HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Edwardian Era as Depicted in *Downton Abbey*

Ritgerð til BA prófs í ensku

Oddfríður Steinunn Helgadóttir

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Abstract

This essay discusses the Edwardian era in English history and how it is depicted in Julian Fellowes' period drama *Downton Abbey.* The essay gives a brief summary of the historical, political and social background on which Downton Abbey is based. It describes the complexities of Edwardian life and society and compares and contrasts it with important characters of the television series, with focus on how effective they are in acting out an accurate reproduction of the times and how certain characteristics are used to symbolize a virtue typical of the era. The essay also discusses how the storyline reflects the period's issues, and how the characters evolve in order to portray a shift in politics or an event in history. It describes some of the main characters and discusses how their part in the series contributes to the overall representation of the era as well as how their character symbolizes a social group or how they are used to portray a social issue. Interpersonal relationships are discussed, focusing on intersex relations, interclass relationships, the complexities of a typical servant-master relationship and the relevance of one's social rank in regards to one's rights and duties in society. The essay looks into the making of Edwardian society and its cultural and historical significance, as well as what impact it had on modern times and its relevance to British heritage. It discusses several reasons for the series' popularity as well as establish the role it plays in modern entertainment.

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Introduction

The Edwardian era, when shown in the media or described in popular literature, is most often depicted as a period of luxury in the land of plenty. Emphasis is placed on the frilly, over-the-top nature of Edwardian attire, architecture and social gatherings and one is hard pressed to find a realistic novel dealing with the average Edwardian family. It is, therefore, not difficult to assume that the Edwardian era was a majestic one, where food, housing and happiness were in unlimited supply. This essay will show how *Downton Abbey,* however, portrays the Edwardian era as a time of change and social upheaval through the use of characters and story lines. *Downton Abbey* explores the effect the era had on both the estate owners and the servants and gives viewers an idea as to what Edwardian life might have been like.

Downton Abbey is a British television fictional history series created by Julian Fellowes and first aired on ITV on September 26, 2010 (Byrne, 1). It is written by Fellowes as well as Shelagh Stephenson and Tina Pepler. Four seasons have aired in Britain as of late 2013; this essay however concentrates on the first three seasons as not all episodes have aired in Iceland to date. The series is set in a fictional country estate belonging to the Earl and Countess of Grantham, and follows the lives of their family and staff beginning in April 1912. Season one spans the period from the sinking of the RMS Titanic in April 1912 until the outbreak of World War I. Season two covers the years 1916 to 1919 and season three takes place in 1920. King Edward passed away in 1910, but the Edwardian era often includes the following years leading up to World War I, while many historians include the war years, and others still argue that the shift in parliamentary power from the Liberals to the Labour party in 1924 mark the break between Edwardian and Modern Britain (Holland; Hynes vii).

Downton Abbey is a huge commercial success and is shown in over 100 countries (Egner). It currently holds the Guinness Book of World Record as the most critically acclaimed English-language television series of 2011 and is the most Emmy nominated British television show in history (Egner; McCormack). This success has

aroused viewers' curiosity regarding the Edwardian era and has led to an increase in sales of Edwardian literature, inspired Edwardian-themed weddings, and boosted sales of a wide variety of products linked to the era (Mohn). *Downton Abbey* is unlike many other period dramas in the sense that it is not based on a classic work of literature, but is written specifically for a modern television audience and is therefore not bound to a text or plot in its quest for popularity and ratings. It falls under the genre of historical fiction which through its use of popular media is "not a history lesson[...] but it certainly inspires an interest in history" (Byrne, 2). It may not be as intellectually demanding as a historical documentary, but "accessibility and ease of watching" have prompted historians to admit that "film has become the chief conveyor of public history in our culture" (Byrne, 2)

It is interesting to view *Downton Abbey* as a microcosm, showing all levels of society and dealing with the common troubles of its people. The creators of *Downton Abbey* have skilfully managed to intertwine many of the Edwardian issues with an entertaining storyline that appeals to the modern viewer. This time period was pivotal in the making of modern society and much more was happening "behind the scenes" than is most often portrayed, drawing yet another parallel with *Downton Abbey* where the goings-on of "downstairs" are never to be seen or heard "upstairs", nor are the private dealings of "upstairs" to be known outside. *Downton Abbey* also reflects the current political climate in Britain in which there is equal unrest and "[s]imultaneously escapist and relevant, *Downton Abbey* has captured the spirit of our own times: it portrays, in microcosm, a society on the brink of disaster" (Groskop). Also relevant are the references British newspapers have made linking the current government to *Downton Abbey* such as in The Guardian's article: "David Cameron's Downton Abbey government - Charging donors for invitations to Highclere Castle won't help the Tory cabinet shake its upper-class, out-of-touch image" (Freedland).

It is striking how the issues themselves do not appear to change throughout history. Edwardian issues were not new issues – the plight of the poor and women's rights, for example, had been Victorian issues before Edward VII's reign, and Georgian even before Victoria's reign, as indicated by calls for social reform and even revolt in those periods of British history. Examples are the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, which

came as a result of people demanding reform in the face of famine and chronic unemployment, and the essay *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the other Half, Men, to Retain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery: in reply to a paragraph of Mr. Mill's celebrated "Article on Government"* published in 1825 by William Thompson and Anna Wheeler which shows desire for more gender equality. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was the first of many to come in the Victorian era. However, only evolving societal values govern if current reforms have done enough, and when those values change, society once again cries out for new improvements. Even more striking is the realization that today's issues mirror the Edwardian ones in many ways, enabling one to view the recent “bubble economy” and financial crisis which ensued with a different perspective than before, as well as other current events: the continuing struggle for gay rights, equal pay for women and public assistance for the poor and elderly.

