

# *The Affair*: Authorship and Melodrama in Complex TV

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When we watch a series like *The Affair*, the first question to be raised is about the way we perceive it among the plethora of TV series. Does it function as an instrument of subversion or as escapism? Neither function is absent from the televised offers that have been growing exponentially since the start of the new millennium. As viewers, we are aware of the wide range of disquieting views that TV series can convey, both politically (*House of Cards*) and socially (*Breaking Bad*). A line of separation must never be drawn, as scriptwriters – always mindful of Shakespeare’s teaching – are well aware. *The Affair*, however, is liable to be open to a more controversial debate, since its contents deal with one of the longest-running plots in the history of literature, as the title indicates: a melodramatic relationship.

Melodrama is the keyword in any close analysis of this series. In fact, I borrowed the opening question from Thomas Elsaesser’s seminal essay on family melodrama, when he ponders over the “radical ambiguity” (72) concerning film melodrama, as compared to the previous expressions of the narrative, such as in Samuel Richardson’s novels or Giuseppe Verdi’s operas. The melodramatic turn, we could say, is so important in cinema as to be coincidental to film becoming a fictional representation instead of the

documentary and scientific product it used to be in the beginning. It brings along a set of new stylistic choices, already present in silent movies, regarding the frame composition and the filming of actors within its space, with the intensity of a detail or a close-up to signal a specific moment in being, thus allowing gifted directors to shift political themes onto a personalized level. In this respect, Erich von Stroheim is one of those who best interpreted this visual ability. In his movie *Foolish Wives*<sup>1</sup> the protagonist, the fake count Karamzin, seduces several women belonging to different social classes, from his maid to the diplomat's wife and openly criticizes American society and its addiction to money and gold, while pursuing the same goal himself through the lure of his European uniforms and their seductive power in the 'innocent' American eye. Therefore, the border between emotional relations and social issues in any given melodramatic film can be more difficult to spot because of this visual relevance in its language. *The Affair* is directly consistent with this tradition and my article will focus on the way the series attempts a frequent intersection of personal and social themes within the frame of multiple points of view. These multiple viewpoints aim at deconstructing any Manichean opposition between female and male perspectives as well as adjusting a moral and emotional response to the narrative drive.

In today's so called complex TV, "narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell 18) and television studies have, therefore, been urged to shift their interest to narrative forms, instead of just focusing on issues of cultural representation in the series. In addition, the usually unplanned narrative close of series and their dependence on a constantly renegotiable narrative development have brought into play other practices shaping storytelling, which include the wider context of the television industry, audiences, critics, and creators. Therefore, a moment crucial to the potential success of a series is the beginning, where all the rhetorical and visual devices are on display to capture the viewer's attention. The appeal of a genre in a TV series, however, has shifted considerably from the standards of television prior to the spread of pay TV and cable channels in order to comply with the expectations of a different kind of audience, who is ready to follow narrative detours that overlap borders with other genres on the map. In his

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<sup>1</sup> For a close analysis of a film scene, where the play of seduction works through the metanarrative use of a book, whose title is the same as the movie's (mirroring the overlapping layers between book and series in *The Affair*) see Maggitti (253-55).

essay, Mittell has deliberately written more about pilot episodes in a complex TV series, as being the most conventional and, at the same time, least typical since they should convey to the audience both a feeling of familiarity and a touch of the unexpected.

Considering how weirdly *The Affair* makes itself recognizable as a genre already in the first episode can be a good starting point for our analysis.

### I. HOW DID ALL THIS MESS BEGIN?

When ‘the affair’ begins, we do not actually know that much about the characters. As each episode is divided into two chapters, initially focused on each of the protagonists, what is shown at the beginning is Noah’s family frantically leaving their New York brownstone apartment and reaching the site of their holiday at his in-laws’, in Montauk (NY), where Noah can devote himself to the writing of his new novel. When Noah meets Alison, who works as a waitress in a local fish diner, she is dramatically introduced by her intervention to save Noah’s youngest daughter from choking. The audience will only know later how much this situation is telling in relation to Alison’s life, as she lost her own same-age child in an accident. But this is what Alison tells in her own version of how the affair started, following Noah’s report, where she gets visibly emotional about the accident, but does not take it upon herself to do anything about it, as if she were frozen by her trauma, as yet unknown, as I said before, to the audience.

