

Stimulus Implications of Television Soap Opera Names

GARY S. FELTON

ASK THE TELEVISION VIEWER to identify the commonality of *Brighter Horizons*, *Inside Hamlin Falls*, and *The Courage of Brenda Liston*, and most likely he will reply that they are television soap operas. Actually, these are fictitious titles, but serve to indicate, for a particular type of television programming, the strength of association which one has to such names. Recognition of this relationship may stimulate one's desire to specify the quality among these names which makes them so clearly definable. In this regard, a brief excursion into analytic discussion will provide a meaningful evaluation of soap opera names.

The production of television soap operas (properly termed daytime serial dramas) dates from 1948, since which time 50 different programs of this type have been produced. The format used seems to be realistic for the viewer, providing him with a situational relationship that includes a succession of familiar predicaments with which he easily can identify. In addition, he is provided with a backdrop against which he can evaluate his own methods of coping with problems. The characters are real to him in that he generally can relate to them at some level of intimacy. He becomes, in many ways, the microscopist who intimately can partake in the life experiences of these people, yet who can retreat to comfortable remoteness when the dilemmas become, for him, too intolerable or threatening. This momentary withdrawal allows him to recognize that these situations really are not happening to him. In addition, this viewer-participant perceives that some people actually are in rougher straits than he is, but at the same time he is provided with a reassurance and an understanding that one can overcome obstacles in the face of adversity.

The contents of these serial dramas assume many psychological twists in their cyclic overlapping of denouement and new rising action. The substance may relate to marital infidelity, financial cunning, illegitimate pregnancies, meddlesome in-laws, crime, fraud, or incurable disease; the underscoring is on domestic tragedy.

Woman's Domain

The soap opera is interpreted by most television viewers as belonging primarily to women. This is attributable to more than the fact that such programs appear in the daytime, when virtually all adult television viewers are women. Analysis of the soap opera format and content reveals that great emphasis is placed on family relationships. Stripped of its dramatic superfluities, the program seems to revolve in great measure around the domestic tragedies, involvements, and psychological problems of women. Examination of the content reveals a matriarchy characterized by women who must display undoubted capacity to cope with any forces which portend a disruption of the family unit. Oafish, bumbling men seem to abound in and clutter the situation.

The degree to which this plot material and style approximate current social patterns is speculative, but the great popular acceptance of the soap opera by women from every social stratum speaks clearly. Whether viewed as healthy escapism, tedious bilge, stark reality, revolting sickness, or pure gimmickry, this form of television drama seems to mirror a meaningful image, recognized and accepted by millions of viewers.

Name Content

An analysis of the matter reveals the clear delineation of soap opera names into three areas: 1) the names readily denoting psychological attitudes or emotions, or reflecting personal relationships; 2) the names of persons; and 3) the names of locales.

Nearly three-fourths of soap opera titles relate to the psychology of people. Explicitly, this aggregation can be broken down into five separate units. The first of these units contains names which refer to a positive tone or reflect a favorable outlook (*Today Is Ours*, *A Time for Us*, *A Time to Live*, and *Golden Windows*), names which evidence forward striving (*Brighter Day*, *Search for Tomorrow*,

Clear Horizon, Three Steps to Heaven, and Never Too Young), or names which suggest courage (*Valiant Lady*). A second arrangement of the names includes those which are psychologically neutral (*As the World Turns, Road of Life, The Way of the World, and Another World*), and names which allude to impasse or confrontation (*Moment of Truth, The Verdict Is Yours, For Better or Worse, Full Circle, and Date with Life*), to dependence (*The Guiding Light*), and to personal history (*My True Story, From These Roots, and Days of Our Lives*). A third sub-group consists of implied, psychologically negative emotional states (*The Edge of Night, The Secret Storm, Dark Shadows, and Woman with a Past*). The fourth collection of terms covers the subject of love (*Love of Life, The Seeking Heart, First Love, The Greatest Gift, and Young Marrieds*). Finally, although family interrelationships underlie the dramatic structure of soap operas, there are only two references to such grouping (*Our Five Daughters, and One Man's Family*) among the names of soap operas.

The second general class of terms includes proper names. These may project the image of psychological involvement with the environment, whether stated or implied (*Portia Faces Life, Concerning Miss Marlow, and The World of Mr. Sweeney*); or they may appear in nominal form only (*Kitty Foyle, Miss Susan, The Bennetts, and Young Doctor Malone*).

In addition, among the types of names used for soap operas, one finds reference to some kind of locale (*Hotel Cosmopolitan, Hawkins Falls, Peyton Place, and The House in the Garden*).

Finally, there are three unclassifiable names which have been used in naming soap operas (*The First Hundred Years, The Egg and I, and The Doctors*).

Semantic Significance

In short, there are many soap opera titles whose stimulus value for immediate association to "soap opera" appears to be strong. What underlies the semantic combinations allowing such ready identifiability? It would seem that the major themes which weave through the daily intrigues of television soap operas and which constitute many of the basic human emotional experiences, to a great degree are contained implicitly or explicitly in the names

attached to these productions. Thus, on hearing such names, one is able to recognize their reference because of the strong correspondence between program name and program content. It is equivalent to one's relating that a program entitled *Colt 45* most likely will be a western. The name content of television soap operas is intriguing and, perhaps more than that for other program types, is immediately related to the psychological complexities of everyday life. Nevertheless, the degree of correspondence between name content and program content would seem to differ little from that for other kinds of programs.

References

¹ Boyle, Dorothy S., Manager, Program Records-Information, Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc., New York, New York. Personal communication with the author, January 30, 1967.

² Cole, Kathryn S., Manager, Department of Information, National Broadcasting Company, Inc., New York, New York. Personal communication with the author, February 3, 1967.

³ Glick, I. O., and Levy, S. J., *Living With Television* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1962).

⁴ Stedman, R. W., *A History of the Broadcasting of Daytime Serial Dramas in the United States*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, (June) 1959.

University of Southern California

Surnames Ending in *-baugh*

Several hundred different American surnames have *-baugh* as their final element. Names with this ending seem to occur most commonly in an area extending from eastern Pennsylvania westward into Iowa, Kansas, and northern Oklahoma and, scatteringly, throughout the West, but rarely in New England and the Southeast. It has been suggested that the ending of such names may originally have been *-bach*, *-baum*, or *-bauer*. Can any reader supply a definite answer to this question?

Raymond R. Wilson
Box 471
Springfield, Mass., 01101