



# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TENDENCIES: CHARACTERS, CONFRONTATION AND FREEDOM IN THE US TELESERIAL POST-DRAMA

(Cultural hybridizations with Spanish-language dramatic culture)

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the ensuing research is to highlight the patterns of the transformations that have taken place in some of the most prestigious television series in the United States in terms of conflict, characters and the decomposition of the classic categories (freedom). Methodologically, the aim is to make an empirical analysis, within the framework of certain scientific models, that would address the current North American tele-serial post-drama and its antecedents in the dramatic culture so typical of the libertarian and anti-classical worldview that enriches the Spanish language.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Teleseries postdramáticas norteamericanas  
Teleseries del siglo XXI en los Estados Unidos  
Teleseries de los Estados Unidos  
Cultura dramática en lengua española  
Tendencias postdramáticas del siglo XXI en la ficción televisiva

## RESUMEN

El propósito de la siguiente investigación es poner de manifiesto las pautas de las transformaciones que se han producido en algunas de las series de televisión más prestigiosas de los Estados Unidos en cuanto al conflicto, personajes y descomposición de las categorías clásicas (libertad). Metodológicamente, se trata de realizar un análisis empírico, en el marco de ciertos modelos científicos, que aborde el actual postdrama televisivo norteamericano y sus antecedentes en la cultura dramática tan propia de la cosmovisión libertaria y anticlásica que enriquece el idioma español.

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## 1. Introduction

The death of the neoclassical model of dramatic character in the area of television fiction, particularly in the United States, is nothing but a manifestation of the effects of post-drama in the television field, which is already affecting the conception of cinematography as well, as evidenced by some of the most outstanding productions of our days.

Theatrical post-drama, which started in the seventies of the 20th century in Europe and also in Latin America, began to exert its influence on television fiction in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century and continues to do so, also in recent years, in the conception of cinema as a spectacle and as a script to be developed in the production of this type of art that continues to grow (Martínez-Sala *et al.*, 2021).

In order to get an idea of the dimensions of the change, we anticipate that this type of new perspectives or renewal of paradigms only occurs every long time, sometimes centuries, which clearly draws a research panorama of capital importance. The purpose of this research is to highlight the characteristics of the transformation, in continuation with other previous articles, within the nature of a post-dramatic tendency in the aforementioned TV-series.

Particularly, we are going to focus —this time— on the novelties presented by the conflict of these TV-series in the United States, with nuances and novel structure if we compare it with the confrontation or second act of a neoclassical brand. We will also approach the study of the ones we call characters with regard to dramatic functions in the TV-serial phenomenon (as well as their fragmentation and their deconstruction in different contexts). Finally, we will refer to the decomposition, or if you prefer the deconstruction, of the classical art-theatrical categories that brings as a consequence a freedom only comparable to that of the Spanish culture of spectacular-dramatic nature (which we will analyse in its connection with other previous articles of the author).

The transition from an essentially dramatic model to a post-dramatic parataxis in the most well-known and prestigious television series forces us to analyse the situation in which this question finds itself within the post-dramatic fiction environment in the United States over these last few years.

## 2. Methodology

The present work, of mixed approach with predominance of the qualitative paradigm, has as its object of study the aesthetic organization of the post-dramatic American TV-series and specifically its conflict, the characters and the process of decategorization linked to the freedom inherent to the dramatic culture in the Spanish language. For this purpose, the analytical-synthetic method will be used: first, there is a decomposition of the scripts in several of their constituent parts and, subsequently, the common characteristics are synthesized in order to be able to draw relevant conclusions.

We are not talking about a simple description of facts or a theoretical exposition of the state of current narrative trends in the field of serialized fiction in the United States devoid of a methodology and results. The reader who spends a little time reviewing this study will see that an authentic scientific framework has been developed, made up of two empirical models that highlight the variables of our research in the fields of the neoclassical dramatic culture (previous to the post-dramatic TV series in the United States) and the cultural-(post)dramatic one in Spanish language.

