

## Saving Face

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# Saving Face: Inflections of Character Role-play in *Shameless*

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James Walters

Sarah Cardwell has written that: ‘While the close textual analysis of film is undergoing something of a renaissance, the same enterprise remains almost non-existent in television studies’ (Gibbs and Pye 2005: 179). In part, this assertion references the uneven status in recent times of close textual analysis as a practice within contemporary film studies, the term ‘renaissance’ succinctly implying a preceding period of relative sparseness. Yet, despite the wariness (and, at times, open hostility) expressed by some scholars towards close textual analysis, film studies has always attended to matters of style and meaning within films themselves. The same prevalence cannot be observed in television studies, however, where close textual analysis has, by and large, remained absent from critical discourse. Cardwell’s outlining of this resonates with observations provided by other television scholars. Charlotte Brunsdon, for example, has traced the relative absence of sustained textual analysis of television back twenty years, stating that: ‘There was, between the 1984 and 1986 [International Television Studies] conferences, a clear move in interest from what is happening on the screen to what is happening in front of it – from text to audience’ (1997: 117). The wider complexities of Brunsdon’s debate cannot be satisfactorily detailed here, but her concise description defines a trend that has since dominated television studies whereby critical inquiry has existed, for the most part, away from a consideration of style and meaning relationships within programmes.

As established scholars outline this neglect of aesthetics-led debate in television studies, so a firmer platform emerges for textual analysis within the discipline. Jason Jacobs, for instance, challenges the perception of television as a device only for relay and, furthermore, identifies a strand of contemporary television drama (primarily recent excellent US programming) that merits scrutiny as work of artistic accomplishment. He explains that:

We need to recognise that our criteria for judgement are in part derived by defining the nature of our involvement with specific texts. As with the analysis of all art, understanding that involvement requires above all concentrated study: minimally, the close observation of texts in order to support the claims and judgements we may wish to make about them (2001: 430-1).

Jacobs' words mark a shift towards detailed analysis of the television text. He acknowledges elsewhere that, in part, his terminology is derived from film studies, and particularly from the work of V.F. Perkins. This might invite the criticism that close study of the kind Jacobs proposes (and performs later in his argument) merely replicates a branch of film criticism with little regard for medium specificity. However, reading Jacobs' persuasive account in full, it seems that questions of value and judgement in television and film are more closely related than has been generally acknowledged and so, naturally, common evaluative language is likely to exist between the two disciplines. Indeed, in the case of television drama, production practices overlap potently with film and we are entitled to talk about the style and meaning of acting, lighting, shot vocabulary, music etc. Yet, despite many television departments existing alongside film departments that invest strongly in such debates, sustained consideration of these matters has been largely avoided. Christine Geraghty, in an article related thematically to Jacobs' and similarly expansive, identifies television studies' close relationship to cultural studies as a potential cause of this disregard. She notes that:

In much teaching of television in higher education questions of aesthetics are being neglected in ways that can only be detrimental to future programming and audiences. In cultural studies, it has been argued that television's main functions lie elsewhere: in the use audiences make of television as a leisure activity, a domestic weapon and a means of cultural formation (2003: 26).

It would be inadequate to dismiss these culture-centred approaches as misled – they seem quite reasonable – and it should be remembered that cultural studies has worked to provide an arena in which television can be discussed seriously at all. Nevertheless, as Geraghty points out, questions of content still matter to television viewers, and the consistent reluctance of television studies to engage with them seems increasingly odd.

It is against the background of these arguments centred on the detailed analysis of television that my analysis of *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-) takes place. I wish to pay close attention to an episode from the series, concentrating upon some aspects of its aesthetic construction.

