements of comparable responses to them. However, if the young women chose to develop areas themselves, I encouraged them to do so.

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