From here, it is possible to pose the main research questions of this paper, that is: what is the change that we are experiencing, seen from a previous dramatic model, and what is the identity of the new TV-serial phenomenon in the United States in terms of the second act (conflict), characters and deconstructing of neoclassicism categories (freedom); and, subsequently, how does this new post-dramatic model of the North American TV-series connect with the popular and libertarian culture that characterizes drama in the Spanish language. The initial premise is validated through the use of the models with their corresponding variables in the sense that it is verified as follows: indeed, there is a dramatic change and a new post-dramatic model (which is embodied in some prestigious TV-series fiction of the United States) that brings its origins from a freedom linked to the dramatic culture in Spanish language. The features are precisely identified (in terms of conflict, characters and decategorization) and we conveniently develop them throughout the study.

## 3. Theoretical framework

### 3.1. Dramatic neoclassical conflict (previous to the post-dramatic model of the US TV series)

The "conflict" of this dramatic model always points to the protagonist's objective and, consequently, to the obstacles or difficulties that arise and oppose the desires of this character, so often of a physical, tangible nature.

**Table 1.** Neoclassical dramatic panel

	Category	Component
1	Plot	Turning points. Emotional projections. Selection of facts (story): not all the life or legends of the hero, but only the events necessary to tell the theme of the work.
2	Dramatic organization	External: blocks or acts Middle: themes, movements (setup, confrontation, resolution). Unity of action (a protagonist who seeks an objective).
3	Dramatic tension	Conflict or confrontation (obstacle that separates the protagonist from his/her objective). Activation: style, spectacular speech, rhetorical discourse, characters, music.
4	Narrative organization within drama. Type of narrative organization.	Narrative organizations involved in the field of drama (arrangements/organization of the "novel" that appears within the drama).
5	Technical-formal organization	Situation, formal drawing, intensity, duration, colors and textures, tempo, story.

Source: Orosa y López-López (2018)

The Western "conflict" has a clear teleological nature that stems from Greek philosophy (around tragedy and life) by virtue of which the human being is born, develops certain qualities, chooses a goal in life and pursues it over time; difficulties arise (confrontation) that make it difficult to achieve and, in the end, the protagonist reaches that goal, or not.

This conflict appears in the second act and usually has a tangible-sensitive quality, as we have said, physical, real, and poses a scenario according to which one of the parties comes out a winner and the other (whatever it is) is a loser. In other words, Western conflict has a clearly destructive (some say "competitive") aspect, unlike other dramatic cultures where confrontation is the result of vital tension (for example, the indigenous Latin American culture). This approach is not only essential for the organization of drama but also for obtaining "tension", that is, the interest of the script that should excite (Barrientos-Báez, 2019). There is no other culture in the world that has been so intensely concerned with providing the spectacle with an attention filled with interest deeply linked to that particular moment, to the time and pulse in which each situation is occurring (Orosa, 2017).

### 3.2. Characters at the drama stage (as opposed to the post-drama period)

With regard to the "characters", we must say that this factor mainly affects the first three variables in Table 1. above: the plot, the dramatic organization and the tension or interest of the work or script. As far as the plot is concerned, those who are familiar with cinematographic or theatrical techniques usually say that the character is the action, it is translated into an expression in the dramatic action: the character is what he does, his action. In terms of the organization of the drama concerned, as we have already pointed out, the character is born, struggles to reach his goals (pursues his objective), and—in the end— he reaches them, achieves them, or not. This teleological or finalistic approach to existence determines the appearance of dramatic contexts around which to organize the script (setup, confrontation, resolution). In its relationship with dramatic tension, in which "conflict" is one of the essential parts, the character is made in and reflects his essence, what he truly is, in the confrontation or overcoming of conflicts. Perhaps this is a somewhat voluntarist perspective, but it is precisely in this regard that it is understood in more classical viewpoints and approaches.

The character also plays an important role in its relationship to dramatic tension as part of what we call "activation". Once the play, the script or the spectacle has taken flight thanks to the conflict, the character or characters are one of the elements to maintain that strength or height that we have reached by virtue of the confrontation.

Under the perspective of the drama phase (as opposed to the post-drama period), the characters are usually round or flat. The former is those that undergo evolution as opposed to the latter, flat, which are generally called epic ones, whose behavior does not vary in the face of a certain impulse (Orosa, 2012).

