Between

Serial Sacrifices: a Semiotic Analysis of *Downton Abbey* Ideology

Piero Polidoro

1. Article goals

This article aims to show how an ideological interpretation of society can be expressed in a television series. The British drama *Downton Abbey* will be analyzed from this point of view, using a semiotic method pointing at deep and abstract levels of narration and the concept of "sacrifice" as it has been treated in anthropology. According to Umberto Eco (1985), seriality is mainly based on the repetition of the same narrative schemas. This article will focus on one of these schemas: the sacrifice of a character in exchange for a modification of the social order. It will be analyzed to show how *Downton Abbey* proposes a coherent and constant ideological message. Before doing this, it is necessary to discuss the concept of "ideology" and to review previous literature on the ideological aspects of *Downton Abbey*.

2. Ideology, possible worlds, seriality

The concept of "ideology" is widely used in social sciences and humanities. In semiotics it has been discussed and developed by Roland Barthes (1957; 1964) and Umberto Eco (1968; 1975). According to Barthes, ideology is the system of connotations that characterizes a given society in a given historical period. Barthes focuses his attention on the dominant ideology, the ideology of the leading class, that is, at

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the time when he was writing (from the 1950s to the 1970s), the 'bourgeoisie'. Dominant ideology helps to keep the 'status quo', because it continuously presents meanings and narrations whose function is to propose as "natural" what is "historical": what Barthes means is that the social and cultural ("historical") construction of society is hidden by its dominant ideology that aims to persuade people that the present social order is "natural", i.e. it could not be arranged in a different way. But how can ideology achieve this goal? Barthes uses the term "myth" to indicate narrations that, under a first, explicit level of meaning, express a second, deeper level of connotations reinforcing the current ideology: myth presents as natural what is cultural and reconfirms the 'status quo' (Barthes 1957)[1]. According to Barthes, semioticians and social scientists ought to denounce the ideological function of these narrations, unveiling their mechanisms.

During the 1960s and 1970s, both Barthes and Eco were very active in analyzing ideological messages in mass media, focusing mainly on advertising or newspapers and magazines. But ideology leaves its traces in any text produced within a given culture; so it can be found also in fictional texts, such as novels or, more recently, television series.

In this case what is at stake is not a representation of the "real" world (of the world in which we live), but a "possible world" (Jaakko Hintikka 1967; 1969). Eco has widely used this concept in his narrative theory (1979; 1990) and it can be useful to understand how ideological schemas propagate through fictional texts. Eco maintains that a fictional text proposes to its readers (or viewers) a "possible world", i.e. a state of affairs described by some propositions about individual properties or actions and sometimes provided with a set of rules (the possible world described by a science fiction novel is equipped with

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[1] For a semiotic point of view on ideology and media, see also Eric Landowski (1989), who describes a "reflexive society" (*société réfléchie*), i.e. a society that produces, through media, a self-representation, looks at itself in this mirror and in this way consolidates its values and stereotypes.

rules that are partially different from those valid in the actual world). Possible worlds can be similar (almost identical) to the world we live in or they can be different, or very different, in many respects. Sometimes a possible world can be apparently different or far in time and space from the actual world, but it is indeed a metaphor for it: in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* Lilliput represents George I's England; J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga is set in a magical parallel world in the 1990s, but it is also a metaphor for the heroic resistance of the United Kingdom against Nazism.

Fictional texts can thus propose ideological messages that are even more hidden than usual. They can be disguised in a possible world that is considered quite distant from ours, but is actually a metaphor for it. For this reason, costume or historical dramas have often been studied from an ideological point of view, i.e. as a representation of a point of view on the contemporary world and a set of proposed values.

This article is based on a postulate (which can, of course, be further investigated and discussed): that television series (and seriality in general) are even more effective than other kinds of fiction in transmitting ideological meaning, because they expose the audience to their messages periodically and for a long span of time (six years in the case of *Downton Abbey*)[2].

Finally, a very important clarification: in this article the term "ideology" does not have the negative connotation suggested by Barthes, where it was considered as a way of controlling public opinion by the dominant class. Here a "neutral" definition will be used: an ideology is a coherent system of values and connotations that characterizes a culture, a group or that can be temporarily borrowed in specific circumstances to shape our attitudes. Many ideologies can coexist or conflict in the same society and can be at the basis of public debate. Moreover, ideology is not necessarily a message consciously produced by the author ('intentio auctoris' is not pertinent from a

[2] For a discussion of this "familiarity effect", see Blanchet – Vaage 2012.

semiotic point of view): it is only one of the possible interpretations legitimated by the text.

