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Fascinating Spectacles: Class as Traditional Obsession in Britain

Fascinující podívaná: Tradiční posedlost třídou v britské kultuře

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

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I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

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Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to explore the notion of class in Britain and its contemporary perception. It tries to explain the phenomenon of class obsession. The thesis consists of two parts. The first, theoretical one describes the British conception of class in general and explains its key aspects, using historical survey. Further it concentrates on the crucial role of the media and popular culture. They perpetuate popular obsession with the class system and support the perception of class as something glamorous. Chapter three presents the class as a 'spectacle' and explains how the popular culture works. The audience is fascinated by visual portrayal of the 'higher life' and therefore often looks up to the upper class as its role models or when in need of amusement.

The second part of the work provides a reflection of the British class system in contemporary TV series *Downton Abbey*. One of the key propositions of this work is that despite the generally negative characteristics of any class system, it is the very class distinction combined with conservative traditions to which the popularity of these British TV series can be attributed. On the example of the above-mentioned series, the ongoing fascination with traditional representations of class (especially the upper class) is demonstrated and the possible reasons for the obsession further explored. 'Heritage industry' and subsequently also 'heritage cinema' create the illusion of an idyllic country with rural aspects and fulfill the audience's fantasies about such life. They also encapsulate certain moments in time and thus remind us of the 'glorious' past of Britain. 'Stately houses' are important in both contemporary heritage industry and in the films and TV series. It is explained what role such houses played in both Victorian and Edwardian era and why they are therefore so often used in this genre today.

'Class' is presented from many different viewpoints in order to explore its variability. It can be perceived as a means for displaying one's social status, defense mechanism or as a part of ritual that is supposed to sooth people. As a subject of popular obsession, class can be also mocked and the 'rural fantasy' turned into parody. For all the attempts at forming a 'classless society', Britain is still a country where class matters. The thesis therefore portrays Britain as 'class division-free society' since it shows it would be premature to talk about a 'classless society'.

Key Words

Class, society, tradition, media, popular culture, television, British culture, *Downton Abbey*, heritage, the press

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je zkoumat pojetí třídy v Británii a její současné vnímání. Pokouší se vysvětlit fenomén posedlosti třídou. Práce se skládá ze dvou částí. První, teoretická, obecně vysvětluje britskou koncepci třídy a pomocí historického přehledu nastiňuje základní prvky s ní související. Dále se tato část práce zaměřuje na důležitou roli televize jako média a populární kulturu. Umožňují totiž zvěčnění Británie jako země, kde je třída důležitá a utvrzují pojetí třídy jako něčeho prestižního. Třetí kapitola představuje třídu jako „podívanou“ a vysvětluje, jak funguje populární kultura. Diváci jsou fascinováni vizuálním zobrazením života „vyšší společnosti“ a tudíž k vyšší společenské třídě často vzhlíží – ať už jako ke svým vzorům či jen pro pobavení.

Druhá část práce poskytuje reflexi britského třídního systému v současném televizním seriálu *Panství Downton*. Jedním z hlavních předpokladů této práce je fakt, že navzdory obecně negativnímu přístupu k jakékoli třídní společnosti, je to právě to rozdělení do tříd spojené s určitými tradicemi, které zajišťují tomuto seriálu danou popularitu. Na příkladu výše zmíněného seriálu je ukázána stále trvající posedlost třídou (především vyšší třídou) a jsou zkoumány možné důvody, které k této posedlosti mohou vést. „Heritage“ průmysl - tedy průmysl soustřeďující se na odkaz Británie - a potažmo také filmová tvorba s touto tematikou související vytvářejí iluzi idylické země s venkovskými prvky a naplňují tak sny a představy obecnstva o takovémto životě. Dokáží také uchovat určitý moment v čase a jsou nám tak schopna připomínat slavnou historii Británie. Venkovská sídla jsou důležitá jak pro současný „heritage“ průmysl, tak pro filmy a seriály natočené v tomto duchu. V práci je vysvětleno jakou roli tato sídla zastávala ve viktoriánské a edwardiánské době a proč se tedy dnes tak často využívají v žánru dobových dramát.

Aby bylo možno posoudit různorodost „třídy“, je na tento koncept v práci nahlíženo z mnoha různých pohledů. Třídu můžeme vnímat jako prostředek jak dát najevo své společenské postavení, obranný mechanismus nebo i jako součást určitého rituálu, jehož cílem je především ukonejšit lidi. Třídě, jakožto předmětu časté posedlosti, je také možno vysmívat se a idylické představy se dají snadno parodovat. Přes všechny snahy o „beztřídní společnost“ má Británie k tomuto modelu ještě stále poměrně daleko. Tato práce tedy zachycuje Británii spíše jako společnost již bez viditelných třídních rozdílů, nicméně hovořit o ní jako o beztřídní by bylo ukvapené.

Klíčová slova

Třída, společnost, tradice, média, populární kultura, televize, britská kultura, *Panství Downton*, „heritage“, tisk

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1. Introduction

Class division and the tradition connected to it is an inherent part of the everyday life of British people. Despite many negatives and disputes about it, class is not only something of the past. It is very much present even today – perhaps not only in the real life but also in contemporary works of art spanning literature, paintings and TV production:

The British are famously obsessed with class, whether they see their country as a huge (and perhaps harmonious) hierarchy, as a society deeply divided into upper, middle and lower, or as the setting for a constant struggle between ‘them’ and ‘us’.¹

From the early beginnings of class distinction until today, class has been a crucial issue for British society. Supposing that the consciousness of class in Britain is inevitable, another question comes to mind. How do we understand class? How important is its role in contemporary society? Is it a part of the British national identity? It is important to think about it in terms of what class is doing to a society. Is it uniting or dividing it? I would like to concentrate on the fact how important class is as a part of the British society.

Even though the nation’s class system is nowadays by many Brits considered a relic of old times, the importance and the undeniable presence of class segregation even in today’s British society is palpable. Interestingly enough, its popularity, as a brief glance at the current TV series production dedicated to respective era of British history (most often the Edwardian era) and the manner of the target audience’s reception indicate, does not seem to fade away. In other words, how is it possible that despite the fact that the class system basically contradicts the modern notion of equality, it is still perceived positively – or actually admired – by the public? The aim of the thesis is to provide an answer to this phenomenon.

¹ David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin Books 2000) preface.

Thus, as one could deduce from what was mentioned above, this work will concentrate on the current perception of class in Britain by analysing relevant literature and TV production. Why should literature and TV production be considered a relevant source of knowledge with respect to the studied subject? Bernard Gortais states that: “A work of art is thus the objectivation (representation in the form of an object or an event) of a subjective relationship to the world by means of expression that are perceptible to the senses.”² In other words, the real spirit of a given time period or situation is best represented through art. Thus, the problem of class-consciousness can be better defined through the representation in texts or motion pictures rather than elaborate theories or definitions. Television as a mass medium best reflects the audience’s interest and the reactions are very immediate. Therefore I have chosen the popular phenomenon of TV series for the demonstration of class obsession.

The reason for selecting popular television can be further clarified by Mike Storry’s and Peter Childs’ book *British Cultural Identities*, where they deal with ways of getting to know the cultural background of the British people. They explain why it might be often more useful to concentrate on the popular culture, which comes from below rather than the high culture, which is imposed from above. Popular culture better reflects the public, widespread taste “and thus enables us to explore Britain’s psychology, motivation and aspirations.”³

Despite the generally negative characteristics of any class system, it is the very class distinction combined with conservative traditions to which the popularity of these British TV series can be attributed. We can see in them the values that are no longer present (or rare) in present-day society – respect, loyalty, order, and tradition. For all attempts at formulating a classless society, Britishness, or at least Englishness,⁴ is perceived as constructed, among others, through the social and cultural concept of class. Class and its representations is a forceful tool for sending out a range of political,

² Bernard Gortais, “Abstraction and Art,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* Jul. 29 (2003): 1241, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3558216>>, June 2013.

³ Mike Storry and Peter Childs, eds. *British Cultural Identities* (London: Routledge, 2002) 9.

⁴ Due to the restriction of space, the various attitudes to class in the different countries that make up the United Kingdom will not be thoroughly investigated. Class indeed seems to be more an issue in the concepts of Englishness (see Storry and Childs). It does not seem to be such a fundamental topic in other national identities.

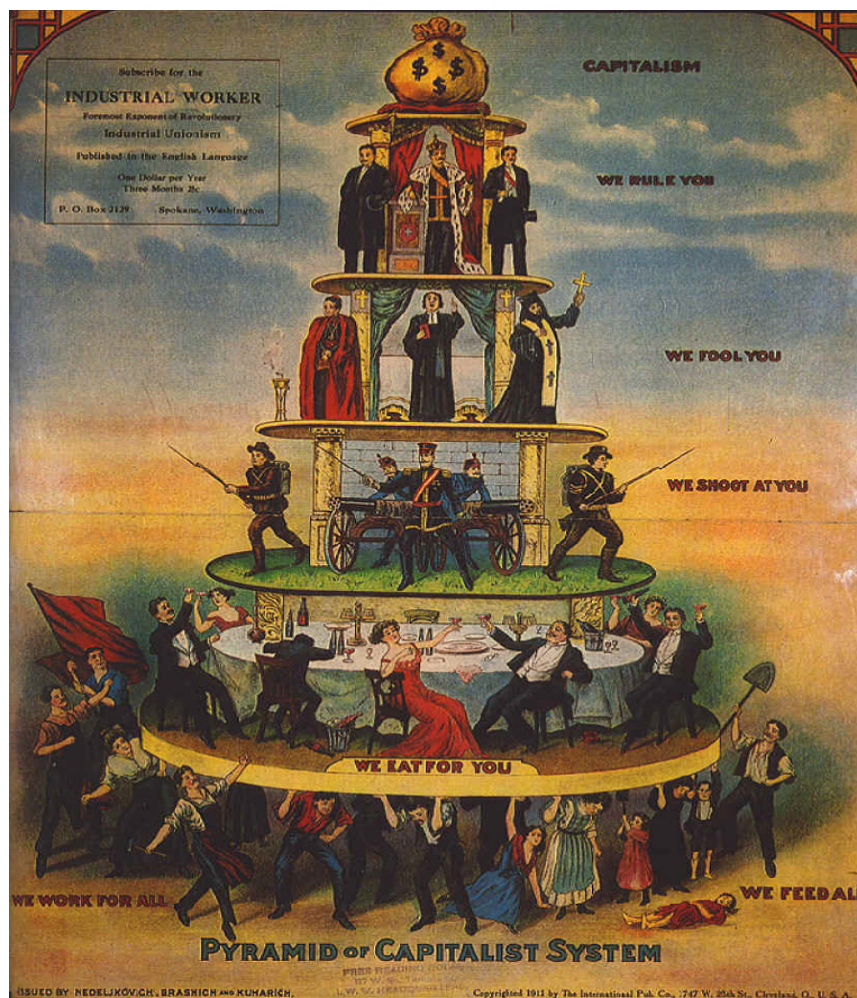
ideological and cultural messages to the public. Class seems to be omnipresent as a social fact but also as a powerful image:

Class distinctions reflect reality – life on a council estate is very different from life in a state home – but they are also constantly used by politicians to forge new notions of national identity, to demonize opponents, and to distribute praise or blame.⁵

⁵ Cannadine - preface.

