

Construction of Meaning in The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills

Neevati Shah

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Construction of Meaning in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*

Despite its blinding images of opulence, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* attempts to portray common, perhaps even “universal”, aspects of American culture which resonate with a broad audience. Sweeping views of sprawling mansions serve as an appealing backdrop, but it is the relationships, conflicts, and wide array of emotions expressed on the show that come to the foreground and captivate viewers. Producers play to the public’s interest in both personal and social conflict and growth, especially in the context of illusory prosperity and success; here they are able to both entertain the audience with a glimpse into a beautiful and luxurious world, and soothe their envy with evidence that the wealthy are “only human” and “just like the rest of us”. To accomplish this in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, producers utilize a variety of tools that carefully and deliberately shape the show’s events and characters in a very specific way, pitting viewers against particular characters while urging them to sympathize with others. This is especially evident in the premiere of the second season, in which most of the housewives openly make mistakes, confront them, and attempt to work through them, while Lisa and her husband Ken, on the other hand, are portrayed as cold, cavalier, and, consequently, less human than their fellow cast members.

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**Comment:** Great Introduction!

The opening scenes present each of the housewives in personal settings, separate from their group of friends. When Kyle is introduced, the camera does not immediately zoom in on her flawlessly made-up face or her designer clothes. Rather, it pans the wall of family photos in her home before settling in on a casually-dressed Kyle, wearing a sweatshirt, jeans, and ponytail, surrounded by her husband and children.

Immediately, the audience is struck with the impression that Kyle is down-to-earth and family-oriented. Even conflict within the family, presented in the form of a flashback to the fight between Kyle and her sister, is portrayed positively. It emphasizes the difficulties of making an emotional investment in a relationship, thus making Kyle seem strong and dedicated when she makes it clear that the relationship between she and Kim is very important to her, and that she intends to work on it.

Similarly, Camille, introduced as a victim of divorce, takes some time to “find herself” and work on her own personal issues in order to emerge from a broken relationship a stronger woman. She goes to one of her former homes in order to sort through boxes that her ex-husband sent to her; she does this, not in a clean, lavish room inside the house, but outside in the dirty stables. The camera does a long shot of Camille as she affectionately pets a horse, drawing attention to her casual t-shirt and jeans, and then pointedly zooms in on her scuffed boots. The rustic setting and the emphasis on simple clothing suggest that Camille is getting in touch with her “roots” and working on her relationship with herself. These elements, along with her talk of donating to charity, come together to create an image of Camille as an empathetic and compassionate human being rather than an inauthentic, spoiled woman to whom one cannot relate.

Lisa’s opening scene, on the other hand, immediately begins with a long shot of she and her dog, both dressed and styled impeccably. Her meeting with her daughter takes place not in her home or an equally casual setting, but in an upscale salon, thus casting the relationship in a superficial light. More importantly, this scene fails to convey

the conflict or vulnerability with which American viewers can identify and sympathize. Admission of one's problems and expression of emotions is, in American media culture, considered a sign of strength and gives hope for growth. Whereas the audience could feel an almost intimate connection with Kyle and Camille because of their open acknowledgement of their issues and their pain, Lisa offers no such opportunity, and therefore comes off as detached and inauthentic.

The repeated binary opposition of British versus American throughout the episode reinforces this view of Lisa. This comparison is first brought up by Adrienne's cook, Bernie, when Adrienne asks, "Who doesn't love macaroni and cheese?" Bernie replies, "The British lady [Lisa] across the street, probably" ("Back to Beverly Hills," 2011). Here Lisa is referred to in opposition to macaroni and cheese, a "comfort food" that has become symbolic of the American diet. The specific use of "British" in this statement implies that "British" is synonymous with disagreeable and judgmental.

