



Death and the Soaps

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“What an eventful year she’s had so far. She’s been wrongly accused of murder, had a near-death experience after being stung by a wasp, miscarried her baby, broken up with her boyfriend, Curtis Reed, and suffered a string of spooky premonitions. It’s not over yet either.”¹

The above quote is taken from the magazine *Inside Soap* and describes the misfortunes that beset Selina Cook (played by Tempany Deckhart) of *Home and Away* during the first three months of 1996. The description could be the history of any character in one of the soap operas and illustrates the compression of events which is typical of the genre. To many people the improbability of events contributes to their incredulity that millions² of other people are regular and avid viewers of these programmes. The soaps, as they are popularly called, are formulaic, melodramatic and occasionally marred by poor acting and limp story-lines. It is not surprising then, as Jane Root says in her book *Open the Box*, that, “Soap is sometimes used as a catch-all phrase for the worst of all television.”³ Derogatory remarks about the programmes themselves are matched by those directed towards their large audiences. From this standpoint they are seen as addicts who are “sucked in and, once enthralled, may never return to the world of the normal citizen, where narratives have endings and life is stable.”⁴ They are also seen as pawns in the hands of the television companies who can manipulate them for commercial gain. At worst the individual viewer is portrayed as one of a passive and mindless mass.

In the face of this criticism the soap operations might seem far from the best place to debate a serious subject like the relationship between the media and death. It could be argued that a documentary on the hospice movement or the coverage of, and tributes to, a dead celebrity might have been more in keeping with the subject. The soap opera has, however, been chosen here because it has three elements to offer to a study of death. Whilst one or more of these elements may be found in other types of programmes it is only in the soaps that all

three are present. Before looking in detail at these particular attributes, it is important to note that they presuppose a more positive attitude towards those who are regular viewers than the one outlined above.

From this perspective, the soap watcher is seen as an armchair critic who is able to laugh at implausibility and poor acting whilst at the same time assessing and appreciating realistic portrayals. Research on the programme *Nationwide* by Dave Morely indicates that reactions vary depending on the nature and circumstances of the individual who is watching. In relation to soap operas he makes the further observation that viewers are “prepared to concede that the drama and soap opera that they like is ‘silly’ or ‘badly acted’ or ‘inconsequential’.”⁵⁵ The enjoyment of watching occurs, then, in spite of the obvious flaws of the genre. This perception of the absurdities and conventions of the soap opera creates a certain distance from the text which enables the viewer to enter into reflection and criticism. The person who engages regularly with a particular soap is able to draw on a detailed knowledge of the personalities who appear and may bring years of watching to this dialogue. They can then try to guess how the scriptwriters will resolve a particular conflict or compare the reactions to a crisis on screen with their own experiences.

The first element, then, that these programmes contribute to a study of death is that they have the capacity to initiate such discourse. John Fiske in his book *Television Culture* suggests the use of the term “third text”⁵⁶ for this discourse. The first text is the cultural environment in which the viewer and the programme makers live and the second is the text of the programme itself. The third text is enriched in the case of the soap opera by the constructs of this style of broadcasting. Unlike other programmes where the pattern is mostly of conflict and resolution, soaps are presented on the ongoing story of people’s lives. Other fictional programmes such as *Kavanagh QC* (ITV) and *Judge John Deed* (BBC1) whilst maintaining the same characters throughout the series tell a story in each episode which is brought to a conclusion, if not in one, then in the following episodes. The audiences of these programmes come with the expectation that the scriptwriters will manage the course of events in such a way that loose

ends are tired up and there will be a solution to the problems which have been encountered. The death of a character is, consequently, to be seen within this framework. Death is often portrayed as an event to be overcome, avenged or even sometimes as forming the resolution itself in the form of a tragic ending. Even documentaries and news programmes are accustomed to packaging stories with some kind of resolution. The documentary in the hospice may, for example, finish with information as to when one of the patients in the film dies. The news coverage of a major topic after stretching over two or three days may end with a statement of what action will now be taken to prevent it happening again.⁷

In the soaps, on the other hand, there are no clearly defined moments of resolution. Even the deaths of characters would be falsely construed as resolutions because more often than not they lead into a new story line. The death of Len Fairclough (played by Peter Adamson) in *Coronation Street*, illustrates this practice, since it is only when he is killed in a motor crash that his wife, Rita, finds out that he was on his way back from a night out with another woman. Since no definite resolution is provided the audience is free to speculate as to what might happen next. In the above example they may choose to watch and see how Len's infidelity affects Rita's ability to mourn, they may even contemplate how Len himself would have felt about dying in this way. Whilst the writers of the script still dictate the progress of the story, the pattern of partial resolutions and disruptions creates a sense of involvement with the characters rather than with the plot. The deaths that occur, instead of propelling the plot forward as in the case of *Kavanagh QC* and *Judge John Deed*, are events to be seen in terms of their effect on the community in general and on individuals in particular.

