

## Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail

"She came home, my Lord, and smashed in the television;  
Me and the kids were peaceably watching Kojak  
When she marched into the living room and declared  
That if I didn't turn off the television immediately  
She'd put her boot through the screen;  
I didn't turn it off, so instead she turned it off –  
I remember the moment exactly because Kojak  
After shooting a dame with the same name as my wife  
Snarled at the corpse – Goodnight, Queen Maeve –  
And then she took off her boots and smashed in the television;  
I had to bring the kids round to my mother's place;  
We got there just before the finish of Kojak;  
(My mother has a fondness for Kojak, my Lord);  
When I returned home my wife had deposited  
What was left of the television into the dustbin,  
Saying – I didn't get married to a television  
And I don't see why my kids or anybody else's kids  
Should have a television for a father or mother,  
We'd be much better off all down in the pub talking  
Or playing bar-billiards –  
Whereupon she disappeared off back down again to the pub."  
Justice O'Brádaigh said wives who preferred bar-billiards to  
family television  
Were a threat to the family which was the basic unit of society  
As indeed the television itself could be said to be a basic unit of



the family

And when as in this case wives expressed their preference in  
forms of violence

Jail was the only place for them. Leave to appeal was refused.

From *Teresa's Bar* - 1976

### **Summary and analysis:**

The poem is presented as a newspaper report with a striking headline. There is both drama and intrigue in the title as we wonder what on earth could have led to a woman being jailed for breaking an appliance. We assume that it must either have been damage caused to someone else's property or an act which included injury or threat to a person to have merited so severe a sentence.

The poem opens with a husband's testimony. His language is an inadvertently hilarious blend of pretentious formality and normal, everyday expressions. His use of the word 'peaceably' shows a rather pathetic desire to impress the judge with quasi-legal language and it is a ridiculous way to describe watching a TV detective series.

The wife's entry and subsequent actions are described in a way that implies violence: she 'marched' into the room, 'declared' she would 'put her boot' through the set if it weren't turned off and then, of course she 'smashed' the set. This is in stark contrast to the husband's behaviour – as he describes it – when he and the children were 'peaceably' sitting watching television.

The programme the husband and children were watching does not fit in with the idea of peace. Kojak, the detective shoots a woman who has the same name as the wife in the poem and then snarls a smart comment at the corpse. This is a dreadful image and presents us with a world in which women are violently oppressed. The American word 'dame' to describe the woman sits oddly with the name 'Queen Maeve' as she was a legendary Irish heroine who ruled Connacht. This line also shows us, therefore, how American culture can creep into our homes and our language and erode our culture and traditions.

It is at this moment that the Maeve in the poem reasserts her authority and power by taking off her boots and making good her threat to smash the television set if it is not switched off.

The wife's reason for smashing in the set is not explained at this point in the poem and we are inclined to see things from the husband's point of view. After all, he was simply watching a programme when his wife – for no good reason that we can see – marched into the room and put her boots through the television screen.

The husband's reaction is interesting. His first priority is to see the end of the programme, so he brings the children to his mother's house and they watch the end of it together. He confides in the judge in an unnecessary aside that his mother has 'a fondness for Kojak', which again makes him appear a slightly ridiculous figure. Why would the judge want to know this and what possible bearing can it have on the case?

Finally, we get a reason for the wife's behaviour. When the husband arrives home, she has thrown out the remnants of the set and she tells him that she



doesn't see why television should dominate their lives to the extent that it has replaced spouses and parents. This is both humorous and sad. She claims that the family would be much better off 'down in the pub talking / Or playing bar-billiards': a statement which is likely to throw the reader a little. Would a family really be better off in a pub? It would normally be seen as a most unsuitable environment for parents and young children, but on reflection we have to admit that they would at least be talking and doing things together. With that, the wife disappears again to the pub which adds to both the humour and the poignancy of the poem.

At this stage it is worth reflecting on the fact that the violence in the poem has been carried out by a woman and that – rightly or wrongly – we would normally associate such behaviour with men. Do you think the poem would have a different feel if it were a husband appearing home from the pub, smashing the television set while the wife and children were watching it and then heading off to the pub again later? Do you think we take the theme more seriously because it is a woman who does these things?

The judge speaks. His name, O'Brádaigh, is an Irish one yet he turns against the woman of the family in a way that would be considered unusual in traditional Irish society where the wife and mother would be considered the centre of family life. Is this, like Kojak's killing of 'Queen Maeve', another example of the corrosion of our traditions by the constant piping of American television shows and so forth into our homes? Think how much more pervasive this influence is now than it was in the 1970s, when Durcan wrote this poem. He could not have dreamed of the internet and all it would bring with us in terms of homogenising world cultures.



The judge says that the television is the 'basic unity of the family': a role we would normally associate with the mother or father. Again, there is a blend of humour and sorrow here. The mother may have been a basic unity of the family in that she would guide, instruct and comfort her children but that role has been taken over by the television. As we can see by the poet's choice of television programme, this new influence is one which promotes violence and a degradation of women. The judge, however, sees it differently. He sees the wife's actions as violent and harmful, although all she has actually damaged is an appliance in her own home.

The wife is sentenced to time in jail and thus justice is seen to be served. Now we need to reflect on the fact that if the television is 'a basic unity of the family' and the family 'the basic unit of society', then our whole society is shaped and formed by the television programmes piped into the home. This is a deeply depressing thought.

Durcan is not afraid to take a swipe at Irish society when he feels it is merited but at the same time he does not wish to offend. He is acutely aware that for all the ills in society, there are good people who prove the exception to the rule. However, he feels that it is right to make this sort of social commentary in that these flaws have to be pointed out if they are to be dealt with.