3. *Downton Abbey*: short introduction and previous literature

Downton Abbey is a British television series created by Julian Fellowes; six seasons have been produced and aired in the United Kingdom from 2010 to 2015[3]. The series has won many awards (including three Golden Globes) and has been universally considered a critical and commercial success. It is set in England from 1912 to 1925 and tells the story of Robert Crawley, Earl of Grantham, and of his family: his wife Cora and their three daughters Mary, Edith and Sybil. They live in a splendid mansion (called Downton Abbey) in the Yorkshire countryside and they are rich landowners. But *Downton Abbey* tells also the parallel and sometimes intertwining stories of the Crawleys' domestic servants[4].

The first two seasons of *Downton Abbey* have already been analyzed from a narrative point of view in two articles by Rosalía Baena and Christa Byker (2014) and Katherine Byrne (2014). Both of them consider *Downton Abbey* as an example of "nostalgia drama", a

[3] Except for the first season (7 episodes), each season is made of 8 episodes plus a "Christmas special"; in this article episodes are numbered from 1 to 9 and the season is indicated by a number following the letter "s" (for example "ep1.s1" indicates the first episode of the first season). Quotations from dialogues are taken from the available official scripts (seasons 1-3; Fellowes 2013a; 2013b; 2015) or transcribed from the screen (seasons 4-6).

[4] Parallel stories of masters and servants are not new in fiction. From 1971 to 1975 ITV broadcasted the television drama *Upstairs, Downstairs*, revived by the BBC in 2010. This theme is also common in literature; it has been applied, for instance, in Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels or, more recently, in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), adapted to a movie in 1993.

very successful genre in British television, and they focus on the series' ideological aspects.

In his lexical analysis of the French word 'nostalgie', Algirdas Julien Greimas considers nostalgia as a passion caused by the (sometimes obsessive) regret for something that is desired again or that has never been known (Greimas 1986). Cultural heritage perfectly satisfies this definition and its ideologized version can be "desired again" by the public. As Baena and Byker write: «nostalgia is really less about the past than it is about the present» (2014: 261).

The favorite period for nostalgia drama is the Edwardian and post-Edwardian era (King Edward VII reigned from 1901 to 1910, but the Edwardian era is often extended until the end of World War I). This is considered a sort of golden age of Englishness and traditional England thanks to «its refined elegance, its unbounded self-confidence, its apparently secure global centrality, its middle-class prosperity with all the attendant visual sumptuousness» (Freedman 1990-1991: 101; also quoted in Baena – Byker 2014: 260). In *Downton Abbey*, and in other nostalgia dramas, this period has been largely «sanitised» (Byrne 2014: 311) in order to offer an idealized picture of the past and an ideological interpretation of it. What the "traditional" England of *Downton Abbey* offers is, first of all, «a feeling of community that works to downplay or deflect potentially divisive social differences» and that contrasts with the weakening of unity and sense of ethnicity observed in contemporary England (Baena – Byker 2014: 261). Cohesion and stability are proposed as valuable alternatives to the crisis and uncertainty of the beginning of the 21st century, even if (or perhaps because) they are the other side of a world characterized by a strong social stratification: «Paternalism here does away with any need for a welfare state, and this does seem like a clear attempt to reassure and comfort an audience dealing with public spending cuts on a scale unequalled since the 1980s» (Byrne 2014: 320).

A possible ideological interpretation of *Downton Abbey* is summarized by Byrne:

> [...] the Abbey itself deliberately functions as a microcosm for the state, and it is difficult to ignore the implication that twenty-first century Britain would be more successful if it were organised in the same hierarchal and patriarchal way, even if that is not "necessarily right" to the modern mind. (Byrne 2014: 315)

Both articles explicitly call this ideological message "conservative"; they also underline that heritage or nostalgia dramas first appeared during Margaret Thatcher's administration (1979-1990). Thus *Downton Abbey* would be the most recent example of an ideologized genre, and its representation «of a world in which people work together for the good and the whole, is idyllic and reassuring» (*ibid.*: 320). More generally, as Byrne writes:

> Throughout both series, there is no tragedy which cannot be overcome with togetherness, loyalty and love. As a metaphor for contemporary Britain beset with economic and social difficulties, *Downton* acts as an idealised vehicle of reassurance for its audience. [...]
>
> Ultimately this kind of comforting cohesion and inclusion goes a long way towards explaining why *Downton*, despite its complexities, can be viewed as deliberately returning to the heyday of 1980s heritage film [...]. Its critics have received it as an ideological tool of the Right, a conservative nation in microcosm, which put forward traditional values of loyalty and order. (*Ibid.*: 324-325)

Nevertheless, the Edwardian golden age ended: after all, its loss is what legitimates the term "nostalgia". Both articles consider *Downton Abbey* as the (nostalgic) tale of this fading, accelerated by World War I. Byrne sees in Thomas Barrow's advancement during the War (he was a footman and he becomes the supervisor of the military hospital established in Downton) the symbol of social change (*ibid.*: 323). Baena and Byker are even more explicit:

> The sinking of the Titanic, set at the beginning of the story, symbolizes the disappearance of an old way of life. The episodes in the series depict the reconfiguration of the English aristocracy, its relationships with bourgeois values and what it meant for the people whose lives were structured by it. With the old way of life dying, a new one rises up: modernity enters Downton Abbey (in the form of electricity and telephones), the house serves as a hospital during the War, and the Crawley daughters find their choices widening. (Baena – Byker 2014: 262)

The nostalgic effect is thus the consequence of the end of an era led by the aristocracy, which is rapidly substituted by the dominance of the middle and upper middle class. This interpretation of the ideological message of *Downton Abbey* is based, in both articles, on an analysis of narrative themes and characters (in semiotic terms: themes and thematic roles). In the following sections, I will try to confirm these analyses with a semiotic method, extending them to deeper levels of narration, such as narrative schemas and functions. This will help me to show that the ideology is not only present on the "surface" of the text, but also in the highly symbolic narrative mechanisms and structures. On the basis of the analysis of narrative deep structures and of some anthropological concepts (the sacred, sacrifice) I will also propose, in the light of all the six seasons of the series, a slightly different interpretation, according to which the passage from the golden age of the aristocracy to the leading role of the upper middle class is not so obvious and straightforward.

4. Social stratification in *Downton Abbey*

Social stratification is one of the most relevant aspects of the representation of English society in *Downton Abbey*. Borders between classes are clearly defined and the social hierarchy is widely acknowledged, even by characters that consider it unfair (as Thomas Barrow) or even fight against it (as Tom Branson). Three main classes

are depicted in this series: the aristocracy, middle class and working class. The underclass (or 'lumpenproletariat') is rarely seen, and when it appears it is usually in the background of a particular scene. Even more rarely, there are underclass characters, but they lack a class consciousness and they are always fallen from a higher condition, such as Ethel Parks, a maid who has had a natural child from an injured Army officer and later has become a prostitute (seasons 2 and 3), or Prince Kuragin, a Russian aristocrat escaped from the Soviet Revolution turned into a homeless man (season 5).

Social classes are further stratified. The apex of aristocracy is of course the Royal family; a duke is of a higher rank than a marquis, and a marquis is more important than an earl. This internal hierarchy is quite evident in ep1.s1 when Charles Carson, the butler, says «[…] it's certainly a great day for Downton, to welcome a duke under our roof»; even more revealing is the Earl of Grantham's delight when he realizes that his daughter Edith's beau has become marquis («Edith would outrank us all!», ep8.s6) and his admiration when he first enters his future son-in-law's castle (ep9.s6).

It is possible to observe an internal stratification also within the middle class[5]. Even if she is certainly the most progressive character (after Tom Branson, the socialist chauffer), Isobel Crawley strongly corrects her son Matthew when he relegates them to middle class:

> MATTHEW: Mother, Lord Grantham has made the unwelcome discovery that his heir is a middle class lawyer and the son of a middle class doctor.
>
> ISOBEL: *Upper* middle class. (ep2.s1)

Even the working class, here mostly represented by Downton servants, has a precise internal stratification. Male servants, for

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[5] The expression "middle class" can be used to indicate both – more generally – the class between the aristocracy and the working class, and the intermediate stratum between the "upper middle class" and the "lower middle class".

example, follow this hierarchy: butler (the head of staff), vice-butler, valet, first footman, footmen. When Joseph Molesley, Matthew Crawley's butler and valet, loses his job, he tries to be re-hired at Downton, but he is cross when he is offered a position as footman, which he considers an unfair demotion, which he finally accepts only because he has fallen on hard times (ep6.s4). It is not just a matter of wages, but a strongly symbolic and existentially relevant difference, as is clear from a dialogue between Molesley and Downton butler, Carson:

> CARSON: And here are some clean gloves that should fit you.
> MOLESLEY: Gloves, Mr Carson?
> CARSON: I'm sorry, Mr Molesley, you're not the butler here. That is my job. You are a footman and a footman wears gloves. (ep3.s4)

Gloves are not only a mark that helps to distinguish among different ranks of staff. They are also a symbolic barrier between the servant and the master. Only a few servants can directly access, and in some circumstances even touch, their masters. The butler has to constantly interact with his master; the valet has to touch him, in order to help him dress; because of their duty, they cross a proxemic boundary that is forbidden to their colleagues. Molesley, who has been Matthew's valet, feels that gloves are a new barrier pushing him back from the sacred space of his masters' intimacy.

This subtle symbolic and proxemic system is evident in many other cases. Daisy Mason is the scullery maid (so the lowest ranked servant): she is a kitchen maid and also in charge of lighting the fires in the fireplaces (ep1.s1). She has to do this early in the morning and to stay confined to the kitchen for the rest of the day. While occasional contacts between masters and room maids are tolerated, Daisy has to be almost invisible and she is constantly afraid of being surprised by the Crawleys while still in their rooms. Even when her rank improves and she becomes kitchen assistant, her presence "upstairs" is not

convenient and she needs to be introduced or accompanied by higher ranked female servants (ep4.s6).

