

Portrayal of senior citizens in Polish television drama series¹

Streszczenie

Tekst jest analizą wizerunków seniorów w najpopularniejszych polskich serialach obyczajowych. Pokazuje, iż wizerunki te są wyidealizowane, realistyczne, a także takie, które są formą promocji nowych, bardziej aktywnych postaw w wieku senioralnym. Z badań z odbiorcami wynika jednak, że najlepiej przyjmowane są wizerunki tradycyjne prezentujące seniorów jako statecznych dziadków, a szczególną sympatią widzów cieszy się obraz troskliwej, ciepłej babci, strażniczki domowego ogniska.

Słowa kluczowe:

senior, serial telewizyjny, wizerunki, odbiór widzów

Abstract

This text analyses the portrayal of senior citizens in the most popular Polish drama television serials. It shows representations that are idealized or realistic, but also some that promote new, more active attitudes in old age. Research with viewers shows, however, that the best received images are traditional ones, which portray senior citizens as stable old folks; viewers are especially fond of the image of the caring, warm grandmother, guardian of hearth and home.

Key words:

senior citizen, television serial, portrayal, viewer reception

Contemporary research regarding television is increasingly becoming an area of public discourse. Television serials are treated as a result of the characteristics of the genre and the creation process – taking into account the time and place in which they are created, the creators' ideas about certain problems, cultural models functioning in the society in question and various interest groups – which can reach viewers and meet social expectations through transmission of content. Therefore, television serials are an interesting cultural source which, partly because of its polysemy, offers the possibility of presenting various attitudes, ideas, judgements and opinions. They also seem significant due to their great popularity: even bestselling books or magazines do not reach as many recipients. Additionally, thanks to modern technology, one can be a regular viewer without considerable effort, regardless of airing time, and also share one's opinions about certain stories, argue and relive the emotions connected with them. Modern media are

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often accused of creating a cult of youth and beauty. Therefore it is worth asking whether, and in what context, the image of senior citizens appears in the most popular television productions; how old age is presented and how it is received by viewers. In attempting to answer this question I will refer to many years of analysis of Polish drama series². For the purpose of this text I have focused on storylines involving senior citizens, i.e. retirees who are at least 65 years old. When it comes to characters in television series, we sometimes do not have exact information regarding their age, but we can infer it based on other information, e.g. the fact that they are retired, have grown-up grandchildren, remember World War II, etc.

In the analysed series, less than 5% of all primary and secondary characters are senior citizens, because the stories are dominated by young and middle-aged characters. In a few of the analysed shows, senior citizens do not appear at all, or as strictly episodic, tertiary characters. Characters of mature age in series are presented in a variety of social contexts and play various roles.

1. Elderly people living with the family

When senior citizens appear as primary characters in series, we usually see them as members of a multi-generational family, living with their children and grandchildren, most often in a home which belongs to them. We see such families in *Clan*, *L is for Love*, *First love* and *Colours of happiness*, The third generation actively participates in family life, engages in daily chores and responsibilities, and cares for the adult children and often also the grown-up grandchildren. The grandparents do not live in a separate household, but as part of a larger familial community. They experience their children's marital conflicts and childrearing problems, and they take part in making key decisions. They are often party to different disputes and conflicts and always stand for traditional values, namely maintaining family unity and the sanctity of marriage, and promoting the good of the children. Additionally, they help pass on and maintain religious values – especially the women. While grandfathers guard traditions of patriotism and national sovereignty, they pass on historical knowledge to their grandchildren: memories of their youth and attachment to national symbols and their homeland. The characters which receive the most exposure in series are usually family matrons (sometimes we see families with only a widowed grandmother), usually presented in the role of ideal grandmothers.

2. The ideal grandmother

Grandmothers presented in series are usually portrayed as retired or simply taking care of the home and grandchildren full-time in old age. They have more time, unlike

² I have included the following series in this analysis: *Clan*, *For better or worse*, *Parish*, *L is for Love*, *That's life*, *On Wspólna street*, *Rose lodge*, *First love*, *Colours of happiness*, *Hotel 52*, *Lifeline*, *Gallery*, *Doctors*, *Recipe for life*, *Agata's right*, *Girlfriends*, *It's all before us*.

