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# How to apply the multi-strand narrative of American TV shows in a British series: the Downton Abbey's case

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Abstract
**The article analyzes the key ideas that allowed Downton Abbey to become one of the most iconic series in the British landscape. By focusing on the show's narrative rhetoric, we especially learn about all those aspects that find their roots in American TV shows. Downton Abbey's creators, producers Gareth Neame and screenwriter Julian Fellowes, asserted that they modeled their show after series like ER and The West Wing. Inspired by the movie Gosford Park, Neame and Fellowes were aiming to reboot the genre of period drama. The article specifically identifies Downton Abbey's elements of international success in the unity between its procedural arena and characters web as well as in the ability to focus organically on a general theme and to keep its tone emotionally consistent. The article ends by questioning all those lectures that look at Downton Abbey exclusively as an escapist and utopic piece. On the contrary, the article highlights the proactive nature of the show. At its dramatic core, Downton Abbey can be considered very similar to a seemingly different show like The West Wing.**

Keywords
**Narrative rhetoric, procedural TV drama, Downton Abbey, positive characters, antiheroes**

## 1. Introduction

*Downton Abbey* is the most prominent series in the English television landscape[1]. Despite its huge international success, screenwriter Julian

[1] *DA* (2010) has been produced by Carnival Films, which belongs to NBCUniversal and is one of the super-indies born from the recent conglomeration between the English system and a few big production companies, most of them American. It has been an extraordinary commercial success (it has been sold to more than 220 countries). It has been critically acclaimed, and has achieved the highest number of Emmy nominations for a foreign series, a Golden Globe and an Emmy as best miniseries). It has been beloved by the public: 120 million viewers watched the end of the third season worldwide, according to NBC. It was also usually viewed by more than ten millions on the English TV network ITV, and it had similar ratings on PBS – the American public channel broadcaster, which also co-produced it. Before *DA*, PBS could not even reach two million viewers.

Fellowes and producer Gareth Neame's TV show received limited attention in the realm of scientific literature on televised storytelling. *Downton Abbey* has mainly been examined for its ideological aspects, for how faithfully it reconstructs the time period and its contribution to the elaboration of the English cultural identity (Byrne, 2013; Baena & Bykers, 2014). Moreover, the show has been the topic of extensive discussion on the evolution of the heritage drama as a genre (Chapman, 2014; Leggott & Taddeo, 2014). This is why the focus of this article is going to be different. We aim to dig deeper into the storytelling of the show and analyze its writing and rhetoric. Our aim is to discuss the reasons behind its success and determine the specifics of how the spectator is kept engaged. Considering the TV drama until its fifth season, we will highlight what elements *Downton Abbey* altered of the movie that it is modeled after –*Gosford Park* (2002), written by the same Julian Fellowes and directed by Robert Altman– and how it adopted the American style of telling a story through an ensemble cast of characters. These are elements that were never properly discussed in previous lectures on *DA*, despite having been brought up by Neame and Fellowes multiple times[2].

Our theoretical point of view on how a story builds interest around its characters and creates its moral compass comes from W.C. Booth (1961; 1988). In his narrative theory, it is central the assumption that every aspect of literary fiction reflects the efforts and the choices made by the author in order to create characters who resonate with the reader. The aim of the author is to guide readers towards the formulation of a specific moral judgment regarding the behaviors depicted in the story. In accordance with this idea, Booth thinks that the basic interest of the reader is the one for the moral truth –the truth about values– expressed by the protagonist's adventure (Booth calls it "practical interest").

We think his perspective is in line with the narrative and dramatic principles on writing for the screen –see especially McKee, 1997; Truby, 2007; Snyder, 2005; Vogler, 1992– which are at the basis of our analysis.

The best screenwriting manuals are essentially annotated collections of narrative devices, i.e. of rhetorical contrivances, that give substance to Booth's foundations in the field of cinematic storytelling. Screenwriting theory focuses on the screenplay in order to examine how conflict is set in the story, which are the levels of drama, how characters are construed so as to face dilemmatic decisions through which the deep moral theme of the series can be explored. It is, in fact, through dramatic conflict that the values at stake in a story become relevant in viewers' perception, and it is through his effort and his difficulty in relating to values that the main character becomes interesting for the viewer. For screenwriting theory, the very root of the empathy with the protagonist is the perception of his moral need: viewers feel that the character is facing an interior challenge regarding universal values which could, in different ways and contexts, be at stake also in real life.

Also cognitive studies of cinematic narrative tackle many of these theoretical issues (see for example Grodal, 1997; Smith, 1995; Tan, 1996). The main difference between the two approaches (Braga, 2003) is the centrality which in screenwriting theory is attributed to the concepts of narrative theme and of the protagonist's inner conflict. Screenwriting theory considers these elements as keystones for the understanding of narrative construction, while cognitive analyses stem from a broad and minute reflection on the psychological mechanisms of decoding fiction (Bordwell, 1989).

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[2] Fellowes: "[...] the skeleton of *Downton* was in fact American. It was really much more *West Wing* and *ER*, these very pacy multi narrative stories..." (Harrington, 2014); Neame, highlighting its analogies with his own show: "*The West Wing* is about a city state, the White House building, what goes on inside, the lives and the relationships of the people who staff it. [...] The President is not really a bigger character than the number two press officer. [...] The workplace is everything. It's a pressure cooker where all the characters are focused on one collective endeavour." (Parker, 2010).