The servants' small microcosm is, therefore, internally stratified as the other classes are. Sometimes it seems to be a scaled-down image of the entire society. This is quite evident when Carson, the butler, and Mrs. Hughes, the housekeeper (the highest ranked female servant), finally marry (ep3.s6): they are now the servants' "royal couple", as the Earl of Grantham and his wife Cora are for the little world of Downton and as the King and the Queen are for the British aristocracy and the whole country.

5. Relations between classes

Downton Abbey describes a society organized into classes and the internal stratification of these classes. But what about the relations between classes?

Lord Grantham and his family (the aristocracy) have daily contact with their servants. Sometimes they also have to deal with the estate tenants. Servants and farmers are almost the only people from the working class to be present in the series, while factory workers are for the most part absent, even when the plot is set in London or other cities. *Downton Abbey* gives therefore a partial (or perhaps distorted[6]) representation of the English working class at the beginning of the 20th century: it is the image of a traditional and rural society and not of an industrial one.

Relations between the Crawleys and their servants can be strong, but always asymmetrical. Carson, the butler, is very loyal to the aristocratic family and is even more conservative than the Earl about

[6] Partial and distorted representations of a society are the essence of an ideological point of view. As we have already seen, a «sanitised» (Byrne 2014: 311) vision of Edwardian society is a prerequisite to its being considered the golden age of aristocracy and of "traditional" England (but whose tradition?).

traditions and social order. Moreover, he is sometimes a father figure to Lord Grantham's eldest daughter, Lady Mary; but it is Lady Mary who decides when this confidence is allowed (ep1.s4). While some servants (such as Mrs. Hughes and Thomas Barrow) are more pragmatic and disenchanted about their bonds with their masters, prefiguring a more modern and democratic contractual relationship, others are deeply involved with them, showing emotions or attitudes ranging from devotion (Carson), to loyalty (Mr. Bates – Lord Grantham's valet – and his wife Anna – Lady Mary's maid) and hatred (Mrs. O'Brien – Lady Grantham's maid). Emotional bonds are possible in the opposite direction too (for example Lord Grantham's affection for his former comrade in arms Mr. Bates or Lady Mary's protective concern about her maid's health), but these are usually weaker. This asymmetry is quite evident when someone from the staff leaves Downton: the servant is usually moved (even the cynical Barrow admits with Mrs. Hughes that «this is the first place I've found where I've laid down some roots», ep7.s6), while Lord Grantham settles the matter with a handshake and some good wishes. In the final episode (ep9.s6), Carson's substitution with Thomas, a real earthquake for the series audience, is decided very quickly, and the former butler and his wife Mrs. Hughes leave the scene from a service door while a big party goes on.

This asymmetrical relation is also symbolized by the spatial organization of Downton Abbey, as it was before in the classic TV drama *Upstairs, downstairs* (Baena and Byker 2014; Byrne 2014), whose title explicitly refers to the distinction between masters (upstairs) and servants (downstairs). The Downton basement houses the kitchen, the butler's and housekeeper's offices and the dining room where the servants spend their day when not busy with their duties; at night, they sleep in their (single or double) rooms in the loft. The servants thus occupy the bottom and the top of the mansion's vertical space, while the Crawleys live, eat and sleep in the middle; a spatial organization that suggests from one side the centrality of the aristocratic family, from the other side how the servants loyally protect it.

Also the upper middle class sometimes has servants, but they are limited to what is strictly essential. When Matthew Crawley and his mother Isobel arrive at Downton village (ep2.s1) they expect to be assisted by a maid and a cook, as it was in Manchester, and Matthew has a hard time accepting a butler and valet, Mr Molesley. Moreover, relationships between the upper middle class and servants are more impersonal and professional.

The aristocracy has a more friendly relation with the working class (servants and farmers) than with the upper middle class. This could be considered a paradox, the upper middle class being closer to the aristocracy in the social stratification. But it is exactly this proximity that creates suspicion and hostility between these two classes, and it is not by chance that the conflict with the aristocracy is much weaker for the middle class than for the upper middle class; the middle class is still sufficiently distant from the aristocracy and so can admire it (this is shown for example in the scene when Downton Abbey is open to the public, ep6.s6), and the aristocracy can still view the lower classes with indulgence (for example former maid Gwen's social advancement is approved and celebrated because she has not risen too much, ep4.s6).

