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"I Used to Think We Were the Same Person:" Disrupting the Ideal Nuclear Family Myth through Incest, Adultery and Gendered Violence in *Taboo* (2017-)

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Abstract:

The nuclear family consolidated its social status as the institution upholding the national, capitalist and moral values of Western societies in the long nineteenth century (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010, 1). Consequently, neo-Victorian literary and screen texts often try to challenge the idealised conceptualization of this institution by bringing to the fore its potential dysfunctionalities, such as monstrous or negligent parents, domestic violence, incest or adultery. This is the case of the TV series *Taboo* (2017-), which portrays a dysfunctional family whose foundations are based on colonialism, patriarchal violence and Oedipal relations. In this article, I examine *Taboo* as a neo-Victorian narrative of family trauma, which foregrounds and criticizes gendered violence, a phenomenon that was silenced in nineteenth-century literary and historical records (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2012a, 1). Moreover, I also scrutinise the incest trope, following Llewellyn's three-fold approach (2010), based on a triangulation between ethics, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. Finally, I consider how *Taboo* reproduces the most characteristic traits of nineteenth-century adultery novels, so as to expose the sexual dissatisfaction of its female protagonist, Zilpha Delaney, and her desire to escape from her abusive and oppressive husband. As I show in this article, *Taboo* manages to disrupt the myth of the nuclear family as a natural and indisputable moralising institution. Likewise, at first, the series shows potential feminist and post-colonial drives, as it attempts to denounce nineteenth-century imperialist and misogynistic ideologies within the family. However, *Taboo* fails to grant its heroine independence and female empowerment in the end. This is so because it replicates

the ending of nineteenth-century adultery novels, where the adulterous wife committed suicide after being rejected by her lover.

Keywords: incest; adultery; gendered violence; neo-Victorian fiction; dysfunctional family

1. Introduction

The heteronormative nuclear family has traditionally played a pivotal role in Western societies. The importance ascribed to this institution, as well as the gender conventions and socio-cultural precepts it has instilled on us, were consolidated in the long nineteenth century (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010, 1). Nonetheless, there are currently new ways of experiencing family life and understanding gender roles and relations. This might lead to an eventual collapse of the nuclear family as the stabilising foundation holding the nation together. Therefore, it is not surprising that neo-Victorian fiction contributes to challenge its seemingly indisputable prestige by exploring its many potential dysfunctionalities. These include absent fathers and monstrous mothers, domestic violence, adultery or incest (Chambers 2021, 66).

Domestic violence is increasingly being foregrounded and criticised in neo-Victorian screen texts, following the feminist drive of excavating the silenced suffering of women across history. Indeed, "wifebeating" did not become illegal until 1853 in England (Clark 2000, 31) and "the secrecy and shame surrounding the abuse perpetuated the problem and delayed legal protection for women of all classes" (Wingert 2007, 3). Neo-Victorian fiction seeks to retroactively right this past wrong and denounce this phenomenon, which–sadly–is still present in contemporary societies. Incest is also a prominent trope in neo-Victorian narratives on screen, as it explores the psychosexual dysfunctionalities that take place within the nuclear family. This is the case of *Taboo*, the screen text analysed in this article. The incest motif has become a chief concern in narratives of family trauma, not only in neo-Victorianism, but also in other genres on screen–e.g., the TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013) or *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017). In the case of *Taboo*, incest is accompanied by wifely adultery, a common late-nineteenth-century trope in Western Europe.

Taboo is a drama television series created by Steven Knight, Tom Hardy and his father, Chips Hardy, for the BBC. The series follows James Delaney (Tom Hardy), a former slave trader who returns to London, following his father's death, after spending twelve years in Africa. *Taboo* is set in 1814, against the historical

backdrop of England's war with the United States.[1] It also explores colonialism and Anglo-American imperialist endeavours, as well as political intrigues. Nonetheless, this article focuses on the more 'domestic' conflicts of the series, particularly the Delaney's family relations and dysfunctionalities. These include James's incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Zilpha (Oona Chaplin) and his distorted memories of his monstrous mother (Noomi Rapace).

In this article, I first provide the theoretical tenets of neo-Victorian studies, particularly in the case of neo-Victorian narratives of family trauma on screen. Second, I examine how the institution of the nuclear family is dismantled in *Taboo* through the neo-Victorian tropes of sibling incest, adultery and patriarchal violence. Finally, I conclude that *Taboo* manages to denounce domestic abuse and foregrounds the incest taboo, which enables the series to challenge the heteronormative nuclear family as an ideal institution. Nonetheless, despite its seemingly revisionist and feminist agendas, *Taboo* ends up replicating the patterns of nineteenth-century adultery novels, where the adulteress committed suicide after being abandoned by her lover. This arguably prevents the female protagonist from experiencing the freedom and agency she has always desired.

