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The Ambling Narrative of *Downton Abbey*

Episode five of *Downton Abbey*'s second season is a conventional addition to the six-season series. The show originally aired on network television in the UK and the USA, but I watched the syndicated version, with no commercials, on Amazon Prime Video. I have only recently started to watch the show regularly, and I have only ever viewed it through this streaming service. The great and unique qualities of *Downton Abbey*, which have garnered much attention and praise, are presented within a narrative framework that adheres to standard conventions of television storytelling. Specifically, the show's pace is dictated by both the necessity for commercial breaks and the challenge of creating an infinite storyline set in a finite historical period. *Downton Abbey* is a modern television serial with a high quality of writing and production value. Yet, the show's status as a "Period Drama" forces it to deal with specific problems and stereotypes. This untitled episode, like any other, exemplifies how the philosophy, character web, and plot of *Downton Abbey* operate in orbit around a pair of narrative problematics which set the tone, pace, and meaning of the show.

If one acknowledges that the "action" of *Downton Abbey* is the discussion, relationship development, and general shenanigans within the ecosystem of the Abbey, then the bayonet charge during the Battle of Amiens at the start of this episode is perhaps not "in the middle of the action". This opening scene is introduced by a text overlay which tells the viewer the name of the battle and the year. This simple exposition helps describe the situation of the brief, introductory scene, but also provides a worldly context for the rest of the show. The exposition is limited to this short and temporary scene, and the "action" resumes immediately afterwards with no

introductions. The opening war scene is necessary because it introduces an event that becomes the primary concern for the other characters. In short, the heir to the Abbey, Matthew, and one of the servants, William, are both badly injured in the battle and are brought back to the Abbey.

Many protagonists are followed throughout the episode as they deal with this event and other lingering issues. The number of true protagonists is debatable, but as many as ten characters are being repeatedly observed. In this episode, the most significant protagonists seem to be Mary and Daisy, who have to deal with the return of the injured men with whom they have complicated relationships. Of course, other characters have a stake in this issue, such as the Earl Robert's concern for his heir, and Matthew's potential wife, Lavinia. The Dowager Countess and the chef Ms. Patmore are both concerned with William's pre-mortem marriage to Daisy. These main events are interleaved with a few side stories in the episode: Mr. Bates and Anna are still dealing with blackmail threats from Mrs. Bates, an antagonist. Mrs. Hughes is struggling to take care of former maid living as a peasant and working to bring order to the house with Mr. Carson. Lastly, Sybil is dealing with her revolutionary and troublesome love interest, Branson. These storylines are often connected and the relationships between characters are extremely complex. The past events that have molded the character web must be understood before viewing the episode.

Several motivations, both those specific to this episode and to the season or show as whole, are present in the episode. The events in the beginning war scene, where two main characters suffer extreme injuries, drive the characters actions for this episode specifically. Overall, the season's concurrency with World War I dictates some characters' motives, such as the Earl Robert's wearing of the army uniform, Mary and Sybil's service as nurses, and Matthew and William's participation in the fighting. Real-world events like World War I and the sinking

of the Titanic are useful for the show writers because they enhance the historic veneer of the show and provide believable catalysts for show-specific events. (Maillos 26). There are more general motives of the Abbey still at play from the first season, such as maintaining order, enforcing the class system, and securing the future of the household.

Butler's description of the television serial's reliance on multiple narrative enigmas certainly fits the nature of *Downton Abbey* (Butler 45). However, the show incorporates all-encompassing narrative problematics that ignite smaller enigmas for each character. For example, Lady Mary's relationship with Matthew is ultimately a general concern for the fate of the Abbey, but the audience becomes enthralled with the enigma of Mary's love, and her fate seems independent and unpredictable. Another relationship story is that of Lady Sybil and Branson, who have an uncertain romantic and political future. Lastly, the fates of Matthew and William, whose injuries are ultimately manifestations of the narrative problematics, and therefore are narrative kernels, are called into question during this episode. An interesting element that Butler points to as a hallmark of serials is how when one enigma is solved, another must be created (Butler 45). This occurs literally in one scene of the episode, where the love triangle between Mary, Lavinia, and Matthew seems to be reaching an end after his injury. As they console each other in the background and out of focus, the Earl and the doctor reveal the new enigma of Matthew's potential paralysis.

The syndicated version of the show is edited well. Although there must have been commercial breaks, these moments are not very noticeable. One must assume that the commercials follow the miniature climaxes throughout the episode, and precede the new scenes introduced with part of the theme song. There are approximately five of these breaks, each built

around the developing enigmas. Thus, the chain of events is perpetually delayed and “the overarching enigma is sustained” (Butler 46).

This episode is unusual because it ends in a legitimate climax. William dies at the end of the episode and it resolves the conflict between him and his unwilling lover, Daisy. The viewer gets closure and satisfaction from the scene of mourning and unity between the rest of the characters. Still, many of the enigmas fostered by the episode are left unanswered. For example, the viewer is still unsure about Mary and Matthew, there is hardly closure for the antagonist Mrs. Bates, and basically every other relationship is still waiting to be resolved. The episode is well balanced because it provides a significant turning point for some characters but drags out the stories of others. Admittedly, the show does not play any tricks to keep the suspense going. Instead, it relies on the narrative problematics at the heart of the story.