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Not many analyses have been done on TV drama from a screenwriting perspective. The closest example is probably Jason Mittell's study of contemporary American TV series (Mittell, 2015). Even from a theoretical point of view that owes a lot to Bordwell's cognitive film theory, Mittell's wide overview on the complex form of recent TV drama takes into account screenwriting issues such as the character arc and the function of narrative ending in defining the general meaning of a story. Our essay aims to be a contribution in this direction, enriching the reflection on the features of quality television (Thompson, 1997; McCabe & Akass, 2007) by underlining some dramatic devices which are generally overlooked by academic research.

## 2. Narrative structure

Able to combine drama and comedy in equal measure, *Downton Abbey* takes place in the first decade of the twentieth-century and tells the story of an aristocratic English family, who is forced to face the slow decay of their life style and privileges. For the value system of the city bourgeoisie has now replaced the country aristocracy's. The bond between nobility and wealth is not as strong, women and labor are demanding new rights, and everyone's routine is compromised by the ever-evolving technology (phone, electricity, etc.). In the series, all of this –progress questioning tradition– is seen from within the Downton Abbey's estate; it shows how it affects the rigid division of class in the house. On one side, there is the family of the Earl of Grantham, the Crawleys; on the other, there is the help. These are two distinct and seemingly opposite realities, in terms of comfort, power and privileges. In truth, this is only one world. It is a united microcosm. The help understands its role at Downton and shares the same value system and obligations of the high society, where lords and ladies belong. The butler believes in his social role as the Earl believes in his. Both of them are convinced that they have a purpose and that the link that bonds them is necessary.

The conflict between progress and tradition and the transformative engine of the story become real in the key storyline of the series. The main plot has the Earl, His Highness, Robert Crawley, as the protagonist, and it deals with the problem of his family inheritance and his attempts to keep the estate running. The inciting incident of the story is the death of Lord Grantham's heir, Patrick Crawley. He is his first cousin's son, who was destined to become the Lord of Downton, since the Earl does not have any sons. But Patrick is unfortunately one of the victims of the Titanic disaster. The series opens with the news of said shipwreck.

The tragedy forces Lord Grantham to face reality: his estate will fall into the hands of strangers. It is specifically going to Matthew Crawley, his third cousin, once removed, who lives a bourgeois life as a lawyer in Manchester. The Earl is therefore invested with the task of guaranteeing the coming of an appropriate management system to Downton, one hinged on the help of a strong servitude and, even more so, on the culture that binds owner and staff together in a system of overly codified but efficient values. The bourgeois nature of the new heir and his foreign nature to such an old school of thought is therefore an obstacle that the show lays out for the Earl. It is not the only one though.

The stakes are adeptly raised by a fact that precedes the story: the deceased father of Lord Grantham conferred an entail to the property, which forces the house as well as the wealth of his family (the dowry brought to the Earl by his wife Cora) to be bound to their title. Whoever owns one owns the other, as without the money the estate would be in ruin. Robert Crawley has now the problem of having to hand a stranger the majority of his possessions and not been able to give his elder daughter Mary a substantial dowry. This is an issue that it would have not existed if Patrick, Crawley's cousin, had not died on the Titanic. He was not only noble by birth and knew the rules of Downton, but he was also engaged to Mary: with him, their wealth, estate and title would have stayed with the family.



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## 3. Developing the main storyline and dramatic concept

With the above premises in mind, the answer to the main question –the survival of Downton– is initially subordinated to the secondary storyline, whose complications keep Lord Grantham's problem relevant for three seasons. If Lady Mary marries the new heir, everything would be solved, as it was planned before the Titanic. The series revolves around the tortured romance between the cold, controlled and proud Mary and the modern, gentle and upright city lawyer, Matthew. It is the right narrative intuition because it invests the issue of the inheritance with pathos: it connects an interesting, but perhaps too distant, conflict –progress vs. tradition– to an easier concept to grasp. One that is able to reach a bigger audience. The series has enough built in complications to keep the conflict alive and prevent the couple from getting together and ending the story too soon. Mary's proud character clashes with Matthew's distaste for aristocratic manners. Her transgressive spirit leads her to dangerous affairs and collides with her parents' silent but clear considerations on who is the right suitor for her.

After separations, rival loves and a messy scandal, the love story between Mary and Matthew ends in the third season. It involves a marriage, the birth of their son, and Matthew's death in a car accident. From here on out, the story progressively focuses on Mary, now the heir thanks to her husband's will. She is ready to assume her dad's position as the head of Downton with the help of her brother in law, Branson. The drama of the survival of the estate, which reached its climax in season three, is kept more in the background in the fourth and fifth season[3].

In general, however, the drama lived by the Earl in the first three seasons constantly reminds the audience what the core of the series is. In those early seasons, the story establishes how vital the estate is for him (in the first episode, he tells his mother: "I've given my life to Downton. I was born here and I hope to die here. I claim no career beyond the nurture of this house and estate. It is my third parent and my fourth child. Do I care about it? Yes, I do care!". In the second episode, he says to the new heir: "You see a million bricks that may crumble, a thousand gutters and pipes that may block and leak, and stone that will crack in the frost. I see my life's work."). He also stressed how work gives an identity to many (again to Matthew: "And when you are a master here, is the butler to be dismissed, or the footman? How many maids or kitchen staff will be allowed to stay? Or must every one be driven out? We all have different parts to play, Matthew. And we must be allowed to play them.")