The second element of the soap opera which contributes to our morbid study is their claim to be set in a world which is very similar to our own. Firstly, the timescale of its fictional places mirrors our own and we are encouraged to believe that life goes on in places like Walford⁸ when we are not there. The continuity announcers encourage this fiction by introducing episodes with words like "now, we're going to

drop in on the inhabitants of Albert Square⁹ and the familiar opening music and homing in sequences of images endeavour to complete the illusion. Similarly the seasons of the year run concurrently with “real life” and events like Guy Fawkes, Christmas and General Elections are woven into the story lines. The feeling of reality is also promoted by the ordinariness of some of the story lines. Characters will place bets, do the shopping, go for a drink in the pub or be seen discussing money problems.

The attention to detail on the sets from the men with beer-bellies in *River City* to the dingy wallpaper in Pauline Fowler’s (played by Wendy Richard) living-room in *EastEnders* are, similarly, intended to give us feelings of recognition and identification. The entire construction of the programme is designed to make the viewer acknowledge that these people are either just like us or like people that we know. The deaths that occur in the series are then perceived to be happening in a similar environment to the one that most people inhabit. This affords a fertile ground for the drawing of comparisons and contrasts.

The genre offers a third element for our study. This last quality is to be found in the relationship which is formed between the viewers and the characters who appear in the individual soaps. Derek Weber has said, “It is less important to know what happens in a soap opera than it is to know to whom it happens”¹⁰ and he argues that the interactions between people are more important than the progression of events. The viewer, then, is interested in discovering how the different characters will react to a series of events and in what ways these events will affect their relationships with each other. In a long-running soap such as *Coronation Street* some people may bring to this speculation decades of familiarity with the screen personalities. One woman said to me about Ena Sharpes (played by Violet Carson) “she used to put me in mind of my mother; all the other women were terrified for her”, and in later conversation said that the death of her mother had left the same kind of gap in the lives of her family as had Ena Sharples removal from the street in 1973.¹¹ It is interesting that more than twenty years after Ena Sharples left the street this seventy year old woman, who

said that she only watched the programme occasionally, remembered the character as being “aggressive and domineering” and that she remarked that she had cleaned the local church. The relevance of such knowledge for this work is that the impact that death has upon an individual often exists in relation to the identity of the person who dies. In other words, the effect that a death has on a person often increases in proportion relative to the extent of their familiarity with the deceased. The boundary of the usefulness of the soaps in this respect is set by the nature of death itself. The fact that death occurs to everyone and, as such, not just to people other than ourselves means that sometimes the identity of the deceased may have no relevance whatsoever.

The inevitability of our own death may, instead, be the determining factor in the quality of our reaction. The minister and poet, John Donne, expresses this feeling well in one of his sermons, when, on hearing a church bell tolling to indicate that someone has died, he writes: “never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” A programme on the hospice movement might, at a certain point in our lives, although we do not know the people involved, cause us to be more aware of our own mortality than the death of even a close friend. It is important to note at this point this limitation, whilst also acknowledging the other strengths of the soaps for this investigation.

The position of death within the genre of soap operas is generally one of a device to be used by the scriptwriters. The perspective that is given doesn't seem, on the surface, to be one that is going to make the viewer any more familiar with death than they were before watching. The sudden deaths with their unnatural causes and doubtful realism could instead be seen to give the false impression that life is cheap and death is insignificant. The logical conclusion is that this “cuddle literature” is failing to help us to confront death in an authentic way. What is being presented is rather what the existentialist Martin Heidegger calls “alienated death.” Instead of the viewer being challenged to face up to the inevitability of his or her own death they are given a sanitised image which can be dismissed as inconsequential. It is the paradox of the soaps, however, that whilst appearing to be trivial they can provide

their viewers with significant experiences. This is no less true of death. We are now going to look in detail at how the funeral, as one aspect of loss, has been covered by the medium in the past.