### 3.3. Classical dramatic categories

The categories of drama, especially in what refers to the organization itself and its tension or interest, are usually quite clear. We have already mentioned this matter in previous sections. Concerning the plot, this is developed based on turning points throughout the story. Turning points are connecting elements between one scene and

the next to give continuity to the plot. The dramatic organization, if that were not enough, is divided into contexts (setup, conflict and resolution), but not only this, each cell of this planning enjoys these three impulses to which we have just referred, in addition to its structure based on acts, themes, motivations, dramatic objectives, unity of action, thematic hierarchies, among others. Tension also obeys rules, sometimes strict, related to confrontation and to what we call “activation”. “Conflict” generates interest or dramatic attention because the spectator projects himself on the interests of the protagonist: any difficulty that jeopardizes his dramatic objective gives rise to an interest in the development of the play. The dramatic “activation”, on the other hand, picks up and keeps the strength derived from the “conflict” and maintains the height of the play’s interest through the characters, the literary styles, the depth of the themes treated, the spectacular staging or the visuality and, finally, the music and dance, for example, that appear in the play (Orosa *et al.*, 2021).

### 3.4. The trigger provided by Spanish-language culture

The drama in the Spanish language, unlike the Elizabethan drama of Greek origin, is not born of an intellectual attitude that seeks beauty and how to achieve it through the appropriate techniques for this purpose. The drama in the Spanish language has popular origins, it is born from the festivity and the pilgrimage with a narrative motif that is celebrated, from the popular participation or from the public presentation before the cathedral or the church. The people, the simple people, know the reason for the celebration and, with very few rules of an informal nature, carry out their intentions in a free or libertarian way.

**Table 2.** (Post-)dramatic culture in the Spanish language

Category	Component
1 <b>Plot/Story</b> <b>Characters</b> <b>Dialogues</b>	The play does not necessarily work with a plot, but with a story or a motive within which there are not (or there must not be) opposing forces.  The constitution of the characters seems somewhat in the hands of the author (puppets), and perhaps serves different purposes other than those that could claim their own identity.  The dialogues do not follow a ritual-causative line, in addition there is a certain liturgical-narrative look at the scene
2 <b>Dramatic organization</b>	The dramatic organization may respect, in its historical evolution, certain structural components such as conflict among others, but its dispositions and architectures are much freer, more inductive and narrative than the classical ones.  The festival and freedom predominate
3 Dramatic tension Type of narrative organization	The play may respect the fundamental components of the dramatic tension, but the intensity and the lengthening of the narrative phases within drama may dispense with the intense use of dramatic attention on the altar of the festive celebration and what is happening within it.  The collage originated by multiplane techniques, simultaneities and narrative multiperspectivisms is predominant, the festive freedom and participation of the audience is prevalent
4 <b>Narrative organization within drama.</b>	The narrative component is very strong, as opposed to the dramatic one. The play is based on the Greek agon and its dramatic technique by virtue of which actors are placed on stage motivated by the confrontation of forces. The narrativity of the situations is predominant
5 <b>Technical-formal organization</b>	The work tends more to juxtapositions, to narrative organizations (much more descriptive and loose) than to other more intellectual or dogmatic dispositions or architectures such as those of the form

Source: Orosa (2022)

As far as the conflict at its origins is concerned, Spanish-language drama is not similar to that of Greek inspiration. The latter has a character of confrontation, of placing opposing forces. The conflict in Spanish culture is more narrative or liturgical, freer, sometimes more visual: it has a more contemplative nature may be of purification, of preponderance of a magical style (Orosa *et al.*, 2019).

According to Pérez (2004) y Poza (2015), the characteristics of medieval theatre, could be summarized as follows: it is a theatre that does not have its own textual realization, nor is it autarkic, and neither was it usual to collect it in writing, therefore, it has reached us through the common ways of literary transmission of the time, if not through the occasional and careless copy; it moves in an unbalanced way between word and gesture (there is no textual autarchy, but there is a multidisciplinary nature to the scene), with hardly any action or plot; it is very static and is resolved either in gestures and visual displays or in long didactic or pious speeches; in short,

these are plays that are close to the ritual act. It is an overdue theatre that of Spain in the Middle Ages, as befits narrative techniques on stage, where the constitution of the characters –they seem to be puppets– is somewhat in the hands of the author, they do not have their own independent nature; the dialogues, in turn, do not follow a logical-causative line and the precious, ornamental, liturgical spectacle is evident as a constant in these texts.