Edwardian society

It is quite complex to define Edwardian society. Its ruling class was neither the most populous nor the most popular. It simply seemed a given fact that the upper-middle class and the aristocracy ruled society, despite the fact that the country was made up of far more working class people than ever before. Samuel Hynes in his book *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* discusses just how established the Victorian "Establishment" (the church, the Tory Party and the peerage, for example) had become. He states:

> Members of secure, conservative, socially dominant groups in Edward's time certainly believed that they composed an established ruling class, and their behaviour is often comprehensible only if one sees behind each action the assumption of the right to rule[.....] This is not to say that they *were* the ruling class – certainly they were not after the Liberal victory of 1906 – but members of that order were clearly not aware of the fact that their rule had ended. (11)

This seemed to come from habit; this is how it had always been and so, therefore, this is how it should remain. Queen Victoria's reign had been a long one, and although there had been significant scientific, industrial and agricultural progress, social change was a much slower and more painful process.

King Edward VII, however, embodied someone who believed in everything in excess. He was "overweight and overdressed" (Hynes, 4) and he relished the luxuries awarded to him. He encapsulated the spirit of his era almost perfectly in that sense. The Liberal politician C.F.G. Masterman called Britain "vulgarized" and a "plutocracy" in his 1909 book *The Condition of England* (n.p.). The upper classes rigidly clung to their Victorian propriety at the same time that they thoroughly enjoyed indulging themselves in near absurd luxury. Their propriety was only superficial, however, and they clung more to the idea of retaining a moral and social structure than to the structure itself. Censorship laws designed to help steer people away from moral evils had an air of

paternalism attached to them, in that they often did not apply to those with money. In a debate in parliament in 1888, a Mr. De Lisle said “Unfortunately, the evil affected the class of persons who were least able to resist it. Those who were rich and had comfortable homes might keep the evil from their doors; but the poor, who had little scope for the higher enjoyments of life, naturally picked up the literature which was nearest at hand” (Hynes, 258). The privileged had a sense of superiority over the poorer, whether it be *noblesse oblige* or a notion that their job as aristocrats was to take care of, again with an air of paternalism, others less fortunate. The double standards are astounding; “more was spent on sport – largely hunting, shooting and racing – than on the whole British navy” (Aslet, 9) and huge amounts were spent on building country houses, hosting parties and other luxuries. Never before had there been such a gap in wealth distribution between the classes and whilst the fortunate were able to squander their money, the poor were going from bad to worse (Hynes, 54).

The emergence of socialism had begun a new wave of thought which alongside improved literacy rates led to increasing demands for reform. Education brings empowerment, and the ever increasing gap between the have's and have-not's caused discontented masses to want to claim their fair share. Ironically, the Education Act of 1870 was met with criticism from those who believed that the mass education of the working class would evolve into revolution. However, it was widely recognized that with new voting power from the Reform Act of 1867, Britain needed a more educated working class as well as a more educated workforce in order to maintain its dominance in an ever increasingly industrial world. Education did not become compulsory until 1880, when it became compulsory for children between the ages of five and ten. However, there were still children who could not attend because their families could not survive without the income provided by these children. In 1899, the age for compulsory attendance was extended to 12. This means that most of the young working class could read in the Edwardian era. It seems that the revolution people anticipated when the Education Act was being passed was coming, and was probably long overdue (parliament).

The Victorian period was widely regarded as a “golden” era and a time of relative peace and prosperity, mirroring the Golden Age as the first “Age of Man” in

Greek mythology (Hynes, 16). Queen Victoria's death created both apprehension and excitement for the coming times. British novelist Elinor Glyn describes the mood surrounding the Queen's funeral in her autobiography *Romantic Adventure*

> It was impossible not to sense, in that stately procession, the passing of an epoch, and a great one; a period in which England had been supreme, and had attained to the height of her material wealth and power. There were many who wondered, doubted perhaps, whether that greatness could continue; who read in the failures of the early part of the Boer War a sign of decadence, and, influenced perhaps unduly by Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and by my French upbringing, I felt that I was witnessing the funeral procession of England's greatness and glory. (Glyn, qtd. in Hynes, 17)

At the same time as Britain was striving to project an image of strength and endurance, the second Boer War of 1899-1902 highlighted the flaws in its isolationist policy and gave reason for concern regarding public health as it emerged that sixty percent of Englishmen were physically unfit for service in the Army (Hynes, 22).
A report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, submitted in August 1904 described the living conditions in English cities:

> the overcrowding, the polluted air, the sub-standard working conditions, the high infant mortality. The report[...]shows that though the urban population of England and Wales had increased over the latter half of the nineteenth century from fifty percent of the population to seventy-seven percent, there had been no corresponding increase in public attention to urban problems, and that consequently the English poor were worse off than they had ever been. (Hynes, 23)

There is no doubt there was need for reform. However, Edwardian efforts were ill-organised and eclectic. Most reform groups shared a longing to liberate themselves from their Victorian past, but that is all they had in common. Ideas remained unformed,

mostly due to clashing and conflicting opinions on what was causing the decline of their English Empire and which of the Victorian virtues they would be willing to sacrifice in order to mend it. Therefore, more time was spent discussing how bad the current situation was and how bleak the future would be without reform than coming up with solutions. The fear was that the British Empire would degenerate in the same way as the Roman Empire had and analogies were soon made, as seen in the anonymously published satirical pamphlet *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, a brief account of those causes which resulted in the destruction of our late Ally, together with a comparison between the British and Roman Empires* (Hynes, 24). The pamphlet is now known to have been written by Elliot Mills, and according to his sections in the book, the causes for the British decline are:

I. The prevalence of Town over Country Life, and its disastrous effect upon the health and faith of English people.
II. Growing tendency of the English throughout the Twentieth Century to forsake the sea except as a health resort.
III. The Growth of Refinement and Luxury.
IV. The Decline of Literary and Dramatic Taste.
V. Gradual Decline of the Physique and Health of the English People.
VI. The Decline of intellectual and religious life among the English.
VII. Excessive Taxation and Municipal Extravagance .
VIII. False Systems of Education prevalent in Britain.
IX. Inability of the British to defend themselves and their Empire. (Mills)