In both versions, we hear, respectively, Noah’s and Alison’s voices answering questions about the way it all began between them. The questions are asked by someone we do not yet know, a disembodied voice in the cinematic experience.<sup>2</sup> The sound and the pressure of these voices, however, remind us strongly of a police department and an interrogating detective, and the images will soon confirm that impression. The first consequence of this aural account corroborating our visual perception is that the melodrama will be colored by hints of crime in the following episodes, which means that the genres are going to be mixed. This is not unusual either in classic melodrama or in its modern declensions. What is not common in television series is that

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<sup>2</sup> For a better understanding on how this split between voice and body cinematically happens, see Chion (66-95).

the whole story becomes a flashback, a much more filmic device, whose most iconic example, in my opinion, is still the confession delivered by a dying man to a police officer in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*.

A further item of analysis is provided by the clash between the images and the voice-over narration. In the aftermath of the judiciary experience the protagonists are going through, a change in their attitude to their affair is apparent in their voices and conveys a detachment that is counter to the images presented. How they talk is furthermore highlighted by the comments they intersperse their answers with, which are, in fact, the only scraps of interview we are allowed to hear before image and sound coincide to let the audience realize where the utterances are coming from. These comments are relevant both to the form of the narrative and its relation to narrative conventions.

Noah describes himself as a family man, with four children, who thought his future was with them, feigning a picture of happiness suddenly marred by his older boy's fake attempt at suicide. Alison starts her report by saying that when things started it was a dark and stormy night, only to revert to a more ordinary tone and apologize to the detective for being foolish. Both comments affect the way we perceive the images, leading us to be aware of a narrator who is overlapping chronology and mixing genres at the very moment the series is presenting itself as a specific type of narration.

Now that we have established a melodramatic frame for the series, following the directions given in the first episode, our focus must zoom out to have a more panoramic view of TV series and set *The Affair* in a wider context. According to Linda Williams, melodrama is such a frequent component of TV series that it can be envisioned more as a narrative mode than a genre on its own. In fact, melodramatic tones are traceable and recognizable in almost every TV series, even in the ones that, apparently, seem to be targeting a different kind of audience, such as *The Wire*. *The Wire*, as Williams has shown in detail, introduces melodrama as a mode in several incidents of the series but ironically finds its greater accomplishment in "developing something more ambitious than the conventional melodrama we love to deride" (7). The spreading of melodramatic nuances provides an interesting key to interpreting the narrative complexity of the new form of TV serialization. Being complex, TV productively interferes with and reacts against the persistence of cultural boundaries between the male and female perception of the series, also touching on the race issue. As Goldberg puts it, "Williams acknowledges but refuses the

limitation of melodrama to the terrain of female gender, opting instead to read it as a mode that serves to index American culture, especially American false consciousness and guilt" (xii). In *The Affair*, as I suggested above, complexity is further reflected in the so called "Rashomon effect", the multiple storytelling by different characters as used in the same titled movie by Akira Kurosawa: applied to the narrative outline of the episodes and, therefore, multiplying our perspectives on the narrated events according to whether it is a male or a female voice telling the same narrative from a different point of view. This stylistic choice makes the critical debate on the issue of gendered-qualified genres one of the main themes of the series. The choice of melodrama as *the* genre/mode in the series should be read through the lenses of this cultural trope and help us focus on the most relevant effects on its structure, both narratively and thematically.

## 2. GENRES, GENDERS AND RACE.

Starting with the issue of gender, melodrama has often been associated with TV soap-operas because of its stress on the sentimental attitude, that has resulted in a recognition of excess as its formal trait. The connection to a prevalently or all-female audience had already made it into a secondary item in the hierarchy of film studies, framing its discussion in such a context that:

whereas many of Hollywood's other genres were granted the dignity of masculine and classical labels – western as epic, gangster as tragic hero – melodrama's emotional effects were syphoned off into a separately gendered genre, precluding consideration of melodrama's broader significance across popular cinema's genre systems. (Gledhill and Williams 18)

However, the way in which melodrama is recognizable even in realistic narrations that eschew the rules of stylistic and emotional excesses, asks for a different approach to its analysis, interpreting most of the TV dramas as a form of melodramatic serial. *The Affair* is part of this expanded category, with the exception, as I wrote above, of staging melodrama as its main genre/mode, encompassing all the genres and issues that it involves in its narrative development. Let's have a closer look at them and how they are sewn into the main fabric of the text.