So, then the question is this: aren't these notes, patterns or characteristics the very ones that remind us of the post-drama of our time?

When we speak of "narration", "narrative" of an act celebrated in Spanish culture, we mean that there is already a previous story (not an action or dramatization), but a story in the heat of which the people freely and spontaneously perform a scenic presentation. That previous story can be the adoration of the Three Wise Men, the homage to certain saints or, why not, to the Virgin of Mercy for protecting us from the volcano, or sharing with the dead their future life or celebrating the feast of the sun. Then all the people freely join that story without a previously planned action to celebrate with their songs, dances and actions (also pilgrimages) this fact, this event. In the Greek theater things do not happen like that. It is not that it is built outside the people, far from it, but the construction is in the hands of experts, of authors who have a technique, studies, a culture, an experience: they are expert artists who dramatize the plot (the confrontation of the West) in a way never seen before.

#### 4. Discussion and results

The shifts introduced by the North American TV serial phenomenon in what refers to the variables we are studying (conflict, characters and rupture of the classical categories) take place fundamentally in the field of dramatic organization (not in other areas, such as plot organization, dramatic tension, narrative-dramatic organization or the technical organization of these works), a feature that is related to the Spanish language culture of dramatic character due to its libertarian and impulsive tendency (Sarrazac, 2010).

##### 4.1. The new conflict of the North American TV series

The burden (oppression, overwhelm) and its sensation would be one of those substances that is always present within the TV serial discourse, giving it a certain aroma that is peculiar to it and that endows it with a rather tasty and generally desirable flavor. This stress, this substance or component, would be an ingredient made up of two other elements, namely: tension and the historically known as "agon", that is, doses or traces of confrontation.

This feeling of overwhelm, which we are dealing with, depends to a large extent on a very intense experience of what is happening on stage "at this moment", the full consciousness of the present time as a result of the masterful use of dramatic tension and, as we have said, its components are conflict and activation. So, these two elements, tension and conflict as a spice, would come to create this new tempo of permanent agitation that generates an idealization of the dramatic action in the sense that it seems that many things are happening, but it is not necessarily so; what is really happening is that the masterful use of dramatic tension, and particularly of agon, are engendering a sensation of the presence in the experience of tempo, of interactivity, which makes us be almost inserted as one more actor in the scene, so that our experience of the dramatic action is particularly intense.

If in an attempt to rejuvenate audiovisual fiction we have seen during these past years how the second act, the conflict, was tinged with spectacular discourse to the point of being able to affirm that there was no dramatic action that was not at the same time an action driven by spectacle, the new North American model has done just the opposite, in our opinion, tinging the activation and therefore the spectacle, with constant doses of confrontation.

The notion of overwhelm (agon) often replaces that of classic conflict; it is more a feeling of discomfort, of noise, of something not going well. It has to do with a matter more related to the senses than with a dramatic physiological or intellectual action in search of an objective.

##### 4.2. The new characters: role changes and fragmentation

The aspect that we are going to comment on next has to do with the changes of functions or roles of the characters as far as their belonging to one or other forces of the dramatic action is concerned. We mean that the same character, and this is a constant feature in the North American paradigm, can fulfill a role as protagonist within one of the themes of a play —independently of the functions he fulfills within the scope of other themes of that same piece— and, in that same dramatic action and soon after, we insist, go on to perform other functions such as, for example, deuteragonist, surprisingly, as antagonist and, suddenly, become a dramatic target. The point is that this is one of the areas where constant changes and fertile ambiguity or freedom are shown when constructing new dramatic works.

