

7) Collective Identity

Examiner Comments

In relation to the mark scheme this answer is on the boundary of level 3 (examples and terminology) and level 4 (explanation, analysis, argument). The response is informed and meets the question set squarely, achieves a balance of theory, text and institutional knowledge but lacks clarity in places; hence it only just meets level 4 criteria for the first area. The words 'in places' and 'mostly' are important in the mark scheme for examples and terms and both apply here. The representation of the family is a fascinating and well judged example for the topic and Marxist theory is relevant to this analysis – this is a good example of how relevant theory is not necessarily 'contemporary' – an application of 'classic' theory to contemporary media examples is a sound approach, as this candidate demonstrates. To secure a level 4 mark, this candidate would need to use some references / quotations on representation / Marxism / ideology / hegemony and make the connections between examples and the theoretical context much more explicit and sustained. In relation to the specification prompts which are used to set the questions and in the construction of the mark scheme for examiners, this candidate shows understanding of ways in which contemporary media represent groups of people in various ways; deals with historical comparison well and begins to engage with more complex questions of mediation and social implication, through the Marxist approach – but for a secure level 4 we would need to see this theoretical angle contrasted with another way of looking at the representation of the family. The answer concludes with some speculative attention to 'the self-representation age' and had the candidate been able to theorise this more coherently – perhaps by setting the 'we media' idea against the hegemonic model, the level 4 criteria (clear, fluent balance of theories) would be more clearly applicable.

In this essay I will look at how the family is represented in the media. In the 1950's and the 1970's the representation of the family in the majority of adverts was the nuclear family. This consists of a domestic mother based the home a 'bread winner' father with a job who can go outside the home roughly two children and usually a pet. A great example of this family being shown is the 1959 Cornflakes advert and the 1960's Fairy Liquid advert. Both show the traditional nuclear family. This representation is also apparent in films such as the 1970s film Halloween. This film had a monstrous killer who was raised in a dysfunctional family, the fact that the other household don't have killers suggest that their way of living (nuclear family) was the ideal way.

So why was, and perhaps still is, this representation so dominant in media? One theory is the Marxist Theory. Althusser is an important theorist here, he developed the ideas of Gramsci on hegemony. Hegemony is the process where the ideological beliefs of the ruling class in society become the ruling ideologies, which we all accept as the norm and common sense. Althusser said the family (along with the media, law education etc) is an Ideological State Apparatus which creates an identity as good little law abiding citizens, who accept the nuclear family as the ideal. Althusser argued that by promoting the nuclear family the ruling powers in society create and maintain a Patriarchal and Capitalist Society. This is because in the family we learn our morality (it's wrong to steal), the value of work, the gender division of labour and to submit to often male authority e.g. fathers, bosses etc. Therefore the promotion and maintenance of the nuclear families representation in media is in the interest of those in power. As you can see the media representation as well as this theory behind it is complex.

In the 1970s big social changes occurred in the form the workers movement. This put an end to the often violent exploitation and objectification of women. So did advertising reflect this social change? Well, the media representations to follow were complicated. Take the 1980's OXO advert "mums out dad's cooking." In this advert role reversal takes place and we see the father cooking instead of the mother. So on the face of it the family is being represented in a progressive way. But if we take a closer look we see that the underlying aspects of the conservative representation still exist. For example, the dad only cooks as a one off because the mother is out shopping. This suggests that the mother is the usual cook and it meets traditional values as the mother is out shopping (consumerist). Therefore this change was only superficial and the hegemonic representation of the family is still dominant. Indeed it seems that this representation may well be straightforward as no texts, as of yet, offer a challenging one.

If we look at current Britain further social change has occurred so it would be reasonable to think that the hegemonic nuclear family ideal is not as strongly represented as the nuclear family only exists in a minority of households (9-20% depending on how you define it). But it still seems that the media is a transmitter of the hegemonic ideal nuclear family. Take the 2005 action film, Cinderella Man. In this film the main male character is losing a crucial fight until he has flashbacks to his family suffering. This then gives him the motivation to go on and win the fight. The family gave him the inspiration needed here. This, like many other Hollywood films, reifies the family into a solid unquestionable thing. If we look at the recent 2009 Lloyds TSB advert 'For the Journey' we again see the conservative image of the family reinforced. For example the dad is seen with the bank card suggesting he is the provider and manager of money and he is seen driving the car (implies he's the dominant figure in the family). The daughter does ballet and the son plays with the toy builder bricks – both are conforming to their family gender roles. In class we undertook a content analysis of a randomly picked sample of TV adverts. We found that roughly 50% of them showed a nuclear family and none of them challenged the ideal family. On the basis of my evidence here we can see the media's representation of the

family is in-fact relatively simply as all media reifies and reinforces the hegemonic nuclear family.

However there are other media texts who show a different media representation of the family and challenges the nuclear family as well as problematising the Marxist theories. These are media texts such as the long running TV series since 2004, Shameless. In Shameless we see the complete opposite of a nuclear family, a family with no mother, an alcoholic father who hasn't got a job, family members that regularly break the law (e.g. steal), one family member who is homosexual and family members that have promiscuous sex. Although this working class family don't meet any typical conventions of the 'ideal' family in media they are still shown to be happy and there is love and care within the family. This offers a different representation of an ideal family, therefore this suggests that, with more than one representation, the family representation in the media is more complex than I previously assumed.

Another text which undermines the nuclear family is perhaps the whole genre of soaps. The most popular TV series in Britain, Eastenders, recently had a storyline about a closet homosexual Indian who was married. Unlike other media, soaps explore the internal functions of the family and show how actually they often cause pain, hurt and disharmony. This is what happens in the gay Indian story as his mum and dad gradually find out, we see the pain caused to everyone within the family. So soaps don't reify the family, they explore its internal aspects and reveal its weaknesses. This again complicates media representations of the family.

As I have just discussed the previous two texts which problematise the Marxist theories, maybe these grand claims about media can't be made because if they were true texts like Shameless and Eastenders wouldn't exist. So perhaps we need to look at how specific texts look at specific audiences. Geraghty and Butler explored this area and came up with the 'gay theory'. Again this is very complicated and puts a different spin of media representations but sadly I don't have time to discuss it.

In conclusion it is fair to say that media representations of the family are varied and complex. While the Marxist theories may still be possible to make the increasingly diverse ways of living and minority of households which hold a nuclear family is itself evidence against them.

Also the self representation age where we can create our own identities with the use of web 2.0 (on Facebook, Secondlife, World of Warcraft and Runescape etc) will further erode any ideological power corporate, commercial media has over us. However the very fact that we all still seem to carry around the nuclear family image around with us in our head suggests the media may still be playing an ideological role. Either way, as I have shown, it is a very complicated area with no clear answer. Therefore I do agree with the statement.

EAA 16

EG 15

T 7

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