While evolving as a character, the Earl defines the progression of the drama (Marks, 2007). If in the first season, Lord Grantham represents the defense of an era –the bourgeois heir needs to be educated on the importance of tradition–, in the second he embodies the realization that change is inevitable (he has to accept Downton becoming a hospital for wounded soldiers, that his daughters are going to take care of them and his third born Sybil will marry the chauffeur with socialist ideas). In the next two seasons, he is plagued by the fear that everything is close to an end (after making the wrong investment, he loses all his money) and that he is going to being deemed old and deprived of his power. Finally, he comes to understand –not without the occasional fight (e.g. his widowed son-in-law falling in love with a socialist teacher)– that things will forever be different from the way they were.

## 4. The arena and its procedural structure

The first and most evident proof of American influence in the writing of *DA* is the construction of its arena and how procedural the story can become (Truby, 2007: 150-177;

[3] The last season is airing as we are writing this. Season six will be the final one.



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Braga, 2008: 43-70). The series develops a rich network of relationships through the use of an extensive group of characters. They all operate within a defined space, where life obeys to protocols. The latter show how the series masters the technical knowledge of its arena to create an illusion of reality (e.g. the chain of commands among the servants, the dressing ritual of being helped by a valet, the bells to call the maids, the different roles and limitations of the help, the formal and obsequious use of language). The estate of *DA* is a diverse world that could be compared to the hospital on *ER* or the editorial staff on *The Newsroom*.

The story benefits from the above-described model, which also applies to the narrative of *Gosford Park*. Altman's film has a multi-strand structure that creates a detailed painting of how it was to live and work in an English villa. However, in the film there is no unity of intent among the characters. The movie lacks a common goal that links the characters and turns them into a "team". On the other hand, *DA* repeatedly stresses that both aristocracy and help deeply care for the estate to be kept in the high standards its lineage deserves.

Like in *Gosford Park*, and even before that in the historical BBC series *Upstairs Downstairs*[4], the plurality of characters is divided in two systems: the aristocratic family and the help. This is a model that mirrors the physical division of the house where the two classes live in two separate floors. Yet, *DA* gives equal dignity to everyone in true American style (see the trainee, nurses and doctors on *ER*; secretaries and publicists on *Mad Men*; interns, secretary, staff members and the President on *The West Wing*). No preference is made to who is more socially relevant. No one is completely marginal. As Fumagalli (2014) states, referencing *DA*'s creator (Fellowes, 2012a), this is due to the fact that every character is defined by a personal goal, which makes them stand out in the eyes of the audience. The spectator is invested in each one of their stories and looks forward to see if they are going to make it. Except for the two villains, the goal of every character is filled with goodness and is a project of self-realization, a dream that involves their future (e.g. to find a job as a servant, despite a physical handicap; to elevate oneself socially; to make sure the work of a lifetime is not lost; to see their children happy).

This narrative choice guarantees the uplifting appeal of the story, way more than its magnificent set design and costumes. In a way, *DA* has the opposite structure of *Gosford Park.* The movie takes place twenty years after *DA* and is the decadent portray of an exhausted aristocracy and servants who have lost passion for their job. The lord and lady of the house are unhappy and unfaithful to each other. It is the resentment of two servants for the wrongdoings of Sir William (the liberties that he takes with his female help, the children he fathers with them and does not recognize) that causes the murder around which the suspense of the movie is built.

On the contrary, in *DA*, integrity is a common character trait as is the sense of responsibility that every character feels towards one another; e.g. the Earl tries to amend the injustices his valet had to suffer and facilitates his love story with a maid; the butler has a special relationship with Lady Mary and encourages her like a grandfather would; Crawley's first born decides that it is wrong to keep William, the young footman, unaware of his mother's illness, etc.

The use of a narrative with positive values makes *DA* similar to *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006). Aaron Sorkin's political procedural, referenced by Fellowes over and over again,

[4] Broadcasted from 1971 to 1975, the much-awarded series tells the story of a rich family and their servants during the Edwardian era. It precedes Altman's movie as well as *DA*, which is often compared to. However, we believe it is more interesting to compare *DA* to the 2010's sequel to *Upstairs Downstairs*, which has not been as successful as Fellowes' show; it only lasted for two seasons with nine episodes overall. The reason for its failure could be traced to the lack of some of the writing techniques employed by the ITV series, such as a procedural pace and rhythm, a profound theme and metaphoric rhetoric.



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has been an isolated model of everyday heroism –the President and his staff are guided by high ideals to build a better future for the nation and the world (Fahy, 2005)– in the landscape of American television, which seems to be fascinated with the antihero narrative. *DA* has many elements in common with Aaron Sorkin's series: the taste for the behind the scene of official worlds, structuring its arena like a court with a king (be it a President or an Earl), building the characters as one big, functional family, where its members improve together. The audience has been invited to be a part of it and feels at ease while being elevated by the material.

## 5. The characters web

The characters web (Truby, 2007: 57-75) and their relationships are constructed around the macro-theme of the series, i.e. the tension between the inclination towards tradition and the openness to the new. In designing the characters, the series is on point from a dramaturgical standpoint[5].