On the contrary, apical figures in the upper middle class are little accepted. This does not only concern Matthew (who, being the unexpected heir, is seen – at least at the beginning – as an usurper), but many other characters. In season 2, Mary first dates and then becomes engaged with Sir Richard Carlisle, an unscrupulous tabloid publisher and a proud self-made man, who is considered with annoyance and even some degree of disgust by Lord Grantham (and by Carson too); when Carlisle, who is going to marry Mary, announces his intention to buy Haxby Park, a great mansion near Downton, Robert does conceal his uneasiness in thinking of a former aristocratic country estate owned by a social climber (ep6.s2). Another publisher, Michael Gregson, even if a much more positive and honest character than Sir Carlisle, sadly finds that the Crawleys oppose his romance with Edith, Lord Grantham's second daughter (ep9.s3 and season 4). Another example could be Charles Blake, a progressive official of the liberal government who is in charge of a survey on the economic health of country estates.

He is considered as an enemy because he sides with social and agricultural reform, while he simply cannot accept the aristocracy's claim of being entitled to its prosperity. Mary and Blake will later improve their relationship, but Blake will be seriously considered as a possible husband only when Mary discovers that he is, actually, the heir of a wealthy baronet (ep9.s4).

6. Narrative structures: subjects and narrative programs

In sections 4 and 5 I have described *Downton Abbey*'s representation and connotation of a stratified society. To fully understand if the series really expresses a conservative ideology and what this would mean, I propose to go further and to analyze more abstract and deep levels of narration. In the following pages I will recur to, above all, the structural method of "generative" semiotics, elaborated by Greimas and his school during the 1970s and the 1980s[7].

According to Greimas every Subject has a narrative program ('programme narratif' or PN), i.e. an action he or she aims to accomplish; PN can be expressed in the following way:

$$PN = S1 \rightarrow (S2 \cap Ov)$$

where S1 is the Subject that will eventually do the action and who the PN belongs to, S2 is the Subject that will be affected by the action, and Ov ('object de valeur') is an (even abstract) element that has a positive or negative value for the Subjects involved. Subjects can be conjunct with (symbol ∩) or disjointed from (symbol ∪) the Object. Expression 1 means that a Subject (S1) does or will do something to make another Subject (S2) conjunct with Ov (a father that builds a kite for his son). S1 and S2 are narrative functions, abstract elements of narrative structures. This means that they can also coexist in the same

[7] Greimas' theory and method are exposed in different works, such as Greimas (1970; 1983) and Greimas – Courtés (1979; 1986).

character (or Actor, in Greimas' terminology), as when I do something to get something I desire.

Every Subject has a PN, but I will focus on Robert's one, because Robert is the head of the Crawleys (who represent the entire aristocracy). One could think that Robert's aim is to enjoy a life of pleasures and privileges (and certainly – at least partially and unconsciously – it is), but he is very clear about what his duty is:

> MARY: The only one who never sticks out for me in all is you. Why is that?
>
> ROBERT: You are my darling daughter and I love you, hard as it is for an Englishman to say the words.
>
> MARY: Well, then...
>
> ROBERT: If I had made my own fortune and bought Downton for myself, it should be yours without questions, but I did not. My fortune is the work of others, who labored to build a great dynasty. Do I have the right to destroy their work? Or impoverish that dynasty? *I am a custodian, my dear, not an owner* [my italics]. I must strive to be worthy of the task I have been set. If I could take Mama's money out of the estate, Downton would have to be sold to pay for it. Is that what you want? To see Matthew a landless peer with a title, but no means to pay for it?
>
> MARY: So I'm just to find a husband and get out of the way?
>
> ROBERT: You could stay here if you married Matthew. (ep4.s1)

Robert is a custodian, his task is to preserve his dynasty fortune, which is in turn functional to the dynasty's prominence; of course, he is part of this dynasty and he takes advantage of this wealth, but his PN is clearly stated and can be resumed, again, by expression 1. This time S1 is Robert, S2 his dynasty (Robert is both S1 and part of S2, that is a "collective" Actor), Ov the estate and the family patrimony. The fact that the aim of the PN is to preserve (and not to transform) a given situation (Robert's family already owns the estate) means that this is a difficult action, i.e. that the Crawleys' prosperity is constantly threatened by something. And, in fact, this goal becomes even more difficult (almost desperate) after World War I.

7. Downton and England as well-ordered societies

When a PN is set for a Subject, it means that the Subject has received it from another narrative element, what Greimas calls the Addresser ('destinateur'). Who is Robert's Addresser? It's his dynasty, of course, that is at the same time Addresser and recipient of Robert's actions. But it is also something wider and more general than the dynasty.

It is, first of all, the complex entangled unity between the dynasty and its possessions. As Robert clearly says in the passage quoted before, a «landless peer» is inconceivable. And when he is in economic difficulties and considers moving to a smaller house, he proposes to rename it Downton Place, as if a continuity in the name of the mansion were as important as a continuity in the family name (ep3.s3).