the mothers, but also more patience and can focus on the grandchildren who are sometimes somewhat neglected by their busy, working mother. Therefore the grandmother gives the little grandchildren tender care and a feeling of security and familial warmth. Apart from that and regardless of the grandchildren's age, the grandmother is also the guardian of various traditions. She personifies the comfort of the family nest, where there is always a warm meal waiting, the smell of homemade cake, preserves and the unforgettable flavours of childhood; she will also tell the best bedtime story, reminisce about her youth and provide an introduction to the world of old beliefs and holiday traditions. The grandmother is also associated with unconditional love and acceptance of the grandchildren. Unlike the parents, the grandmother has more tolerance for the grandchildren's various shortcomings and minor sins; she will support, understand and cheer them up, and since she does not have as big a sense of responsibility for their upbringing, she is not as demanding, strict or consistent. If needed, in situations of conflict between maturing children and parents, it is often the grandmother who is the negotiator and presents the arguments of both sides. Her life experience lets her look upon current problems with perspective. Therefore, the grandmother satisfies many practical, everyday needs – she will walk the grandchildren to preschool or school, will watch over them when the parents are busy, care for them in sickness, make delicious preserves for the winter, show them how to knit or crochet, bake cakes, prepare their favourite deserts, etc. The grandmother also satisfies many emotional needs – she is supportive, gives unconditional love, embraces, caresses and can help out financially by e.g. adding some money to savings for a bike, skates or other desired object.

It turns out that despite their traditionalism, grandfathers and especially grandmothers can be quite tolerant and full of understanding towards their grandchildren; even more so than towards their own children. Thus we often see grandparents defending their grandchildren in conflicts with the parents, and accuse their children of spending too little time with, and not paying enough attention to, the grandchildren (*Colours of happiness*, *Clan*, *L is for love*, *That's life*, *Parish*, *Recipe for life*). Although we sometimes hear the senior citizens sigh and say that they don't understand the younger generation very well or cannot keep up, we often see that they are supportive of their grandchildren; talking to them and helping in difficult situations.

In the analysed series we also see grandmothers as their grandchildren's sole guardians. When the parents are working abroad and sending money, the responsibility for daily care falls on the growing children's grandmother (*Parish*, *Colours of happiness*, *For better or worse*). Sometimes grandmothers take over care for their grandchildren when the parents have died (*Parish*, *Colours of happiness*, *First love*). Despite the strong bond with their grandmother, the grandchildren sometimes cause trouble, neglect their studies or come into conflict with the law, which results in probation or even jail. Sometimes these problems are connected with the family's financial situation. Grandmothers

who raise grandchildren by themselves usually have some financial difficulties. Generally, the material situation of elderly characters leaves something to be desired. We often hear about low retirement benefits and a frugal lifestyle, with a lack of funds for medicine and any kind of durable goods, especially if the current ones break or wear down. We see senior citizens who take out loans and cannot repay them or have trouble covering the cost of a roof repair, payments for dental prosthetics or costly medical care (*Clan, Parish, That's life*) without help from their family.

Senior citizens who live with their children's family are portrayed as people surrounded by love, care and respect from their relatives. Senior citizens help with their children's and grandchildren's daily tasks and support them, but also receive support themselves. Their children not only assist them financially, but also care for their health, help with the more difficult chores and nurse them when they are sick. We can observe examples of such ideal relationships in serials such as *Clan, L is for love, Colours of happiness* and *First love*. Sometimes, the serials in question show a generational conflict: a lack of acceptance for the attitudes or opinions of the grandchildren, or in turn a conviction on the part of the grandchildren that the life choices, views or demands of the grandparents are antiquated or strange (*Parish, Clan, L is for love*). Usually, however, a strong emotional bond outlives the temporary misunderstandings. After all, the serials often let us observe an exchange of life experiences between grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents, being the guardians of tradition, share their rich experience with their grandchildren, while the younger generation helps introduce the senior citizens to modern technology or new phenomena. So we see teenagers or students showing senior citizens how to handle home appliances and computers, how to conduct electronic bank transfers, and how to use e-mail, Skype or mobile phones (*Clan, Parish, That's life, L is for love*).

3. Senior citizens living alone

Some of the elderly characters in serials are people who have no children or close relatives and live independently with their spouses or alone, usually after the death of their life partners. These characters are very rarely shown as lonely or unhappy people; usually they have other relatives or a group of friends, on whom they can count in need and with whom they spend their holidays or free time. In the serials analysed there are numerous instances of such relations. A few times we observe a developing friendship between older characters living on their own and incidental young acquaintances, who become a kind of surrogate family (*L is for love, Parish, For better or worse, Colours of happiness*).

4. Elderly people as a burden on the family

Apart from the vision of harmonious relations between senior citizens and their families and surroundings, the analysed serials also show relationships that are difficult

or more conflicted. Aged characters are often treated as a troublesome burden, especially if they require constant care. Adult children or grandchildren are often rude to the grandparents or treat them and their needs with disregard, making decisions about their life without involving them. In the serials analysed we see a family that deprives a grandfather of his pension, siblings disputing over who should take care of their sick or disabled parent, and grandchildren moving their grandfather or grandmother to the hospital during the holidays or trying to certify them as incapacitated in order to take over their assets (*Parish, Clan, For better or worse, Agata's rights*). Poor treatment of the elderly is presented as unrelated to environment or social status. The depiction of older persons in serials is a clear voice in support of their ageing with dignity, of which no one, including the family, should deprive them.