2. The Dysfunctional Family in Neo-Victorianism on Screen

Contemporary creators revisit the nineteenth century in order to question our popular beliefs about the period. They recuperate characters that were silenced in both literature and historical accounts due to their gender, class, sexual orientation or ethnicity (Llewellyn 2008, 165). Neo-Victorian texts also allow contemporary audiences to bear after-witness to the traumas of these marginalised subjects, so that they can develop empathy towards them. Moreover, these audiences might also find a link between the traumatic events depicted in the texts and those they might be experiencing at present.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn define neo-Victorian fiction as cultural products that should "in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (2010, 4, emphasis in original). However, Kohlke offers a more inclusive definition, as an "integrative umbrella term to encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors' or characters'

1 The War of 1812 is a conflict that took place between England and the United States over trade disputes and America's expansionist desires (Inohara, Hipel and Walker 2007, 181). America declared war against Britain on June 18th, 1812 despite its military disadvantage (Inohara, Hipel and Walker 2007, 184). Peace terms were drawn upon in the Treaty of Ghent (December 1814), which was ratified by Congress on February 17th, 1815 (Carr 1979, 273).

nationalities, the plots' geographical settings, the language of composition or, indeed, the extent of narratives' self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity or otherwise" (2014, 27).

Despite the fact that the classification of *Taboo* as a neo-Victorian screen text might be regarded as problematic by some critics, since the series is set in 1814–some decades before Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne–, I understand the term 'neo-Victorian' in its most inclusive form, following Kohlke's definition. Indeed, some scholars argue that neo-Victorianism should not be defined chronologically, but aesthetically–i.e., taking into consideration common stylist traits, plots and tropes of texts set in the long nineteenth century. Therefore, neo-Victorian texts would include adaptations and appropriations from "Romantic and pre-war fiction, ignoring historical data like the birth and death of the Queen" (Kirchknopf 2008, 55).

Owing to the popular and critical acclaim of neo-Victorian screen texts, visual adaptations of the long nineteenth century have flourished in the big and small screens in the last decades (Louttit and Louttit 2018, 1). As a result, they are increasingly being produced by digital networks and streaming platforms, such as Netflix, HBO, Amazon Video or Hulu. This is the case of *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), *Taboo*, *The Irregulars* (2021) or *The Nevers* (2021). According to Antonija Primorac, these adaptations attempt to reinterpret the past by translating it into a new medium, where it can be reinvented through a style that might be more attractive and comprehensible for contemporary audiences (2018, 1).

Family features prominently in neo-Victorian literary and screen texts. As explained above, during the nineteenth century, the institution came to epitomise the patriarchal, national and capitalist values of Western culture at a private level. Thus, neo-Victorian fiction strives to disrupt this idealised conceptualisation by portraying the nuclear family as dysfunctional and deeply flawed. Likewise, Kohlke and Gutleben contend that the neo-Victorian family helps us reflect on contemporary anxieties regarding our shifting family values, which might threaten the "institution's presumed stabilising and civilising function" (2010, 1).

One of the main family dysfunctionalities explored in neo-Victorian fiction is incest, which has traditionally been considered "a universal and trans-historical taboo" (Tate 2013, 181). Our current fascination with the incest trope seems to stem from its conflicting ethical and aesthetical theorisations during the nineteenth century (Llewellyn 2017, 135). Incest was then a salient literary trope, which flourished "at the heart of the Romantic movement" (Richardson 1985, 738), and mainly focused on brother-sister love. Furthermore, the emergence of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century was a turning point for the social and psychiatric understandings of incest, especially with Freudian diagnoses of primary desires, narcissism and Oedipal complexes in his publication *Three*

Theories of Sexuality (1905). Owing to the legal punishment of this practice and its treatment as a taboo, incest has now become a prominent motif in a wide range of cultural and artistic manifestations, particularly literature and cinema. There is a considerable number of neo-Victorian films and TV series explore this topic, including *Crimson Peak* (2015), *Penny Dreadful*, *Carnival Row* (2019-) or *Taboo*.

Regarding gender-based violence, Kohlke and Gutleben contend that neo-Victorian fiction can function “as a means of exploring wider patriarchal and societal ‘crimes against women’, from incest and domestic violence to sexual slavery, many of them still rife today.” Indeed, neo-Victorianism’s “engagement with such ‘historical’ abuses may be read as a cynical commentary on how (too) little has changed in real terms since the Victorians” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012a, 28). This is the case of *Taboo*, whose graphic portrayal of domestic abuse can help its audience reflect on the multitemporality of this type of violence and how to prevent it at present.