Arthur Fowler (played by Bill Treacher) died in the omnibus edition of *EastEnders* on the twenty-sixth of May 1996. The character had been off-screen for some months having been sent to prison after being falsely accused of embezzling money from a community fund. After his son, Mark (played by Todd Carty), managed to prove that his father was innocent of the crime, Arthur returned to Albert Square. His joy in being released from prison, however, was to be short-lived. On the day of his nephew's christening, Arthur chooses to go to his allotment because he feels that he is not yet ready to face a large family gathering. On his way to the allotment Arthur is seen to be holding his head. On arriving there he collapses in front of his hut which still has the word "thief" daubed in black paint across it. It later transpires that Arthur has died of a cerebral haemorrhage. His demise provides a typical example of a soap death. Like many it was unexpected, quick and occasioned by the wish of the actor to leave the programme. At the funeral of Arthur Fowler there are two wreaths which say "ARTHUR" and "DAD" in flowers. Such wreaths are becoming more and more common at funeral services along with symbols of just about anything imaginable. There are the standard gates of heaven and teddy bears for children, but it is also possible to get pool tables, dart boards and different kinds of vehicles all made out of flowers. The wreaths are symptomatic of the subtle changes that are taking place in the way that families mark the deaths of their members. Since I entered into the ministry the number of requests to have popular music played at services has increased to the extent that about one in three services include this element. The event which is highlighted at Arthur's funeral, however, is the point where his son, Mark, comes forward to talk about his father. It may be noted here that this is eloquently done by the actor. He says, "For the last week or so, I've been searching the Bible for something that said everything that I wanted to say about dad, but I couldn't find anything. But as I was reading one of Michelle's [his sister] text books I found this:" and he proceeds to read the following poem:

*I know who my father was –
Who he was?
I heard his life beneath me:
His pounding heart,
His very breath.
Imagine, I beseech thee,
A son's head on a father's chest;
A giant hand his crown, O sweet rise and fall;
A love to which to drown.
It mattered not what he did,
What glories he achieved,
The day he held me as a child
Is everything I need.
He was my sun, my warmth, my light,
The thing that gave me life.
I love him now and I loved him then,
Come sunset as a knife.
And so I sought a memory
Before I let you rest.
I chose today and took my head
And laid it on your chest.¹²*

This poem is the only part of the church service which is included in the programme. The priest is pictured standing in the church but the committal at the graveside is the only time that his words are heard. This selection of material for the funeral service raises many questions.

In the first place it is relatively infrequent for families, in my experience, to ask if someone can speak at the funeral service. The first time this happened locally was at the funeral of a victim of AIDS in 1992 and this was prompted by an instruction that had been left by the deceased. The person who had died had told his sister that he had seen this happening on television and at a friend's funeral. There has been a small but growing number of requests since for either a friend to pay tribute or to read a piece of poetry.¹³ On asking the widow of a taxi driver, recently, why she wanted his best friend to speak she

replied, “But this is the way it is always done on the television.” In comparison to the delivery by Mark Fowler, in the working class community in which I work these tributes are often very nervously and awkwardly presented by folk who may never have spoken in public before. During the same period the funerals which have occurred on the soaps have nearly always featured a friend paying tribute to the person who has died.

This takes us into a complicated area where there is much debate. Is it the case that the soaps are reflecting a change that is taking place in society or are they part of a process which is creating that change? Julia Smith, the original producer of *EastEnders* has claimed that the programme merely “reflects life”¹⁴ but in the light of the above observation this would seem to be too simplistic a statement. The producers choose the words of a character over the words of a priest or minister because it will have more dramatic impact. The words of the Church are almost entirely left out and so this is not merely a reflection of what happens in “real life.” It would, also, seem from my experience of tributes, that this representation of what happens at a funeral does influence people’s behaviour, albeit perhaps in a dialectic way.

There is another question which concerns what meaning is being given to the deaths which are occurring. The traditional intention of the funeral service is to interpret the death in a spiritual way. In the soaps, the words of faith are merely in the background with the remembrance of the person’s life being placed in the foreground. In *EastEnders* the comments of the other characters, like the funeral service itself are mostly in the form of tributes.

In the programme in which Arthur dies comments such as “He had the patience of a saint”¹⁵ and “He had a heart of gold. He took people at face value”¹⁶ are used to sum up his life. When these comments are taken alongside the tribute in the funeral service, it seems that death is being presented primarily as a time for appraisal of what has gone before. The fact that Arthur Fowler is a fictitious character is no doubt

influential. The death for some viewers is seen in terms of the loss of a well-loved character. It is this loss which is, in part, being marked by the producers at this time.

Reflections on the nature of death itself are less common. When Nigel Bates (played by Paul Bradley) raises this subject by saying, “Why is it that the good ones always go first?” Peggy Mitchell (played by Barbara Windsor) replies, “I don’t know, but I like to think that they go to a better place.” The only other comment is by one of the elderly residents of the Square, Ethel Skinner (played by Gretchen Franklin) who remarks, “You see they never leave you. I often have a talk with my Willie.” Apart from these common reflections on death there is little effort in the programme as a whole to grapple with the issue of human mortality.