General Baden-Powell also used this analogy as his grounds for founding the Boy Scout movement, in the belief that by preparing the next generation of soldiers he could save Britain from the fate of Rome: “One cause which contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire was the fact that the soldiers fell away from the standard of their forefathers in bodily strength” (Baden-Powell, 335-336). His *Scouting for Boys* reads like Tory propaganda; it has several references to Rome (appealing to imperialists) and denigrates the working classes, “the labor movement because it is unpatriotic, and

paupers because they lack will power" (Hynes, 28). The Boy Scouts became popular with girls too, but soon that was met with disapproval from parents and those who felt that boys and girls should not be spending so much time together and that the training of girls was of no national use, hence the birth of the Girl Guides. With his sister, Baden-Powell wrote the *Handbook for Girl Guides, or How Girls can Help Build the Empire.* In a pamphlet preceding its publication, named *Pamphlet A: Baden-Powell Girl Guides, a Suggestion for Character Training for Girls.* Baden-Powell opens with "Decadence is threatening the nation", voicing the opinion that the cause of Britain's problems were moral in nature. According to Baden-Powell, girls could help the empire by learning

1. To make themselves of practical use in case of invasion
2. To prepare themselves for a Colonial life in case their destiny should lead them to such
3. To make themselves more useful to others and to themselves by learning useful occupations and handiwork and yet retaining their womanliness. (Hynes, 29)

The typical Edwardian Tory appears to have believed that the decline of the nation was the result of physical and moral deterioration, not the cause of it, and that with a little more patriotic and imperialistic ideals in place all could be reversed. Liberals, however, saw it as a judgement of Edwardian society, needing compassion and reform to rebuild something better. Nevertheless, as Hynes states in his book "they did not significantly alter the social conditions that they deplored" (54). They were responsible for the People's Budget of 1909, which was:

> the most important single piece of legislation of the Edwardian period: first, because it declared, for the first time in British history, a government's willingness to use taxation as a means of redistributing wealth, and second, because it roused the Tories to enraged resistance[...] But one thing it did not do: it did not alter the condition of the poor, and the Edwardian Age ended with little social improvement accomplished. It had been more an Age of Reformers than

an Age of Reform. (Hynes, 55-56)

This is how the Liberals ultimately lost their popularity; they were acutely aware of the need for change without being able to effectively solve any problems. Hynes continues his overview thus:

> A standard explanation of the Liberals' failure to seize the day is that they were hampered by their own traditions. Their inheritance of the nineteenth-century laissez-faire individualism made the idea of strong government control seem anti-Liberal, and their traditional constituency, the commercial middle class, was hostile to government interference and to high taxes. Furthermore, as the period progressed the Liberals came increasingly under pressure both from the outraged Right and from the growing Labour party on the left. If the Liberals wooed the workers with social reforms, they lost their middle class constituents to the Tories; if they wooed the middle classes, they lost the workers. Caught in the middle of a classic three-party squeeze, the Liberals procrastinated, and let Labour take over the role of the progressive party in English politics. (56)

The Edwardian era was therefore not just an extended garden-party. It was a time of anxiety and anticipation, of nostalgia and hope, and *Downton Abbey* bases itself upon this chaotic backdrop. Although realism was coined in the Victorian era, it is almost as though the aristocracy had clung to Romanticism up until the Edwardian era, and it is only then that their era of realism began.

The characters of *Downton*

and *Downton Abbey* as a micro-society

Every character of *Downton Abbey* plays a part in enlightening the viewer as to what life may have been like for various people in the Edwardian era. Some characters symbolize an era, others give life to the moral standpoint and virtues of that time. Their story lines inform the viewers about significant events in history and how they impacted people differently according to their status. They also portray the shifting class dynamic between master and servant as is revealed in the relationships between the two.

Lord and Lady Grantham

Robert Crawley, the Earl of Grantham and owner of the Downton Abbey estate, is a stereotypical Victorian, Tory-voting conservative. He holds on to tradition because it is how it has always been done even when faced with evidence pointing to its outdated ineffectiveness. He says to Matthew “I have a duty beyond saving my own skin. The estate must be a major employer and support the house or there's no point to it.To any of it.” (Episode 1, Season 3) showing that he feels entrusted by those around him and sees not only all of *Downton Abbey* but the entire estate as his social, moral and financial responsibility. He struggles against reform and appears to rather risk losing everything than change his ways. He symbolizes the morally upright and imperialist Victorian, the idolized Englishman before the “decline and fall” and before “decadence” took over. He embodies the paternalist spirit of his generation in his reply to Matthew wanting to dismiss Molesely:

> “Is that quite fair? To deprive a man of his livelihood when he has done nothing wrong? Your mother derives satisfaction from her work from the hospital, I think. Would you really deny the same to poor old Molesley? And when you are master here is the butler to be dismissed? Or the footman? . . . We all have

different parts to play, Matthew – and we must all be allowed to play them." (Episode 2, Season 1)

He is shown to be kind, generous, well-bred, fit and healthy. This clashes against the majority of the population which was living in extreme poverty and was neither fit nor healthy. However, the series' focus on paternalism as a means for taking care of each other can be argued to undermine the apparent need for a welfare state. It is not only Lord Grantham who looks after his own; Lady Sybil looks out for Gwen and for women and the sick and injured in general, and Mrs. Hughes looks after her staff much as a mother would her family. As Byrne writes in her article: "this does seems like a clear attempt to reassure and comfort an audience dealing with public spending cuts on a scale unequalled since the 1980s."

Lord Grantham's management of the Downton Abbey estate can be said to mirror the management of England; it all looks wonderful on the surface, but underneath are concealed problems due to agricultural difficulties, cheaper imports from elsewhere in the world, increasing pay demands of employees, and therefore the "business" is suffering. He, along with many other English noblemen and gentry, resorted to marrying an American "Buccaneer", or a rich American heiress, who in exchange for her money received entry into the English aristocracy. The Earl's wife Lady Cora, is a strong character in *Downton Abbey* and her practical and more modern views create an essential balance to Lord Grantham's rigidity. She does not have the same ties to Downton Abbey and is thereby able to focus more on the prosperity of the individuals it contains rather than the survival of the actual estate.