Nonetheless, the adulterous and incestuous relationship between the Delaney siblings in *Taboo* might be symptomatic of what Kohlke defines as neo-Victorianism’s “sexsation,” characterized by a “contradictory celebration of libidinous fantasy, its parody of erotic fulfilment, and its political impulse to sexually liberate the past” (Kohlke 2008a, 11). Aesthetically, neo-Victorian texts like *Taboo* have arguably become “the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, sex-surfeited age” (Kohlke 2008a, 12). Considering that Season 1 ends with the suicide of a fallen woman, Zilpha Delaney, the series’ seemingly liberating agenda turns out to be lacking and catering to the audience’s voyeuristic expectations.

Against this theoretical background, in the next section I examine *Taboo* following Llewellyn’s analysis of incestuous relationships in neo-Victorian novels, through a “structural and conceptual triangulation between ethics, aesthetics and psychoanalysis” (Llewellyn 2010, 135). Furthermore, I also consider the series’ take on gender politics, particularly in its portrayal of domestic violence and the nineteenth-century adulteress.

3. Dismantling the nineteenth-century nuclear family in *Taboo*

Legislative debates around the incest motif left their imprint on nineteenth-century England. Llewellyn claims that “the period between 1835 and 1908, from the Deceased Wife’s Sister Act through to the Punishment of Incest Act,[2]

2 The Deceased Wife’s Sister Act (1907) made legal that a man could marry his dead wife’s sister, which had been prohibited in England since 1835 (Kuper 2009). This law reversed the Marriage Act of 1835, which prohibited any marriage contract between a man and his

can be divided into four decades where incest was a question of ethics, morality and issues of legal (mis)conduct" (2010, 135). Incest, however, evolved over the course of the nineteenth century into "a structural, artistic and creative device or trope [that] played with, reinvented and reinterpreted these earlier ethical concerns" (Llewellyn 2010, 134). There are several literary examples in both American and English novels from the period that explore the aesthetic and ethical aspects of incest, including Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) or Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854).

From an ethical perspective, incest came to be understood in legal terms as a punishable offence, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century with the passing of The Punishment of Incest Act (1908), which "served as a statutory demarcation of the moment at which [...] incestuous actions [were] separated from the debates about consanguinity, deceased wives and their sisters, Darwinism, eugenics, and anthropological research that had marked the period from the 1830s onwards" (Llewellyn 2010, 144). According to Adam Kuper, incest–as bigamy and adultery–was a matter that had concerned ecclesiastical authorities alone, from the twelfth century to the early nineteenth century in England (2002, 158). However, after the abolishment of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Emancipation in 1829, religious control of sex and marriage was progressively declining. First, the Marriage Act of 1836 acknowledged civil marriages. The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) transferred jurisdiction of matrimonial cases from religious to civil courts and a Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes was established (Kuper 2002, 158).

This shift from ecclesiastical to secular legislation in family law was guided by a public debate that included the opinion of politicians, biologists and anthropologists, such as Darwinists, who were mostly concerned about the incest taboo. Religious courts had regarded incest "simply as a form of fornication or adultery, to be punished by a light penanalty" (Kuper 2002, 160), and this consideration did not immediately change when secular courts started to manage family matters. Incest was a complex concept that proved to be difficult to define. Traditionally, it had been regarded as sexual intercourse between individuals who were not allowed to marry "by church decree" (Kuper 2002, 160-161). However, these prohibitions "applied not only to blood relatives but also to certain relatives by marriage" (Kuper 2002, 161), as in the case of the wife's sister. The biggest change in the conceptualisation of incest occurred in the 1880s, when the term came to designate sexual relations between close kin: fathers and daughters, or brothers and sisters. Moreover, incest started to be regarded as a form of child

dead wife's sister, although it maintained "those marriages already contracted under the terms of canon law, which allowed such a union prior to 1835" (Llewelyn 2010, 139).

abuse perpetrated by a male relative against a young female (Kuper 2002, 180). However, it was not until 1908 that incest–understood as the sexual abuse of a child by a family member–became a punishable crime (Kuper 2002, 183).

On a different note, from an aesthetic viewpoint, the sensationalist and morbid agendas of some contemporary screen texts that exploit sexual traumas "may serve to highlight past wrongs, [but] they might also be read as both opportunistic and voyeuristic, indicative of a contemporary fascination with personal narratives of trauma" (Cox 2014, 139). *Taboo* seems to be following this same pattern, especially in the case of the interrupted sex scene between the Delaney siblings, which is rather graphic (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 6, 00:46:19-00:47:29), as I further explain below. Likewise, Zilpha's erotic dreams are characterised by an Orientalist and sensual imagery while she has sexual intercourse with a masked James.[3] This arguably contributes to the neo-Victorian "sexsation" of the past (Kohlke 2008, 11), as discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, the series also defies the myth of the perfect nuclear family through the incest trope, as this deviant relationship reveals the fragmentation of the Delaney family and brings to the forefront James's unresolved issues: the fact that his mother attempted to murder him as a child, his ambiguous feelings towards his father's colonising practices and his clandestine love for his sister.