Let's examine them by starting from the lord and lady of the house. The Earl is the one who needs to guide Downton to a new era while keeping its essence intact. He is the well-known and respected head of the family and a lord, who is very much part of the management of the estate. He is an authoritarian, sensitive and magnanimous master, a loving husband and an affectionate parent. His role as a good father is one of the reasons why this series is so unique in the contemporary television landscape (Braga, 2014a). His wife Cora has instead innovation in her blood. Being American, she was not born into her husband's aristocratic traditions, but she has made them work. Their marriage is the symbolic epitome of the character of the Earl. He married Cora so that her dowry could save Downton, and he bears the ever-present fragility of the class that formed him. While husband and wife love each other and share the dream to save Downton, they also want the happiness of their three daughters, who are all of marriageable age.

Compared to their parents, the young Crawleys are the focal point of change and express it in different ways. Mary, the first born, does not want to be conditioned by money when choosing a husband. Yet, as it is clear in her relationship with Matthew, her mentality is a far cry from the bourgeois one. The second born, Edith, is the less attractive of the three and unlucky in love, but she hopes to find her own path, which proves to be more troubled than her sisters'. Edith seems constantly unbalanced in her choices and suspended between two extremes. She is first determined to marry an aristocratic but far too old man, and then veers towards a married one. Finally there is the cheerful Sybil, the third born. She is guided by the desire to be an active protagonist in building a more just society with equal rights for women. The series explores her passion through a series of concrete actions. Sybil initially helps a maid, Gwen –the daughter of a farmer who does not want to give in to her class barrier and aspires to be a secretary–, then she becomes a nurse during the war, and ends up marrying the Irish chauffeur with socialist ideals.

The highest tension between past and present, aristocracy and bourgeoisie, is expressed by the collision of two members of the Crawley family, who express opposite perspectives: the Dowager Countess Lady Violet and Matthew's mother, Mrs. Crawley. Maggie Smith's incredible performance paints the irony of a conservative and unapologetic traditionalist; her salacious conventionalism donates precious comedic moments to the series. From the very beginning, Lady Violet is the quintessential symbol of the end of an era and its last line of defense. In reality, and this is her most comedic and charming aspect, she

[5] Since there are eighteen characters in the first season of the show, we decided to limit our analysis to the ones that had the the most significant relationships. However, we should also mention the town doctor, Dr. Clarkson, Matthew Molesley, a valet, and Lady Rosamund, the Earl's sister.



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secretly realizes that time cannot be stopped. This becomes more and more evident throughout the series, when the Dowager Countess shows unexpected openness to change while her son struggles to accept it (the marriage between Sybil and the chauffeur, for example). Designed as the antithesis of the Dowager Countess of Grantham, Mrs. Crawley embodies the bourgeoisie's point of view: she is involved in charity and, to Lady Violet's dismay, she is anxious to help in the hospital that the Dowager finances.

If we have a couple in power among the aristocracy, the same can be said for the help: they are the butler, Carson, and the head housekeeper, Mrs. Hughes, colleagues and friends until the fifth season when he asks her to marry him. They have dedicated their entire lives to Downton and they embody the highest expression of professionalism and spirit of sacrifice. Year after year they make the estate their home and expect or want nothing to change. Their dream is for the Crawley family to prosper as they consider the latter their own. While they both represent tradition, they personify it with different flexibility. The butler is almost a religious figure with his stern and meticulous attitude and his glance focused on the past. His zeal, solemnity and uncompromising temper are repeatedly tested by unpredictable events and infractions of the protocol. He soon becomes another source of comedic relief, alongside the sharp tongue of the Dowager. Next to him, there is Mrs. Hughes. She has the attitude of an experienced teacher to her subordinates, but she is also the one able to sweeten Carson. It is typical to see her perform spontaneous acts of charity and offer advice while always being respectful to her staff.

The kitchen of the house is a sort of engine room, a realm on its own, under the power of Mrs. Patmore, a grumpy cook. Expressing the proletarian spirit of the era, she feels recognized and respected for her work, which she loves dearly. Following the logic of multiplying the relations between past and future, she is shadowed by a young and naïve kitchen maid, Daisy. Mrs. Patmore loves to torture her but she is also very protective and mentors her in her love for the footman William, who is very young as well.

Lastly, there are two other relationships among the servants that are worth mentioning, since they are source of constant drama. The first one is the alliance between the two villains, the first footman Thomas and the lady's maid Mrs. O'Brian. They represent the discomfort that can arise from a system founded on class distinction.

The social climbing of Thomas makes him a character open to the ever-advancing innovation and finding stratagems for his personal gain (e.g. the black market after the war). The series humanizes him by spending a little bit of time on the discriminations he has to suffer as a gay man. It subtly suggests that there is a link between his viciousness and how badly he is treated for being different. However, this never happens at Downton, where he is simply accepted by his peers as the black sheep of the family. He is a villain we can sympathize with, above all when he is aware of his behavior and simply accepts his role. Mrs. O'Brian is more passively stuck in the social place she happened to be born in. She feels rewarded when able to ruin other people's happiness. The two villains are both figures of jealousy and opportunism towards their lord and lady. The moments of maximum conflict in the story come from their machinations against Bates (the valet the Earl prefers to Thomas) and the lady's maid Anna.