Lady Cora is socially ambitious, but is at the same time genuinely preoccupied with her daughters' happiness and is a major influence in her husband reconciling himself and adjusting to the changing times. She is much more adaptable than her husband; during the war she is willing and able to make herself useful, whereas it is very difficult for Lord Grantham to realize that as a breed, aristocratic men are becoming extinct. His only role in the war effort is an honorary one and he has no particular duties. He, alongside his generation of Boer War veterans could only stand by as the young and healthy members of their family or community were sent to war where

tragically most of them died. In fact, one in five aristocrats who went to the war died, whereas the ratio for the rest of Britain was one in eight (Fellowes, 26). This is ironic when one takes into consideration that they were supposedly superior to their "decadent" counterparts.

Ladies Cora, Mary, Edith and Sybil Crawley

Lady Cora, alongside her daughters, symbolizes the changing roles of women in England in the Edwardian era. Women's rights were gathering much attention and as Hynes describes in *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*

> This social revolution had many implications besides the sexual: it also involved legal, political, and economic issues, and touched on property ownership, the franchise, higher education, the birth rate, laws of marriage and divorce, the protocol of the court, and the future of the Empire – in short, on nearly every aspect of Edwardian society. In all these aspects, the question asked was, what should be the role of women here? (Or by Tories, what is the trouble with women *now?*) Before the Edwardian years were past, the trouble with women had been blamed on everything from contraceptives to bicycles and had been the subject of novels, poems, and plays, of debates in the Lords and the Commons, and of rallies in Trafalgar Square.
> When the war brought a sudden end to controversy, women still had their problems: marriage and divorce were legally what they had been twenty years earlier, women still did not have the vote, and the double standard was still double. (172)

It is significant, then, that the three *Downton Abbey* children are all girls. It is interesting how *Downton Abbey* is able to use the three daughters to symbolize three very distinct female types within Edwardian society. Mary, the eldest, is, like her father, conservative and traditional. She tries to do as is expected of her, despite her fiery temper. Mary has the most inner conflict as she struggles to reconcile her stubbornness

and free will with her sense of obligation and duty. She believes in the system into which she is born and defends it whenever she feels it is threatened. She was willing to marry her cousin Patrick to keep the estate in the family and her reaction to his death during the sinking of the Titanic shows that the engagement was not founded on any sort of romantic relationship. She is less keen to marry Matthew, feeling as if she is being passed on to the next heir of the estate, but she is still unwilling to challenge the system that makes it so. She shares a great deal with her father, including the view that an estate like Downton not only warrants but needs protecting: “But the role of houses like Downton is to protect tradition. That's why they're so important to maintain” (Episode 2, Season 3). Mary is aware that she falls short in her role as eldest child just by being a woman; had she been a boy, the estate would automatically stay in the family according to the inheritance laws and life would be simpler. She is a strong woman but her old fashioned opinions hold her back from being the rebel her sister Sybil is. “I'm not the rebel you and my parents think I am.”, she says to Kamal Pamuk (Episode 3, Season 1). Her character evolves a great deal in the series, going from her trying very hard to assert her superiority over Matthew when they first meet, to her being genuinely in love with him, and her character softens significantly as the series develops.

Sybil, the youngest daughter, is the exact opposite of Mary. If Mary represents the Tories, then Sybil represents the Labour party. She is a fiercely political radical, wanting genuinely to change the world in which she lives. She has a rebellious streak, but her idealism centres more on improving the lives of other people than herself. She will go to extreme lengths to achieve this too. She is a feminist, and wants to break free from social restrictions. She wants “people to make their own lives, especially women” as she says to Gwen, an under housemaid at Downton, who she helps find another job (Episode 4, Season 1). She seems aware of the genuine moral obligation to help those in need when she states “It's the gloomy things that need our help. If everything in the garden's sunny, why meddle?” (Episode 1, Season 2). Whereas Mary will more likely comply with society's predetermined role for her, Sybil deliberately pushes for change, from wearing trousers for the first time or applying for nurses' training college, to taking cooking lessons and marrying Tom Branson, the family's chauffeur. Branson, however, is equally, if not more, radical than she is and their relationship blurs the lines between

the classes even more than Mary's and Matthew's, for although Matthew is of a lower class, he is at least the heir to the estate.

Edith is in between these two sisters in every way imaginable. She is sandwiched between Mary's conservative nature and Sybil's rebellious one. This means she is quite the typical, forgotten middle child and her rivalry with Mary echoes this fact. She quite desperately wants recognition and acceptance but it is not until she begins to assert her own independence that she begins to blossom. Edith, in many ways, symbolizes the Liberals in that she does not actually achieve much. She acknowledges that the system, and indeed the world, is changing, yet she is reluctant to act. Emotionally she lacks neither sympathy nor empathy but rather than chase her dreams she is much more willing to settle for what little she is given. As with Liberals, she acts in order to ease acute human suffering but refrains from coming up with solutions in order to avoid them in the first place. She is too timid and insecure to take any large decisions or steps to alter her destiny. Liberals were very aware that England needed reform, but seemed incapable of forming concrete plans to alleviate the problems. However, Edith too, like her sisters, evolves as the series continues. The challenges that Edith has faced have strengthened and empowered her and she decides to write about modern women's issues for a newspaper, perhaps leading to some influence in changing society. At least it asserts her independence from her family, providing her with her own income, and will presumably enable her to enter the modern world with less fear than she otherwise would have had.

Matthew

Despite being related to the family at Downton, Matthew is entirely new to their world and frequently clashes with both it and them in the beginning, for example when he feels it wrong to retain Molesley as a valet when he is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Matthew can be said to symbolize the tension between old and new. He neither feels the need for a servant, nor does he want to assert that kind of authority. Despite the best intentions he manages to insult Molesley when he calls what he does a

“silly occupation for a grown man” (Episode 2, Season 1). It is not until Lord Grantham explains to him the delicate and very co-dependent relationship between servant and master (they both need the other for survival) that he allows Molesley to continue. As Violet puts it: “It's our job to create employment. An aristocrat with no servants is as much use to the county as a glass hammer” (Episode 1, Season 3).