The estate, and Downton Abbey above all, is the concrete, tangible representation of the dynasty and, therefore, of the Addresser. This is quite clear in iconic images of the series, widely used – for instance – on DVD covers. The image is always structured with a group of characters organized along a sort of asymmetric W without the last leg; Fig. 1 is from the first season and Fig. 2 from the fourth, while Fig. 3 represents them in diagram form.

Fig. 1 – *Downton Abbey*, season 1

Fig. 2 – *Downton Abbey*, season 4

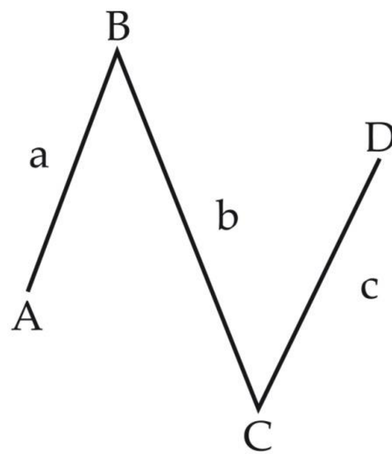

Fig. 3 – A diagram of the structure of Figs. 1 and 2

On the left (segment *a* and first part of segment *b*) there are the servants, on the right the masters (*b* and *c*). The two forward vertexes are occupied by the apical figures of the two groups: the butler Carson (vertex A) and the Earl of Grantham (vertex C); but the former is usually a step behind the line of the latter (except in the season 5

official image). Behind them, the other characters, organized in hierarchical order (Cora, Robert's wife, is always next to him, as Mrs. Hughes – the housekeeper – is next to the butler; Robert's daughters are always in birth order) or, secondary, according to other criteria (for instance, their relevance in the season). Iconography, therefore, confirms the strict social stratification represented in the story.

But what I want to focus on here is the constant presence of Downton Abbey in the background. It is not only a matter of scenic effect or of a symbolic landmark. It is also the visual position of the Addresser: in public offices the portrait of the Head of State (representing the nation) is hung on the wall behind the officer's desk; and in the same Head of State's portrait, a national flag (the ultimate symbol of the nation) is usually seen in the background.

Downton Abbey can be therefore considered as the plastic representation of the Addresser; but the Addresser seems now to be something more than the existence and the prosperity of the Crawley dynasty. This glimpse of English countryside is not only the symbol of a family history, but also of England itself[8], or better of a specific idea of England as a country identified with its aristocracy. This England is first of all an ideal and idealized system, based on a clear and regulated social stratification (as we have already seen), a well-ordered society (Rawls 2001; 2005) where everyone has their role and their place and in turn receives their proportional share of prosperity and peace. When Matthew wants to dismiss his valet, Mr Molesley, because he believes his role is a formality and unnecessary, he receives a lesson from Robert that he will very quickly learn:

> ROBERT: Is that quite fair? To deprive a man of his livelihood, when he's done nothing wrong?
> MATTHEW: Well, I wouldn't quite put it-

[8] «The English estate, "a man's castle", is a powerful, omnipresent mental construct and a symbol of English national heritage. Indeed, Downton's very existence and future are important catalyzers for the conflicts and relationships in the plot» (Baena – Byker 2014: 263).

> ROBERT: Your mother derives satisfaction from her work at the hospital, I think? Some sense of self worth?
> MATTHEW: Certainly.
> ROBERT: Would you really deny the same to poor old Molesley? And when you are master here? Is the butler to be dismissed? Or the footmen? How many maids or kitchen staff will be allowed to stay? Or must everyone be driven out? We all have different parts to play, Matthew. And we must all be allowed to play them. (ep2.s1)

So, there is a social order that assures everyone their share of happiness and prosperity. There is a common interest to preserve this social order, even if it does not give the same opportunities to everyone. The moral and economic engine of this society is aristocracy, through its values and its consumption activity. To be the custodian of Downton Abbey means not only to preserve the property for the dynasty, but also to assure an entire community of its wealth. This is, of course, the point of view of the aristocracy, the way it looks at and interprets the world or, at least, it is the point of view that the series depicts and proposes to its audience. The aristocracy, the class producing this vision, considers it to be impartial, "natural" (in Barthes' terms), even if it clearly coincides with its interests; from this perspective, which is perfectly embodied by Violet (Robert's mother), it is England itself and its spirit that is the real Addresser.

8. Social change as the violation of a sacred order

A well-ordered society does not exclude some controlled change. In *Downton Abbey* social mobility is tolerated and sometimes seen as positive and functional (as when former maid Gwen becomes the wife of a respected and active upper middle class man, ep4.s6). But there is a limit that cannot be crossed, and this is the territory of the leading class: the aristocracy.