These two characters are the beating heart of the storyline concerning the help. Bates comes from a difficult past (he walks with a cane after having being wounded in the Boer War and was arrested for a theft his evil wife committed). He is in search of a job as a valet, despite his physical problem and longs for a new life with someone loving. Anna's feelings for him and his resistance to accept her love for fear to ruin her push her to ignore the gender norms of the time and declare her love for him. In the true spirit of a modern heroine, Anna investigates Bates' case herself and frees him from the dangers of his previous life, dangers that kept leading him into the evil hands of Thomas and O'Brien. Due to the emotional and narrative intensity of the story, Bates and Anna's romance is the



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architrave of the through line concerning the help, and it works in perfect symmetry to Mary and Matthew's love story. It is essential as it confirms that the series does not privilege the narrative of the aristocracy, but it pays equal attention to every character.

## 6. Adapting the genre to modern sensibility

To close the gap between the Edwardian aristocratic culture of the time and the sensibility of today's audience, the show employs three solutions: the introduction of outside characters to Downton, an ironic approach, and the use of narrative and dramatic techniques typical of the soap.

Starting with the first solution, the presence of characters, whose sensibility does not fit the Granthams' culture, is the consequence of having the series take place in a period that precedes *Gosford Park*. This is not a world close to its end, but a system that still exists and feels the pressure of a new historical phase pressing in. This dichotomy creates vivid uneasiness between characters, whose judgment system is close to the one of the audience. This is true for Matthew, but also for the chauffeur Tom Branson, and, under his influence, for Sybil. With them, we learn the rules of the game (Matthew), or to critique the system in light of more modern values (Sybil). Even the destructive complains of Thomas are effective.

The second solution, the use of irony to create some distance from Downton –in other words, highlighting specific ideas and behaviors that would be unacceptable today– works mainly because of Maggie Smith's character and the moments of humor she grants to the show.

The third and final solution, i.e. the use of strong and clear contrapositions of characters, typical of the soap opera, has immediate appeal to a TV audience. The straightforward role of the villain, evil beyond doubts (with the occasional episode that shows his/her humanity), and constantly at odds with the rest of the group, is typical of the genre. There is also the pleasure of seeing family members of the aristocracy fighting, building alliances and carrying out strategies to manipulate each other. Like in soaps, there is a heavy use of a very specific type of dialogue, where two characters talk about a third party (commenting on their behavior, interpreting situations, and praying for certain outcomes). Finally and above all, there is the heavy presence (almost inhibited in the second and fourth season) of love triangles and countless obstacles, which melodramatically procrastinate the union between lovers.

## 7. The creation of an emotionally balanced tone

One of the strengths of the series is its emotionally engaging tone, which the show succeeds in preserving throughout the years, following the American way of constructing TV shows (Epstein, 2005: 4-7). *DA*'s tone is never overly dramatic and is constantly lightened up by a substantial dose of comedy. For there is an abundance of witty and comedic characters (the Dowager, the cook, the butler Carson, the valet Molesley).

The show doesn't sinks to mere melodrama –at least in its best seasons: we will highlight in our conclusions when and why the show hasn't been up to its standards– thanks to its tense rhythm, brevity and numerous scenes –stylistic choices that once again have American roots. The vast cast of characters and stories is another reason that distances *DA* from a "once-upon-a-time" type of tale. While each episode can contain up to six or seven narratives, one of them usually reaches full circle by the end of the hour, elevating the quality of the writing.

There are also several adrenaline filled moments, mostly passing scenes, which see the servants working at the speed of light and in unison to make sure everything is ready for an event (a ball or a reception). These are the details that allow *Downton Abbey* to constantly re-establish the dynamic picture of a working team, which is the epitome of a procedural show,



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no matter how different or lacking of technology the arena can seem. Think of the policemen in *NYPD Blue* when they receive a call, or the doctors on *ER*, ready to start an emergency procedure. The same can be said for the valets running up and down the house with their trays, answering to the butler and the cook. This element is particularly evident in the incipit of *DA* –the opening sequence[6]. It is six in the morning, and the servitude wakes up and rushes to work because breakfast for the Earl, who is at home today, has to be perfect. This well-oiled and laborious environment needs to keep working on time and at the best of its abilities so to confirm its excellence. While briefly cutting through scenes, the camera roams through the rooms and simulates the point of view of someone who is passing through. It stays behind this or that servant, and it becomes a fluid succession of brief moments and lines of dialogue. The influence of *The West Wing* is noticeable here. Also in the beginning of Sorkin's pilot, there is the exploration of a professional environment, once work is about to start, early in the morning at the White House. It is filmed with a handheld camera that follows the path of the head of staff (a solution typical of the directorial rhetoric of procedural series. It is used to accentuate the tense rhythm of a work environment).

## 8. The value of justice as the underlying theme of the series

The series serves as a metaphor (on the rhetorical function of the narrative see Fumagalli, 2003: 486-495) for a universal truth: tradition and progress will always intersect each other's paths and clash. However, this is only a superficial and more immediate theme that the story tends to overshadow in favor of a more specific one. While it is fair to say that *DA* is a discourse on tradition, we still have to assess where its heart lies, what its essence is. The notion of tradition is per se quite general but it becomes tangible through the value system that guides the actions of the characters. With that in mind, the key concept of the series –its real theme– is justice. The series seems to advocate that the clear separation of roles, the hierarchy and the respect of the rules are all part of a system that forms upright people. In screenwriting terms, this is the pivotal value of the show and is explored through specific characters' choices (see on this McKee 1997: 248-251). When someone, no matter what their class is, does not act with integrity, that person betrays the essence of the rules that shape Downton. This is the core message of the show. This is why when new times come and demand a sense of justice not foreseen by the system, it is necessary to accept change and adjust accordingly.