2. Class

This paper does not aim to deliver a precise definition of class as a social phenomenon. Its goal is rather to explore it within the context of the British cultural, historical and perhaps even political background with respect to its current popularity and so called 'heritage industry.' Given that the term 'class' is basically an essentially contested concept, it is easy to find many different definitions from various academic sources. However, this work will be concerned with a more popular notion of 'class', which is typical for British culture. Therefore such perception of class cannot be restricted to only economic aspect, for instance, but it has to include also the historical, social and cultural perspective that is connected to the respective society and its lifestyle. Still, with that being said, it is useful to provide at least a general definition of class for a better understanding of the topic.



Picture I - Traditional portrayal of the capitalist pyramid hierarchy

Class is usually defined as “a group sharing the same economic or social status.”⁶ These groups, once identified, form a class system that is often portrayed as a pyramid. Such portrayal was not chosen randomly – it serves as an apt representation of the division of society. Marx emphasizes the role of the lower class that has to bear the weight of the richer, upper classes on their shoulders. Furthermore, Cannadine suggests that: “classes, like nations, are sometimes more, sometimes less, than imagined communities.”⁷

When thinking about class, one should be careful to avoid narrowing his or her point of view to only one specific opinion. The whole class ideology, which often deals with these divisions, can be also perceived as “derived from a fear of losing social superiority to the forces of social mobility.”⁸ Thus, class can also serve in the society as a means of defence, having variable importance during the course of its history:

The labels ‘working’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ first appeared in the 19th century as a way of classifying the sharp social differences that arose in Britain as it led the world in the Industrial Revolution. But can a Victorian system designed to describe the relationship between industrial workers, managers and owners still be relevant today?⁹

Even though the sharp differences of above mentioned class system are not so sharp anymore, class is still something that helps people find their place in society and, thus cannot be easily eliminated from it. Perhaps in the next decades class status will become increasingly less important but this shift will not be a sudden one as it does not only necessitates the change of the system itself but also the tradition revolving around it:

⁶ ‘Class.’ Def. Merriam-Webster online dictionary. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>

⁷ Cannadine 18.

⁸ Emily Williams, “Modern Britain is Still a Class Society,” *New Histories*. The free online History magazine, 3rd March 2010 <<http://newhistories.group.shef.ac.uk/wordpress/wordpress/?p=555>>, June 2013.

⁹ “About the Great British Class Survey,” *BBC.co.uk*, <<https://ssl.bbc.co.uk/labuk/articles/class/>>, May 2013.

Taking a long and broad view, changes in popular perceptions of British society have been at least as important as changes in British society itself, and it is in the evolving relationship between these social perceptions and social structures that the history of class is properly to be found and to be studied.¹⁰

In order to understand class and its significance in British society, it is necessary to trace the beginning of class consciousness and also its development that lead to the present day situation. Emily Williams in her article “Modern Britain is Still a Class Society”¹¹ discusses the origin of the class rivalry and analyses in detail the reason for the prestige connected with it. She starts her discussion by looking at the medieval feudal period, where the social hierarchy was rather rigid with a clear pyramid structure that placed the king at the top of the social order above the nobility and the plebeians. People had their place in a divine scheme and occupied the social positions that they were born into, making it very difficult to escape. Family lineage therefore defined one’s social position.

The way social status was understood began to change with the beginning of the late medieval period. Feudal systems started to break down and subsequently were slowly replaced by new forms of more fluid social organization. The increase in production and trade then concentrated capital in urban centres, accelerating the process of urbanization. This shift in economy created a new class of urban merchants who were both wealthy and well educated, forced by the need to succeed in business. According to Williams, it is important to realize the contrast between feudal systems, where it was the family that mattered most, and the new social system that followed, which enabled people to gain social status because of their wealth and education. It was in this era that social mobility became a real possibility.

Once the importance of feudal lineage was lowered, new ideologies needed to be created in order to maintain the social superiority of the upper class. This anxiety was expressed by a new level of preoccupation with demonstrating social superiority in

¹⁰ Cannadine 23.

¹¹ Emily Williams, “Modern Britain is Still a Class Society,” *New Histories*. The free online History magazine, 3rd March 2010 <<http://newhistories.group.shef.ac.uk/wordpress/wordpress/?p=555>>, June 2013.

order to gain an aristocratic identity for the sake of securing one's privileged social position. Those who managed to achieve the described elite status usually did so through commercial success. However, since the aforementioned cultural shift, their attention focused on disassociating themselves from their origins while simultaneously trying to present themselves as aristocratic, hereditary elite that was the new iconic attribute of prestige. Williams explains that as a result, behaviour, culture and spending habits¹² became increasingly important categories for asserting privileged class status:

In the effort to make elite status more exclusive, the upper classes created strictly regulated set of social codes, emphasizing self-control, elegance, refined speech, table manners and forms of address. Art, music and fashion became areas in which taste could be exercised.¹³

Taste and cultural background became indicators of social advancement. In other words, these attributes determined one's position in the society. If given people proved to possess the required qualities, they received a higher social rank and were thus distinguished from the less educated and less civilized mass. The ability of suppressing one's natural, 'animal' instincts was highly valued and therefore both emotional and physical control became important, indicating certain 'superior quality' of the elite. It is crucial for the reader to realize that this is the moment of class becoming a spectacle - the necessity of the upper class to demonstrate visibly and obviously (in order to be immediately identifiable as members of the upper class elite) their social status. From Williams' analysis it is also clear that even though economic indicators no longer describe the boundaries of class today (income is not an indicator, nor is the financial size of property), behaviour, tastefulness and educational background still divide the classes in society.

¹² Such obsessions are today referred to as 'conspicuous consumption', term introduced by American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929). He is best known for his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*, which was published in 1899 and where he introduces this term.

¹³ Williams.

2.1 Class Division

It was once a commonplace to portray Britain as a class-ridden society. Class was a staple part of the British way of life. Each class had unique characteristics. The upper class had stately homes, aristocratic backgrounds, and posh accents; the middle class, semi-detached houses, suits, and bowler hats; the working class, common accents, fish and chips, and council flats.¹⁴

The quote above seems to imply a very rigid class system in operation, but this system has disintegrated and the range of various lifestyles that characterise different social segments in contemporary British society is very large. But precisely this yearning for clear identification markers of social belonging marks the nostalgia for clarity. The upper class is supposed to represent certain values, position and potentially also power: "They were an hereditary elite whose wealth and position were based on property and title."¹⁵ However, during the course of the 20th century, the position of the upper class has changed. Storry and Childs continue: "Hence, over time, the aristocracy have been gradually replaced by a new upper class of businessmen who emerged with 'gentlemanly capitalists' and settled in London and the south-east."¹⁶

There are many factors to take into account in order to divide people into classes. "Britain's place in this class hierarchy is also determined by such considerations as ancestry, accent, education, deportment, mode of dress, patterns of recreation, type of housing and style of life."¹⁷ Each class therefore has its own specific features, place in the social hierarchy and role.

Fiske and Hartley in their book *Reading Television* emphasize that "there is indeed a sense in which the differences in class and status that we can observe at any one time should more properly be thought of as a constant flux than as a fixed hierarchy

¹⁴ Storry and Childs 177.

¹⁵ Storry and Childs 180.

¹⁶ Storry and Childs 180.

¹⁷ Cannadine 22.

of relations."¹⁸ Therefore one should always keep in mind that even though the position of class is firmly fixed in the society, the class hierarchy itself is very flexible.

Nowadays the role of the class division is much smaller, which means the elite is not that strictly separated from the others. However, there are still some factors that show us specific background can still make relatively large difference. Famous families still have a great influence in Britain and it is often connected with their education. "The modern upper class is still based on individuals with a common background and close social contacts."¹⁹ Almost 50% of the most successful and highest positioned people in Great Britain went to either Oxford or Cambridge – the most prestigious schools with the biggest tradition.²⁰

2.2 'Classless Society'

"In recent years, many writers have begun to speak of the 'decline of class' in British society. The term 'classless society' has become commonplace."²¹ Often connected with these tendencies are Margaret Thatcher and John Major – both from rather poor families and without the traditional public school education. Therefore they can serve as evidence that anyone can rise to the very top of the British society (to the post of Prime Minister in this case), regardless of their social status.

Class was regarded as something unwanted and therefore many attempted to figure out how to eliminate it. Many people suggest²² that the credit for transformation of the society belongs to Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990. She removed class from the political landscape through a series of government reforms by shifting power towards individual consumers and the free market, advocating the opinion that everybody had the opportunity to improve his or her position in society.

¹⁸ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Routledge, 1992) 103.

¹⁹ Storry and Childs 181.

²⁰ Storry and Childs 181.

²¹ Storry and Childs 177.

²² Storry and Childs deal with this topic in *British Cultural Identities* in the chapter "Class and politics" (pages 177-207).