It is also worth noting that incest in *Taboo* seems to follow one of the three types of sibling incest in Richardson's classification of Romantic poetry (1985, 739-740). The first one takes place between a foster-brother and sister that have grown up together, as in the case of Coleridge's *Osorio* (1797). The second relation is that between a brother and a sister who are very close and share a common fate, but do not have sexual intercourse, as in Wordsworth's *White Doe of Rylstone* (1815). Finally, the third one is the most common form of Romantic sibling incest: that between a sister and a brother who are sexually involved, as in Percy B. Shelley's *Manfred or Laon and Cythna* (1817). What these categories of incest have in common is that they end with a death that separates the siblings, which is arguably a representation of "the consummation–whether physical or spiritual–of their love" (Richardson, 1985, 740). Incest was punished with death in primitive times, and Freud suggests that this fear persists in us at a psychological level (1913, 3). *Taboo* would fall under Richardson's third category, as it features the relationship between a half-brother and a half-sister

3 In this article I do not examine *Taboo*'s ambivalent engagement with imperialist and Orientalising ideologies and stereotypes in its portrayal of James as a racial Other. For a further discussion on these elements of the series, see MOUSOUTZANIS, Aris. 2020. "Imperial Gothic for Global Britain: BBC's *Taboo* (2017-present)." *Gothic Studies* 22(3): 1-16.

who are sexual partners and whose attraction is based on shared experience. This incestuous relationship culminates with the death of one of the siblings: Zilpha commits suicide at the end of Season 1.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, neo-Victorian fiction is concerned with the lack of proper representation of sexual and gendered traumas. Therefore, by verbalising those previously silenced experiences, neo-Victorianism helps to expose, and so work through, past experiences of violence. As Jessica Cox contends, "the traumas of the past–so often ignored at the time–must be written in order for us to come to terms with our collective history; we must write the traumas of the past in order to confront and ultimately deal with them" (2014, 140).

According to Heilmann and Llewellyn, the central locus of family trauma in neo-Victorian fiction is normally the family home: a space haunted by past tragedy and a female presence (2010, 35). In *Taboo*, the Delaney siblings grew up in a dysfunctional family that was haunted by the presence of its former mistress–James's Native American mother–and the ghosts of slavery and colonialism. These imperialist endeavours made James's father a rich man, but also drove him mad in the end. In the series, the siblings try to cope with these family traumas and dysfunctionalities by engaging in an incestuous relationship. As opposed to other neo-Victorian screen texts like *Crimson Peak*, where the relationship between the Sharpe siblings is not revealed until the end, in *Taboo* the audience is fully aware of the siblings' liaison since the beginning of the series. James hints at their incestuous love as the reason why he left England in the very first episode: "One thing Africa did not cure is that I still love you" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017, Episode 1, 00:13:17-00:13:22).

This incestuous relationship can also be interpreted as an instance of Freud's uncanny and the overly exploited phenomenon of the double in (neo-)Gothic fiction. According to Freud, the phenomenon of the double takes place when two people are physically indistinguishable, share a deep emotional bond and the same vital experiences. These people would also identify themselves "with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own–in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self" (2001 [1919], 234). The Delaney siblings share the same vital experiences regarding their family dysfunctionalities. Indeed, they used to know each other so deeply that they did not even need to communicate verbally with one another, as James reminds her: "We used to talk to each other without words in dark corners" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 3, 00:35:18-00:35:22).

James and Zilpha represent the Freudian double in that they see themselves as two parts of the same being, as Zilpha tells her brother: "I used to think we were the same person" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 3, 00:45:32-00:45:34). The representation of the double in the series seems to be associated

with what Llewellyn describes as the process of identity formation through "the trauma of excessively close familial relationships" (2010, 137). In the case of *Taboo*, the trauma is rooted in a dysfunctional family characterised by imperial dynamics, disputes over inheritances, but, above all, an "Oedipal family drama." This trauma, according to Mousoutzanis, includes James's "succession of his father Horace (Edward Fox), his traumatic fixation with his mother Salish (Noomi Rapace), and his incestuous relationship with his sister Zilpha (Oona Chaplin)" (2020, 4). Incest is polytemporal, in that incestuous relations are "repetitive, cyclical, and simultaneously reconstructive, and deconstructive." Therefore, the trauma is part and parcel of the victims' identities, "development" and "existence" (Llewellyn 2010, 137). The Delaney siblings were raised in a patriarchal and imperialist family with deviant psychosexual tendencies, so that James's relationship with Zilpha seems to be a consequence of those dysfunctional dynamics.