A similar comparison is made when Taylor and Kyle are talking in a clothing store about how Taylor finds Lisa to be intimidating. Taylor says, "She kind of makes me feel like I'm not as good as she is...[M]aybe it's a British personality thing..." to which Kyle responds, "Maybe it is the British thing. They're a little bit 'cooler' like that. They're not as demonstrative with their..." "Yeah, not as affectionate and loving" ("Back to Beverly Hills," 2011). Here the two women explicitly define what it means to be British as opposed to being American. This definition centers on a lack of intimacy, emotional detachment, and [an air of](#) superiority. In a culture that values friendliness and human

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**Comment:** Great opportunity here to cite the readings by defining binary opposition and including a citation.

connection, Lisa's behavior and personality are interpreted as cold, rude, and intimidating.

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All of these snippets of conversation regarding Lisa establish the audience's expectations for the conflict and drama that is sure to ensue when the plot moves the housewives from the personal realm into the realm of social interaction. After several short scenes establishing the personality and viewpoints of each character, Adrienne's dinner party provides a setting in which the supposed British/American culture clash can play out fully. The show is specifically structured in this way so that by the time the group comes together, the audience already knows whom to support should an argument arise.

As everyone arrives at Adrienne's house, the audience anxiously awaits Lisa's arrival. She and Ken finally appear, both dressed in black while nearly everyone else is wearing some shade of blue. The couple's late arrival and dark apparel already establishes a sort of disconnect between them and the rest of the group gathered cozily around the couch. This rift becomes more pronounced when Lisa's dog, Jiggy, and Adrienne's dog, Jackpot growl and bark at each other. Jackpot is taken into Kim's arms and comforted while Jiggy remains by Ken's side, apart from the rest of the group. Ken claims that most dogs are jealous of Jiggy's clothing and his beauty, thus reinforcing the audience's perception of the British as arrogant.

By the time a conflict arises, the audience has already defined "hero" as fallible yet sensitive, loving, and American, and "villain" as elitist, unfeeling, unwilling to express vulnerability, and British. When Taylor openly discusses her troubled marriage and

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**Comment:** While I do know where this idea of hero and villain comes from, you need to assume that your reader is not familiar with these concepts as defined by Propp so it is important to add some definition here so the reader knows exactly what you mean. Also, since the idea of character types comes from Propp, you should also cite the readings since this is not your original idea.

psychotherapy, she is met with nods of encouragement and is portrayed as courageous and admirable for trying to keep her family together. In contrast, when Ken implies that Taylor is weak for taking her problems to a stranger, his words are followed by dramatic music denoting his position as the wrongdoer, and close-ups of everyone at the table looking appalled. Shortly afterwards, Kyle, taking on the role of the “helper”, comforts Taylor in the bathroom while Lisa, appearing in front of the mirror to fix her makeup rather than to apologize to Taylor, asserts her loyalty to her husband and demonstrates her characteristically “British” lack of consideration for others’ feelings. In this way, she and Ken are painted as the villains while Taylor, motivated by an unfulfilling marriage, seeking happiness and stability, is painted as the hero.

Ultimately, this episode draws upon America’s fascination with the layers and complexities of human relationships, and the prospect of healing and growth. Although all of the *Real Housewives* are wealthy, the audience is encouraged to judge them based on their ability to make themselves vulnerable and become emotionally invested in relationships. Producers provide visual cues, silently urging viewers to think of these characters as “real”, based on their clothing choice, familiar home décor, and commitment to family. By establishing oppositions between British and American, judgmental and open, feeling and unfeeling, and so on, the show sets Lisa and Ken apart from the American housewives and emphasized American values. It attempts to align these values and render them synonymous with those of the quintessential human being. In this way, media producers can guide viewers through an audiovisual experience deliberately designed to convey specific messages and meanings.

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**Comment:** Neeyati, your paper is a joy to read and you do a great job of analyzing the text and incorporating material from the lectures. There are a couple of areas you might need to focus on for the next paper. Your thesis is very good, but during the paper, it seems like this opposition between British and American cultures is very prominent. You might want to foreshadow that argument by indicating in your thesis that a significant part of the depictions of Ken and Lisa has to do with their British culture/origins. Also, the paper did require you to cite from the lectures and the readings. While you incorporate terminology from both, there is no citation in this paper, other than the television show. Grade: A

### References

Back to Beverly Hills [Television series episode]. (2011). In Ross, D. (Executive Producer), *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Los Angeles, CA: Bravo.