Most of the reservations towards class naturally emanate from one's own consciousness about his or her position in the society, which is predetermined by birth. Class division is linked to many prejudices and also establishes many precedents. Therefore, class division represents a certain social order present in Britain for a long time, which is accompanied by many traditions. Therefore, as traditions have an annoying habit of lasting over centuries, it might be hard to let go of it. The paradox is that even though there are several tendencies towards a classless society, class distinction is still an issue. In fact, instead of reducing the number of classes, new ones appear:

There is strong evidence to suggest social class divisions have not disappeared from British life. The global financial crisis and subsequent recession may even have acted to make class divisions more, rather than less defined.²³

On April 2nd 2013, the results of Great British Class Survey,²⁴ conducted by the BBC and developed in collaboration with academic experts, were published. The results were based on a survey of 160,000 residents of the United Kingdom most of whom lived in England and described themselves as 'white'. It used economic, social and cultural indicators rather than occupation, wealth and education to define the new classes. The study showed that the established model of the upper, middle and working class is no longer sufficient to contain and explain Britain's enduring obsession. Instead, fragmentation into seven individual categories was necessary to accurately reflect the real state of affairs. The highest one, called 'elite' represented about 6% of the contemporary British society. The lowest one, called 'precariat', represented approximately 15% of the total. The aforementioned segregation was established in the following manner:

²³ "About the Great British Class Survey".

²⁴ BBC Lab UK's 'Great British Class Survey' was designed by Professor Mike Savage (University of York) and Professor Fiona Devine (University of Manchester). Lab UK was launched on the BBC website in September 2009 to encourage citizen science. The research was carried out by academics at the London School of Economics, the University of Manchester, City University and the Universities of York, Bergen in Norway, and the Université Paris Descartes, France.

Elite: This is the most privileged class in Great Britain who have high levels of all three capitals. [The survey is based on examining three categories – economic, cultural and social resources that people possess, also known as ‘capitals’.] Their high amount of economic capital sets them apart from everyone else.

Established Middle Class: Members of this class have high levels of all three capitals although not as high as the Elite. They are a gregarious and culturally engaged class.

Technical Middle Class: This is a new, small class with high economic capital but seem less culturally engaged. They have relatively few social contacts and so are less socially engaged.

New Affluent Workers: This class has medium levels of economic capital and higher levels of cultural and social capital. They are a young and active group.

Emergent Service Workers: This new class has low economic capital but has high levels of 'emerging' cultural capital and high social capital.

Traditional Working Class: This class scores low on all forms of the three capitals although they are not the poorest group. The average age of this class is older than the others.

Precariat: This is the most deprived class of all with low levels of economic, cultural and social capital. The everyday lives of members of this class are precarious.²⁵

Some of the aspects that used to define class in the past are no longer relevant. Nevertheless, some still prevail - for example the already above mentioned education or cultural background. Furthermore, the accent determines what background people come from. “The words an individual speaks immediately reveal her or his class.”²⁶ We cannot speak about the decline of class in Britain yet “for Britons are always thinking about whom they are, what kind of society they belong to, and where they themselves belong in it.”²⁷

²⁵ “The Great British Class Survey - Results”, *BBC.co.uk*, 3rd April 2013
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/21970879>>, May 2013.

²⁶ Storry and Childs 178.

²⁷ Cannadine 23.

Pronouncing the death of class in British society would be premature. A recent extensive survey of public opinion found that 90% of people are still placing themselves in a particular class; 73% agreed that class is still an integral part of British society; and 52% thought there were still sharp class divisions.²⁸

“Class may have become culturally and politically invisible, yet it remains an integral part of British society.”²⁹ In spite of several significant attempts to remove class from the every-day life or at least to lower its significance in Britain, as long as it remains firmly rooted in people’s minds, it will not be possible to dramatically alter its perception.

²⁸ Statistics taken from: Storry and Childs, 178.

²⁹ Storry and Childs 178.

3. Class as Spectacle

Class ideology is still derived from a fear of losing social superiority to the forces of social mobility. Where economic opportunities allow people of different backgrounds to obtain similar levels of wealth, different social groups create class ideologies in order to disassociate themselves from other groups that they feel to be a threat to their own social superiority.³⁰

As shown above, Emily Williams emphasizes that this tendency started with the rise of the non-feudal aristocratic elite of the early modern period who wished to maintain their social exclusivity. Nevertheless, this trend is still well alive today, which is being demonstrated by its frequent critique in popular culture. People who want to remain at the apex of society need to make a lot of effort in order to distinguish themselves from the masses. By living large, the elite not only maintains its position on top of the social ladder but it also creates a defence mechanism against the aspiring lower classes. This is the reason why class became ostentatious and associated with exclusivity and luxury.

In the 19th century, the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' to describe the behavioural characteristics of the 'nouveau riche'- members of the social class that emerged as a result of the accumulation of capital wealth during the Second Industrial Revolution³¹. 'Conspicuous consumption' was a term used when talking about men, women, and families of the upper class that saw their wealth as a tool for public manifestation of their social power, motivated by the desire for prestige and public display of their social status.

When thinking about TV series or films that deal with the topic of class, Fiske and Hartley suggest that:

³⁰ Williams.

³¹ The Second Industrial Revolution took place between the years 1860–1914.

Television performs a function of 'anticipatory socialization', whereby people use the mediated view of status groups [that is] higher than their own (which they see on television) as models they can emulate. The idea is that people can then learn the characteristic language, behaviour, and habits of the aspired-to status group in order to gain entry and then adjust to that group.³²

Subsequently, this creates an obsession of watching other people's lives, which might occasionally lead to a certain level of addiction that explains the enormous popularity of the above-mentioned series.

3.1 Popular Culture

The last paragraph of the previous section described the thought process whereby the audience becomes attracted, if not even addicted, to TV series involving the lifestyle of a privileged class. Although attitudes towards popular culture differ and cultural theorists tend to disagree in their opinions about popular media, this thesis will take a more positive approach. Apart from the ability to portray the manners and traits typical for the admired social group, Fiske adds yet another important attribute that the television as a medium benefits from:

Television as the mass medium is paradoxically classless - in the sense that most of its content derives from the experience of and is directed towards the members of what we can now see is the class to which the vast majority of us belong: the subordinate class in itself.³³

This essential quality enables us to explore such a sensitive topic like the class is. By allowing us to see the genuine, unforced reactions of the audience, we see the way British perceive class today:

Popular culture is made by subordinate peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests

³² Fiske and Hartley 106.

³³ Fiske and Hartley 107.

of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above, as mass cultural theorists would have it.

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In other words, popular culture is made by the people for the people of the same social status. However, one should keep in mind that even though it comes from the masses, popular culture is often forced upon us without any option to defend ourselves. Therefore it is important to realize this connection: "Making popular culture out of television [...] is possible and pleasurable only if the subordinate can make their meanings out of it."³⁵ Popular culture can mean something only if it really reflexes the needs of society and analyses the preferences of the audience; otherwise it would be only pressure from the media: "It [television] can be made popular only if it offers meanings that are relevant to the everyday lives of subordinate people [...]."³⁶ Therefore, 'heritage films' and 'costume dramas' try to incorporate romance and other features so that the subordinate people can relate these to their everyday lives. If the films and series failed to do so, they would not be able to reach such popularity. (The specific reasons for their popularity are further demonstrated on the example of *Downton Abbey* and *The Forsyte Saga* in chapter 5 of this thesis.)

"Anyone who has ever watched *Little Britain*, *Harry Enfield* or *Shameless* can see that popular culture maintains standardised class portrayals."³⁷ While talking about these TV series, Emily Williams in her article *Modern Britain is Still a Class Society* suggests that class ideologies are "thus self-defensive, spawned by an insecurity concerning one's own value in society."³⁸ We see that the cultural background is interconnected with the society and with the notion of class:

Culture making (and culture is always in process, never achieved) is a social process: all meanings of self, of social relations, all the discourses and texts that play such important cultural roles can circulate only in relationship to the social system. Any social system needs a cultural system of meanings that serves either to hold it in place or destabilize it,

³⁴ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London: Routledge, 1994) 2.

³⁵ Fiske 3.

³⁶ Fiske 3.

³⁷ Williams.

³⁸ Williams.

to make it more or less amenable to change. Culture is a constant succession of social practices; it is therefore inherently political, it is centrally involved in the distribution and possible redistribution of various forms of social power.³⁹

3.2 'Sparkle' and Etiquette of the Upper Class

Class hierarchy created a certain value system in society that helps keep up traditions and manners. Etiquette is closely connected to the upper class and the aristocracy. They were not only the role models for proper manners but also for proper language. The people were used to looking up to them, so they could get at least some of the social prestige. "As a result, what were perceived to be the habits and practices of the traditional ruling class were imitated or adapted in thousands of bourgeois homes."⁴⁰ Proper behaviour and social education were part of the family tradition; many generations were passing on the specific traditions and proper manners:

Etiquette was not peculiar to the Victorians, who inherited a good deal of social ritual from the preceding era. In the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, there were forms of behaviour that were practised by the 'best people' and imitated to a greater or lesser extent by those farther down the scale.⁴¹

Fiske and Hartley came up with an interesting point that the glamour of some series or films has a metonymic relationship with our own life-styles as viewers – meaning that we share the culture that values this life-style, and we may even possess some of the objects and attributes that such a series celebrates: "We are drawn into this well-heeled milieu, and not debarred from it by virtue of our lack of wealth."⁴² Among the already mentioned relevance to our everyday situation, these are some additional reasons why it is so interesting for other people to watch the upper class, even if only on television, why we are fascinated by it. As Fiske suggests, we are drawn to it, looking for

³⁹ Fiske 1.

⁴⁰ Michael Paterson, *Life in Victorian Britain* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2008) 195.

⁴¹ Paterson 195.