In the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*, which is considered a canonical work within the North American television series, if we take a close look at the fantastic Dr. Melfi, Tony's psychiatrist, we can observe how she plays different dramatic roles depending on the moment and development of the action. We see her as a deuteragonist throughout the pilot chapter trying to help Tony Soprano to discover the cause of his depression in order to heal it. In addition, she also appears as the dramatic target of a weak and dreamy love theme on the part of Tony Soprano when he comments to his psychiatrist that his mother, Tony's mother, would have liked Dr. Melfi to be

his daughter-in-law. Also, she plays the role as the main character in a meeting of friends with Dr. Cusamano with whom she talks about Tony Soprano or, in that same role, when she meets him in an important restaurant in the city and they greet each other as if they were friends or even as if they were going to be in the development of the dramatic action a sentimental couple; consequently, when Tony gets her a table for dinner, which until now was unattainable for her and her companion. And what to say, to cite another of the moments of change of dramatic force, of his role as an antagonist opposing the darkest part of Tony Soprano's character and making him reach the depths of his soul and observe how lonely it is in order to understand the importance of communication between human beings.

Next, we are going to address another issue that has to do with what we usually call the fragmentation and deconstruction of characters within the scope of a dramatic work. We understand that literary narrative is more accustomed to this type of issues related to the characters given the trajectory of this specialty through the great most advanced authors of the twentieth century; but within the dramatic field (and more so in television fiction) this is an issue that presents a relative novelty and, for the same reason, we also want to include it in this section. When we speak of fragmentation we refer to that lost and broken piece of the mirror in which a character is reflected, in one of the aspects of his multiple, varied and complex personality (they are other scattered pieces); and when we speak of deconstruction we mean that side or facet of the personality of a character that emerges, at a given moment, on the specific referential context on which it is located, in some precise circumstances. It is these two singular and persistent characteristics of the characters of this new model that we do not wish to omit to refer to. There is a constant reinvention and multiperspective of the characters in all these TV series to which we must necessarily refer in a subsection dedicated to the characters of dramatic bias.

Tony Soprano (in *The Sopranos*) is a very complex character who, without doubt, shows admirable symptoms of rupture and fragmentation in so many different pieces and so many ways of reacting, which make him a museum temperament for universal and possibly historical dramatic literature. This is also a characteristic note of the characters of the new dramatic model, who reinvent themselves and express themselves a thousand times in a thousand different ways, as appropriate in each case, perhaps like the men and women of our time and this specific historical moment. Tony is, without question, a friend and a good friend, as befits a serial mobster. He proves it in the pilot episode when he blows up the restaurant of Arti Bucco, his close and best friend and schoolmate, to avoid greater evils that were threatening his business and so that, in this strange way, he can collect his insurance and not see his life and fortune destroyed. His personality is also endowed with vulnerability and melancholy, not without a certain romanticism; his attitude, often so human in the face of the passing of time or the change of values, the memories, so many dreams that inspired his struggle since his youth, and the incomprehension and loneliness to which the human being is so often doomed.

Tony Soprano is sensitive to the lack of communication among his colleagues to the point that this causes him to suffer from depression with severe panic attacks and loss of consciousness in public places. Affectionate with his children, protective; understanding to unsuspected limits with his wife, a tremendous cynic, who does not understand him and wants to ignore what she herself is not interested in, thus provoking a psychological and sentimental rejection in this Tony that we would all like to see loved once and for all; schizophrenic in the defense at all costs of a family he essentially betrays every time a good female is put in front of him and he feels like it, especially if she is vulgar and willing to be his mistress for a while. Faithful philosopher in his search for the truth about life and the human being and also about the cause that motivates his profound illness.

A ruthless ruler and, at the same time, a conversationalist, who likes to explore multiple perspectives when it comes to solving the problem of the Mafia and its business, which he has had to face in a historical moment that is neither to his taste nor to his liking. Finally, he is implacable with his enemies and, if necessary, an irredeemable murderer in order not to lose those values that tradition has placed in his hands and that he, as long as he lives, is obliged to safeguard. All of these, and a few others not mentioned, are facets and perspectives that are observed in this pilot chapter in the unique and at the same time multiple and fragmented personality of this eternal Mafioso. They all constitute in their deconstruction, one of the characteristics of this new model that we are now analyzing.