Matthew is brought up believing in social justice. He is educated and works as a solicitor before arriving at Downton Abbey. In that sense, he represents the new type of landowner, one who must also have a profession as the estates alone could not sustain themselves after the war. Careers which are very reputable today such as doctors, solicitors and bankers were for the middle class until after the war. The aristocracy simply did not work, not outside of their estates. Lord Montague of Beaulieu recalled: “Individuals, prompted by the changing times, began to make their ways in fields unknown to their predecessors. Peers, often under plebeian pseudonyms, were to be found on the stage, in the cinema world, in journalism, motoring and exploration” (Fellowes, 222). In that respect, Matthew is ahead of his time and can be shown to represent what the future is to bring. He also embodies the creators target audience: “the professional, urbanised middle classes” (Byrne) and the viewer can therefore much more easily associate with his character. His initial response to Downton in many ways mirrors the typical viewer's “a mixture of admiration and awe at the spectacle it presents, and distaste for the aristocratic way of life” (Byrne). Yet, just as the viewer is convinced that the future of the aristocracy is moving towards a more socially just position, Matthew is killed in an accident (*Downton Abbey,* Christmas Special 2012). He has, after all, served his purpose perhaps; the Downton estate is financially secure again and a legitimate male heir is born.

The relationships between Mary and Matthew, and Sybil and Tom

The relationship between Mary and Matthew shows that even amongst the upper classes, there was distinction between the aristocracy and Matthew's upper-middle class

status. Lord Grantham says in the very first episode: “It does seem odd that my third cousin should be a doctor” (Episode 1, Season 1). When Matthew and his mother first arrive at Downton Abbey, it causes quite a stir. The Dowager Countess makes it clear that she is to be addressed as Lady Grantham and Matthew's mother is Mrs. Crawley. There is a definite drawing of lines taking place here. Even the servants comment on how they should address them and O'Brien states: “Real gentlemen don't work” (Episode 1, Season 1) referring to Matthew not being a gentleman of the same class as the Granthams. However, as it becomes clear that the entail on the estate can not be broken, the family is forced to come to terms with the fact that Matthew will inherit the estate and despite some clashes between the two families, Matthew, remaining kind and poised, quickly wins them over.

It is equally hard for Matthew to become a part of Mary's world as it is for her to become a part of his. He is as out of his comfort zone with valets and dressing for dinner as she and the rest of the family are with work and “weekends” (Episode 1, Season 1). Also, Matthew serves in the war alongside Thomas, and in the trenches there are no class distinctions. While Matthew is being encouraged to stop working as a solicitor so that he can focus on the estate, essentially moving against the current of reform, Mary is also having to make concessions to the life that she thought was automatically in front of her, shown for example in the episode where they go to look at houses and it becomes clear that Matthew wants something smaller with much fewer staff and fewer formalities.

The relationship between Sybil and Tom is both more radical and more naïve at the same time. Although Sybil may want to break free from the shackles of being an Earl's daughter, society is not yet ready to embrace love across social barricades. The love between Sybil and Tom is more care-free but that also makes it more reckless. An earl's daughter would have been a prime target for Irish nationalists at the time that they go to live in Ireland (Fellowes, 138). Despite Sybil's family trying their best to accommodate Tom and to reconcile themselves to the fact that he is part of their family, Tom is not one of them. However, he no longer belongs with the servants either, who do not want to serve him, nor do they want his company downstairs anymore. Tom and Sybil's relationship is neither for “upstairs” nor “downstairs” and while they may have

thought themselves independent enough to handle this fact, they seek refuge at Downton Abbey when life in Ireland has become dangerous for them (Episode 3, Season 3). Their struggle for acceptance in society would have remained had Sybil been allowed to live beyond her giving birth to their daughter, but cross-class marriages were occurring in the Edwardian era and although many of them failed, they did blur the lines between the classes even further (Fellowes, 148).

The Dowager Countess - Violet Grantham

Violet Grantham is the ultimate matriarch. She is fiercely protective of her family and despite whatever she herself may think of them, she will protect them from the ills of society or the carelessness of themselves often explaining that it is the family name that she is saving from ruin. Under that prickly exterior however is a very wise and experienced woman who loves her family and would do anything for them. She epitomises the Victorian matriarch who prefers a glossy exterior than to letting her guard down. With her quick wit and sharp comments, it is hard for the viewer to understand her true intentions in the very beginning of the series. She is the speaker of both the funniest and the most scathing lines and she quite often borders on parody. She is at the least extremely sarcastic and enjoys keeping her family on their toes while providing viewers with comic relief.

She believes in the "conventional standards of behaviour" that Hynes described, as well as believing in the class system, moral exactitude and noblesse oblige. She expresses anti-American sentiments to Lady Cora and her mother: "Why does everyday involve a fight with an American?" (Episode 4, Season 1) yet were anyone else to threaten Lady Cora, Violet would stop at nothing to prevent them from doing them any harm. She has a good relationship with her granddaughters; she is the one who sends Sybil money so that she can come back to Downton (Episode 1, Season 3) and after Sybil's death, she is the one who orchestrates a reconciliation between Lord Grantham and Lady Cora (Episode 5, Season 3). She is also compassionate to her servants and is one of the first to accept Tom Branson into the family, although she is already plotting lies to tell about his background to make him more acceptable in her society. When

William is fatally wounded, she fights to have him moved to Downton so that he can die surrounded by those who love him. She orchestrates the wedding between William and Daisy on his deathbed and on walking in on a sobbing Daisy sits down with her and consoles her (Episode 4, Season 2).

Violet has a love/hate relationship with Mrs. Isobel Crawley, Matthew's mother. Isobel is equally frank and outspoken and the mother of the present Earl may have found her match in the mother of the future heir. Finding her influence under threat she tries to undermine Isobel when she can and is very competitive with her. Yet, they forge a bond that deepens as the series continues.

The servants

Servants were essential to the aristocratic way of life. It would have been completely impossible for the family to take care of themselves, to manage the house, look after the children and let alone host a fancy dinner party, without the help of servants. The clothes were also of that fashion where quite often family members would have been incapable of dressing and undressing themselves alone. So to maintain the lifestyle to which they were accustomed they were just as dependent on their servants as their servants were dependent on them for employment (Aslet, 94).