Concurrently, I suggest the handling of a particular theme – character role-play – to be a measure of the episode’s achievement. I choose ‘achievement’ as an evaluative criterion primarily because I would maintain that other programmes achieve in ways quite different to an episode of *Shameless*. This assertion is guided by an awareness of the ambitions of different television programmes: the ambitions of *Shameless*, a serial drama, are significantly divergent from those of a BBC weather report, for example. While there is undoubtedly an art to the design and delivery of the weather report, the ambitions of the broadcast are not necessarily artistic and it might be evaluated more appropriately according to its clarity in relaying information. An episode of *Shameless*, on the other hand, does not involve those same direct methods of communication. More complex, it invites a different sort of engagement. Evidently, everything that appears on television cannot be judged according to the same criteria and we are required to find an analytical method and evaluative vocabulary appropriate to the text. Like Jacobs, I find great pertinence in V.F. Perkins’ suggestions for the productive study of film. Perkins tells us that: ‘The critic cannot require a movie to fit his definitions; it’s his task to find the description which best fits the movie’ (1993: 62). This ideology could well prove useful for studying television – a medium offering the critic a multitude of texts, each proposing different ambitions and achievements. To suppose that we could talk about all television in the same evaluative tone would be unrealistic given the medium’s diverse offerings.

In the following discussion, the theme of character role-play is chosen partly because it encapsulates *Shameless*’ ongoing interest in probing the tensions between individuals’ interior emotions and their exterior appearances. Concordantly, the series often explores the gap between characters’ inner perceptions of themselves and the outer perceptions of others. Both interests result in varying modes of performance as characters self-consciously or inadvertently adopt and act out particular roles as a means of negotiating the everyday realities of their lives. Role-play thus forms an essential and consistent theme within the series as characters become motivated to perform roles either by choice or through necessity. By persistently revisiting this theme, the series reaffirms its investment in the complexities of human behaviour, encouraging the viewer to interpret often-slight actions to understand underlying attitudes, emotions and perspectives. The series’ uncompromising visual style, which frequently scrutinises characters in relentless close-up, searching faces and interrogating expressions, gestures and words, facilitates this type of intimate viewer-engagement. In attending to these features, I seek to analyse the series’

skill in shaping particular stylistic attributes into moments of significance by representing nuances of character action and speech through distinct visual composition, rhyming and patterning to create thematic resonance. I suggest that the accomplished handling of these aesthetic arrangements within episodes contributes to *Shameless*' achievements, recommending it for closer attention.

I focus on the second episode in the first series of *Shameless*. The series centres on the Gallagher family and in the first episode we encountered each member and their main acquaintances. Subsequent episodes begin with a title sequence that re-introduces the characters through the voiceover of the father, Frank Gallagher. As well as revisiting each character's traits through Frank's description of them, the title sequence re-emphasises the disparity between Frank's perception of himself as head of the household and his actual position within his family. This is exemplified as Frank is heard to say, in voiceover: 'Me kids, who I'm proud of 'cos every single one of them reminds me a little of ... me. They can all think for themselves, which they've me to thank for.' These words are accompanied by images of Frank grabbing his son, Ian, aggressively by the collar, only to be hit over the back of the head by a frozen bread loaf and knocked to the ground unconscious. His children gather around his body, checking tentatively for visible signs of life, but as he stirs they run frantically from the room, a set of exterior shots tracking their progress as they stream outside. Frank's self-professed family pride is thus compromised by images that reveal his true, antagonistic relationship to his children and their solidarity against him. The dissonance of word and image creates discrepancy between Frank's self-perception and the reality of events, so each episode begins by effectively re-questioning his role as a father.

After the titles, an extreme close-up shot captures Frank's feet padding down the stairs of his house and stopping. We cut to a medium shot as he sits down on a step, before a reverse shot captures Fiona, Frank's eldest daughter, glancing across at her father while she dries dishes. We then return to the extreme close-up of Frank's feet as he pulls at one of his laces and it snaps. (This sequence, lasting less than ten seconds and comprising four cuts and three different camera set-ups, not only encapsulates the fast-paced editing rhythm of the series but also emphasises its relatively dense aesthetic construction.) After the lace-snap, Fiona's voice is heard, separate from the diegetic space of the scene, talking about her mother's sudden disappearance in straightforward, everyday terms ('went for a loaf – never seen since') and how her father did 'a superb job of taking on the role of both our parents: he did sod all twice over.' Voiceover is used consistently

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throughout the series, with different characters providing brief framing narration at the start of each episode and reflecting in epilogue at the end. Here, Fiona's subjective criticisms are given an objective context as Frank is seen to delve between the stair-banisters to rifle through his children's shoes for a replacement lace. The contrast of this selfish act with Fiona's altruistic activity of preparing items for a family meal conveys the authenticity of her derisive account of her father: image and sound now functioning cohesively to create meaning. Moreover, while Fiona performs the domestic rituals of an adult, Frank's act of stealing a child's shoelace is in itself childlike, diminishing his status to that of a minor. It is made clear that a reversal has occurred whereby Frank chooses a role far-removed from that of a father, forcing Fiona to adopt the role of parent.