Another fact that seems to point to the Delaney siblings as doubles is that James can project himself in his sister's dreams. The siblings share a telepathic connection that has survived their long separation across continents, even though Zilpha tries to resist it through Christian penitence and her husband's beatings: "My husband is harsh, and as a Christian, I welcome it. I deserve it" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 3, 00:35:01-00:35:05). James's projections to his sister's dreams are graphically portrayed in Episode 4, where he performs what seems to be a tribal ritual, as he paints his face with ashes while casting a spell in an indigenous language (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 4, 00:19:53-00:21:08). In this scene, he acts as an incubus, seducing Zilpha while she moans and contorts her body on her bed. In her dream, she is having sexual intercourse in a snow-covered forest with a man in an African mask. Images of the dream overlap with others of James performing the ritual and Zilpha in her bedroom.

Then, Zilpha's husband comes home drunk and realises that she has been with James in her dreams, so he forcefully undresses and rapes her. This is one of the many instances of gender-based violence that Zilpha has to endure in the series. Her husband is also aggressive towards her owing to the fact that he has not been able to get her pregnant, despite his many attempts. He blames her deviant sexuality for that, implying that she does not allow herself to bear the child of a man who is not related to her: "The dock boys I pay for pennies have litters of children. I just get blood. My dearest Zilpha, I apologise that I am not related to you… But you could allow your cunt to swallow the work of an honest man who will promise to buy you the finest china… If you just agree to stop fucking bleeding! (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 3, 00:49:00-00:49:43).[4]

4 It is implied in the series that Zilpha and James had a child, and this was the real reason why he was forced to leave England. This child was left in the care of a farmer, who was

According to Maria Mikolchak, a woman's main role in the society of the nineteenth century was based on "marriage and motherhood as the only acceptable modes of self-definition" (2004, 31). Likewise, Anna Clark claims that "[t]he domestic ideal could excuse violence against those wives whom their husbands perceived as failing to fulfil their domestic responsibilities" (2000, 30). In this case, Zilpha's husband abuses her physically and psychologically as a punishment for her sexual transgressions, but also for her apparent incapacity to fulfil her role as a loving wife and mother. Female sexual desire or pleasure were inconsequential, since the only purpose of sexual intercourse between husband and wife was procreation. As a result, nineteenth-century authors portrayed marriages as sexually frustrating in adultery novels, where the female heroines had to experience their sexual awakening with other men (Mikolchak 2004, 31). *Taboo* replicates this portrayal of the nineteenth-century adulteress, as Zilpha seeks sexual pleasure with a man other than her husband: her own brother.

Domestic violence was a phenomenon that arguably ran counter to the nineteenth-century convention of the separate spheres, which "stressed the home as a woman's sphere, as the place of her security and her rule" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2012a, 2). However, Victorian texts that include a female victim of gendered violence do not "urgently explore the violence visited upon these bodies as pressing social, political, or moral problems, and even in those that focus on these questions […] where the beaten wife is at the center of the plot, the implications of these questions finally tend to be evaded, or set aside" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2012a, 2). Therefore, *Taboo* subverts this Victorian convention, as it excavates the silenced and ignored reality of many nineteenth-century women by graphically depicting and criticising gender-based violence. Finally, it is also worth noting that, even though the use of the labels "domestic" or "gendered" violence might seem anachronistic when approaching nineteenth-century texts–since the terms used at the time were "marital cruelty" or "wife beating" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2012a, 1)–I argue that this should not be the case when discussing neo-Victorian works, as they are contemporary cultural products. As discussed in the previous section, neo-Victorian fiction revisits the nineteenth-century past in order to help us reflect on both present and past anxieties. Given that gender-based violence is, unfortunately, still a reality in contemporary societies, *Taboo* enables us to both reflect on and denounce this phenomenon in both periods.

led to believe that he was an illegitimate son of James's father. Upon returning to England, James gives a considerable amount of money to this farmer and tells him: "Fate can be hard, so you put money aside for his future in case he grows up to be rash, like me" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 2017, Episode 1, 00:45:31-00:45:38). This latter sentence seems to point to the fact that the child is actually his son.