The first genres I have mentioned are thriller and detective, the former only evoked, the latter more visibly stated, since it is the interview a detective is having with both Alison and Noah that frames the episode of their first meeting. To the same genres belong Cole (Alison's husband) and his family's trading in drugs, as it will be used as possible evidence in the search for clues about Scottie, Cole's brother, in the investigation of his death. Selling drugs is not only lucrative for the family, but it is part of a revenue that shores up the crisis in fishing, which used to be the most important activity in Montauk's economy. This feature in the series can be claimed to belong to a trend in ecocriticism which includes references to illegal activities as a consequence of a suffering economy. Crucial to the series, indeed, is the divide between New York and Montauk. These are the two settings of this drama, critically standing for the city and the village in a millennial rewriting of Raymond Williams' economic and social tensions between the country and the city in a contemporary North American context. From a melodramatic point of view, Noah and his family represent the urban intruders in the apparently traditional lore of the Montauk community.

Not in order of appearance, but quite relevant to the prismatic shaping of themes in the series, we have race issues. These issues are embodied by different characters. Two of them are male and are new partners in the sentimental existence of Helen (Noah's divorcing wife) and Alison (who also marries Noah). The former is Vik, a surgeon born into an Indian family, whose deep concern is not to disappoint his parents because of all the sacrifices they have made for him to achieve such a good position in his American life. The latter is Ben, an originally Hispanic war veteran just returned from Afghanistan, who faces serious problems both in his military experience and in his private life. The range is widened to include Noah's special relation to one of his students, the Afro-American Anton, whose mother Janelle, supported by Noah, is the school principal coping with racially biased criticism by higher educational authorities. Last, but not least, there is Cole's new wife, the South American Lisa, who has no legal documents and lives in a clandestine and precarious situation as an illegal citizen.

As a series portraying melodrama in an extended 'play', *The Affair* deals with gender in more than a trajectory. Alison and Noah, of course, represent the poles of attraction who are entrusted with the task of redefining the meaning of an affair. Noah's relationship with Alison operates in the service of affection, helping him to retrospectively find the reasons for his emotional

detachment from his wife and finally unearth the causes of a discontent that is deeply rooted in his family history. Noah will retrace different stages of his affairs with other women, besides Alison, the most significant of which is with the French visiting professor at the university where he teaches creative writing. Her involvement with Noah starts from her indirect fascination with the sexual encounters that imbue most of the pages of Noah's novel, but embedded within the sexual theme, and imposed upon it, she finds the heart of darkness Noah reveals when facing the ghosts of his youth. Back home, she will face the ostracism of her faculty principal, who, disappointed by the poor results of her research on a medieval manuscript on courtly love, hints at her faltering position in the department, once her husband, and former professor, is dead and, therefore, unable to defend her academic standing. Her storyline supplies the plot with a clue as to gender prejudice in the workplace (even by same-sex opponents) and is functional as well to Noah's redoubling his fellow American expatriates' experience in Paris and cementing the parallelism with Hemingway which runs, often ironically, through the whole series, a point which I am going to deal with later in this essay, when literature becomes the main focus of my argument.

It's Alison, however, who plays the main 'role' in the gender agenda of the scriptwriters. Discussing the main points in her revised theory of a melodramatic mode, Williams writes that:

If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama. (43)

Alison's character has lost her innocence with her child's death by water, a symbolical rite that is more than once revived with different emotional options (and it is the main theme of Fiona Apple's song in the opening credits of the series). She defines herself as a victim at the end, when she is once again blamed for having seduced a man as if that was the only thing she is good at, and she goes through a whole sequence of reconfiguring moments in her attempt at retrieving her virtues by taking on a counseling job and having a second chance at being a mother. She seems to reject an empathic reaction from the viewer, at least in the aesthetic sense of feeling one's way into an art object or another person which is attached to the first, now classic definition

of empathy by Theodore Lipps at the beginning of the twentieth century. She is rather ambiguous in her demeanor to other characters, who, nonetheless, end up by feeling for her more than they used to. She is also one of the few characters in the series who do not undergo psychoanalysis in order to cope with the inner turmoil and trammels of their relationships.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary TV dramas are often blamed for emphasizing masculinity in order to deny any allegedly historical connection with the kind of gendered audience that melodrama seemed aimed to attract. Since melodrama has been revised as a mode and therefore integrated into other genres, any gendered division has quite lost its meaning. And the convergence of media, “the competing and contradictory ideas about participation that are shaping this new media culture” (Jenkins 22) is an added push in that direction, since each complex TV series draws on different sources, mainly from literature to cinema, but quite significantly from television fanzine and blogs as well, and contains a certain number of scenes where the borders between ‘masculine’ realism and ‘female’ melodrama become blurred and reach a balanced concurrence, since they both contribute to the revelation of moral and emotional truths. In *The Affair* the multiple perspectives that the structure of each episode allows have the controversial effect of apparently reinforcing a gendered gaze on the story while, at the same time, dismantling its priority in our expectations because of the lack of any objective grasp of the reality of the events around which each scene is centered.

