

Civilization and Its Malcontents: *Untamed*

The dialogue of many a script these days features a crossfire of wisecracks and putdowns. An extreme case is the Netflix thriller *Untamed* (2025), containing the following one-liners among others:

One of us doesn't understand the physics of horsepower.

A cow is not a fucking horse.

Yeah, wasting time till you realize you aren't.

A: I don't want to ride another horse.

B: You won't be. You'll ride the same horse.

Fucking make yourself at home.

I prefer most animals to people.

I'm going to file a formal request for your transfer the fuck out of my park.

I don't know you well enough for you to upset me.

I'd have been here sooner but your tracks were going round and round in circles.

A: They're bad people.

B: Who isn't?

A: I seem to remember you were a couple at one point.

B: That just means I would wake up each morning hoping he would die.

Forgive me if my tone lacks a certain degree of warmth. That's what honesty sounds like.

A: Which of you is Gary Horowitz?

B: It's "Pakuna." It means "deer jumping downhill."

A: Good for you. Bruce Milch. It means I don't give a shit.

What a terrible person I've become. Maybe I always was. And it just took losing Caleb [her child] to really let me shine.

People thought my father was like a guardian angel or some shit.

The outline of *Untamed* is as conventional as the dialogue. Haunted by his own demons and losses, a reclusive detective investigating a death in Yosemite Park flouts the system, gets suspended, continues undeterred, has a narrow escape, and ultimately discovers that the culprit is none other than his supervisor. The world itself is an underworld, shadowy and sordid, and everything is broken, including the most intimate and formative of our institutions: the family. As if bearing out the dialogue's black vision, families in *Untamed* become a mockery of themselves and ultimately consume those who belong to them.

While there is plenty of gunfire, much of it automatic, in *Untamed*, it's actually the verbal gunfire that gives the series its tone, ethos and character. A practice invested with such importance bears looking into.

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A stroke of wit comes as a surprise, and it is this—the element of the unexpected—that makes it delightful. The story goes that Alfred Sheinwold, the author of *Five Weeks to Winning Bridge*, ran into a woman who exclaimed, “Oh, Mr. Sheinwold! Thank you for writing *Ten Weeks to Winning Bridge*.” Replied he, “How good of you to read it twice.” Note the semblance of gallantry in Sheinwold’s riposte, the veiling of a cutting remark as a gracious one—and all this conceived and executed on the spot, in real time, with the utmost elegance.

The witticisms of *Untamed* are the exact opposite of this kind of polished performance: they are raw and ugly. Many would say that only means they are more authentic, but something else negates their authenticity: their frequency. Being so continual, so nearly automatic, the gibes of *Untamed* come to lack the spark of spontaneity. In the world of *Untamed* where twisted sentiments are obligatory, wit becomes rote.

With one witticism following another with the regularity of clockwork, the viewer of *Untamed* sooner or later gets the sense that it is all canned. Spouting epigrams like “This just means I would wake up each morning hoping he would die,” figures in *Untamed* forfeit the possibility of independent existence and become the scriptwriter’s puppets. Everyone sounds pretty much alike—rancorous, resentful, swollen with contempt and self-contempt—because the same hand authored them all. If Sheinwold had appeared in *Untamed*, he would have spat sarcasms, too. “Get yourself a pair of glasses, lady. You’re seeing double.”

If a twisted statement like “This just means I would wake up each morning hoping he would die” becomes normative, then what has become of norms? *Untamed* pours a dissolving acid on the very concept of norms—standards—distinguishing the licit from the illicit, the decent from the indecent. In the end if not before, things tend to rot. Like the abandoned church once attended by the child-abusers who figure in the complicated backstory of *Untamed* (complicated because complexity suggests corrupted systems), norms in general have become a black joke. Characteristically, the chief of the park rangers seems a figure of decency until he doesn’t. Amidst such inversions, the sneering comment becomes the accent of truth.