Frank leaves the house and we cut to an exterior shot of him walking down the street. As he wanders left out of the frame, the camera pans right to capture Steve, Fiona's new boyfriend, in the background, laden with some sort of packages, stepping out of his jeep. In one sense, the camera's movement performs a direct narrative function: Steve arrives at the house Frank has just left. Yet, in the absence of a cut or temporal gap between their actions, the two characters become associated within the image. Occurring simultaneously, Steve's arrival becomes conjoined with Frank's departure and the sense is evoked of one character replacing the other. This visual relationship invites comparison between the characters, a theme that is continued as Steve enters the Gallagher household that Frank has just departed. The living room is frenetic, with the family (plus Veronica from next door and eldest son Lip's girlfriend, Karen) arranging themselves in preparation for their meal. This busy pace is evoked as figures pass constantly at various trajectories across the frame, the camera adopting a mobile fluency as though it were an extra member of the small community of bodies and the editing becoming rapid once again, with most shots lasting no more than two seconds. Amid this activity, we might miss Steve's progress as he hands out fish and chips packages to everyone: while the camera settles on the faces of others he moves mainly outside of the frame. However, we should note that, on arriving, Steve performs an opposite role to the departed Frank by providing for the family whereas Frank's singular act was to take from them. The visual changeover that occurred outside as Steve stepped out of his jeep and Frank ambled away thus marked a symbolic exchange of functions and attitudes: taker displaced by provider. Again, it is worth mentioning the slightness with which this contrast is made: Steve's arrival shown briefly and in the background, his and Frank's divergent roles expressed in understated terms.

Reflecting on this undramatic style of representation, we might consider how easy it would be for the programme to overplay its themes, to labour them in order to make plain precisely what is at stake. Instead, a key relationship is constructed with a degree of visual subtlety.

The episode establishes a comparison between Frank and Steve based on parental roles and responsibilities. Frank is shown to have relinquished, even abused, his parental role whereas Steve steps in willingly. His awareness of this is conveyed fleetingly in a proceeding shot sequence. After a short scene illustrating that Frank's journey has taken him as far as the local pub, we return to a wide shot of the Gallaghers seated around the television set, eating their meal. We cut to a three second close-up of Steve glancing firstly at Fiona and then lingeringly across the faces of the assembled group. As he looks, he smiles instinctively, as though evaluating those around him and his relationship to them. The warmth of his smile suggests that Steve finds satisfaction in his temporary role as head of the household, his subconscious reaction to events indexing his point-of-view. A cut to the seated group matches Steve's line of vision before we return to him for another three-second close-up that re-emphasises the qualities he exhibited initially. This time, however, Steve's affectionate glance is followed by a moment of inner contemplation as his gaze lowers slightly, away from his surroundings, as though his thoughts had turned inward. The sense is evoked of Steve reflecting upon his growing role, entertaining the notion that he could be like a father to this family, could belong to them permanently. After a frenetic beginning, the pace of the scene has become settled and we might well suggest that Steve likewise settles into his role. The moment is brief and, although much can be read from Steve's features in these six seconds, they still retain an enigmatic quality, requiring the viewer to scrutinise the minutiae of his behaviour to interpret and evaluate his personal thoughts and feelings.

Steve's growing comfort as head of the Gallagher family perhaps guides his reaction when Frank returns from the pub and head-butts his son, Ian. (Frank is 'passing on' a head-butt he received in the pub from a father who believes that Ian has been sexually involved with his daughter.) The event unsurprisingly disrupts the settled ambience, and Steve leaps up to Frank, grabbing him by the collar, putting himself between the family and their drunken father. The effect is of Steve protecting his 'family' against the intrusive threat. When Fiona finally manages to drag him away, Frank shouts across at them: 'Big lad now then Steve? Reckon you're a big lad?' Ironically, Frank's drunken provocation encapsulate Steve's perceptions of himself in relation to the Gallagher family: he has matured rapidly into the role of father and

head of the household to the extent that he now feels duty-bound to protect the family from their real, abusive, father. Frank's use of the words 'big lad' alludes precisely (and unintentionally) to Steve's growth.