By putting in contrastive relation the version of any narrated event, according to each of the two main characters involved, male and female, the series incorporates into its narrative layout the very question of a gendered audience, thus reappraising what Robyn Warhol calls nonsexual affectivity, unraveling “the assumptions that have kept gender and sexuality on the periphery of narrative theory” (15). As a matter of fact, *the affair* itself is introduced as a kind of twist in the straightforward narrative line of a marriage, that can modify, as it happens in the series, its relation as a subplot to the main story, by turning it into a manifold echo of its consequences.

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<sup>3</sup> The offices of the physiotherapists actually offer the viewers a semi-parody of a genre which has acquired a substantial space of its own in television palimpsests (think of *In Treatment*, for example) and can be indirectly included in the genres’ encyclopedia hinted at by their authors. The series is so crammed with subthemes that it makes the last season superfluous to my argument, which is the reason I have decided to not include it in my essay.



The plot of *The Affair* develops as a cluster of individual choices, and individual episodes, the rights and wrongs of which constitute the story itself, in what can be considered also as a rewriting of classic Hollywood melodrama, where the visual intensity of film language encouraged storytellers to emphasize the expression of desire and conflict in the characters' body language, an emphasis that *The Affair* develops in quite a different way from televised standards. The history of film melodrama is replete with sexual allusions that can reveal a repressed and perverse normalcy, just as in Douglas Sirk's films of the 1950s. In the TV series written by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi for Showtime, we are frequently permitted to witness sexual encounters between different characters and sexual intimacy becomes a battlefield in the series and conveys the terms of the negotiations that 'gendered' characters are developing in their relationship.

#### AUTHORS AND AUTHORSHIP IN *THE AFFAIR*

As we have seen from their ability to create and follow different threads of social, cultural and formal questions, unfolding them within the narrative curves along which the story is shaped, the writers of *The Affair* are to be rightly counted among those scriptwriters who led television studios to consider the relevance of an *auteurist* contribution<sup>4</sup> to the making of a series, especially if classifiable as "quality drama". This type of TV author, entrusted with the role of the so-called *showrunner*, has completely different claims to an authorial figure as compared to the passionately debated one in the history of cinema, where the attempt to reach the same status as literature led to the proposal of the camera-stylo, a neologism coined by Alexandre Astruc in 1948, whose theoretical aim was to attribute to the camera the literary and symbolic status of the pen. The very idea, however, of defining a role inside the TV system, for a person who controls the development of the series combining writing and other more managerial roles, and always outranking the directors of the episodes, is replete with echoes from the authorial debate in the movie industry. As a token of how deeply concerned *The Affair* is with the matter of authorial recognition, the first episode of the series already thematizes a struggle in this

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<sup>4</sup> The adjective is used in reference to Andrew Sarris's 1962 essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory".

arena, a kind of writerly, metafictional subtheme, which is dramatized in the opposing figures of Noah and Bruce Butler, his father-in-law.

Failure is always lurking behind the American Scene and melodrama heightens its backlash in the narrative structure. In Noah's case, this type of anxiety takes shape as the ambition to become a recognized writer, after the commercial failure of his first book. He works as a teacher but has a dream of becoming a successful writer for two dovetailing reasons, the first being to get it back at his father-in-law. A writer himself, albeit a very successful and commercially thriving one, Bruce never misses the opportunity to criticize Noah's lack of both talent and commitment to his work, constantly reminding him of all the economic support he is giving him to raise his four kids. The other reason for craving to write a best seller has to do precisely with the economic gap between him and his wife and the urge to achieve a position from which his lower social background will no longer be a burden.

The meeting of Noah and Alison, the waitress he will be starting the affair with, happens 'within' the frame of this book, whose edges disturbingly overlap with those of the story itself. Noah's bibliographical research on the history of Montauk and its fishing community purposefully blends with his carnal knowledge of Alison, whose sensuality overwhelms his increasingly loose attachment to family values, offering him an escape from his subordinate position. The book ends up becoming one of the characters in the play, as its presence both as a work in progress and as a finished one dogs the human relations and causes unexpected reactions as the story unfolds. More than anything else, the book's ending is a troublesome issue as we learn from the conversation between Henry, the editor, and Noah, in my opinion a key scene of the first season of the series. They meet after being introduced to each other by Bruce himself, who has been working with Henry for ages and relies on his professional ability to turn Noah into a successful writer. Noah is pressured by the editor about how he can revive a conventional plot such as the affair which is described in his book, and about which he is clearly racking his brain to find a satisfactory answer to, until he comes up with the idea of introducing a murder, which immediately galvanizes the editor. It is precisely at that moment that we start nourishing the impression of a story which is coming to life as we watch it, in such a way that the adjective "writerly", which I have used above to define the theme of Noah's book in the series, can properly acquire the meaning devised by Roland Barthes to distinguish a literature whose goal is to defy readers' expectations from