The thematic union "tradition/aristocratic society-justice" is quickly apparent in the pilot. The audience immediately learns how the drama will evolve and what its value system is. The central idea is elaborated through the protagonist, as it usually happens in screenwriting. In the episode, the Earl is called to resolve the two major problems of the main storylines by making the "right" decisions.

One of the two decisions comes at the climax of the pilot and concerns Mr. Bates' arrival. It transforms the story into a parable –it is an exemplary manifesto on justice. Previously in the episode, Lord Grantham hires Bates as his valet after they became friends during the war, years prior to the story. He attempts to assure everyone that Bates' limp will not be an issue, but the servants are worried the valet will not be able to do his job properly. Thomas, who aspires to Bates' position, and his comrade Mrs. O'Brien make sure to confirm their doubts. The two of them manage to mortify Bates by making him stumble in front of everyone –family and help– as they are all about to welcome a possible suitor for Lady Mary.

[6] It played an important part in attracting the ITV audience, which is a younger crowd than the BBC's one and less used to period drama. Gareth Neame believes that broadcasting it on ITV increased its success and made it different from similar shows. The series asserted itself by convincing the *X Factor* audience, which used to air right before *DA* and was a visually rich, young and fast paced program. It was a particularly difficult time slot for an "*upstairs downstairs" drama* (Fellowes, Froggatt, Mackie & Neame, 2011).



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Now persuaded that Bates is unsuitable for the demanding working environment of Downton, Lord Grantham sadly sees no choice but to let him go. In the last scene though, as Bates is leaving, the Earl has a change of heart and, in front of a surprised Carson, stops the car and calls back his friend. The explanation he offers to Carson is simple: "It wasn't right, Carson. I just didn't think it was right". It suggests that everything they believe in would have lost meaning, if Bates had been fired.

The episode asserts even more the value of justice through the ending of another storyline strictly connected to the one we have just analyzed: the story of Bates – his arrival at Downton, his difficulty in demonstrating that he can work there in spite of his disability. This line largely overlaps the story of the Earl's decision. Most of the events are the same – the two characters are both involved in the solution of the problem of Bates' stay– but here they are seen from the valet's perspective. The two lines end in the same scene and with the same climax –when Lord Grantham realizes that "it wasn't right"– but this same ending, if considered as the epilogue of the story of Bates, appears to assert justice through a different and specific writing technique: not through the difficult moral choice of the protagonist (the ending of the Earl's storyline), but through a surprising help received by the main character (the valet) when everything seemed lost.

This kind of ending works only when the script doesn't give the impression that the character's success is due to the intervention of a *deus ex machina* –the success would appear too easy, the character's behavior in itself wouldn't offer an answer to the moral questions raised by his drama. In theory, the climax should always be the outcome of a resolute action of the protagonist. In this way, the character has to make a real effort to stay true to himself to make such a positive event happen. It would be a cheat if the resolution had only been made possible by external help or something unrelated to the protagonist. If this were the case, this happy ending would have felt safe, naively optimistic, and a simplistic trick to make the audience feel good.

All this is true, unless, when the protagonist receives a decisive help, it has been made very clear to the audience that he/her has spent him/herself completely, without avoiding sufferance, till the point that his unhappy ending would appear to be an assertion of the insignificance of values in life. This condition is perfectly respected in Bates' storyline. During the episode, Bates never complains, not even when fired, reacts with bitterness, or loses his dignity and self-respect by begging the Earl to let him stay. If there had not being an external intervention, the story would have been pervaded by frustrating nihilism. It would have missed its axiological value, which is essential to the narrative and shows what kind of behavior fulfills a man's destiny (Booth, 1961: 133-134; Booth, 1988: 169-179). When Bates loses everything and an external element – the Earl's consciousness – does intervene, the latter respects the universal sense of justice that guides the human spirit because it happens to a character that deserves it (Fumagalli, 2008).

We have mentioned above a second right decision of the Earl in the pilot. It is made possible before the above-depicted event with Bates and involves the main storyline of the series, the one about the inheritance. After the death of the heir and fearing whom the new one may be, Lord Grantham is pressured by his wife and mother to break the entail with the help of his family lawyer. But even in this case, the Earl's sense of justice wins and he chooses to respect the rules. He stays true to his character, by explicitly saying that it is important for him to follow his consciousness.

We can also add that there is a third storyline in the episode that involves the idea of justice. Lady Mary's shady suitor, who is only interested in her dowry, is sent home with nothing. The envious Thomas, who has been plotting against Bates, is in turn the victim of the aristocratic guest, who is also his lover. After having been used to gain information on Mary's dowry, now that the plan failed, Thomas is humiliated and abandoned by the duke. Once again, merits are rewarded and wrong behavior is punished.