Steve dramatically extends his protective role by following Frank to the pub after their row, drugging him with prescription medication, driving him to Calais and leaving him there. On discovering this, Fiona visits Steve's house to confront him. As they talk, Steve is unrepentant and nonchalant, drawing an angry reaction from Fiona. She suggests that his actions were actually motivated by Frank 'taking a swing' at him and accuses Steve of not having 'the bollocks to whack him back'. Steve protests: 'I don't do violence,' provoking Fiona to hit him twice in the face and wrestle him to the ground shouting: 'What my dad is and what my family is has got fuck all to do with someone like you!' Fiona lashes out, furiously defending herself, her family and her father against his actions, whereas previously Steve had sought to shield that family from Frank. The roles shift, therefore, with Steve now ostracised from the family; Fiona's use of language reinvents him as an outsider, isolating him from the Gallaghers with the phrase 'someone like you'. And yet, something beyond Steve's actions motivates Fiona's furious onslaught. As she kneels over Steve, frantically beating him about the head and arms, her voice gives out to be replaced by a series of taunted, anguished gasps, vocalising a deep frustration directed partly at Steve, but perhaps more profoundly related to the constraining maternal role imposed upon her at home, which we observed briefly at the beginning of this episode and extensively in the first of the series. In this sense, Fiona channels her anger at this into her attack on Steve, expelling those suppressed emotions which derive from her everyday existence but which she is duty-bound never to voice. By altering her family situation, Steve brings into focus its imperfections, reminding Fiona of her imperfect life. Her rage therefore stems not only from her resentment at being reacquainted with the shortcomings in her life but also at the role that has been unfairly created for her. Fiona's outward show of strength in this scene effectively betrays her vulnerability as she struggles to control the emotion that erupts within her; the frustration she experiences in her daily life overwhelming her initial anger towards Steve.

Although having unwittingly compromised her show of strength at Steve's, in a preceding scene at the Gallagher household Fiona composes herself to manage her resilient act, using it to construct an exterior defence around her true interior emotions. The family are crowding around their neighbour Dave (Veronica's boyfriend) making



requests for items to be bought from France, as he is accompanying Steve to reclaim Frank from a Calais prison. Fiona walks through the throng towards Steve, her forehead creased into a deep frown. She glances only briefly at him and then, in a flat dispassionate tone, instructs him to 'take his birth certificate – they might need it for identification', handing Steve Frank's document. These words are delivered in a reverse shot that frames Steve's face and the back of Fiona's head. From this perspective, we see Steve's apprehensive demeanour, denoting his uncertainty over their relationship at this juncture. Additionally, however, we catch sight of Fiona's expression as she turns away from him (having delivered her austere instruction) and back towards the camera. As she walks to camera, a small, satisfied half-grin spreads across her face. It is a slight moment, but this fleeting expression deftly undermines the severity of Fiona's behaviour, revealing that she has overplayed her anger towards Steve. The camera set-up allows us to appreciate Fiona's moment of interior satisfaction at odds with her outward deportment. A contrast is therefore struck between the character's private and public self – the public face that she wants others (especially Steve) to see and the private, unguarded expression that betrays the nature of her act. The visual difference between the first shot of her frowning features and the companion shot of her softened, smirking face, emphasises this disparity. Her look leaves open the possibility of her forgiving Steve's actions in the future, pre-empting the episode's eventual resolution. The shots that capture this brief moment form a recurrent visual motif with the earlier shots of Steve as he glanced across the faces of the Gallagher family. Both sets of close-up shots glimpse aspects of the characters' private thoughts and feelings as well as their awareness of their public roles, but neither sequence exploits or dwells too heavily upon the moment, relying instead upon an audience's skills in perceiving and interpreting character behaviour to understand point-of-view.