one that demands no particular effort to be understood. Drawing on Peter Brooks' prediction that the development of melodrama in film studies in the 1970s was paving the way to its future interdisciplinarity,<sup>5</sup> one cannot but agree on the contention that:

television itself can be a writerly medium, both in the sense of challenging viewer expectations, and in the sense of traditionally privileging the place of the scriptwriter / producer / showrunner, an aspect of television narrative that has come to the attention of even the most dilettante of television viewers through the prominence of an "auteurist" vision of television being used to promote certain premium television offerings. (Shannon Wells-Lassagne 2)

This distinction can be formally applied to TV series, the more *writerly* being those whose viewers are vicariously involved in the process of considering critically the lines of development in a complex narrative structure such as *The Affair*.

The final draft of Noah's book will be prominently displayed on his desk when he and Alison move together into a ramshackle house on the river in Cold Spring, NY, whose owner, Yvonne, happens to be the head of a publishing house who rents the place to writers. The draft tempts Alison to read it in the long idle hours of her incognito stay at the place, but she resists the temptation in compliance with Noah's request not to. In line with the TV series authors' tendency to revisit genres, the forbidden book plays a role which is reminiscent of Gothic novels, where a pursued girl comes across a manuscript in an old manor, containing a true account of her host and revealing his evil side. In this particular scene, the authors have got rid of any literary paraphernalia, but the atmosphere can still strike the viewer as creepy since the affair is already showing cracks for which Noah's novel provides a metonymic counterpart. In the end, Alison will break her promise to Noah and read the book, not in their love nest, but at Yvonne's, who is proofreading it in order to better advise Noah as to the end of the story. Yvonne's proofreading makes her change her mind about Alison, whom she had hired as a kindred spirit to be her assistant just a few weeks before. In fact, she sends her husband to inform Alison that her help is no longer required. As a reaction, Alison rushes to their mansion and, since there is no one at home, she bursts into Yvonne's office

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion on this topic, see Goldberg (ix-xvi).

and starts flipping randomly through the pages of the draft, picking up words and phrases about 'her' which describe her character as "pure sex" and dwell upon sexual intercourse as the main component in the relationship. She will throw this back in Noah's face later in the second season and it is only then that we will discover that she had actually read it all, including the criminal proceedings into the murder of Scottie.

As a matter of fact, the 'object' book will be staged even more in the series when it finally gets published, receiving approval from both critics and public. Now paragraphs from it will be read by the author in book launches, though the selection is affected by his ex-wife's presence in the public. In one of the two launch scenes we can notice that Noah stops reading the softcore paragraph about his lover that he was supposed to read and abruptly substitutes it for one about memories of his San Francisco years with his ex-wife, who had enjoyed listening to it during the previous launch. This choice does not prevent a young critic, present at the launch, from asking Noah about the allure of pornography in his book, and, even more pointedly, what balance between memoir and autobiography he can claim to have achieved in his novel.

Questions like these could find a rightful place in an academic essay about the series, such as this one. By making them part of a scene, however, the series shows its metafictional awareness. No one can expect a series about an affair to be naïve and incapable of relating its content to a cultural background which has to be, Hamlet-style, re-mirrored for a contemporary audience. *The Affair* goes one step beyond this and provides a new take on the theme by mischievously underplaying the issues of sexual misdemeanors nominally inherent in an affair and highlighting what is related to economic, gender and national matters rather than to the private and socially exclusive sphere it is usually connected to.

The book stands as an intermedial perspective on Noah and Alison's affair, having been 'written' by each of the partners whose personal version of the story is shown in specific chapters of many an episode, and, progressively including the other characters mainly affected by the affair. The fictionality of the book, though, is claimed by Noah as clear evidence of how untenable any literal match is between what 'really' happens and the novel. This standpoint is claimed by Noah in quite different circumstances, such as his editorial controversy with Henry about the ending of the novel and his fight with Alison at the yoga center, showing that he is aware of having an ace up his sleeve both professionally and in personal life. This defense of the author's freedom