On a different note, *Taboo* also replicates the nineteenth-century trope of the adulteress that commits suicide at the end of the narrative. In the late nineteenth century, there was a type of novel that focused on wifely adultery, which flourished in continental Europe–although there were also some examples of this type of novel in America. With some minor variations, the plot of these novels revolved around an upper-middle class wife who is seduced by an unmarried man. She is then socially ostracised and finally commits suicide (Overton 2002, 3). These novels were usually written by a male author–with the notable exception of the American novel *The Awakening* (1899), written by Kate Chopin–and include: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895), Leopoldo Alas, Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884-5), or Eça de Queirós's *Cousin Bazilio* (1878). Thus, despite its seemingly feminist agenda, *Taboo* reproduces the "nineteenth-century novelistic convention of adultery that includes broken marriage, woman's guilt, and atonement by death," which leads to a "moralistic ending" with "received notions of resignation and contrition" (Mikolchak 2004, 30).

After her lover rejects her, Zilpha experiences "a universal meaninglessness and her suicide from the end of a platform that offers nowhere to go" (Tanner 1981, 30) appears to be her only way out. Tory Tanner claims that Helen of Troy, who is arguably one of the most famous adulteresses in Ancient History, also experienced a meaningless existence with her lover Paris in his homeland. She felt like she was dead to her loved ones in Sparta, despite the fact that "legend generously restore her to her husband" at the end of *The Iliad* (Tanner 1981, 30). However, nineteenth-century fictional women after her were not given the same redeeming opportunity, so that they usually found "themselves intimate with death–but more usually it is their own" (Tanner 1981, 30).

This is often so because there seems to be no land in Western cultures that condones adultery, so that adulterers tend to be ostracised and rejected by society. These characters fantasise about a world where they could love each other freely and feel accepted. Consequently, fiction that focuses on adultery usually has at the centre of its narrative "[t]he quest for, or dream of, such an impossible world apart recurs constantly in the novel of adultery–for all available areas of the given world ultimately seem inhospitable to the adulterous lovers" (Tanner 1981, 34). In the case of *Taboo*, James dreams of leaving England and moving to a land where he can love Zilpha without any obstacles. An American organisation with which James is making a trading deal promises to help him and Zilpha escape to America and get them new identities, so that they can live as a real couple:

> Now, I make no moral judgments […] Well, you can have her as part of the deal, part of our second offering. So why don' you just take her? Just take her

> with you. No more hiding. We can guarantee you safe passage, anonymity, new worlds. Now, look, if you don't want to deal with the obstacle, we can certainly take care of that for you. Say her husband gets drunk, no surprise, falls from a bridge, something. Let me just make the point, from an American point of view: Love is now part of the deal that we are offering (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 4, 00:42:31-00:43:20).

However, James does not need to accept the Americans' offer, as Zilpha is the one that eventually murders her husband as a way to escape domestic violence. Likewise, James's dream of escaping with his sister is not fulfilled in the end either, as he breaks up with her. As discussed above, the series–which is set in 1814–is influenced by the Romantics' understandings of sibling love. As in *Taboo*, Romantic English poets tended to combine sibling incest with erotic love, in an attempt to create the perfect aesthetic foundation for "sympathetic love" (Richarson 1985, 744). Although at first it might seem that the combination of sibling and erotic love will create the most perfect sympathy, such a union never lasts in Romantic poetry, and nor does it in *Taboo*.

Even though Zilpha has been able to explore her female sexuality with her brother since they were children, the passage of time and her newfound Christian devotion seem to have severed the connection that the siblings once shared, as James no longer sees Zilpha as an extension of himself by the end of Season 1:

> Zilpha: I know you. I know your nature. I know you.
> James: No. I believed once that we were the same person.
> Zilpha: We are.
> James: We are not […] Not anymore. Perhaps you should thank your God for that (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 7, 00:17:28-00:17:55).

Despite what James tells her, however, the real reasons for breaking up with his sister appear to be more rooted in his unresolved traumas with her mother than in Zilpha's newfound religious beliefs. After the latter kills her husband and acknowledges that she is in love with James, her behaviour becomes erratic and reckless, and James believes that she has gone mad, as his mother allegedly did before she tried to drown him. In the sixth episode of Season 1, a voice in her head compels Zilpha to murder her husband, and she believes that voice to be James's. Thus, she picks up a hatpin from her dresser while her husband is asleep. She then straddles him and sinks the hatpin in his stomach, while he cries for help (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 6, 00:32:56-00:34:35).

In turning the hatpin into "an assassin's" weapon, she is arguably subverting "the feminine ideal" (Noimann 2018, 95) of the domesticated angel of the

house, since the hatpin, like the corset, was used as a fashion accessory to further oppress women in the Victorian system.[5] Afterwards, Zilpha goes to her brother's house and tells him what she has done: "I killed him, just like you said" (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 6, 00:35:52-00:35:55). In this, *Taboo* subverts the nineteenth-century conventions of the 'beaten wife', as not only does it bring to the forefront the physical and sexual violence she has had to endure, but it also allows her to get rid of that violence. Whilst James is worried about whether his sister might be found guilty of her husband's murder, she seems to be content, freed of the man that had been abusing her.