⁴² Fiske and Hartley 108.

parallels with our own life. Christopher Caudwell describes what beauty means and how even the simplest things in life can be performed with grace and elegance:

Not only language but all social products have an affective role. Each society evolves its own gestures, deportment, and manner. These include a reference to reality, a pointing to something, the necessary opening of doors to get through them, or lifting of food to feed oneself [...]. But these actions also include an affective element: all can be done 'beautifully' or artistically. One can point with an air, open a door politely, feed oneself quiet and 'off silver' [...]. All this is beauty; all this is desirable; all this is a social product. ⁴³

In his book *Life in Victorian Britain*, Michael Paterson discusses the habits and subtle rules for social conventions. From manners and clothing to so-called 'morning calls,' everything had a set of rules. "It was also necessary to fend off any unsuitable marriage that might be entered into for romantic reasons."⁴⁴ People of that era certainly did not have much freedom. "This level of respect for conformity is difficult to understand from a modern perspective, but until the 1950s society was run from the top, with modes being created by the aristocracy."⁴⁵ On one hand, many customs upheld in Victorian Britain may seem very odd – or peculiar at least – from the perspective of the 21st century. On the other hand, they are possibly yet another reason why to be fascinated by various elements reminding us of that glorious era of Britain and help us understand it.

Furthermore, despite these customs may seem very rigid, impractical or even possibly ridiculous when observed from today's loose and arguably overly 'free' world, they provide a fascinating spectacle of a safe ritualization of life. Ritual, according to many sociologists and psychologists, is indeed a safety net in moments of insecurity. Therefore, when depressed or insecure, people might enjoy this aspect, even if only through television in the aforementioned films and TV series.

⁴³ Christopher Caudwell, *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (Dalkeith: Scottish County Press, 1949) 104.

⁴⁴ Paterson 210.

⁴⁵ Paterson 195.

4. Heritage

Despite being a part of the European continent, Great Britain has always been separated from other countries – not only geographically but also socially. Therefore it is possible to find many specific features of British society. Some of the traditions may seem rather odd; nevertheless, they help to create a unique national identity and therefore are typical for the cultural and social system. ‘Heritage industry’ is supposed to keep these traditions intact and preserve the image of idyllic country:

Heritage is more complicated than the preservation of historic monuments. It involves the idea of theme-park Britain, the Notting Hill Carnival, distinctive foods. It is very often about the incorporation of influences from the margins into the eventual mainstream.⁴⁶

Fiske and Hartley discuss a TV series from the 1970s *A Man called Ironside*⁴⁷ and explain its popularity and what it represents. The key to the success of such a show is that it is a “conscious enactment of the values of an ordered, stable, liberal-conservative society. Its very existence as such presupposes that such values are on the defensive.”⁴⁸ These characteristics can be applied to the whole ‘heritage industry’, which indeed concentrates on the enactment of the values and it is supposed to remind us of the society order. Fiske is specifically talking about the ‘nostalgia boom’ of the early 1970s. Series like *Upstairs Downstairs*, *The Forsyte Saga* or the film *Edward VII*, apart from *Ironside*, usually regarded also as ‘products’ of this boom. While thinking about the possible reasons for this ‘heritage boom’, Storry and Childs present an interesting idea that the sudden popularity did not appear out of nowhere but it is likely that it replaced something:

A major cultural change in British life from the 1970s through to the present has been that Britons spend more leisure time and money on

⁴⁶ Storry and Childs 30.

⁴⁷ *Ironside* is a Universal television series that ran on NBC from September 14, 1967 to January 16, 1975. When broadcast in the United Kingdom the show was initially titled *A Man Called Ironside*. The show earned Edmund Burr six Emmys and two Golden Globe nominations.

⁴⁸ Fiske and Hartley 171.

visiting historical sights and exhibits. It has been argued that the growth in the heritage industry has in some ways filled a gap left in people's lives by the loss of a religious dimension.⁴⁹

Regarding the success of the 'heritage industry' and the popularity of what it represents, one should think about what makes it interesting for people and why they enjoy it. Storry's idea about replacing religion might be correct because heritage is supposed to preserve the past for us. It does not introduce anything new in particular but rather helps to represent the history (in a more marketable way) and reminds us of national traditions. That is something that can provide people with certain amount of security and stability and therefore could be compared to people's faith and the role of religion.

Cannadine states that the history of class is basically "the history of [different] ways in which, across the centuries, most Britons have visualised their society."⁵⁰ Therefore it is natural to perceive it as an inherent part of the British society and one of the crucial instruments to understand Britain, especially in the historical context. "As justifications for the former 'Greatness' of Great Britain fall away, it could be said that its people turn to the past to find symbols of their identity, and indeed, their importance".⁵¹

4.1 British Characteristics

When thinking about individual countries, one can usually recall certain characteristics that are typical for the respective country's culture. These characteristics, which are commonly regarded as long established truths, are called stereotypes. Despite not describing the reality accurately, they can definitely shape the way one regards a given country or the people living in it. Thus, it comes as no surprise that based on various stereotypes, people have a natural tendency towards creating prejudices. During the course of its long history, many eyes have been pinned on Britain and therefore we can speak about many of such presumptions.

⁴⁹ Storry and Childs 264.

⁵⁰ Cannadine 20.

⁵¹ Storry and Childs 265.

Julian Barnes in his novel *England, England* (1998) establishes 'Fifty Quintessences of Englishness' that are supposed to represent the most typical aspects of England. He lists them in a certain order, containing for instance:

Royal Family, Houses of Parliament/Big Ben, Manchester United FC, Class system, Imperialism, Snobbery, BBC, Cup of tea, Phlegm / Stiff upper lip, TV classic serials, Oxford/Cambridge, Hypocrisy, Gardening, Homosexuality, Queen Victoria, Breakfast, Emotional frigidity or Flagellation/Public schools.⁵²

Heritage industry builds upon some of these characteristics, emphasizing the aspects that helped created the image of a powerful country – the architectural symbols like Houses of Parliament or Queen Victoria as the longest reigning monarch are fundamentals of Englishness. It is interesting that the very first place there is the Royal Family – and not just monarchy in general, but Barnes specifically speaks about the family. It is well known that the British are obsessed with keeping up with the 'Royals' and the public enjoys it indeed as some kind of spectacle. Therefore it can be close to our topic of the obsession with class in general. The upper class, nobility and aristocrats since being at the top of the society, cannot avoid the attention of the subordinate.

Many of these typical features also hold an important position in the nostalgic films and 'costume dramas'. Emotional frigidity or 'stiff upper lip' are often targets for parodies and source for prejudices about the British nature (more about this in section 5.4 of this thesis) but at the same time, most of the British heritage movies includes them and the audience enjoys it and we can assume also accepts it as a part of national 'local colour'.

Regarding the classic serials category, most people would name *The Forsyte Saga*, Jane Austen adaptations, *Miss Marple* or *Midsomer Murders*. "Television series such as those above trade on rural myth. Set in beautiful locations, they are essentially about restoring order and calm to an idyllic place whose waters have been ruffled by the odd

⁵² Storry and Childs 20.

murder or two.”⁵³ From such series and characteristics we can thus deduce the nature of British people both viewed from the outside and the inside. While we can find here many negatives and typical British ‘vices’, the heritage cinema usually manages to present them in a historical context, which leads to better acceptance by the audience.

4.2 Heritage Films and Costume Dramas – ‘Merchant Ivory’ Films

‘Merchant Ivory’ is a collaboration of three remarkable people from three vastly different cultures: Ismail Merchant, the producer, born in India; Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the screenwriter, born in Germany and educated in England; and James Ivory, the director, born in the United States. This multicultural group tried to address the multicultural society in Britain and trace the cultural roots. ‘Merchant Ivory’ films have been praised, among others, for their visual beauty, their mature and intelligent themes and remarkable casting and acting. Yet, in many ways they are all dream-like nostalgic fantasies of a lost past:

In other ways, too, the British could be accused of living in their past. Many films lovingly recreate Edwardian England, particularly those of Merchant and Ivory, who have specialised in finely detailed costume dramas and adaptations of literary classics such as *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*.⁵⁴

The role of the heritage industry may be making England idyllic. “The common elements of the aristocracy, venerable buildings, and English eccentrics occur over and over in such films, offering a picture of a quaint, gentle England.”⁵⁵ An article discussing the success of the TV series *Downton Abbey* is very accurately named “A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets”⁵⁶. While celebrating the success of the series, we see the irony in the title of this article. Typical heritage films and TV series usually show only the

⁵³ Storry and Childs 21.

⁵⁴ Storry and Childs 265-266. Both *Room with a View* and *Howards End* are novels by E.M. Forster. Their film adaptations (from 1985 and 1992) by Merchant and Ivory belong to the most famous ‘heritage films’.

⁵⁵ Storry and Childs 266.

⁵⁶ Jeremy Egner, “A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets” *The New York Times*, 3rd January 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/arts/television/downton-abbey-reaches-around-the-world.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1372531292-56Yqq3qeVYg0aRnPe0qoYQ>, June 2013.

idyllic version of Britain; the ever-green lawn, lovely weather, small villages with various merchants and happy farmers. Such films and series are “profitably sold around the world as an image of an ideal Britain, and eagerly consumed by Britons themselves as a kind of national myth.”⁵⁷

Critical studies of ‘heritage cinema’ have also explored the links between the success of such films and the growth of the ‘heritage industry’: “Some writers have dismissed such films as reactionary, finding them overly nostalgic and selective in their presentation of the past. Others have claimed that they provide a critique of social repression and sexual politics which can be seen as progressive.”⁵⁸ Even though opinions regarding the true value of ‘heritage cinema’ vary, we can still objectively say that these films are enjoying a huge success. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that popular TV series belonging to ‘heritage industry’ may, despite sharing many elements with the films in the same category, tend to resemble soap operas rather than accurate description of class-dictated lifestyle.

One of the key elements in the heritage films are so called ‘stately houses,’ sometimes referred to also as ‘Edwardian mansions’ or ‘country estates’. These houses are connected especially to the Edwardian era and the period between wars, when people’s certainties have been shaken - there was a strong tendency to look for other ways to help re-establish one’s world. While thinking within the borders of social establishment or stability, it is one of the possible ways of reassuring people’s position in society and reminding the past glory.

When Storry and Childs discuss the heritage industry and the importance of the symbols from the past representing the identity of the nation, they claim that “of these, the stately home is one of the most enduring as well as the most successfully marketed to the public.”⁵⁹ Their proposition is based on the fact that it is important that the attraction of ‘heritage culture’ does not extend only to the remote past but can be applied even to the 21st century to certain areas of life that have been just recently part of everyday life and therefore closer to the public.