to draw on his life in order to write fiction, however, as much as it raises philosophical and narratological issues, audaciously verging on the authorial domain of *autofiction*, can lead to disturbing conjectures about the story we are watching on screen. Noah's attitude to the affair is, in fact, ultimately tainted by this idea, whereby we are led to believe, on the one hand, that the affair has given him the necessary spur to write a novel about it while, on the other, he deludes himself into perceiving it as a fictional interlude in his ordinary life. This being said, however, there could be the legitimate chance that Noah has made up his mind to find a solution to the affair impasse through its fictional rewriting, as the repeated doubts cast on its ending suggest. Once the functional device of the book reaches its climax and, above all, when Alison successfully manages to get rid of her fictional alter ego by telling Noah that they are not in a book (which is physically true) and that he cannot dispose of her as he wishes, it's Noah who gets unexpectedly entangled in a plot twist which turns him into a character of a completely different type of fiction: the legal-thriller. The title of his novel, *The Descent*, foreshadows Noah's touching the depth of his traumatic experience as a young man and surfacing again in his mature life.

Noah's book is, therefore, in a constant interaction between the characters and the audience as a living part of the plot, mostly, as said above, in the first two seasons of the series. Literature, however, plays a much wider role in the texture of the series, not only as a professional item in the character's life, since he teaches English and American literature in high schools, but also as a connecting device in transitional passages inside some key episodes, which is worth discussing. The connection, actually, is twofold, and it is better to comment on this before moving on. On the one hand, there are meaningful references to literary masterpieces Noah is discussing with his students, bringing to the fore an ensuing twist in the plot of the series and providing an insight into its motives; on the other hand, Noah's conversations with both his literary agent and his psychotherapist (two sides of the same coin in terms of heightening the viewers' expectations) involve references to representative but critically uneven authors from the American literary canon. The kind of medial relationship for this way of bringing up literature and literary references is not covered theoretically by adaptation studies or cultural studies and requires a formulation of its own, which I will try to articulate through the analyzed examples.

*THE AFFAIR'S* RELATIONSHIP WITH LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN CANON.

The first 'transitional' literary reference is to *Romeo and Juliet*, whose names are synonymous with the idealized couple they embody in the collective imagination, during one of Noah's classes where Shakespeare's tragedy is a topic for discussion. He asks students to share their views about the reason why the play, though beginning as a comedy, turns abruptly into a tragedy. One of the pupils says that it's the old people's fault, namely the nurse and the friar, who mess up things, and Noah enthusiastically endorses her hint, rounding it up with the inclusion of all the adults in the play, who hinder the couple's union. This contrast between adolescence and adulthood is not to be found in *The Affair*, at least not where its two protagonists are concerned, but some undercurrent connection still holds, mostly in the tenet that a "couple is heroic because it defies the world and its institutions, starting from its first social cluster: family" (Fusillo 19; my translation).

Both Noah and Alison defy the institution of family, although they come from quite a different set of circumstances. Noah is a family man with four children, a loving wife and two caring in-laws, though it won't be long before we discover how bad things really are; Alison is shattered by the pain of having lost her six-year-old only child and her acceptance into the healing nest of her husband's family comes just on the brink of collapse. The affair between Noah and Alison acts definitively as a trigger for the issues that both families are forced to face, related to unfulfilled ambitions, personal disappointments and unresolved traumas. But they also regain, through the affair, a sense of freedom and disentanglement from social ties, that gives them a second chance to be youthful and carefree. Moreover, the relationship between their families turns to hatred when Whitney, Noah's older daughter, is almost raped by Cole's brother, Scottie, and Martin, Noah's older boy, says he would rather stay with Cole, after helping him with a voluntary job during summer, taking care of horses in their stables, thus calling into question Noah as a father figure.

Hence, the Shakespearian connection gets clearer and comparisons more likely to hold. The reference to Shakespeare's play, by the way, cannot be labeled just as a quote from the most adaptable and iconic playwright in the world, but takes on a structural role in warning the viewer that comedy, the joyful experience of love at first sight that Noah and Alison are sharing, is

going to have a tragic epilogue. The adjective transitional, therefore, refers to a change in the plot that the literary reference anticipates in the narrative in a proleptic mode which is unconventional in serialized narratives.