After her husband's funeral, the Delaney siblings hurry to Zilpha's bedroom and engage in sexual intercourse. Nonetheless, James abruptly stops, as he starts having flashbacks of his mother, when she tried to drown him in the river as a baby. Here, his time perception of the chronological line seems to be disrupted by his PTSD.[6] Cuts of Zilpha's face are superimposed with images of his mother laughing in the river. Therefore, in this scene James arguably associates–and even confuses–Zilpha with his mother. As Mousoutzanis claims:

> [T]he editing clearly suggests [Zilpha's] role as a substitute for the mother, as the scenes of their sexual encounter in bed are intercut with intrusive flashbacks of his mother trying to drown him. In fact, Delaney's entire project seems to be propelled by his attempt to recover from this trauma as it is revealed to be one of a return, a return to his mother's land (2020, 6).

Salish and Zilpha are analogous characters in that they both rebel against patriarchal oppression in a violent manner. Salish confronted the social impositions that her husband and society tried to instil on her, which eventually led her to attempt to murder their own child. Likewise, Zilpha turns into a murderess when she finally kills her abuser as a way to escape his violence and control. Owing to the similarities between them, James's obsession with the women in his family might

5 The use of hatpins as deadly weapons is inspired by historical accounts of the period. By 1900, hatpins had caused several head and brain injuries. As a consequence, this fashion item was deemed to be particularly dangerous in crowded spaces (Godfrey 2012, 80-1). The hatpin also came to be used as a crime weapon, as an American paper of the period described: "A woman can't very well carry a stick. But she has a weapon in a long hatpin" (qtd. in Godfrey 2012, 81). The hatpin was also used as a suicide method, as well as for "eye-stabbing," "self-defence, revenge, or […] jealousy" (Godfrey 2012, 81).

6 PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) could be defined as a number of responses to different kinds of personal and collective traumas, including "rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on" (Caruth 11). According to Freud and Breuer, patients might experience "memory gaps, but also repeatedly re-experienced extreme events in flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations months or even years afterwards" (1895, 500).

be understood as an unresolved Oedipal complex, which, according to Freud, is a universal phenomenon that affects both men and women in the nuclear family. While sons fall in love with the mother and want to get rid of the father, daughters are jealous of their mothers and plan to assume their role as their fathers' psychosexual partners (1985, 265). Consequently, James would have developed sexual desires towards his mother as a child, and wished his father's death in order to keep her to himself. Freud claims that overcoming the Oedipal complex–that is to say, accepting the sexual and emotional bond between our parents and fixating our desires on someone outside our family–is central to enter adulthood. Those who fail to work through this complex usually suffer from a form of neurosis (1905, 10).

This could be James's case, considering his obsession with his mother through his recurring flashbacks and his ferocious defence of her innocence. All these traits might be symptomatic of his unresolved Oedipal complex, which could have caused him a psychosexual trauma that was probably triggered by his mother's death. Consequently, he directed his sexual and romantic feelings towards the only other female member of his family: his half-sister Zilpha. Their incestuous relationship as children strengthened his Oedipal inclinations, but as soon as he redirects his desires towards someone he is not related to–i.e., when he meets Lorna Bow, his father's recent widow–, he realises that he no longer seeks familiarity and similarity in his partner, but quite the opposite. This is arguably why he abruptly stops his sexual intercourse with Zilpha: because she reminds him of his deceased mother.

Despite the fact that James has apparently overcome his Oedipal complex, Zilpha still feels attached to him. When he abandons her, she feels like she has nothing else to live for. Therefore, she commits suicide by jumping off a bridge to drown in the river Thames. It is worth stressing that the place and form of Zilpha's suicide are key in understanding *Taboo*'s engament with nineteenth-century literature and culture, since a fallen woman jumping off a bridge to commit suicide had become a trope in itself. As Nicola Onyett contends, the river represents "an appropriate resting place that connotes a fallen woman who can fall no further" (2010, 2).