After depicting in some detail the relationships between Frank, Steve and Fiona, the episode shifts focus to present a further variation of role-play in the relationship between Frank and his youngest daughter Debbie. She was affected most profoundly by her father's disappearance and her anguish is matched by her joy at his return to England. Frank, however, is less enthused and marks his homecoming with the simple words: 'For fuck's sake.' Later, having resolved to leave home, he sits on his bed stuffing clothes into a satchel. Debbie appears behind him in the doorway with a pile of clean clothes and says: 'I wish you'd taken a camera, with you in the pictures,' to which Frank, without looking up, replies: 'Total shithole' before turning around to crack a

weak joke regarding French foreplay. This, clearly, is lost on nine-year-old Debbie and she looks downcast at the pile of clothes in her arms. However, when Frank asserts sulkily: 'Bet you're the only one who missed me' she seizes her chance to tell him that he was missed because no one else knew how to 'do the meter' when the gas ran out. This revelation softens Frank's demeanour and he half-grins, expelling a short, satisfied 'humph'. Debbie, now sitting on the bed, continues by asking Frank whether he saw Paris and the Eiffel tower. Frank says yes to both, telling her that: 'You can see right across France from the top' but that he didn't stay up there too long because the French women found him irresistible, causing the captivated Debbie to grin and giggle. When Frank says that he 'legged it back down', Debbie's gaze drops downheartedly as she senses that his story might conclude there, but Frank is uncharacteristically sensitive to her subtle change and quickly explains that: 'Bits of France are gorgeous, you just got to know your way about.' When Debbie asks: 'Do you now?' he replies: 'Every inch,' tapping his forehead conspiratorially and maintaining the illusion.

The exchange between the characters is tender, performed with a restrained sensitivity respectful of the nuances that signal father and daughter's unspoken affection for one another – her frame tilted forward in rapt attention, a childish grin spreading across her face as he speaks, his vocal tone softened, eyes trained upon his daughter as he measures and responds to her reactions. The camera remains stationary and settled, whilst no rapid editing – abundant elsewhere in the episode – disrupts the moment's natural rhythm and tempo. Similarly, no extradiegetic music is present in the sequence, allowing their exchange an audio texture of its own. Watching the scene, we notice the extent to which the moment's success relies upon each character reinventing their roles as father and daughter. Frank's stories are fictitious: he saw only a small park and the inside of a prison cell in France. He is naturally aware of this, and it is likely that Debbie too might recognise the superficiality of Frank's account (it becomes clear in later episodes that Debbie possesses a calculating intelligence). Yet, both characters indulge in the daydream, temporarily suspending the world's realities to firm their bond. That bond is forged in fantasy, with Debbie make-believing her role as a naïve, unquestioning daughter and Frank make-believing his role as an intrepid, worldly-wise father. Both characters wordlessly acknowledge the imagination required for their relationship to endure; their closeness achieved precisely through resisting life's realities in favour of fantasised versions of themselves. Crucially, their activity suspends the issue of Frank's parental ineptitude, ignoring his consistent failure and recasting him temporarily as successful. Con-

sequently, the moment challenges our perceptions of Frank, complicating initial judgements of him as simply useless by making clear his use to Debbie now. In this scene, Frank and Debbie's union is reliant upon their ability and willingness to act out roles with each other and their preserving the pretence references their instinctive understanding of each other's need to play, evacuating the constraints of the everyday to share in a bond of make-believe. By devoting to the act of role-play, each character proves their commitment to one another, making their relationship tangible through a shared reinvention of themselves. The moment's brevity is marked as Frank returns to everyday concerns, instructing Debbie to make him a brew, as he has to cash his giro. The return to reality re-emphasises the preciousness of the previous exchange in which both characters momentarily found closeness through reinvention.