The first to violate this order is Tom Branson, the chauffer, who marries Lord Grantham's third daughter, Sybil, despite her family's opposition. The price they have to pay is to go away and live, by their own means, in Dublin, where Tom comes from (ep8.s2). They will return to Downton some months later for Mary and Matthew's wedding (ep1.s3), and, a second time, when they have to leave Ireland after Tom has been involved in a revolt (ep4.s3). But Sybil will die soon after the birth of their daughter (ep5.s3)[9].

Another intrusion is Mary and Matthew's marriage. It is true that Matthew is the direct heir of Robert, but he clearly and proudly belongs to the upper middle class. He saves Downton in three different ways: after Robert has lost the family fortune in bad investments, Matthew prevents bankruptcy thanks to a large sum of money inherited from his former fiancée's father, a rich upper middle class solicitor (ep3.s3); he guarantees Downton's financial survival in the post-WWI economy by establishing a more modern and efficient management of the estate; and, above all, together with Mary he gives a new heir to the Crawleys. And on the same day that his son is born (as it was for Sybil) he is killed in a car accident (ep9.s3).

When he dies, Matthew's character is stuck at a crossroads. He still has many features of the young upper middle class solicitor, but he has also learned to appreciate some aspects of aristocratic life and values. At the very beginning of the series he declares he does not hunt and this symbolically opposes him to Mary and her family:

> MARY: Do you hunt?
> MATTHEW: No. I don't hunt.

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[9] The ternary structure represented by the Crawley sisters (Mary, Edith and Sybil) is broken by the death of the youngest one, Sybil (ep5.s3). But it will soon be restored. From the end of season 3 (ep9.s3) until the end of season 5 (ep9.s5), Lord Grantham's young niece, Rose MacClare, lives at Downton, while her parents are in India. Rose is a frivolous person, while Sybil was trustworthy and socially active, but they are similar in their liveliness and in their intolerance for aristocratic rules.

> VIOLET: I dare say there is not much opportunity in Manchester.
> MATTHEW: Are you a hunting family?
> MARY: Families like ours are always hunting families.
> ROBERT: Not always. Billy Skelton won't have them on his land.
> MARY: But all the Skeltons are mad.
> MATTHEW: Do you hunt?
> MARY: Occasionally. I suppose you are more interested in books than in country sports.
> MATTHEW: I probably am. You'll tell me that's rather unhealthy.
> MARY: Not unhealthy. Just unusual. Among our kind of people. (ep2.s1)

But just before coming back to Downton to see his new born son, we find Matthew in Scotland, learning how to hunt deer (ep9.s3).

Matthew's transformation is evident in the way he considers the romance between Edith and her publisher, Michael Gregson. On the one hand, he supports Edith's project of writing a newspaper column dealing with the condition of the modern woman; on the other hand, he – unexpectedly – discourages Gregson from pursuing a relationship with her because he is a married man, even if his wife lives in an asylum and there is no hope she will recover.

> GREGSON: So the laws of the society would be preserved, no matter what? Edith gave me the impression you were a freer soul than that.
> MATTHEW: I find that hard to believe. I agree, your position is tragic, and I'm very sorry. But you can't imagine I would let Edith slide into a life of scandal without lifting a finger to stop her. (ep9.s3)[10]

[10] The parallel between Matthew and Gregson and their common middle class origin is underlined in what is said at the end of this conversation,

Nevertheless, Matthew remains a champion of modernity. A symbol of this arriving modernity is the car. Cars are accepted in the Downton world, but under certain conditions. If they are used for practical reasons, as a tool to do something, they concern the working class and so are not appropriate for the aristocracy, unless driven by a chauffeur, like Tom. Only Edith, to show she is emancipated and as good as her sister Sybil (who is serving as a nurse in a military hospital), learns to drive, but there is the stigma of an impossible and inconvenient love affair with Mr. Drake, a local farmer (ep2.s2). Cars can be driven by gentlemen only for hobby (Anthony Strallan in season 1) or for sport (Henry Talbot in seasons 5 and 6). But Matthew, the middle class solicitor, drives for practical reasons: he uses the car as a means of transport, as a servant would do. Coming back from honeymoon he buys a car, causing Robert's concern («What in God's name is this? [...] Well, at least it's English», ep2.s3), and in their very last conversation Matthew and Mary jokes about what will later become a typical middle class stereotype on wives and cars (MARY: «I'll remind you of that next time I scratch the car»; MATTHEW: «Do. I give you full permission», ep9.s3). But he pays for this modernity and independence: as I have anticipated, he dies driving the car, on the way back from the hospital; if he had had a chauffeur, as Robert would have, he would probably have arrived home safe.