#### 4.3. Liberty and decategorization in the new US post-dramatic and TV serial model

This conceptual freedom of the new model of the North American television series has its origin, as we have already mentioned above, in the specific dramatic notion of Spanish-language culture. Just as the drama of the Greco-Isabelline tradition follows intellectual and aesthetic norms in search of an Art (of beauty, of the most profound and sublime), the dramatic culture in the Spanish language is born of the fiesta, of improvisation, of the individual will of each of the participants who join in the event or situation that is being represented. This fiesta is the result of a narration that, liturgically, takes place in front of the church or wherever it corresponds according to the objective to be celebrated: a river, a wasteland, a holy field, a pilgrimage to a saint, a visit to a volcano... It is not a staging of an aesthetically conceived plot; we are talking about a popular event; and this concept is the one

that will modify the conception of the scene in contemporary drama and will influence the architectures of the new American TV series.

And from this ambition, which we believe to be de-structuring (by comparison with a classical paradigm), also liberating and creative of an absolutely new dramatic impulse (where the new is feasible and possible in the difficult world of art), arises this original model in the popular field of the dramaturgy of television series whose dramatic essences or founding characteristics we will now enunciate in some of its aspects.

This decategorization or contamination, if you prefer, of the dramatic concepts opens in the new model the doors, as we have already said, towards total freedom, towards a creation without barriers guided only by the impulse of the moment, by intuition, by the formal creative desire; feeling the needs of the piece minute by minute, from a current perspective typical of the people of our time.

The theory of drama according to which a protagonist character pursues a dramatic goal from the beginning of the action, passing through a set of conflicting circumstances until reaching, or not, that goal (at the end of the play) would be sustained in the new American model in general if, and only if, we dispense with categorical maxims for the development of the dramatic action or of the characters typical of a more classical, orthodox or academic conception of drama. The new categories and ideas are more impulsive or guided by a creative or formal desire.

The result of all this phenomenon and conception is the permanent change, the eternal substitution of situations, characters, manners, objectives, struggles, goals and, therefore, of dramatic categories so that the intrigue and the structural puzzle are the organizational and labyrinthine constants of the creative process within this new dramaturgy. Hence the use of so many themes at the same time that the spectator has to guess slowly; hence the use and change of ambiguous hierarchies that move in time as life does; hence the constant fragmentation and dismemberment of the themes from their forces of origin, the substantial mutation of the themes or their oblique presentations, the constant changes of roles and functions of the characters, the creation of a new concept of the second act (essential for the drama of western character), the fusion of genres or, why not, of different worlds (real, fantastic) or so many other novelties that are nothing more than an invitation to do what we feel when the precise circumstance arises that can open the doors to the seduction of the spectator of always.

## 5. Conclusions

The transition from a dramatic model of a neoclassical nature to an essentially contemporary post-dramatic model is reflected primarily in the area of dramatic organization (also called dramatic arrangement or structure) and not in other areas such as tension or attention, narrativity or formal techniques of a dramatic nature. It is true that the techniques related to attention or interest displace, in second position, due to their prominence, to those more classic technical-formal techniques.

Within the dramatic structure, we have focused on three elements of fundamental importance in this change in the United States television series: the conflict, the characters and the freedom that emerges in the new teleserial model as a result of the decomposition of the classic categories of a previous model.

The conversion of the classic conflict, more physical-sensitive, into one that we call "agon", characterized by pressure, noise and overflow, is one of the patterns and variables that we point out in this article. When we speak of the new characters, we refer to their multiplicity of reflections and dimensions, and to their fragmentation and deconstructive process.

The classical categories of architectural sign vanish in the new teleserial model and its conception or approach, similar to the post-dramatic, gives rise to a much freer and contemporary categorical universe.

One of the points to mention in this paper, which stands out for its surely unprecedented character, is the relationship between the new post-dramatic model and the dramatic culture in the Spanish language, much more narrative and undoubtedly more liberating than the Greco-Isabelline one. The paper insists on the Spanish origin of the dramatic stamp that can be attributed to the most prestigious television series in the United States, while at the same time it delves into some descriptions of this culture of medieval origin.

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