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The thematic importance of justice is emblematically repeated in the second episode. In this case, the script uses the technique of "emotional transition", also known as the axiological reframing of the protagonist's morals (McKee, 1997: 243-48; Braga, 2014b; Braga, 2015: 70-89). The episode's main storyline tells the story of Matthew's arrival at Downton and his first steps in this aristocratic society. The young man is not intimidated, but feels strong in his bourgeois formation and at ease in showing how new he is to the baroque rituals of the place. In particular, Matthew is reluctant to accept Molesley's service, the valet the family gave him. In one of the key scenes of the episode, the lawyer refuses Molesley's help in getting dressed and disorients the valet, who ends up complaining to Bates. In the following scene, a similar situation occurs. Matthew friendly refuses to let Molesley help him with his cuffs in and clarifies that he does not need any help at all. In explaining his reasoning, Matthew lets an ironic comment escapes his lips and he ends up humiliating the valet.

The problem is resolved with a brilliant turn at the end of one of Matthew's visits to Downton, as he is saying goodbye to Lord Grantham. Matthew learns that the Earl has made possible for his mother to work at the town hospital, financed by the Crawley, despite the firm opposition of the Dowager Countess (this storyline is developed independently from the others). As he is thanking the Earl, Matthew lets him know that he does not need Molesley and asks Robert to spare him the inconvenience. The Earl's quiet and disarming reply forces Matthew to see the issue under a different light (Lord Grantham: "Is that quite fair? To deprive a man of his livelihood when he has done nothing wrong? Your mother derives satisfaction from her work at the hospital, I think, some sense of self-worth? Would you really deny the same to poor old Molesley?").

The incentive for this reframing of perspective, which sheds new light to the system at Downton, comes from the unpredictable collision of two narrative storylines that were kept separate until that very moment. The values of independence, autonomy and practicality are overturned by justice. At the end of the episode, Matthew lets Molesley help him choosing his cuffs.

Moreover, we can observe how justice –i.e. the consequences of good or bad behavior– becomes the theme of the finale of season one. From a thematic standpoint, the first season has thus a circular design.

In the final episode, the issue of the diverse outcome of good and evil actions comes back multiple times. This is the case in the Bates' storyline. Once learned that the valet allegedly committed a theft years prior, O'Brien exposes his secret, hoping to have him fired. While Bates, despite being innocent, does not try to defend himself, he is freed from the charges thanks to Anna's investigation: for the real thief was the valet's wife. He protected her by taking the blame and he remained silent even at Downton, showing his ever-present dignity. The events reward him as they punish Lady Mary. To get her revenge against her sister Edith, who spread the rumor of her night with the Turkish diplomat, Mary sabotages her sister's relationship with her suitor.

Fate quickly hits her back: she is left heartbroken when Matthew ends their relationship, upset at her indecisiveness to marry him. And again, the theme of a moral action (or lack of) and its consequence fills Mrs. O'Brien's story. One of her evil actions –to have secretly caused the abortion of her lady's unborn child– does not remain unpunished for long. The discovery that her evil act comes from a misunderstanding –the maid thought her lady wanted to replace her– is a shock that will torment the woman for the following season as well. Among the many examples of justice being served, Thomas is the only one that ironically escapes his fate. When they find out he is stealing, he succeeds in finding a new job and leaving Downton before Carson can fire him.



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## 9. One episode, one theme, multiple storylines

As the previously analyzed examples suggest, theme is a prerogative of the series and it can be dissected even within a single episode. It is a writing style that comes from the multi-strand narration typical of American TV shows (Epstein, 2006, 63-64; Wells, 1994). Once again, American scripted drama seems to be influencing the writing of *DA*. For in every episode of the first season, all the stories tend to converge into a single theme, which every character actualizes through action. They do so in their own storyline that may or may not intersect the others. Theme is always present, whether it is justice, like the cases previously analyzed, or something different.

For example, in the first season, episode three explores the theme of personal ambitions –possible and impossible dreams– through each one of its storylines. Mr. Bates, after concealing a too painful attempt to cure his leg with a steel brace, realizes that it is not worth to give in to ambition. At the same time, encouraged by her colleagues, Gwen opens up about her dream to find job as a secretary. A job that would elevate her socially. Despite not being understood by the majority of the servitude, she sends her candidacy out in the hope to get some interviews. The theme of aspiration also dominates the stories surrounding the aristocracy, where it is explored in terms of romance. Lady Mary accepts the interest of a guest, an attractive Turkish diplomat, who represents her declaration of female independence from her parents. But her dreams are destined to remain unfulfilled, because, after having seduced her, he dies in her bed. As if this was not enough, Lady Edith tries the impossible task of conquering Matthew's heart, who in turn has only eyes for Mary.

## 10. Conclusions

*DA* has conquered its place in the Olympus of high quality American TV. The awards received and how involved Fellows is in TV writing debates with other creators of American series, (McNamara, 2014) testify to that. However, it should be pointed out that the narrative fluidity and the dramatic arcs of many characters created by Fellowes are not always as on point as series like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men* or *The West Wing*. Some screenwriters and attentive critics have noticed (Paskin 2012; Nicolosi, 2014) that Fellowes' writing seems too fast and repetitive at times. If the first season works perfectly, some passages of the following ones are not as well oiled and feel forced. In particular, the series does not seem to hit the right pace in every episode: some events would require more time than a couple of scenes, while others should move faster and not linger, hitting the same beat over and over again[7]. After such considerations, it is even more relevant to understand why the show succeeded, despite its imperfections.

First of all, the first season seems the most balanced one and able to invest period drama with new meaning. The use of a strong theme, a fast narrative pace, and stunning cinematography have made the show unique and stand out: it is elevated, contemporary and cinematographic. The series has also been able to keep the tone of the beginning in its following seasons, thanks to some strong but unfortunately fewer episodes. All of this has made sure that the soapy parts of the show and plot weaknesses are less apparent.