⁵⁷ Storry and Childs 266.

⁵⁸ Robert Murphy, ed. *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: British Film Institute, 2000) 115.

⁵⁹ Storry and Childs 265.

'Stately houses' do not appear only in 'Merchant Ivory' films; we can find them in various pieces of British cinema and literature. Many scenes of the popular TV series *Hercule Poirot* (based on the detective stories by Agatha Christie) are set in the English country, usually at some family mansion, where society meets. Agatha Christie, who is for many British people – or perhaps even more so for foreigners - something like a national icon, describes in her autobiography how important their family estate and the enclosed gardens were for her. She claims that she has drawn inspiration from her childhood her whole life.⁶⁰ It is one of the typical features of the English country and therefore also a suitable topic for heritage films. (More about 'stately house' can be found in section 5.3 of this thesis.)

⁶⁰ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

5. *Downton Abbey*

The series, taking place in the Yorkshire country estate of Downton Abbey, depicts the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants. Set in the post-Edwardian era, several significant historical events impact their lives and, also, the British social hierarchy. It can be classified as a heritage film and a costume drama.⁶¹

Throughout the series, we can see the reactions of the family and the society to major historical events such as the outbreak of World War I, the Spanish influenza pandemic, the Marconi scandal (in the second season), the Interwar period and the formation of the Irish Free State (in the third season). Perhaps because of the connection with real historical occurrences, the audience can better relate to the story and reminisce about that time; therefore making it more interesting and popular for them.

While the story of *Downton Abbey* takes place at the beginning of the 20th century, it also tries to include some topics that might be interesting for the audience of the 21st century. Such an example may be homosexuality and the perception of it in the society. Intimate relationship between two members of the same sex was certainly a taboo at the time into which the series is set, yet nowadays the topic is frequently a subject of many passionate debates. It is suggested already in the first season that Thomas, one of the footmen in Downton Abbey, is a homosexual. As the series develops, it is becoming increasingly apparent and, finally, in the third season it escalates into an uncomfortable incident. It is one of those topics that are taboo in the society and therefore people try to avoid them as much as possible. They try to pretend there is no such thing. Thus, it comes as a nice surprise in the series that when some of the people in Downton hear about Thomas' incident, they feel sympathy towards him and do not judge him too hard.

However, one should keep in mind that the predominant positive reaction of the people in *Downton Abbey* may actually be intended more for the viewers of the show and should not be considered a true historical portrayal of the issue, since homosexuality is

⁶¹ *Downton Abbey* is a British period drama television series created by Julian Fellowes and co-produced by Carnival Films and Masterpiece. It first aired on ITV television in the United Kingdom on 26th September 2010.

now a very common theme to include in many TV series. This issue can be taken as an example of how controversial topics are actually treated in popular TV series or films. They present a scandalous theme, deal with it in rather anachronistic terms to titillate the public, but do not particularly explore the historical problematic of such issues. The reason for this may be that the producers attempt to capture a large viewing audience, address contemporary issues, but not alienate by committing themselves to a particular, perhaps controversial attitude.

Looking at TV shows like *Downton Abbey*, which is about the upper class and elite of the society, the authors need to think about how to attract the target audience's attention and so they occasionally need to sacrifice certain level of authenticity for the sake of likeability: "The producers say the show resonates so deeply because of the universality of themes like the tensions of social status and, most important, the unabashed romance."⁶² Perhaps the public taste suggests that a simpler story line filled with characters the audience can relate to better fulfils viewers' expectations. The executive producer of *Downton Abbey* explains the success of the series: " 'Downton' marries conventional British costume drama with quite soapy plotting and with characters that provide many, many different points of entry."⁶³ As already mentioned above, the television can, in this case, serve as a certain mediator between the life on the screen and the mass.

5.1 Class in *Downton Abbey*

Downton Abbey is set in the first half of the 20th century. The Crawley family are the ancestors of the 2nd Earl of Grantham and the owners of Downton Abbey. The very first episode begins with the sinking of the Titanic⁶⁴, which caused the death of 1,502 people. One of the passengers who did not survive the accident was a cousin of the family and the future male heir to Downton Abbey, Patrick Crawley. This event creates a problem in the hereditary line.

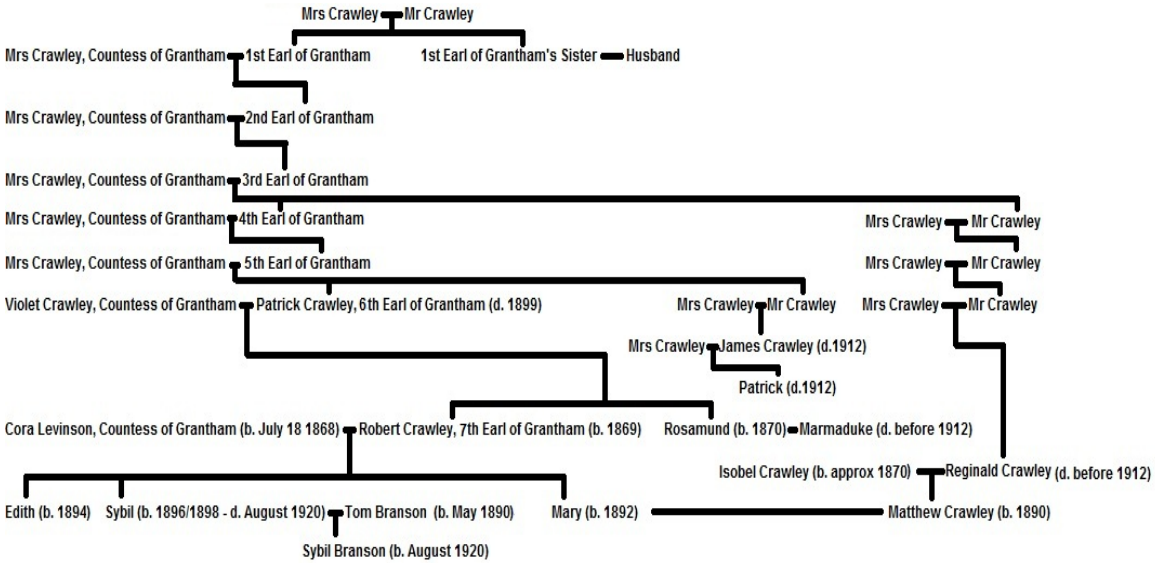
The trouble is that the whole estate cannot be separated into multiple parts.

⁶² Jeremy Egner, "A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets".

⁶³ Egner, "A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets".

⁶⁴ The sinking of the Titanic happened on 15th April 1912.

There is an entail that says both the estate and the family fortune (that comes from Cora’s family money) need to be kept together. That means there can be only one heir to all of that and it must be the one who also inherits the title – the next Earl of Grantham. The entail was supposed to secure the future of the estate – so it could not be separated from the family and from the family money. However, only a male can inherit the title, which is a complication for the family since they have only three daughters. The deceased Earl of Grantham did not realize there might not be any male heirs.



Picture II - Suggested family tree of the Crawley family since the First Earl of Grantham.

It is indeed a great struggle for the members of the family to adjust to some of the changes. The future of the Crawleys will depend on this new heir, Robert Crawley’s third cousin, the middle class lawyer Matthew Crawley from Manchester. It appears that his two major mistakes he is constantly criticised for are the fact he does not have a butler and that he has an actual job:

Matthew Crawley: “I have got a job in Ripon.”
 Robert Crawley: “A job??”
 Matthew Crawley: “Yes, in a Partnership. [...]

They need someone who understands industrial law...”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Downton Abbey*, season 1, episode 2. Dir. Ben Bolt. Writ. Julian Fellowes. 2th October 2010 by ITV network. 08 min. 02 sec.

However, he seems to be the only one who is not afraid of the challenge that the family has to face. Adjustments are necessary. Things that would be unthinkable in the past are now very much real.

The series also clearly shows the difference between people whose wealth and position is hereditary and 'newcomers' who gained these only recently. "Behaviour and cultural codes are still used to criticise and suppress the 'nouveau riche' by those who feel threatened by the upwards mobility of the lower orders."⁶⁶ One of the examples is the character of Cora Crawley and her mother Lady Levinson, who are Americans and therefore new to the 'Crawley way of life.' It is simply because according to most of British people, "wealth however can never replace 'breeding'."⁶⁷

The viewer can see another example of the social hostility when Lady Mary becomes engaged to Sir Richard Carlisle – a very powerful publishing magnate from London. Being very rich and well connected, he appears right in time when the Crawleys actually need his help. However, not even that seems to matter. Yes, they do have to respect him and remain polite in every possible way but there are still apparent traces of disapproval to be found:

The [Victorian] era saw the rise of a huge and wealthy middle class whose members – pleased with their attainments but unsure how to behave – looked to the aristocracy for social guidance (the nobility responded with varying degrees of disdain).⁶⁸

This situation is very ironic since a similar situation appeared in the family already a few years back when the Earl of Grantham had to marry an American heiress in order to get the money needed for saving the estate. Therefore, we have a famous family that takes pride in its tradition and predecessors on one hand, yet we need a another foreign family to come and to be actually able to save the first family's heritage on the other. This shows us the imperfection of the upper class system. Such houses like

⁶⁶ Williams.

⁶⁷ Storry and Childs 180.

⁶⁸ Paterson 195.

Downton Abbey needed a lot of money for their functioning. In case they were not able to work anymore, it would not be a disaster only for the family but also for their staff and people in villages that were dependent on such estates.