Sybil and Matthew are not the only characters to pay with their lives an upturning of the social order. Mr. Gregson's story reminds us of Matthew's one. He does not marry Edith, but they have a child

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where their personal luck is compared and Matthew does a prophetic consideration:

> GREGSON: It's odd the way we're punished for things, when we're not to blame.
>
> MATTHEW: But we also get rewards we don't deserve. It's called luck. And I'm afraid you've had a rotten luck.
>
> GREGSON: More than you, I suspect.
>
> MATTHEW: Perhaps, touch wood, but you never know what's coming.

(Marigold), born after his disappearance in Germany (ep6.s4; in ep4.s5 it is revealed that Gregson has been killed in Munich by Nazi Brownshirts during the Beer Hall Putsch), and he leaves Edith the ownership of his magazine. Henry Talbot too is not truly an aristocrat: he belongs to the junior branch of a family headed by an Earl but he is very far from the title («About forty strong men would have to drop dead»; ep4.s6). But his behavior is much more aristocratic than Matthew's: it seems his only occupation is car racing and he is used to a London upper class lifestyle. Nevertheless, the turning point of his romance with Mary is the racing accident in which his best friend, Charles Roger, dies (ep7.s6).

The closed circle of aristocracy, which is at the heart of the entire social order, can be considered a sacred space; I am using the term "sacred" in its broader meaning: something that is set apart from the "profane" and is not normally accessible or at people's disposal. Even those who are allowed to be part of it must undergo rites of passage (Van Gennep 1909), such as Rose's presentation at court (ep9.s4). But all others should not enter this space. Every time this happens, despite tradition and convenience, the sacred social order is broken and it reacts demanding a sacrifice:

> Social order is one with cosmic order. The rules of respect (*teck*) keep men and things that should be separated well apart […] Everyone is in his own place when everything goes well, but when an offence has been committed, deliberately or accidentally, this symbolic order is threatened at a precise point. The sacrificial debt must be paid in order to put the system back in place (De Heusch 1985: 13-14).

Anthropology considers sacrifice as a ritualized offering to the gods, but its function and phenomenology may vary. Here it is not to be considered literally: there is no ritual nor explicit offering, but the very essence of what De Heusch describes – something or someone is sacrificed to repair a violation of the sacred order – is clearly present.

Repeating many times this narrative schema, *Downton Abbey* proposes British aristocracy as this sacred social and cosmic order. Even if it is not possible to deny or stop its decline, aristocracy is presented in its sacred superiority, and this is the very essence of the series' conservativeness.

Exceptions confirm this hypothesis. Cora comes from the American upper middle class, but when *Downton Abbey* begins she has been married to Robert for more than twenty years. "Bertie" Pelham would be another case of violation of this order, but, before marrying Edith, he unexpectedly becomes marquis (ep8.s6). In season 5, Matthew's mother, Isobel, becomes engaged to Richard Gray, Baron of Merton and godfather to Mary Crawley; but the strong opposition of Richard's disdainful son persuades Isobel to renounce their marriage. In ep9.s6, she revises her decision and announces she will marry Lord Merton, but only after learning that he is dying of pernicious anemia. In the very last scene of the series, they will discover that Lord Merton is not dying and he has only a weak form of anemia; but in the meanwhile he has left his mansion to live with Isobel in her home: they live together, but as an upper middle class family.

9. Conclusions

The hypothesis at the basis of this article was that a television series can express and propose an ideology, i.e. a coherent system of value and a point of view on society. Here the term "ideology" has not been used with a negative connotation: ideologies can freely coexist and compete in the same society.

This article is focused on the ideological message in *Downton Abbey*. I have tried to show how a semiotic approach, integrated with anthropological concepts and applied to abstract levels of narration (narrative functions, programs) and to other aspects (such as iconography) can support and deepen the analysis of themes and characters. The "conservative" ideology of *Downton Abbey* resides, from this point of view, in the fact it presents aristocracy as a sacred

space that assures a well-ordered society for everyone: social change is possible, but it is seen as a perturbation of this sacred order and thus requires a tribute.

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The Author

Piero Polidoro

Piero Polidoro is Assistant Professor (Ricercatore) in Semiotics at LUMSA University in Rome. He has obtained is PhD in Semiotics at University of Bologna under the supervision of Umberto Eco and Patrizia Violi. His main interests are General Semiotics, Visual Semiotics and application of Semiotics to digital media. Among his publications the volumes *Che cos'è la semiotica visiva* (2008) and *Umberto Eco e il dibattito sull'iconismo* (2012). He has written many articles in Italian and English.

Email: piero.polidoro@gmail.com

The paper

Date sent: 30/01/2016
Date accepted: 15/04/2016
Date published: 31/05/2016

How to quote this paper

Polidoro, Piero, "Serial Sacrifices: a Semiotic Analysis of *Downton Abbey* Ideology", *Forme, strategie e mutazioni del racconto seriale*, Eds. A. Bernardelli – E. Federici – G. Rossini, *Between*, VI.11 (2016), http://www.betweenjournal.it.