But there are more profound reasons to its success and they are linked to the content of the story. Some critics have identified them with *DA*'s power of escapism, idealism and its

[7] E.g. in the second season, the story of a disfigured soldier, who pretends to be the heir that perished on the Titanic, is a poignant moment. However, it only lasts an episode (the fifth) and, even there, is under-developed and unsatisfactory. The same can be said for every romantic scene between Sybil and the chauffeur; they repeat the same beat and do not evolve over any of their three episodes. The reason for these narrative missteps is probably related to the fact that Fellowes is the only one writing the series and does not have a staff of writers, like most writing rooms in the US. The importance of the writing room, and the specific dynamics of the development of a series connected to it, are studied in Redvall (2013).



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comforting nature. The show offers the audience an escape from our difficult present into a world of reassuring traditions, wealth and every day heroes. However, we should look at all of this under a different light.

We could object that the pleasure of being transported to different worlds, distant from our everyday tensions, is offered by series that are dramatically different from *DA*. The trade of ice on the Mexican border in *Breaking Bad*, the world of psychotherapists in *In Treatment*, or of advertisers in the Sixties in *Mad Men,* are uncharted territories and faraway lands. They provide the opportunity to explore relationship dynamics, technological endeavors and cultural activities. *DA* does offer a similar type of pleasure in depicting a detailed and realistic picture of the Edwardian estate. We feel immersed in that world.

Even underlining the importance of comfort and idealization (the paternal kindness of the Earl and the integrity of the majority of the characters) misses an essential point[8]. Firstly, it is not to be taken for granted that the high number of negative characters in other TV series is a realistic portray of our society. Fellowes himself doubts that and states that he intentionally took a different and statistically more truthful route: "The show takes the view, and I suppose that I take the view, that most people are reasonably decent and that they are trying to do their best. And so much drama is now made by people who are horrible and doing horrible things to other people…" (Fellowes, 2012 b).

It should also be observed that the core expectation of a story should not be the desire to be realistic, but to explore moral truths and models of behavior that could be inspirational (Booth 1961, 1988; Nussbaum, 1995: 2). This is why having fundamentally positive characters is a potentially perfect solution to hit that mark –to critically face reality rather than run from it– within a dramatic arc. However, the goodness of the characters should come through the effort of an interior change, resulting in a transformed and renewed sensibility on certain values. This does happen in some of the key storylines of the first season of *DA*. But it also stands true for the general narrative structure of the series, intrinsically inspired by the idea that change can be difficult to accept. The people who live in Downton are not perfect. Their shared value of justice is challenged by history. The show poses the question on how and if the characters will be able to maintain the integrity of an era that has a valid code of values, but has also its limits. The audience knows that the way the Earl and the Dowager Countess live is not always justifiable and it is destined to fade away.

What is engaging is the characters' effort to defend the system, to adjust it and make their integrity richer by opening themselves to the new. For example, the rules of Downton do not see a place for a valet with a limp, but the Earl realizes that the right thing to do is to go against his butler's opinion and hire Bates. If the aristocracy does not see women having an active role in society, the Crawley family has to accept that this is going to be the case for their daughters. *DA*, thus, does not tell fairy tales, but brings a renewed idea of justice throughout the evolving arcs of the characters. It has proactive morals.

The last reason of *DA*'s success comes from comparing it to other high quality TV products. The core drama of the story is different from all the others who offer antihero narrative. It goes against the tide when everything seems to be about existential loss, tragic storylines or the constant postponement of the character's redemption. The latter are adrenaline filled shows that need sophisticated writing and tend to attract a smaller and

[8] Some of the comforting aspects of *DA* are highlighted by Byrne, 2013, and are part of the success of the show. It is also true, as Fellowes points out, that it is charming to see characters acting within defined and neat role and whose cultural identity is secured. They operate in antithesis to the complexity of our own society. However, we believe those to be superficial elements of the show. The same can be said for the nostalgia that the show evokes, which is definitely present (as stated by Baena & Byker, 2014) but cannot be considered the main reason for *DA*'s success.



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more selected audience. Having said that, they are praised by the critics and have created a trend in the TV industry (mainly the American one), as they seem to suit the cultural and ideological sensibilities of its artistic elite (Shapiro, 2011; Fumagalli, 2013: 221-254). *DA*'s success, on the other hand, has revealed the need of positive stories that mirror the audience's need for happiness. In this, *DA* seems to be similar to cinematographic cases of the past, where, in a climate of antihero narratives, they went for the hero, taking critics and industry by surprise. This is the case of *Rocky* (1977) and *Star Wars* (1977). They represent a turn towards heroism in the cinema of the Seventies, which tended to show the negative side of the American dream. We can also cite *Back to the Future* (1985), whose incredible success gave a teenage audience the option of seeing something other than crass comedies (e.g. *Porky's*, 1982)[9].

In today's landscape, *DA* is closing the gap between TV narratives, which seems to have specialized in existential crisis, and mainstream movies, where the heroic narrative has been the dominant one.

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[9] Screenwriter Bob Gale points that out in his speech at the University of California, where he recalls how the script had been rejected by the major studios more than forty times (Gale & Lloyd, 2013).



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