However, over the years, such a life-style got too expensive and therefore was no longer possible. The time has evolved and so had to also the traditions and the lives of people. We see the progress throughout the series. It is not always easy or fast, but there are fundamental changes to be noticed. People often seek certain support or role models and therefore it is important that the series actually enables the audience to see how the British society can function in spite of the challenges it has to face:

The viewer is expected to sympathize with the conservative value system portrayed, to find its formality, courtesy and stability a recompense for the loss of such values in our daily social experience. Yet at the same time the viewer is continually reminded that this value system is doomed.⁶⁹

Even though Fiske and Hartley are talking here about the popularity of *Man Called Ironside*, the same analysis may be applied to *Downton Abbey*. In the series, the audience is often reminded that the social system is changing and that everything will be more and more different. They also continue by stating that with the progressing decline of such system, the viewers are forced to realize that the “old, conservative value system needs updating, however distasteful it may appear”⁷⁰ to those involved and therefore it is important to see the continuance of the “old world” even after those changes. Once those values are put under stress, we realize the importance of adaptation. It is important to see that the ‘old world’ can continue even after the changes. Still, it is interesting to see how the society responds to such a challenge and how it manages to function under different conditions. In other words, the series reminds us of the good old times, yet it forces us to realize that change is necessary. Progress into a ‘new world’ can be successful and reassuring as well.

⁶⁹ Fiske and Hartley 174.

⁷⁰ Fiske and Hartley 174.

As mentioned above, one of the traditional expectations and marker of upper class behaviour and education is emotional reserve. There is very often a conflict of the mind and conflict of the heart. The characters in *Downton Abbey* (from the upper class) are supposed to represent the people that were taught how not to show their emotions. There is a clear disparity between the proper behaviour of the upper class and that of the common people, who have more freedom in doing as they please. In a family like the Crawleys, one simply cannot forget about his or her social status – not even for a moment. There is a protocol for everything. The series implicitly criticises the traditional concepts of upper class education, which is connected with the traditional ‘stiff upper lip’ and lack of emotions that are attributed to Public School education.

One of the favourite scenes often used in *Downton Abbey* is a traditional family breakfast (yet another item on Barnes’s list). It is shown already in the very first episode; it is in fact at the breakfast table where the family hears about the Titanic tragedy. Not even breakfast is a simple procedure in a house like Downton. Everyone must be properly dressed; there is strict schedule for serving the food and some special traditions. For example married ladies can have their breakfast in their bed yet all the single ladies must attend breakfast with the men in the salon.

In heritage films and TV series, there is usually a clear separation of the upper and lower class. The family is distinguished from the servants already by a choice of clothing or by the rooms in the great house that these groups occupy. Another TV show similar to *Downton Abbey* (and often mentioned as an inspiration for it) is therefore aptly named *Upstairs, Downstairs*. The family members live in the upper chambers of the house in the main floors, while the lower class lives and eats in the basement. The servants also have their own stairs, which they are supposed to use to interfere as little as possible with the everyday life of the masters.

While clearly separating the two distinct groups like this, it gives us more space for their own personal quarrels within these social groups. There is rivalry between the servants about who gets the position of the first footman or the valet. However, they are not the only ones who are fighting for their position. There are scenes, mostly in the 1st season, which clearly show also the rivalry between the three sisters. Especially Edith

struggles with the fact that she is always the one getting the least attention, always in the shade of the beautiful Mary or the darling Sybil.

5.2 Characters in *Downton Abbey* and What They Represent

The whole series is supposed to represent the life at a certain social level. The behaviour of the Crawley family is very noble and their emotions controlled. Even at some serious scenes we can see that the characters remain unmoved – at least for the public. They simply had to learn how to control their emotions since they are supposed to serve as an example for others.

There is a scene in the third season of *Downton Abbey*, after Lady Sybil's funeral, which indicates that they still do have the family reputation in mind. We see a scene where all the characters are frozen with grief but they stand or sit around the living room – straight, noble and quiet. They do grieve of course but they do so in private, reminding us again of the typical 'emotional frigidity.' In effect, the distance of the upper class may sometimes seem as cold and heartless, yet it is also something that makes them appear to be on some kind of a pedestal. They are the people who we enjoy to both idealize and criticize.

The series shows how hard and sometimes even how unfortunate it can be to hide one's true feelings. Since the society judges severely any improper behaviour, the three young Crawley sisters in marrying age⁷¹ need to control themselves to prevent any social faux-pas. Lady Edith, for instance, is very sensitive to what other people think about her and her potential romances. However, she always ends up spurned and alone. Lady Sybil on the other hand, prefers to listen to her heart instead of family advice and even though she is being criticized for marrying below her status, she is very happy. She does create a family scandal but she does not need to have any remorse.

⁷¹ The situation in the series is presented with such a certainty that we can also compare it with the situation in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the famous opening line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) 5.

It is also possible to find at least one more inspirational source for *Downton Abbey* in *Pride and Prejudice*, the whole dispute about the entail – the fact that female heiress cannot inherit the property.

In Greek and Roman mythologies, it was the Gods that people looked up to. They were immortal. Later during the centuries, many other idols came. As suggested already above, in feudal times it was the monarch, the military generals or the nobility that people aspired to and who were at the top of the social pyramid. In the new millennium it is usually celebrities that are considered idols by many – people still want to see someone perfect, desirable to take inspiration from. However, the difference between the common man and the idol is getting closer and closer. The Gods were not humans; they were immortal and distant. The nobility or the monarchs were human, yet one still had to be born into aristocracy. The only difference between celebrities and normal people is that they happen to be lucky enough to be extraordinary in some way and gained enough popularity for that. It is possible to claim that people have the tendency to get closer and closer to their objects of idealization while trying to imitate them. The people we look up to are certain models for us; the whole phenomenon of the class is something to watch – it is a spectacle for the others. Therefore, not only the actual upper class but also the TV series like *Downton Abbey* get a lot of attention. It is something that Fiske and Hartley describe as ‘well-heeled milieu’, something that people enjoy to watch and are fascinated by.

Countess Of Grantham, Violet Crawley

Lady Violet can be an example of the person who represents the conservative; she cares about the traditional way things are done and is able to respect only certain social groups. She is one of those who cannot accept the fact the family heritage is in the hands of a simple lawyer, “Mr nobody from nowhere”.⁷² She is outraged when she sees how stubborn Matthew is:

Robert: “You do you know I am planning to involve you in the running of the estate?”

Matthew Crawley: “Well, there are many hours in a day and of course, there is always the weekend...”

Robert: “We will discuss this later, we must not bore the ladies.”

⁷² *Downton Abbey*, season 1, episode 2. 17min. 24 sec. Even the maid O’Brien is manifesting her contempt of Matthew Crawley.

Violet: "Wait, what is a weekend??"⁷³

The family reputation and social status are very important to her and she tries to defend them and fight for the family as much as she can. When her son, Lord Grantham confides to her about his trouble in marriage and raises the question that perhaps something might be wrong, she simply ends the discussions by saying: "Robert, people like us are never unhappily married."⁷⁴

She has the distant features of the upper class ('stiff upper lip') and rarely shows her emotions. She prefers to deal with everything in privacy, with a clear mind. In the third season of *Downton Abbey*, there is a very hard moment for the family when Lady Sybil dies. Violet is trying to give her son an advice that shows how she really feels inside: "I do not speak much of the heart, since it is seldom helpful to do so, but I know well enough the pain when it is broken."⁷⁵ The fact they do not speak about certain topics or about feelings does not necessarily mean they do not feel them.



Picture III – Maggie Smith as Violet, the Dowager Countess of Grantham.

⁷³ *Downton Abbey*, season 1, episode 2. 08 min. 13 sec.

⁷⁴ *Downton Abbey*, season 3 Episode 6, dir. Jeremy Webb, writ. Julian Fellowes, 21st October 2012 by ITV network, 11 min. 31 sec.

⁷⁵ *Downton Abbey*, season 3, episode 6, 12 min. 12 sec.

Violet might often seem hard and distant yet these characteristics are balanced with her irony and wit. We do not see her expressing her emotions through words; however, it is even more distinctive when she does so through subtle gestures or hints (especially towards the Americans):

Cora: "I might send her over to visit my aunt. She could get to know New York."

Violet: "Oh, I don't think things are quite that desperate."⁷⁶

Violet: "Of course it would happen to a foreigner, it is typical."

Lady Mary: "Don't be ridiculous."

Violet: "I am not ridiculous. No Englishman would dream of dying in someone else's house."⁷⁷

Maggie Smith, widely considered a great actress, plays the character of Violet. It is yet another indicator that points towards the intention of the producers to create a successful show. As Violet, Smith can amazingly express her opinions without actually saying anything. Even though she is not an eloquent woman, when she eventually says something, only a few words are sufficient to immediately express her feelings, often with an ironical subtext (for example towards the 'nouveau riche'):

Sir Richard Carlisle: "I'm leaving in the morning Lady Grantham. I doubt we'll meet again."

Violet: "Do you promise?"⁷⁸

Displaying infectively dry and ironic humour, Violet quickly gains the heart of the public. In her cynical, rational approach, she always keeps her balance and a clear mind. She constantly strives to maintain her dignity and elegance. One could even say that Violet enables the viewer to see the flaws in

⁷⁶ *Downton Abbey*, season 1, episode 4, dir. Brian Kelly, writ. Julian Fellowes and Shelagh Stephenson, 17th October 2013 by ITV, 03 min. 31 sec.

⁷⁷ *Downton Abbey*, season 1, episode 3, dir. Ben Bolt, writ. Julian Fellowes, 10th October 2013 by ITV, 38 min. 19 sec.

⁷⁸ *Christmas at Downton Abbey*, (Christmas special 2011), dir. Brian Percival, writ. Julian Fellowes, 25th December 2011 by ITV, 1 hour. 14 min. 50 sec.

other characters as their traits are in a sharp contrast with her steady composure. She represents all the snobbish and distant values of the upper class mentioned earlier in this work, yet she manages to win the viewers' sympathies anyway.

Earl Of Grantham, Robert Crawley

Robert Crawley is the head of the family and therefore he also has to behave that way. His job often entails trying to mediate the relationships between the members of his family (his wife and his mother, for example) and sometimes even between the servants. He is the one who has the final word in everything and therefore also the one that needs to hold everything together.

In some way, he is very similar to his mother – perhaps by honouring the traditions. In some particular moments, there is an obvious difference between him and his wife Cora. As she is an American, he sometimes finds her liberal opinions shocking:

Robert: "I am flabbergasted!"

Cora: "You are always flabbergasted by the unconventional."