5. Senior citizens in retirement homes

A similar message accompanies the portrayal of residents of retirement and nursing homes, who are background characters in several of the analysed serials. A recurring element in the depiction of nursing homes is a critical attitude toward the management of these establishments. Several times we see the administration poorly managing funds received for the upkeep of the home, physically or mentally abusing the residents, giving the senior citizens sedatives not prescribed by a doctor, or taking possession of their valuables (*Parish, Rose lodge*). What is more, the serials show local governments usually treating retirement homes as a necessary evil, limiting their funds, neglecting repairs or deciding to move the establishment to a different, less suitable space without hesitation (*Parish, Gallery*). There is a clear suggestion that the elderly are not particularly important to the people in charge. The atmosphere in these homes, the feeling of daily, mundane repetition and the limitation of freedom make the residents want to change their situation, at least temporarily; to spend a few days or even hours in a different, more exciting way. These desires are fulfilled by senior citizens in serials who run away from their retirement or nursing home and organize their time independently, which gives them at least a bit of pleasure, entertainment and distraction from the everyday (*Rose lodge, For better or worse, Hotel 52*). In these depictions, old age in a home is shown as the rather sad and lonely autumn of life, especially for those whose relatives do not care about them at all and rarely or never visit them; even holidays being no exception (*Parish, Rose lodge, Gallery*).

6. The autumn of life – reflection and creation

The serialised image of life in old age is varied. In many ways, this portrayal is a reflection of reality. The senior citizens shown usually live modestly and have limited financial resources: only sharing a household with their grown-up children and receiving

permanent help from them, or working after retirement helps their material standing. Very often older people are shown wanting to be needed; they help and provide care. This applies especially to women. The serials confirm the image of an ideal grandmother. The audience is a receptive target since fewer and fewer families live together with their grandparents, and a reference to this slightly idealized depiction of the grandmother can be seen as a return to the idyllic land of childhood, where grandma personifies the feelings of that time: warmth, stability and support. The other, no less significant reason for the popularity of this idealized image is that the emotional bond in Polish families is still quite strong, as is the idea that one should support one's grown-up children – if in no other way, then at least by helping raise their children. In short, the care of a grandmother is part of the experience of consecutive generations of Poles. CBOS shows this quite clearly in their surveys regarding what Poles are grateful for when it comes to grandmothers and grandfathers. The research has been conducted cyclically, in 2000, 2007 and 2012. According to the results, most Polish people – 59% in 2000 (Wciórka 2001), 56% in 2007 (Szczepańska 2008) and 72% in 2012 (Kowalczyk 2012) – declared that they owe a lot to their grandmother or grandfather. In the most recent survey, respondents usually stated that they are thankful for their care (65%) and thanks to their grandmothers/-fathers they felt loved (64%). Grandfathers and grandmothers are also a source of knowledge about the history of the family (57% of all surveyed). Most respondents also received some moral ground rules from them (57%) and religious faith (54%). Almost half of all respondents (48%) feel that grandparents taught them certain character traits such as being hard-working, responsible and self-disciplined.

The number of people who feel grateful to their grandparents is all the more significant when we consider that 8% of those surveyed said that they do not remember or never knew their grandmothers or grandfathers. No less interesting is the fact that usually the youngest generation feels that they owe a lot to their grandparents. In the 18–24 age group this amounts to 88%; for ages 25–34 it is 82% (Kowalczyk 2012). One could try to explain the lower percentage in the older group as the result of fading or weaker memory. However, I think that what we see here is a certain tendency which is also confirmed by research conducted with young people in smaller (not nationwide) samples. In the nineties, Hanna Świda-Ziemba (2000) studied Warsaw high school students and noticed their very strong bonds with grandparents (mostly grandmothers, because they were more likely still to be alive). The students made it clear in interviews that they receive emotional support and unconditional love from their grandparents, who are also, as people who have and uphold clearly defined values, stronger role models than their parents. Even if they are perceived as somewhat archaic and hold views contrary to that of their grandchildren, they still command respect through their faithfulness to each other.

Serials fairly often present emotional ties and marriages formed in the late years of life. Usually, these are new relationships, mostly formed by widowed people (*Clan*, *L is*

for love, *That's life*, *Rose lodge*, *Recipe for life*, *Agata's right*), but there are also stories of characters who have spent their lives alone and find someone in old age, become engaged emotionally and decide to share a future (*Clan*, *First love*, *For better or worse*). All such relations are shown favourably; rarely do we see an adverse attitude in these couples' surroundings. It is more likely that the senior citizens themselves have doubts about whether it is right to start a new life at their age, while the family and friends support their decision. The only negative reactions appear among adult children who are afraid that the parent's new marriage in old age will threaten their inheritance of assets, e.g. a flat (*Rose lodge*, *Clan*, *For better or worse*). The senior citizens' relationships and their emotional relations, whether lasting for many years or recently formed, are portrayed similarly to the relationships of the younger people. We see strong emotions, jealousy, displays of affection, intimacy, and in the case of recently formed bonds, the typical elements of new partnerships – namely getting to know each other's habits and learning mutual compromise.