It became increasingly difficult to staff country houses during the Edwardian era as more and more young people looked towards working in factories or shops where they retained a sense of their independence and dignity (Aslet, 99). The Workmen's Compensation Act of 1906 required all employers to take out insurance on their staff, meaning they were also increasingly more expensive to hire (Holland). Winifred Hurlstone-Jones wrote an article which was published in the *Lady* in 1919 where she outlined the case against service:

1. It means loss of caste.
2. It means loss of freedom of action – a girl is not on her own.
3. Long hours when they are on duty, if not actually working.

4. It is dull, the work is fairly hard, and distinctly monotonous. (Aslet, 99)

The upper classes, however, often felt as if their servants should have been grateful for the employment and were certain that within a kind household, with food and lodgings, they ought to be happy. Older servants, who had never questioned this way of life, and thought it "God's will" that some were born privileged and others were not, were sometimes equally resistant to change as their masters. This is shown in most or all of Downton Abbey's older servants' attitudes towards changing society, sometimes even going so far as to belittle the younger ones' plans or ambitions. The younger ones, armed with a better education, are more susceptible to the changes occurring around them and can allow themselves to believe that they can influence their own destinies.

The relationship between the upper servants and their masters was a very complex one. The servants would be privy to seeing the masters at their most vulnerable and the masters would need to show a great deal of trust towards them in return. Spending so much time together also meant that there was opportunity to become confidantes. Servants were, however, acutely aware that they were completely at their masters' mercy and so there was always a limit to how much they could let their guard down, even if their masters bared all. For some servants, this was the only "family" they had and while some may have been disgruntled, others were as fiercely loyal towards their masters as they would have been to their own flesh and blood. This is reflected in the character of Miss O'Brien, who belongs to this type of servant, but at the same time she strives to keep a certain distance between Lady Cora and herself. This is illustrated in a scene where Lady Cora comes downstairs to talk to her (Episode 2, Season 1). Miss O'Brien, not expecting a member of the family downstairs, comments that she feels it is beneath her to curtsey to a "doctor's son from Manchester". Lady Cora chastises her and in addition to hurt pride there is a certain element to this scene which implies that O'Brien feels the sanctity of "downstairs" violated by Her Ladyship's arrival. Downstairs is where the servants can enjoy some freedom from their role as servant, and even though there was class distinction between the servants, they could more or less be themselves down there. "Upstairs" was all about keeping up appearances, and all about behaving according to another's wishes. One can therefore not call the

relationship a friendship by any means, but in some ways the relationship was probably even closer than any other.

Carson and Mrs. Hughes

Some of the servants themselves would have been middle class, such as Carson and Mrs. Hughes. They symbolize the difficult position of belonging neither “upstairs” nor “downstairs”, and essentially being the “middle” class, and like Edith, somewhat shunned and forgotten. As butler, Carson is in charge of the male servants, and the housekeeper, Mrs. Hughes, in charge of the female staff. Even within the confines of “downstairs” there exists a strict hierarchy by which everyone must abide. The valet, lady's maid and cook are separate from the “lower” staff and answer only to Lord and Lady Grantham. Working in such close proximity with each other, however, must have required a certain amount of diplomacy and restraint, skills that were also necessary in order to have a successful career in service. One of the closest relationships in *Downton Abbey* is that between Lady Mary and Carson. She looks to him for advice regarding personal matters and it is clear that he is very fond of her. He has been with the family long enough to have known Mary as a small child, and regards them all as his family.

Mrs. Hughes takes on the role of strict but caring matriarch to the other servants, especially the female staff, but not exclusively. She tries to guide them and assists them all the best she can. She has a strict moral code that she adheres to and expects the same of the others. However, such as in the example of Ethel, despite being disappointed and also bound by the unwritten rules of society regarding illegitimacy, she comes to Ethel's aid, knowing that those rules, despite being in place, may not be right (Episode 4, Season 3). Carson plays the role of the head of the family of servants. He is more a disciplinarian than a father figure to them, but he has a definite soft side which he protects fiercely. It is not often shown, but then it is apparent that his dogmatic temperament is more an act than his actual nature. He was, after all, an actor before working at Downton which highlights the characters as role-players within their society.

Daisy

A career in service underwent dramatic changes from the time when Carson and Mrs. Hughes would have been starting out to when the younger ones came along. For many, a career in service seemed inevitable. For others, it was plain desirable. Previously, it would have meant somewhere to live and regular meals, as well as a steady job leading to a reasonably comfortable retirement but that included having to work themselves up through the ranks, starting out at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The sheer size of the lower class meant that the divide between the lowest (e.g. Daisy, the kitchenmaid) and highest (e.g Carson) was greater than the divide between Carson and Lord Grantham (Fellowes, 196). For someone like Daisy, service would almost be a salvation. Her story echoes that of Margaret Powell, lending credibility to her character. In her memoirs, Powell recounts her day to day experiences as a kitchenmaid and gives readers an insight into some of their gruelling duties. As the series of *Downton Abbey* continues and the cries for reform become louder, Daisy, as well as some of the other lower staff, begins to find her ambition and develops her own voice and her own opinions. Her self-confidence is tied to the perception of her status within society.
In the beginning of the series, Daisy was timid and somewhat beleaguered by the other servants. Kitchenmaids were the first to wake up in the morning and often the last to go to bed and had physically gruelling duties. Margaret Powell, who in 1968 published *Below Stairs,* her memoirs about being an Edwardian kitchenmaid, wrote that her day started at 5.30am and describes her reaction to her list of duties thus: “When I looked at this list I thought they had made a mistake. I thought it was for six people to do” (Powell, 45). In the first episode of Downton Abbey we meet Daisy as she awakens the rest of the servants, yet she has already completed a list of duties such as blackening the stove and lighting the fires before she talks to Mrs. Patmore. Daisy, as a kitchenmaid, is so low on the social ladder that she is barely to be seen by those “upstairs” and after completing her duties is told by Mrs. Patmore: “Very well. Now, get back down to the kitchens before anyone sees you” (Episode 1, Season 1). As the series progresses, Daisy becomes more confident, she builds a trusted relationship with Mrs. Patmore, and becomes a part of the family of servants “downstairs”, She is also promoted to assistant

cook, bringing the arrival of a new kitchenmaid which means that Daisy is no longer the lowest placed servant. All this gives Daisy an added confidence in following seasons that is not present in the beginning.