Robert: "But in a family like this one...?"⁷⁹

Cora does not seem to have a problem with breaking the traditions and accepting the new. Therefore, she is often the one trying to make Robert see that some progress is necessary.

Matthew Crawley

Matthew Crawley and Tom Branson represent the new, fresh air in the family. Even though both are not welcome at first, in time it is showed in the series that people can change their minds. Many disputes are connected with the class phenomenon and whether all the traditions connected to it actually have a meaning. The character of Matthew Crawley can be a great example of this dilemma. "He is both morally

⁷⁹ *Downton Abbey*, season 3, episode 6, 17 min, 10 sec. Robert's reaction over the fact his granddaughter should be catholic.

disapproving of the flagrant exploitation of the estate and utterly seduced by it.”⁸⁰

We can see that there are two sides to every story. Matthew criticizes the way of life of the upper class. Yet, the more he experiences the life of the Crawleys, the more he realizes that some of his assumptions might have been wrong. One of the first things Matthew refused was to have a butler:

Matthew Crawley: “I do not want a butler. I will not let them change me.”

Isobel Crawley: “Why would they want to?”

Matthew Crawley: “Mother, Lord Grantham made the unpleasant discovery that his heir is a middle class lawyer, son of a middle class doctor...”

Isobel Crawley: “Upper middle class!”⁸¹

However, later in the series he discovered that it was not only about his preferences but also about the way the system worked. What would happen to the butler if he were let go? Houses like Downton Abbey provided a living for many people and so he quickly realized that there was a meaning after all; the position of butler enabled Mosley to have a certain position in the society that he felt comfortable in.

Despite the initial hesitation, Matthew Crawley turns out to be the best thing that could have happened to the family – he is not afraid of the modernisation that needs to be done and he is also capable of bringing more money for the estate and managing it at the same time. The whole cycle closes when he marries Lady Mary, the oldest Crawley daughter, who was supposed to be the heiress in the first place. This way, he secures not only the heirloom but also a happy marriage.

Tom Branson

Branson, who is an Irish man and a former driver at Downton Abbey, represents

⁸⁰ Katie Roiphe. “Of Noblemen and Investment Bankers” *The Washington Post.com*, 19th Jan 2012 <http://www.slate.com/articles/life/roiphe/2012/01/downton_abbey_and_our_new_obsession_with_cla ss_.html>, June 2013.

⁸¹ *Downton Abbey*, Season 1, episode 2. 01 min. 36 sec. After arrival to the Crawley House, Matthew shows his irritation with the unpleasant social situation he has found himself into.

the revolutionary changes of the society at that time. At first, he is being treated strictly as a servant and it is more than shocking when he gets intimate with Lady Sybil. However, as the story and also the time evolve, the family does not have much of an option than to accept him and moderate their opinions about him. In the third season, he even gets the position of a caretaker of Downton Abbey and its whole estate. As much as Lord Grantham does not like it, he needs to admit that the situation has changed and that in certain areas, it is important to listen to the younger generation and agree with some new conception and improvements. Therefore, we see how even such a conservative family as the Crawleys can manage to adjust. The Irish topic⁸² in *Downton Abbey* represents a contrast to the more conservative Britain. It is supposed to emphasize the original divergence of character Tom Branson from the Crawley family. However, later in the series it is shown how even such different worlds can coexist together.

Despite the initial incompatibility, we see a peaceful transition. While nationality, religion and social status remain a sensitive topic throughout the whole series, it is perhaps supposed to show us that Britain is a flexible country, reinforcing the positive image of it, which is often presented in *Downton Abbey*. Britain with its long and complex history certainly did not avoid many social, political and nationality conflicts. It is usually presented as a former Empire that then became a multicultural country. Therefore it is clear that history is a major part of such a country. Heritage helps to preserve all that while concentrating on the more positive and glorious aspects of British history. They do want to be remembered for tea parties at five o'clock, green lawns, and the proper manners nor for the lack of humour, gloomy weather or oppression of the less fortunate. *Downton Abbey* is both emphasizing this positive view but on the other hand it is also pointing out some of the paradoxes and drawbacks of local traditions through the typical, dry British humour.

Carson

As a butler of Downton Abbey, he is in charge of everything and the head of the servants. He is not only the supervisor but in a way also the authoritative figure

⁸² The 'Irish Revolutionary Period' is usually set from 1910 to 1920. 'Irish Revolution' for independence is narrowed to years 1916-1921.

'downstairs', the one who helps to keep everything together and the support of the system. He may be lower class however, when it comes to proper behaviour, he might be even more punctual than Countess Violet or Lord Grantham.

Many characters in the series have difficulties facing the changes in the society. Carson is surely one of them:

Miss Hughes: "Perhaps the world is becoming a kinder place."

Carson: "You say kinder, I say weaker and less disciplined."⁸³

He is representing the old world with a strict set of rules that must be followed but at the same time, we see how big heart he has. On his character, we can see what loyalty means and how important it used to be. Carson not only takes care of the whole house but he would also breathe for it – if he had the chance. The same way the serfdoms were bound to their monarch or the army to its leader, the staff is loyal to their masters and they honour the whole family.

There is a closer connection between the staff and the family than we might think. It is interesting to realize that the servants are the ones who see everything in the family – both the positive and the negative things. They should keep the family secret and try to prevent any unnecessary scandals. In the third episode of the first season, there is an incident where Lady Mary becomes intimate with a visiting Turkish diplomat. Unfortunately, the Turk dies in the least appropriate moment. To prevent a huge scandal, Lady Mary needs to keep it a secret and she asks Anna, her maid, for help – relying on her loyalty. Therefore, it is not only the character of Carson that can show how discrete and supportive he can be towards the family.

5.3 Stately House

Many heritage films or TV series have a story centred on one family and a family estate connected with it. The phenomenon of coming back to our own cultural roots and foundation is closely tied to it. It is yet another way to emphasize the importance of

⁸³ *Downton Abbey*, season 3, episode 6, 34 min. 27 sec.

tradition and respect for the history by honouring the predecessors and often their life's work with taking care of the family estate.

In some way, it is a world just to itself, microcosms of the old world, reminding us of the time past. With a beautiful architecture and pieces of art, its nonchalance reminds us of the cultural and social roots of Britain. The nostalgia of the past can therefore still be present with us. Such stately houses all over Britain represent the nostalgia of the past and are very popular destinations of visits. Many of these houses have been used in films; they function as visual symbolic sites and also embody some of the typical values mentioned earlier. 'Stately houses' are usually being associated with stability, grandeur and old fashion. Moreover, they are a representation of the past, which we can never match, still magnificently standing in the present. Many of them are being preserved by the English Heritage foundation as an essential part of British history.

These houses are often part of family legacy and therefore a place where everyone and everything comes together. It has its own and unique place in the social order, with complex social network around it. When the function of the cities and the agglomeration in Great Britain was not as developed as it is today, these stately houses played an important role both as employers and cultural centres.

Downton Abbey does not bring anything new in this aspect; it is very similar to other 'heritage films' or 'costume drama' series. We get the information and the most important subject of the TV show already from the title. No matter how essential the main characters are, it is the estate that plays the fundamental part:

Despite its starry cast, the real star of *Downton Abbey* is, of course, the house itself. Set in 6,000 acres of glorious Berkshire countryside and boasting a park designed by Capability Brown, Highclere Castle was remodelled in the 19th Century by Sir Charles Barry, who rebuilt the Houses of Parliament.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Adam Lee Potter, "Downton Abbey: How Hollywood is snapping up our bright TV drama stars", *Mirror.co.uk*, 7th Nov 2010 <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/downton-abbey-how-hollywood-is-snapping-260578>>, June 2013.



Picture IV - Photo of the Highclere Castle, which represents Downton Abbey in the TV show.

With the progress in the story, there is a scene in the third season of *Downton Abbey* where Farmer Mason asks Daisy, the maid, about her future: “Do you think these great houses like Downton Abbey are going to go on, just as they are, for another 40 years? Because I do not.”⁸⁵ And suggests she should think about other possibilities than just being in service her whole life. It is a rather sensitive topic for the staff dependent on such house as Downton Abbey. The people both work and live there; since most of them do not have their own families, the house and the master family replaces it in a way. It is not only the place where all the story takes place but also the pride of the family and legacy of their ancestors. Therefore it is the continuous and not easy fate of members of the Crawley family to try to do the very best they can to hand it over to the generations to come and ensure the family legacy.

5.4 New Phenomenon Born

Downton Abbey has gained a rapid popularity since its introduction in 2010. In these few years, it was able to get fans all over the world. It is not only this show in

⁸⁵ *Downton Abbey*, season 3, episode 8, dir. David Evans, writ. Julian Fellowes, 4th November 2012, 22 min. 36 sec.

particular that is so popular. We can speak about the whole 'heritage film phenomenon' which *Downton Abbey* is a part of. The sudden popularity can be an indicator that people do want to see more of this topic. Since its premiere on ITV in Britain, the show has appeared in "more than 200 countries or regions, suggesting that anxiety about status and familial obligations — and a weakness for mushy melodrama — observe no geographic bounds."⁸⁶ The popularity of the show proves that people not only in Britain but also in other countries are interested in this theme and that social status is an attractive topic.

Downton Abbey is also a part of *Masterpiece series* (formerly known as *Masterpiece Theatre*) that is a drama anthology television series produced by WGBH Boston. It premiered on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) on January 10th 1971, making it America's longest-running weekly prime time drama series.⁸⁷ It is best known for presenting adaptations of novels and biographies. The series has presented numerous acclaimed British productions. Apart from *Downton Abbey*, they include for example *Upstairs Downstairs*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Hercule Poirot*, *Great Expectations* or *Sherlock*. Most of these were produced by the BBC or by the ITV network. In total, the *Masterpiece* dramas have garnered 57 Emmys, 17 Peabody, and two Academy Award nominations. *Downton Abbey* therefore successfully continues in the tradition of 'heritage films' and 'costume dramas':

Downton Abbey, an absorbing if somewhat formulaic costume drama in the early decades of the 20th century, surprised even its architects by becoming a transcendent hit in both Britain and America, becoming possibly the most successful show in the 40-year history of PBS's *Masterpiece* series. [...] 'Nobody in their right mind could have predicted what happened, when it sort of went viral', Julian Fellowes, the creator and the writer of the show, said in recent phone interview. But perhaps even more surprising, the series, a quintessentially British dramedy of

⁸⁶ Egner. "A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets."