In the serials analysed it is much rarer to see an image of active old age, full of passion and interests. The majority of senior citizens in serials travel seldom or never and do not display much activity, be it physical, cultural or social. Sometimes we see an episodic character, who despite their age strives to remain active. An exception among these serials is *Recipe for life*, where alongside the main characters aged 30–40 there is also a group of one of the characters' mother's friends. She is retired and has an adult granddaughter and a circle of friends of her own age with whom she spends time playing bridge, walking, meeting over wine, going to the cinema and concerts, or dancing. They all decide to take a dance class and one of the couples later takes part in a dance contest. The men indulge their historical interests by taking part in historical reconstructions of battles. A man she has recently met, who becomes her partner, invites her to go parasailing. *Recipe for life* is also the only serial in which there is mention of senior citizens and sex, showing all areas of the characters' lives with fondness, showing their joy of life, as well as the balance between the role of a grandmother who supports her daughter and grandchildren, and a mature woman who has the right to her own life and happiness.

The image of an active, dynamic person clearly contrasts with Polish reality, considering various studies that show that Polish senior citizens most often base their retired life on family, church, television and maybe a summer house or garden. After retirement there is a retreat from professional, cultural and social life (Wądołowska 2010; Trafiałek 2003). However, one could treat these serials' portrayals of active senior citizens as a way of promoting alternative role models and encouraging retirees not to stay at home and limit their lives to television and grandchildren. It is a shame, then, that such models are usually incidental or the subject of a one-time plot element (probably introduced by contract), probably rendering their impact rather insignificant.

Several times, the senior citizens in serials who try to hang on to their youth are shown in a comical and to some extent patronizing manner (*Parish, Rose lodge, For better or worse*). Slight vices or various oddities to which old people are prone are also shown in a similar fashion (e.g. disregarding doctors' orders and eating sweets and fatty foods, or drinking alcohol or smoking). In these portrayals the senior citizens appear as unruly children who require guidance and control, although they are usually shown with fondness.

7. Reception of senior citizens in serials

I wanted to compare the presentation of senior citizens in serials with viewer reception. I tried to show how serial content is decoded by analysing two types of materials: internet forums devoted to specific serials³ and casual, open interviews conducted according to the same structure⁴.

From the material analysed I conclude that the most widely accepted image of senior citizens is that of the cornerstone of the family; the warm, wise and good grandparent who supports their children and grandchildren with advice. Grandmothers should be resourceful, excellent cooks, caring and prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of the family. Senior citizens are accepted if they show concern and care but do not try to interfere with their children's or grandchildren's lives too much. The portrayal of senior citizens who strayed from this stereotypical image proved quite controversial. Scenes of jealousy among older characters, as well as displays of various forms of physical activity (e.g. going to the gym or pool or engaging in Nordic walking) or cultural activity (e.g. going to the cinema or using the internet) spurred discussion among viewers. Some accused the creators of an unrealistic portrayal, while others criticised them with indignation, claiming that such behaviour is inappropriate for senior citizens. Some viewers, however, protested against the marginalization of senior citizens, which limits their activity to watching television, caring for grandchildren and religious practices.

This dispute clearly shows that opinion is divided regarding the social standing of senior citizens and their assumed rules of behaviour. Traditional convictions are still quite strong, namely that old age should be stable and focused on the family and the needs of others, at the expense of one's own needs, which become insignificant. I think that media portrayals (serials included) of other, alternative images of the elderly can play a significant role in changing views and attitudes.

³ I analysed the entirety of Internet forum posts available in April 2012 on official websites for the serials analysed and on forums regarding those serials on www.gazeta.pl, www.filmweb.pl.

⁴ In 2006–2012, 180 interviews were conducted with respondents who regularly viewed the selected Polish drama serials.

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Serial titles:

Klan (Clan), *Na dobre i na złe* (For better or worse), *Plebania* (Parish), *M jak miłość* (L is for Love), *Samo życie* (That's life), *Na Wspólnej* (On Wspólna street), *Pensjonat pod różą* (Rose lodge), *Pierwsza miłość* (First love), *Barwy szczęścia* (Colors of happiness), *Hotel 52*, *Linia życia* (Lifeline), *Galeria* (Gallery), *Lekarze* (Doctors), *Przepis na życie* (Recipe for life), *Prawo Agaty* (Agata's right), *Przyjaciółki* (Girlfriends), *Wszystko przed nami* (The future is ours, literally “it's all before us”)