Significant story lines of servants:

The lower servants' characters are not only used as a tool to demonstrate the various ranks in the internal and external social hierarchies but also as a medium for divulging many of the social injustices the less fortunate faced. Byrne states in her article:

> The only dissenting voices in this idealised society are those of the supposedly 'bad' characters, Thomas the footman and O'Brien the ladies maid, who are both viewed with suspicion by everyone else at Downton. 'Guy Fawkes and his assistant', as Bates the valet describes them, are considered to be untrustworthy, disloyal and dangerously radical because they frequently voice their frustration with their lot, and don't hesitate to criticise their employers, in private if not directly. Nonetheless, Thomas and O'Brien are the most important and complex characters in the servants' hall, as well as the most relevant to a twenty-first-century perspective: their complaints about their working conditions and their employers seem more 'modern' than the unquestioning loyalty displayed by most of the others. (10)

Thomas' frustrations and his struggle for better equality, however, are portrayed as disloyalty and cunningness. His rivalry with the much more liked William has an ironic twist: "simple, straightforward and heterosexual" William dies in the war (Byrne, 12) whereas Thomas who is a complex and intelligent homosexual survives, albeit using less than honest means. He is, however, a survivor which sends out a message that perhaps there is not room in such a violent world for people like William after all.

Crucial to Thomas' storyline is his sexuality; homosexuality was not just frowned upon, it was downright punishable by law. People such as Thomas would

therefore have been in an incredibly vulnerable position, even if it is implied that most people at Downton know, or at least suspect, the truth. This forced secrecy explains many of Thomas' characteristics. He needs to be skilled at his job, polished in his demeanour, guarded about his personal life and still try to remain diplomatic. There he fails. It is true he has a soft side, but he is more often than not bitter and malicious. He is an ambitious man in a world that will not accept him, and in some respects it mirrors his slow and often wavering ascent up the ranks at Downton Abbey. Fortunately for him and the society he mirrors, reforms do come in regards to gay rights, even if they were (and still are in some ways) slow and wavering. Another character used to portray a social stigma of the era is Ethel, the housemaid who finds herself pregnant with an illegitimate war baby. We are introduced to her as an ambitious young woman who wants to leave service and and better her position (Episode 1, Season 2). After having an affair with a visiting officer who she believes will provide her with an escape from the life she feels trapped in, she leaves Downton with bleak prospects and must resort to prostitution to provide for herself and the child.

Homosexuality and illegitimacy guaranteed social stigmatization in Edwardian England. Homosexuality was illegal and was actively prosecuted such as in the case against Oscar Wilde in 1895 (The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, n.p.). The moral standards of the era apparently did not stretch to include “Love thy neighbour”. Despite religion playing a most important role in the Edwardian era, the moral piousness focused on retribution rather than empathy and forgiveness. Margaret Powell wrote on these double standards thus:

> Employers were always greatly concerned with your moral welfare. They couldn't have cared less about your physical welfare; so long as you were able to do the work, it didn't matter in the least to them whether you had back-ache, stomach-ache, or what ache, but anything to do with your morals they considered was their concern. That way they called it 'looking after servants', taking an interest in those below. They didn't worry about the long hours you put in, the lack of freedom and the poor wages, so long as you worked hard and knew that God was in Heaven and that He'd arranged for it that you lived down

> below and laboured, and that they lived upstairs in comfort and luxury, that was all right with them. (76)

This kind of master is not portrayed in *Downton Abbey* and the creators can be said to ignore many of the disadvantages to the distinct class system that was still in place in the Edwardian era. Life most certainly was not easy for those not born into privileged families and many servants were much more resentful than those represented in *Downton Abbey.* However, Thomas' and Ethel's storylines move them from their marginalised class position to the centre stage and Thomas gives the disgruntled servants a voice when he defiantly states: "we can say what we like down here [. . .] there's such a thing as free speech" (Episode 2, Season 1) echoing both Margaret Powell and Winifred Hurlstone-Jones who both criticized their experiences as servants.

Downton Abbey as a microcosm

> "Downton must be self-supporting if it's to have a chance of survival"
> (Episode 7, Season 3)

These words, which Matthew says to Lord Grantham, may just as well be applied to England as a whole, pointing out the parallels between *Downton Abbey* and England. Just like England had previously been a glorious and dominating presence, Downton had been a much larger, richer and more dominating feature in its community but has now become mismanaged, has fewer staff, is running out of money and needs to rely on outside help in the form of Lady Cora's fortune in order to survive. Ironically, this began before the Edwardian era, during the "gilded age" of the Victorian era. The match between Lord Grantham and Cora was orchestrated by his father and occurred in approximately 1889. This coincides with many an aristocratic home running into financial trouble at the same time as rich Americans were looking to increase their social status in Europe. The nouveau riche of America wanted entry into European nobility and either bought landed titles or, by marrying into the families, ensured that their descendants were part of an accepted European family and quite literally bought their way into the English aristocracy by marrying their daughters off to eligible English

bachelors (Aslet, 32; Fellowes, 7). The Victorian age had not been as gilded as people liked to believe, but the sentiment of the Edwardian era was that it was, first of all, vital to keep up appearances, and that these things were not discussed. Painstaking effort appears to have been used to keep a glossy, "golden" veneer on the surface, all to maintain a reputation of strength and glory. Additionally, there was a strong custom to cling on to tradition, for tradition's sake, not because it was successful, but because all change was predetermined to be bad (Hynes, 6). This is true of both England and of *Downton Abbey*. Internally they have both become laced with conflicting values and ideals, and often fraught with tension. While England was at war with the world, Downton was was at war with itself (Barber). That which used to work, no longer suffices. The inner politics are often detrimental, yet the urge to change for change's sake, without having thought things through, often leads characters to make hasty decisions. In other cases, change is crucial, and the viewer, with the gift of hindsight, can be grateful for the risk that others took so that one can reap the benefits of it today, such as Sybil's determination in the women's suffrage movement. Without real-life women like her, modern society might have turned out to be very different indeed.