Home and Away is out of step with the other soaps in that it treats the issue very differently. There are no pictures of Shane’s funeral, but the characters themselves are heard over many weeks discussing death. An attempt seems to be being made to present all the current views on death. For example, one of the young characters, Jack (played by Daniel Amalm) says, “There’s no reason, it just happens. You grab what you can while you can. It’s only a matter of time.”¹⁷ The same episode includes a very different conversation between Angel and Damien Roberts (played by Matt Doran) a close friend of Shane’s. Damian is a character who is away from home supposedly studying to become a priest and he has returned home on hearing of Shane’s death. The conversation between the two of them begins in an argument because Damian has been encouraging Angel’s son to write letters describing his feelings to God. Part of the dialogue between these characters is included here:

Angel: I don’t get it. Are you saying that this has nothing to do with God? So are you saying that God’s got no power, that he can’t save someone, or are you saying that he doesn’t care or what?

Damian: Well, look at it in philosophical terms. Now, I'm saying that God is the first cause but not the only cause.

[and then later]

Angel: That's just a cop out. What's the point of him having all the power when he doesn't use it. Why does he intervene for some people and not others? Why didn't he listen to my prayers?

Damian: The short answer to that is that I can't tell you, not in words. But if there was somehow that you could get in here *[points to his heart]* and feel what I'm feeling then you'd know that there is an answer ... but it's not just something that can come from the outside. Faith must come from within. I know Shane is going to be OK. I know that he is going to be loved and that he's safe and that he's protected. I just wish that there was some way I could share that with you.

Angel: So do I.

A much more simplistic view of death had already been presented in the series when Angel tells her son, Dylan, that Shane has gone to heaven. The little boy asks concrete questions such as “When is he coming back?” and “When did he go?” This emphasis on talking about death is set within the programme's general interest in the mystical. It has dealt over the years with issues such as previous lives, telepathy and unexplained presences. The views that are expressed are often given validity by the character who speaks them. Jack, for example, is in a particularly rebellious phase when he speaks about death. Damian has had a troubled childhood and, although well liked, his vocation has not been welcomed by all of the other characters. The language

that he uses in the dialogue above is out of keeping with the rest of the show. It is possible that it is being used to reflect not only Damian's ideas but the thoughts of the Church which are often perceived to be couched in inaccessible language.

Despite the differences between *Home and Away* and *EastEnders* the emphasis in both programmes is upon the community as the interpreter of meaning.

The characters, rather than some outside vehicle such as the Church, are the ones who give opinions on the possibility of the continuance of life beyond death. If the programmes have a role in affecting current funeral practice, do they also encourage people in the view that the churches are increasingly irrelevant? It is hard to answer this question, but because death is the main point of contact for many people between themselves and organised religion perhaps it is an area that warrants closer study. Such a study could even examine the accessibility of the funeral service to those who have no personal history of involvement with the Church and help those of us who are ministers in responding to the subtle changes that are taking place in the way that people approach us at times of loss.

- ¹ Helen Childs, “Stay away from him,” *Inside Soap* (23 March – 5 April 1996), 24.
- ² The figures for the week ending 18 February 1996 were: *EastEnders* (BBC1), 20.5 million; *Coronation Street* (ITV), 20.17 million; *Home and Away* (ITV), 12.66 million; and *Brookside* (Channel 4), 6.62 million – Source: BARB.
- ³ Jane Root, *Open the Box* (London: Comedian Publishing Group, 1986), 45.
- ⁴ Mary Ellen Brown, “Soap opera as a site of struggle – the politics of interpretation,” *Media Development* XXXVIII (2/1991), 23.
- ⁵ David Morely, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 152.
- ⁶ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), 108–110.
- ⁷ The television news coverage of the killing of sixteen children and their teacher at Dunblane Primary School on 13 March 1996 ended several days later with the focus on gun control.
- ⁸ *EastEnders* is set in the fictional London borough of Walford.
- ⁹ The central location in *EastEnders*.
- ¹⁰ Derek Weber, “Everybody needs good neighbours: soap opera as a community of meaning,” in *Religion and the Media: An Introductory Reader* (ed. Chris Arthur; Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 115.
- ¹¹ The character Ena Sharpes had a heart attack in November 1973 and moved away to St Anne’s-on-Sea in the December of the same year.
- ¹² Transcribed from the programme – source unknown.
- ¹³ This has always been “Death is Nothing at All” by Cannon Holland.
- ¹⁴ Christine Gerachty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 32.
- ¹⁵ Spoken by Ian Beale (played by Adam Woodyatt), *EastEnders*, BBC1 30/6/96.
- ¹⁶ Spoken by Peggy Mitchell (played by Barbara Windsor), *EastEnders*, BBC1 30/6/96.
- ¹⁷ *Home and Away*, Network 7: Australia, 28/5/96.