A further example of what I have called transitional reference happens later in the series. Noah is given a temporary refuge by Helen in her basement when she finds him in a state close to a mental breakdown in his father's home, after being released from prison. Nobody else knows about it but Vik, who has to put up with the intolerable situation just for one day. During dinner, the younger boy in the family, Trevor, is telling how much he is enjoying reading *Jane Eyre*, as he wants to know the whole story of the play that they are putting on stage at school. A noise comes from the basement and Trevor comments on it, saying it must be Bertha Mason, and ironically substituting the attic for the basement in his quotation from Charlotte Brontë's Victorian novel. The ironic reversal concerns the gendered position of his father as well, whose suffering from mental instability is caused by similar reasons to those responsible for Bertha Mason's having become a lunatic, i.e., too long a confinement in the chartered space of a hostile place. As a matter of fact, Noah is haunted by the nightmarish figure of one of his jailers, a former schoolmate who resents Noah's success as a writer and cannot forgive him for criticizing their former hometown in his novel. Driven by his obsession, Noah will conjure up his pursuer in the basement and fight with him to survive. Even in this case the literary reference hints at something happening in the episode, though on a smaller scale from that in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Besides Shakespeare, both Victorian and classic literature has certainly provided television storytelling with one of the most resourceful narrative patterns ever, so much so as to make it a commonplace that TV series' prolonged form of narration can only be compared to the breadth of classic novels, like Charles Dickens', that always appeared in serial form in periodicals. *The Affair*, though, does not invite us to search for a literary model that could have supplied the writers with an outline of diegetic development. Rather, this series contains plenty of direct and indirect references to literary texts and authors and revolves around Noah's book in such an extensive way as to change paradigmatically the relation to literature and to engage the literary work in the same narrative struggle as other modifying factors.

The series is literally crammed with references to canonical texts of American and English literature. Their 'appearance' in the series is specifically organized according to the age of the protagonists, starting from Barrie's *Peter Pan* that

Alison reads to her dead son while visiting his tomb on his birthday in the first episode. When she meets Noah at the library in Montauk, she proudly shows him a picture from a book of local history where her grandfather is standing close to a big fish in a Hemingway-like pose that recalls *The Old Man and the Sea*, with another, implicit, reference also ranking as juvenile literature. Later in the series, Alison will quote a book title when she is asked by Yvonne, the publisher, about her reading habits, and replies that she is not much into reading, mentioning *A Catcher in the Rye* as the last book that she remembers reading. The inclusion of Salinger's problematic novel, in terms of its belated acceptance into the American literary canon because of the mixed reception it received, cannot be casual in connection with her character, whose controversial features and rebellious attitude find a meaningful correspondence in Holden Caulfield's reactions to the American lifestyle.

Most of the authors' names are mentioned in Noah's presence, as he has a double bind relationship to literature, both as a high school teacher and as a professional writer. Many episodes show Noah discussing books and plays in a classroom, in an array that spans titles of English literature, from Shakespeare, as we have discussed above, to Orwell and Waugh, understandably included in the school syllabus but narratively linked to a change in the storyline. Orwell, for example, comes into play with his *Animal Farm* where an Afro-American student writes an essay on Orwell's novel and the racial theme, that I mentioned above, comes to the fore. Writers' names surfacing in the plot must always be considered as being representative of a narrative device to shift our focus on to a new theme. Are the TV authors doing this to rehab the teacher's profession that Noah never gives up in the series, offering him the opportunity to regain the educational role he could have had in his family? Maybe, but what I posit here is that *The Affair* contributes to reshaping the role of literature and authors in writing the television narrative. This issue is better dealt with by considering how literary references are made in relation to Noah as a writer.

I have already commented on his conversations with Henry, the literary agent. On that occasion, talking about the kind of book he has in mind, Noah sums up the plot as the meeting of a country girl with a city boy against the background of the collapse of the *American Pastoral*. The reference to Philip Roth will be repeated during a party given to celebrate the release of Noah's book, *The Descent*. Roth is a thorny name to be mentioned because of the atmosphere of alleged moral reproach his name is doomed to evoke,



something that will soon happen to Noah and the pornographic allure of his book. During a second conversation with Henry, when they discuss about the ending of the novel, the agent supports his preference for the murder by naming Steinbeck and the same epic tone permeating *Of Mice and Men*, that he perceives in Noah's novel and that would be drastically undermined if the novel ended with a dinner full of unspoken implications, such as Noah opts for. A quote from their dialogue can be helpful in focusing this ironic flirting with the idea of a literary canon discussed in a TV series:

N.: Murder, it's... it's... it's salacious. It's... it's cheap. It...

H.: Well, it doesn't have to be. Have you read *Of Mice and Men*?

N.: Is that a rhetorical question?

H.: Well, you may want to review it. The murder at the end of that book felt surprising while it was happening and completely inevitable in retrospect. Like all great endings in literature.

N.: So what are you saying, you won't publish it if I don't change the ending?

H.: I'm not saying that.

N.: 'Cause, you know, as generous as that advance you got me was, I still only got a fifth of it.

H.: That's because that's how advances work. You'll get the next part when you submit the final draft.

N.: This is the final draft.