I argue that there are two narrative problematics at the center of *Downton Abbey*'s storytelling. The first and most obvious is the constant concern for the Abbey's future. The viewer returns to the show to see if and how order will be maintained in the Abbey and who will ultimately inherit the wealth and responsibility. This narrative problematic is constantly concerning the characters and the audience by reintroducing itself through chaotic events. In this episode, the concern for the Abbey arises from the narrative kernel of Matthew's injury. It is revealed that he is likely paralyzed and will not be able to produce an heir himself. This creates chaos for almost everybody. The Earl Robert obviously is not happy, as he had grown to see Matthew as his son and was hoping he was the solution to disorder. Matthew's potential wife Lavinia learns that her dream of being properly married is no longer possible and Matthew sends her away. Mary, who the audience knows is in love with Matthew and hoped to win him over, is now forced to rethink her position. Matthew, who once was the cause for concern because he

was a foreign and uncivilized cousin who happened to be the only heir, has reignited the narrative problematic that was temporarily solved.

The second narrative problematic is less concrete and affects the story in subtle ways. The unstoppable transition from the “Old World” to the “New World” characterizes the events of the show. *Downton Abbey* is not just a historical piece, but a piece set in a time period of extreme change. The most innocent example of this looming issue in the episode is when the Dowager Countess, a very old and conservative member of the family, picks up the telephone and says “Is this an instrument of communication or torture?” The problem of change is less enigmatic for the viewer because we know what is going to happen in regards world events and technology. Hence, the writing depends on “dramatic irony to provide a contrast between the period during which their narratives take place and the future” (Maillos 24). Changing times affects the characters in other ways, such as the rise of revolutionary ideologies and wealthy figures who challenge the standing nobility. This shows how both narrative problematics are intimately related and ultimately describe the problem of change at different granularities. In this case, “the conflict between progress and tradition and the transformative engine of the story become real in the key storyline of the series” (Braga).

The most intense manifestation of a changing world is the fate of William, a servant who is guilted by the White Feather Girls to enlist and join the front lines, only to be fatally injured. This is a manifestation of the recurring “change” problematic because it is the dilemma between the Old World (the glory of war) and the New World (pointless death). The audience feels sympathy for William because he is the victim of the traditional system’s misunderstanding of modern war. This manifestation drags Daisy, another servant, into the issue because William is still under the spell of glory and honor and has the last wish of marrying her. In summary,

change is present in the narrative of *Downton Abbey*, and it occasionally becomes concrete, creating narrative kernels that must be dealt with to move the story forward.

Downton Abbey is a television serial that borrows from other television formats. It is a serial because it has a multitude of protagonists, a saturation of enigmas, and a delaying or lack of resolution. However, the show could certainly be associated with the elements of a television series because it has a familiar location and characters that do not need exposition and overarching narrative problematics that define the entire mood of the show. In addition, Paolo Braga argues that *Downton Abbey* “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” (Braga). This assessment of the show refers to the philosophy of goodwill that the show seems to express. The protagonists of the show are more like Hollywood heroes than the typical television “antihero”.

Because this format is an online syndication, it is impossible to miss an episode. The show would not be great for stripped syndication (Baran 192) because the story is continuous and complicated. One episode does not have a lot of meaning out of context. This episode in particular relies on the assumption that the viewer has seen the first season. Otherwise, people would not even be able to differentiate between the aristocratic and lower-class characters as the events of the war force them into different roles within the Abbey.

Downton Abbey works to ensure repeat viewership by enticing viewers with the constant and unknown fate of the Abbey. Additionally, the transitional period of the early twentieth-century spawns unique ironies, fantasies, and tragedies. The story lures the viewer in and, as a period drama, drags on because “temporality in transition era series does not simply fulfill a decorative function but shapes the narrative itself” (Maillos 27). The central problematics of the

story create a tension that permeates and sometimes initiates the subplots. These narrative enigmas hold the character web in constant tension and create new links between protagonists for the viewer to think about and look forward to. The show rarely relies on cheap cliffhangers at the end of an episode or scene, but the action certainly does climax around these moments to retain viewer attention over commercial breaks or at the end of the episode. The comfort and familiarity of the Abbey and the rigid behavior of its inhabitants are key elements that keep viewers coming back regardless of the narrative. The audience is allowed to walk alongside the story, and even as they know what will eventually happen to the orderly class system and the world as a whole. Instead of ignoring this era between eras, the viewer becomes even more interested in its traditional character on the edge of temporality and volatility.

Work Cited

Baran, Stanley J. *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture*. McGraw-Hill, 2019.

Braga, Paolo. (2016). "How to apply the multi-strand narrative of American TV shows in a British series: the Downton Abbey's case." *Communication & Society* 29, vol. 2, pp. 1-16.

Annotation: Braga describes the philosophy of Downton Abbey and what he sees as the central enigma of season 1. The conflict is framed as the aristocratic family versus the lower class "help" who all understand their position in society and accept it. He describes how the motives of many different characters are all tied to a central theme, and work within a network of relationships that define the Abbey.

Butler, Jeremy G. "Narrative Structure: Television Stories." *Television Critical Methods and Applications*. N.p.: Routledge, 2012. 21-53. Print.

Maillos, Marie. "From Downton Abbey to Mad Men: TV Series as the Privileged Format for Transition Eras." *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 21-34.

Annotation: Maillos analyzes Downton Abbey a unique way: not just a period drama, but a transitional drama. The transitional period of the early twentieth century lends itself to the slow pace of the show. She shows how the use of real events and changing world attitudes help the audience sympathize with the characters while also exploring a different way of thinking. Viewers may have a modern view of the world and of morality, but a human depiction of the past helps us sympathize with their values.