Having presented these different forms of character role-play, the episode appropriately resolves its tensions through Frank and Steve finding new roles to perform. Firstly, Frank hears about Sheila, a sex-obsessed agoraphobic living on extensive benefits, from her estranged husband, Eddie. Frank opportunistically rushes around to introduce himself to her. Sheila invites him in and, unable to cope with Frank's unwashed stench, offers him a bath in her house. Afterwards, as she hands him a pile of Eddie's old clothes, Frank lets his towel slip and Sheila stands, apparently enamoured at the sight of his naked body. Frank invites Sheila to touch him, but his expectations of the sexual encounter unravel as she throws a towel over his head, marches him through to her bedroom and handcuffs him to her metal bed-frame. Sheila makes it explicit that a bout of sadomasochistic lovemaking is pending, involving a leather whip and eighteen-inch dildo. Role-play is necessarily involved here, with Frank relenting to play the submissive role (after suffering an apparent panic-attack) and Sheila dominating. It is almost a joke reference to the role-play issues explored elsewhere in the episode, featuring Frank receiving a figurative 'punishment' for his errant behaviour. Yet, Frank also adopts a second role. Having slept for a great length of time, he emerges in Sheila's front room wearing a liquorice allsorts-patterned jumper of Eddie's that contrasts starkly with his habitual grubby anorak. (Frank's long sleep is thus cocoon-like, with him re-emerging apparently transfigured afterwards.) Sheila brings through his dinner and pours him a glass of lager, stopping only to place a soft cushion on Frank's chair (suggesting that the dildo was indeed used). They sit down at the table and Frank gestures flamboyantly towards his refined surroundings and the food and drink provided for him, chuckling to himself. Frank has been offered a new role, as

substitute 'husband' to Sheila, and a place in her home. Clearly, this role is at odds with Frank's life outside of those four walls, but he accepts and plays along nonetheless, even revelling in his new life. The conjunction of this domestic portrait with the bedroom scene serves to illustrate the odd pretence of Frank and Sheila's new relationship: both aspects of their life together incorporating discrete brands of role-play.

Elsewhere, at the Gallagher household, Steve summons Fiona by ringing a mobile phone hidden in one of youngest brother Liam's toys. Fiona answers it and we cut to her walking into the back yard. A reverse shot captures a single rose appearing at the window of the run-down van parked in the yard. Fiona tentatively walks across, opening the rear door to find Steve lying naked except for a bunch of red roses. From this position he hastily describes his relationship with his father to explain his reasons for dropping out of medical school, a fact that had further angered Fiona earlier in the episode. Steve's appearance marks his ambitiously romantic gesture. His speech is nervous and shaky, exposing his effort in the act he tries to perform. By recasting himself once more as Fiona's lover, he expels the earlier tensions surrounding his 'fatherly' interventions and, by inviting Fiona into the van, provides a space away from the household in which her imposed role as 'mother' to the family can be temporarily suspended. Thus, Steve recasts them both as lovers again, temporarily lifting the weight of outside responsibility altogether. Fiona's smile back conveys her acceptance, causing Steve to sigh with relief, and she completes his gesture by drawing the curtains across the van windows, closing out the world entirely. The scene cuts before Steve and Fiona's lovemaking just as it did before Frank and Sheila's. This rhyming in the editing draws attention to the parallel between the two events, with both Steve and Frank's stories being resolved through recasting themselves in new roles, integrating sexuality and role-play, and finding a space beyond the Gallagher family home. The episode thus momentarily positions each character away from the paternal role, whereas previously it had created tension through their comparison as 'fathers'. By establishing roles away from fatherhood – Steve as Fiona's lover and Frank as Sheila's replacement 'husband' – both characters can re-engage with the family and satisfactorily withdraw again. Thus, as this episode concludes, we see that Frank's relationship with Debbie (and sporadically with his other children) survives whilst, in proceeding episodes, Steve comfortably performs the paternal role he was beginning to grow into. In both cases, their 'fathering' occurs alongside those other roles they have learnt to perform successfully.

The theme of character role-play is afforded different nuances and

configurations in this episode of *Shameless*. The series continues to explore and question the roles that characters play in their everyday lives: Frank's role in Sheila's life is undermined when he has sex with her daughter; Ian, his son, hides his homosexuality by overplaying the role of a young heterosexual male; Debbie's innocent role is compromised when she steals a toddler and then keeps the reward for his safe return and so on. My discussion has necessarily mentioned aspects of the episode's aesthetic construction such as performance, voiceover, camera and editing style, costuming, setting and so on, as they relate to and express the theme of character role-play. These areas could fruitfully be expanded upon. Likewise, other aspects such as humour, authorship or social class, each potentially central to the series, have largely been overlooked in favour of illustrating the stylistic handling of a particular theme. Concentration upon one facet necessarily leads to the neglect of others, but it is perhaps indicative of the series' accomplishments that it offers such diverse opportunities for future analysis.

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