H.: Maybe you should take another pass at the end. No, just one more pass.

N.: Oh, God.

H.: Okay, maybe I should be more articulate about what I did appreciate in this draft. I thought bringing the feud to the foreground of the earlier chapters worked beautifully. There's something almost epic in the way that you now depict that family, those four brothers...

N.: "Almost"?

H.: It's got a real *East of Eden* feel to me.

N.: What is it with you and Steinbeck today?

H.: And I love the way that you introduced Lana. And I gotta ask, how much of this is based on what happened between you and, um, what's her actual name?

N.: It's fiction, Harry.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dialogues from *The Affair* are online and their web address, which I accessed on the 19 October 2021, is: <<https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org>>.

By naming Steinbeck and *East of Eden*, the agent is indirectly attributing to Noah's work a role to be played among those representative texts that can or would aspire to become the Great American Novel since the term was coined in 1868 to define a novel thought to embody the American national character. Though harshly criticized for having attempted it when it was released in 1952, Steinbeck's novel was imagined by his author as a literary picture of the American soul. Actually, Noah doesn't sound flattered by the association; in fact, he is annoyed by it, as if he resented his agent for revealing a compulsory literary influence. His reaction somehow mirrors what the authors of the TV series would say if asked to comment on Steinbeck, or any other big name, as one of their literary sources for the series. Another conversation about the same topic and with similar authorial reflections will follow, this time with a publisher, Yvonne, who, after avidly reading the unfinished draft by Noah, claims that the ending should not be a structural problem if the novel has been built on solid ground. In fact, she assumes that the epilogue should flow spontaneously from the plot, as if dispossessing the author of his control, whereupon Noah skeptically replies that it has never happened to him.

Against the background of such a highly collaborative medium as narrative television, Yvonne's assumption sounds particularly crucial to the question of authorship as it metonymically underlines the difficulty of ascribing the series to a single author. Obviously, here she is talking about a book, but, as discussed above, Noah's book is made of the same stuff as the series, so much so that the literary agent cannot help asking him how much of Alison is in the female protagonist of his novel (a question which Noah answers with a blunt "It's fiction, Henry"). The choice of a writer as the main character in the series could be interpreted as a thematic incursion into the world of book publishing, as Liam O'Brian has brilliantly discussed in his blog entries: "This is why I (try to) watch every show that even remotely depicts book publishing—precisely because they are all wildly inaccurate, hilariously exaggerated, and, therefore, great." (November 23, 2015). I am more inclined to interpret it by resorting to the reception theory, as more linked with the relevance of the viewer's perception that narrative television implies.

There is a rather problematic issue in reception theory regarding the category of the *implied authorship*, which has been more accurately envisioned and defined by Wayne Booth in his literary approach, as a figure of speech that overcomes the problem of the distinction between the biographical and the virtual author in any given work of fiction. In film studies, Seymour Chatman

argues that the *implied author* is the source of a narrative's origination and the agent whose responsibility is the overall design, a definition that applies as well to the origin of creative vision and the managerial handling of writers for television. Though 'dispossessed' by visual studies scholars such as David Bordwell and Jason Mittell,<sup>7</sup> as they have judged the construct negligible in the analysis of film and television products, the *implied author* can help us better understand the character of Noah as an intersectional construct, since he belongs – as a character – to the fiction of TV serials, but his role is strongly shaped on an authorial *mise en abyme*, by making him the creator of a fiction based on his affair with Alison. Corroborating this option, the series shows how Alison is affected by Noah's novel and even rebukes him for considering her as just a figment of his possessive imagination, something she would definitely like to be free from as it poisons all her attempts to have a serious and responsible relationship.

By staging his unwanted presence, Treem and Levi are quite unconsciously calling forth a problematic authorial figure that is more linked to the film genre and its melodramatic role as a cornerstone in the history of media. *The Affair* is a series where the literary model of a single, gifted author is dramatized in a fictional affair, which happens to become functional to his reconsideration of life concerns. On one hand, in Noah's behavior we can recognize the role played in his profession by a series of elements usually minimized in the conception of a literary author, such as publishing and intertextual influence, not to mention the canonizing lure that he, alternatively, follows or shuns in shaping his book. On the other hand, through Noah's melodramatic experience the writers of the series put their authorial branding functions to the test, using them as an implement to include a vast array of thematic developments which do not always 'flow spontaneously' through the plot, and hence, maybe involuntarily, but nonetheless meaningfully, dramatize the open debate about how many themes a narrative (and an audience) can bear in TV complex series.

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussion on implied author in television in reference to Bordwell, see Mittell (106-108).

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