Examples of this trope in Victorian literature and arts include Thomas Hood's early Victorian ballad "The Bridge of Sighs" (1844), wich inspired a number of paintings: G. F. Watts' *Found Drowned* (c.1848-50), Augustus Egg's *Past and Present, No. 3* (1858), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's unfinished painting *Found* (1854–1855, 1859–1881) and Abraham Solomon's *Drowned! Drowned!* (c. 1860). Even though the representation in these works varied from an endorsement to "the typical Victorian view that a married woman who destroys her own family deserves to die," as in Egg's painting, to a more sympathetic depiction in Watt's, they all portrayed

a fallen woman's "guilt, remorse and fear over a failed love affair or illegitimate pregnancy" (Onyett 2010, 2). Another example of a fallen woman committing suicide by drowning in a Victorian novel could be found in Wilkie Collins *The Moonstone* (1868), where Rosanna Spearmann drowns herself in the Shivering Sands, which, according to Anne Schwan, is "a trope typically associated to sexually fallen women" (2014, 87). In doing that, Collins is arguably portraying her male interest, Blake, as the "implied, if not actual, perpetrator, who shares his class of men's responsibility in this woman's 'crime'of suicide" (Schwan 2014, 87). *Taboo* follows this depiction of the male protagonist as an indirect perpetrator of the fallen woman's death, as James's rejection drives Zilpha to drown herself in the river Thames. James finds out about her suicide through a letter that she writes to him:

> Dear James,
> At last, I have found a way out of the cage in which I have been living. Eyes I didn't know I had were opened. I saw the limits of my life, the iron bars around my soul. At last, I found a way to slip between them. I intend to leave society, leave London, leave England behind, travel to a place where I will be free. It is a place where, someday, I hope we will meet and be happy. [...] I'm planning to journey to heaven, James. I've realized the truth. My cage is my flesh; I can shed it. The River Thames will take me to God […] (Knight, Hardy and Hardy, 2017, Episode 8, 00:02:12-00:02:53; 00:28:22-00:28:34).

The description of Zilpha's feelings in this letter follows the prominent Victorian trope that depicted women's role in society as caged birds. Examples of Victorian texts that explored this metaphor range from Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), where the ideal upper-middle-class Englishwoman is portrayed as "a stunted existence of dull domesticity in which women are expected to glory in the very limitations to their freedoms, knowledge and experience" (Primorac 2018, 96). Zilpha has always loathed her cage. However, she has come to realise that the very thing that was trapping her was her own flesh, a metonymy that stands for her female body. She feels that her biological sex has forced her to perform the social role of the submissive wife and tied her to a violent man that she does not love. As a result, the only way she can escape her cage–i.e., her own feminine body and the social constraints attached to it–is through death, where she hopes to be free at last.[7]

7 Contrary to Zilpha's case in *Taboo*, the caged bird metaphor is often translated in neo-Victorian screen adaptations through the use of corsets and crinolines. In fact, in these neo-Victorian texts, "the image of a tightly-laced, corseted female figure in particular becomes an accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman" (Primorac 2018, 98).

Hence, despite the potential that *Taboo* has in defying the nineteenth-century nuclear family as an institution that instils national and moral values, it fails to grant Zilpha a sense of female empowerment and independence. In replicating–rather than challenging–the tragical ending of nineteenth-century adultery novels, the series is subjugating its female protagonist both to her male counterpart–without whom she does not want to live anymore–and to the constrictive social rules of a society that cannot accept a woman's active sexuality.

4. Conclusion

As discussed throughout this article, the nuclear family has customarily held a privileged position in Western societies, as a domestic and private institution representing patriarchal gender conventions, national sentiments and capitalist values. However, there are increasingly alternative manners of conceiving family life–such as queer families, single parenthood, adoption or surrogate motherhood–, as well as new ways of interpreting gender roles. Consequently, neo-Victorian fiction has been exploring the inherent traumas and dysfunctionalities of the nuclear family to challenge the institution as the only natural family model and to advocate for alternative ones, as in the case of the TV series *Penny Dreadful*.

Taboo follows this disruptive pattern in neo-Victorian fiction, as it attempts to defy the prestige of the nuclear family by foregrounding its potential dysfunctionalities, particularly incest, gender-based violence and adultery. Nonetheless, the fact that the series mainly reproduces–rather than challenges–the main characteristics of nineteenth-century adultery novels condemns her female protagonist for her sexual transgressions. This deprives the heroine from subverting the social rules and conventions attached to her gender and sends a dangerous message to female viewers: if they try to transgress such conventions, they will be punished by the patriarchal status quo.

Finally, it is also worth stressing that *Taboo* is an incomplete TV series–its second season is likely to be filmed at some point in 2023. As a consequence, it has not been possible to analyse some key aspects of the series regarding its portrayal of the incest and adultery plotlines, including whether James will take responsibility for driving his sister to commit suicide. Another relevant topic for future research would be the comparison between *Taboo* and other neo-Victorian TV series that explore the demythification of the nuclear family, including *The Irregulars*, *Penny Dreadful* or *The Nevers*. I believe that a comparative analysis between these neo-Victorian screen texts would prove to be extremely enriching, especially in terms of their critique of the institution of the nuclear family and their advocation for alternative family models.

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