With their continual insults and profanities, the people of *Untamed* jab at the norm of civility, but their animus extends to something larger—civilization itself; and for the detective-hero, Kyle Turner, conflict with civilization becomes highly personal. If civilization implies the rule of law as opposed to the private pursuit of revenge, Turner is an officer of the law whose then-wife arranged for the murder of the man who abducted and murdered their child, and did so specifically because she couldn’t bear the thought of seeing the culprit tried in a court of law, with its norms and procedures. The killer she hired lives beyond the margins of civilization, as befits a mercenary. In a series where everything except mother-love is infected with falsity, even a mother ends up living a double life. Turner, a man of few words who lets the incivility of his actions speak for him, carries her secret with him as the series concludes. Instead of merely delivering twisted statements, he leads a twisted existence, a lawman caught up in the primal law of revenge. And all the

while, standing before us as a reproach to civilization and its lies and concealments, is the grandeur of Yosemite.

This is Rousseau with a vengeance. Where Rousseau rails against artificial distinctions, *Untamed* so vexes the distinction between lawbreakers and lawmen, between the guilty and the innocent, that sometimes we can hardly tell which is which. The script makes its case against civilization with a rhetoric as stylized as that of *A Discourse on Inequality*..

Belonging to a civilization whether they like it or not, the characters of *Untamed*—a title that distills Rousseauism into a single word—are condemned to anomie. Anomie refers not only to the collapse of laws or norms (such as those distinguishing decency from its opposite or indeed justice from vengeance), but the psychological ruin that results, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a state of alienation from mainstream society characterized by feelings of hopelessness, loss of purpose, and isolation.” It is this bleak mix that gives the foulmouthed witticisms in *Untamed* their note of despairing nastiness. The illicit drugs omnipresent in the world of *Untamed*, seen or unseen, represent a spurious remedy for the extreme anomie of its inhabitants.

Often pictured wandering through Yosemite on horseback, the protagonist of *Untamed* (whose drug is drink) seems isolated even when among others and lives in a remote cabin. Following a trail of clues gives him an appearance, and only an appearance, of purpose. But others too wander, sever themselves from society, lack purpose—not least the mystery girl at the center of the series, Lucy Cook, abused child turned drug runner. In one way or another, almost everyone in *Untamed*, including a band of hippie squatters,

seems at odds with civilization despite being unable to put anything in its place. Full of bitterness and pointless hostility, they have been endowed by their creator, that is, the scriptwriter, with the same wretched anomie.

If in principle the family introduces us to the norms of “mainstream society” and helps us make them our own, in *Untamed* this project goes terribly awry. Family is a cursed institution. Lucy Cook escaped an abusive stepfather as a child only to wind up jailed in the basement of a husband and wife who collected a subsidy for her care. Paul Souter, Turner’s supervisor, looks like an exemplary family-man but stalks his biological daughter, the same Lucy Cook, with a rifle. Communing with a child who died some years before and remaining loyal to the ex-wife whose crime mocks his badge, Turner inhabits a sort of family that is not there, in lieu of an actual one. It’s a comment on the state of marriage in *Untamed* that their secret binds Turner and his ex-wife more closely than their vows, and that this bloodstained woman indeed seems to prefer him to her current spouse, a dentist.

Turner’s assistant, meanwhile, is menaced by the ex-cop who fathered her child, but who (she insists) is not her husband. He is the reason she flees with the child to Yosemite in the first place: she is running for her life and the child’s. Her love for her child stands out amidst the general depravity, representing as it does the one good to be found in a world or underworld of predators, abusers, killers, blackmailers, vultures, avengers, cheats, crooked officers of the law, drug gangs, outcasts and exiles. Why this madonna in uniform ever had a child with a thug remains unknown. For her and indeed everyone else in *Untamed*, family is a death-trap.

A man who phones his ex-wife at all hours and seems like a third party to her second marriage; an ex-cop who would blend in on Death Row—figures like these act out the breakdown of norms that turns virtually everything in *Untamed* into a mockery of itself. No wonder the dominant note of the whole is mockery per se. “*Fucking make yourself at home.*”

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