Downton Abbey manages to incorporate astonishingly many Edwardian issues into its storyline. Each character has a role in the story-telling, every plot corresponds with genuine issues of the day and one can sense the dynamics of the changing relationships between both the characters and each other and then their community. The characters often symbolize certain traits or values of the era, as discussed in the previous section, but their personalities and their diverse backgrounds allow for an education in what it could have been like for either a domestic servant or an aristocrat. The generation gap between the downstairs servants highlights the changing views on domestic service workers, and through Sybil we learn of the suffragette movement, while Branson tells of the Irish revolt. The plight of the poor, the unemployed, the handicapped is shown in *Downton Abbey,* in some cases in more detail than in others. Through the series, the viewer is also introduced to the then latest technology as new appliances begin to appear at the Abbey. Appropriately, these new additions came during a severe shortage in the supply of domestic workers (Aslet, 103). Servants who already had up to 16-hour days would not have been able to cope with an increased

workload had it got any worse, and so any machine that could cut a servant's workload in half would have been very welcome. The Edwardian era saw the arrival of ice making machines, laundry machines, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, irons and central heating (Aslet, 104-113). Understandably, especially for resisting Edwardians, there were some who feared that they would become obsolete in case there would be no more use for them in service. Those like Mrs. Patmore would have had a much harder time finding new employment than the younger staff.

Within the walls of *Downton Abbey* one can see representatives from most areas of Edwardian life, albeit on a much smaller scale. The series displays the rigid class structure that governed society, viewers get an insight into the mentality behind the actions taken and also gain a real sense of the issues the characters were facing. The use of mirror imagery is also quite impressive. One can argue that Carson and Mrs. Hughes mirror the Lord and Lady Grantham. While Lord Grantham may be the head of the estate, Carson is in charge of the running of the house, and whilst Lady Cora oversees the social life of the family, Mrs. Hughes is the one making sure all the guests are taken care of. Taken further, one can then argue that Lord Grantham and Lady Cora mirror two sides of the English aristocracy; Lord Grantham being the more traditional of the two and therefore slower to accept change and Lady Cora symbolizing a more modern approach and a fresher outlook. The characters are the foundation in their community and are all equally important. Their micro-society could not function without each of them separately and no one is of greater value than another despite differences in wealth or status. For instance, Lord and Lady Grantham are dependent on the kitchenmaid in order for their house, and indeed the estate and their immediate society, to function as it should. This dependence on the kitchenmaid may not be as straightforward as their dependence on the upper servants, but each of them has a place in the social food chain and one can not live without the other. Without the kitchenmaid, the cook could not run a kitchen that size. Without the cook, Lord Grantham and his family could not entertain guests, let alone survive, as it was completely unheard of that the aristocracy cooked (Aslet, 92). It was shocking for that era that a lady like Sybil would take cooking lessons. Therefore, as indirect as it may at first appear, the kitchenmaid at the bottom of the social food chain is no less important than the aristocracy at the top.

A combination of social reforms and the outbreak of First World War broke down the barriers that had before then kept individuals from different classes separate from each other, shortening the distance between the worlds of "upstairs" and "downstairs". This is echoed in *Downton Abbey* in the episodes during and after the war. The characters all become visibly more sympathetic towards each other as was the general sentiment of the era, some even attempting to remove the barriers altogether. Neville Lytton describes how the Hilles country house was run in *The English Country Gentleman.* Construction of Hilles began in 1913 when the house was owned by the socialist architect Detmar Blow, who did not wish for there to be a distinction between the servants and his family: "For the better welfare of the children, there is no nursery, and, for the better welfare of the servants, there are no servants' quarters'" (Aslet, 101). The family and servants ate together in the kitchen, although this proved to be awkward for them all and the practice was eventually abandoned. The barriers may not have been ready to be removed altogether, but this example shows a willingness to move towards it that was unprecedented.

The main causes of Edwardian unrest remained largely unresolved until well beyond its era. The final years before the war saw a sudden increase in strikes which were not only expensive and disruptive, but had also become violent. The suffrage movement also resorted to violence in order to force change, and Irish nationalists were very restless indeed (Hynes, 353). Attitudes were changing; for example, the Lords voted away their veto power eventually in 1911, but change was coming slowly. The Edwardian "garden party" was simply too much fun, but it was also too good to be true. The war brought the party to an abrupt halt. In stark contrast to previous descriptions of a "gilded" age, writer Henry James wrote the day after the English entered war:

> The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words. (qtd. in Hynes, 358)

This echoes Lady Mary's statement in 1913: “Everything seems so golden one minute and then turns to ashes the next” (Episode 3, Season 1). After the war people were too embittered to go back to life as it had been before (Hynes, 14). Although there are not many laws, bills or acts directly attributed to the Edwardian era, it was however a catalyst to a great many changes which have shaped today's society and social values.

Conclusion

It is fitting that a historical period so filled with “behind-the-scenes” action as the the Edwardian era be used as a backdrop for a television series, let alone one with such layers to it as *Downton Abbey.* The Edwardian era, at first glance peaceful and “golden”, was in fact a chaotic and anxiety-ridden time. It was a time of fervent optimism mixed in with a sense of pessimistic doom. People wanted change, without actually having to change anything, resulting in a stalemate, creating a melting pot of emotions and ideas. Remembering Lady Mary's statement about gold turning to ashes, it summarizes the era perfectly. It only seemed to be “golden”, and even then it was only golden to those privileged enough to enjoy it. It hardly seems a coincidence that World War I came to violently end the era, shaking every aspect and every member of society into action and forcing them to work together for a greater cause. As Matthew says to Thomas whilst in the trenches: “War has a way of distinguishing between the things that matter and the things that don't” (Episode 1, Season 2).

The war did not end social injustices, but it did start to close the gap between the classes, blurring lines which up until then had been carved in stone. *Downton Abbey* is not to be viewed as a documentary, and there are bound to be minor inaccuracies in favour of artistic license. That said, it is still a gripping and compelling show about a fairly underestimated and unjustly forgotten period in time that serves as a metaphor “for contemporary Britain beset with economic and social difficulties” (Byrne, 14). It is no wonder that viewers anticipate new episodes like never before; if their life mirrors that of *Downton Abbey* logic tells them to keep watching to see how everything will eventually play out.

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