⁸⁷ "About Masterpiece," *PBS.org*, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/about-masterpiece/>> June 2013.

manners, has also become a hit in Sweden, Russia, South Korea, the Middle East...⁸⁸

It may indeed come as a surprise that something so British have caught the attention of so many different viewers. Fellowes said that “*Downton* is very British — it’s very fixed in a particular part and way of life, a particular limited range of society and so on — I think most of the stories are about emotional situations that everyone can understand.”⁸⁹

The United States is one of the countries where the popularity of *Downton Abbey* is most apparent. “There is in the show's popularity some quality of nostalgia for a class structure we never had. We don't wholly approve of it... but are somehow entranced.”⁹⁰ The world that is already lost seems glamorous to us and therefore even though the American concern about inequality is still present, *Downton Abbey* manages to sooth it:

One hopes, as in a Jane Austen novel, that the Crawley daughters marry well, that they keep the money in the family and the estate intact, even though that wish runs directly counter to the things, say, one might be arguing at a dinner party about the inequality of wealth in this country.⁹¹

Downton Abbey has received critical acclaim from television critics and won numerous awards, including a *Golden Globe Award* for Best Miniseries in 2012 or a *Primetime Emmy Award* for Outstanding Miniseries. It is rather interesting that the *Guinness World Records* also marked it as the most critically acclaimed English-language television series of 2011. *Downton Abbey* was also the most watched television series on both ITV and PBS, and subsequently became the most successful British costume drama series since the 1981 television serial of *Brideshead Revisited*.⁹²

According to the official press release of PBS, national ratings state that the 3rd season of *Downton Abbey* is the highest-rated drama in PBS history with 24 million

⁸⁸ Egner. “A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets.”

⁸⁹ Egner. “A Bit of Britain Where the Sun Still Never Sets.”

⁹⁰ Roiphe.

⁹¹ Roiphe.

⁹² Lee Potter.

viewers.⁹³ The season had an average rating of 7.7 and an average audience of 11.5 million across the seven week run. Moreover, the number of the viewers is continually increasing - of 7 million viewers from the sophomore season.⁹⁴

The popularity of *Downton Abbey* can be also noticed by many references to it in other media. A lot of attention is paid to *Downton Abbey* in the press, in the TV awards and also in various TV shows. It may not come as a surprise that it were American TV shows that included already some hints to *Downton Abbey* and its enormous success. We can find such reference in famous American retrospective series *How I met your Mother*, science TV show *The Big Bang Theory* or drama from the legal settings *Suits*.

Characters in *How I met your mother*⁹⁵ cannot stop watching a TV show called *Woodworthy Manor*. It is supposed to be a parody of *Downton Abbey* and ridicules some of the classical aspect however, on the other hand, it is shown how enthusiastic can people living in today's New York get about British early 20th century costume drama. It is a representation of the enormous popularity of the show across countries and social groups and also demonstration of the 'obsession' and addiction mentioned previously.

Another example of reference might be the discussion about the social privileges between characters in *The Big Bang Theory*:

Sheldon Cooper: "Do you think it is appropriate for her [Sheldon's assistant] to sit with us – giving her station? "

Leonard Hofstadter: "Given what?"

Sheldon Cooper: "If I have learned anything from British television shows on PBS, it is that servants dine downstairs with their own kind."⁹⁶

⁹³ Press Release, *PBS.org*, 19th Mar 2013 < <http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2013/da3-national-ratings>>, June 2013.

⁹⁴ Jace Lacob, "Downton Abbey Becomes Highest Rated PBS Drama of All Time," *The Daily Beast*, 19th Mar 2013 <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/19/downton-abbey-season-3-becomes-top-rated-pbs-drama-of-all-time.html>> June 2013.

⁹⁵ *How I Met Your Mother*, Season 8, Episode 19, dir. Michael Shea, writ. Stephen Lloyd, 18th March 2013 by CBS, 08 min. 30 sec and 20 min. 28 sec.

⁹⁶ *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 6, episode 3, dir. Mark Ceendrowski, writ. Molaro, Goetsch and Holland, 11th October 2012 by CBS, 12 min. 10 sec.

While using *Downton Abbey* as an example in a contemporary show, we see how illogical and ridiculous it would be to try to apply those rules in modern world. While watching *Downton Abbey*, one could get used to such conventions very easily. At the beginning of the 20th century, it seems completely normal because it was a part of tradition. However, similar parodies or references to these remind us the importance of unbiased opinion. One has to realize that as idyllic as such society may seem, there are two points of view. Very little *Downton Abbey* viewers probably imagine themselves in the roles of the servants. While admiring the show and nostalgically thinking about the era it represents, one should not forget to try to picture such situation today and see the reality. The absurdity of it and inequality of such relationship are being reminded to us here.

The right social manners and the importance of a proper introduction are topics for discussion in the TV show *Suits*,⁹⁷ again, referencing to *Downton Abbey*. It is even more appropriate since there is a conflict in the show between British Law Company and an American one about certain provision not written in any law book, simply a custom honoured for many decades. It may be hard to understand for some people how important role these unwritten conventions may have in the society. In this case it is in legal dispute however, in the world that *Downton Abbey* is supposed to portray, these conventions are used for almost everything. It is a part of the normal life of the upper class. Those are the little details mentioned earlier in this work (such as difference between aristocrats and the 'nouveau riche', loyalty between the family and the servants or what is appropriate for a young lady) that many of the 'outsiders' can find hard to understand and that can make a crucial different in the social fluency.

5.5 *Downton Abbey* and *The Forsyte Saga*

While *Downton Abbey* is an original series created by Julian Fellowes, it certainly had many inspirations and possible models. *The Forsyte Saga* could be one of them. "As source material goes, the 'Forsyte' pedigree is hard to top. Galsworthy's books about social class and materialism in late 19th and early 20th century Britain, published from

⁹⁷ *Suits*, Season 2, episode 16, dir. John Scott, dir. Aaron Kosh, 21st February 2013 by USA Network, 12th min.

1906 to 1921, won him the Nobel Prize in Literature.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the lack of literary pattern does not seem to matter in the case of *Downton Abbey*:

An earlier adaptation of the novels — a behemoth 26-part BBC production in 1967 — is widely considered to be the first modern TV costume drama. It was a phenomenon in Britain: Soames and Irene’s marriage was the subject of national debate, and local vicars were reportedly asked to change the times of services so their congregations could be home in time for ‘Forsyte’.⁹⁹

Therefore we can compare both the content and the popularity of these two series. We see that both *Downton Abbey* and *The Forsyte Saga* can be a common topic of discussion. Mr Fellowes confirms: “You travel thousands and thousands of miles, and you get off the plane, and someone says, ‘Is Mr. Carson going to marry Mrs. Hughes?’”¹⁰⁰ People are taking Soames and Irene or Carson and Mrs Hughes as one of their actual acquaintances they are just gossiping about with their friends. These series thus have the potential of becoming a ‘phenomenon’. It is true that *The Forsyte Saga* was already popular as a book however, the television as a mean of popular culture makes a phenomenon out of it.

In both *The Forsyte Saga* and *Downton Abbey* we can see the struggle of a strong family with the ‘new era’ and new generations. Daniel Lewis, who plays Soames Forsyte (in the newest miniseries from 2002), comments on the charm of these series: “It’s a family of power that saw its world crumbling around it. It’s a moment in time encapsulated by *Downton Abbey* and *The Forsyte Saga* that people really respond to, I think.”¹⁰¹ We see certain development, which is crucial for the storyline of the series yet something stays the same. We can observe how the characters and their relationships change with the progression of the era without disrupting the nostalgic poetics.

⁹⁸ Jeremy Egner. “The Bodice Ripper That Started It All” *The New York Times*, 21st Sept 2012 < http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/arts/television/the-forsyte-saga-and-downton-abbey.html?_r=2& > June 2013.

⁹⁹ Egner. “The Bodice Ripper That Started It All”.

¹⁰⁰ Egner. “The Bodice Ripper That Started It All”.

¹⁰¹ Egner. “The Bodice Ripper That Started It All”.

6. Conclusion

The transition from a once great imperial power to a yet another European country was rather difficult. 'Heritage films' or series like *Downton Abbey* represent values and hierarchy system but at the same time they demonstrate the ability to move on. The viewers are able to find certain parallels with their own lives. It is also because of the reminder of former 'Greatness' of Great Britain that people still enjoy this genre, as shown on the popularity and phenomenon of 'Merchant Ivory' films or, more recently, *Downton Abbey* that was discussed in the previous chapter. The heritage cinema re-invents the already missing order of society (because such a world never really existed) and it gives people an illusion of certainty and something to hold on to. *Downton Abbey*, or 'heritage cinema' in general, enables the audience to see a moment in time 'encapsulated' enabling the past to be preserved for the audience. The series depicts Britain in its glorious days without dealing with the less 'Great' aspects of British history or culture.

Demonstrated for example on the 'Great British Class Survey', we see that the division of society is still an attractive topic in Britain even at the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, it is logical that the producers of films and TV series take it as an inspiration for their work, hoping to attract the audience. Indeed, it brought success for the authors of *Downton Abbey* that is usually being referred to as our "beloved British costume drama *Downton Abbey*"¹⁰². The show earned the title by its widespread popularity that proved that 'costume dramas' still have fans not only in Britain but also all over the world. In fact, it reinforced the image of the country and supported the association of Britain with noble families and charming country estates. Thus, both British and foreign viewers could be satisfied by the creation of a pastoral, typically rural idyll that was only briefly interrupted by the odd romantic problem.

In *Reading Television*, Fiske and Hartley remind the reader that the television is a means of representation, or mediator, between the reality and us. However, no matter how charming such films and series might be, one should always keep in mind that there

¹⁰² Jace Lacob, "Downton Abbey Becomes Highest Rated PBS Drama of All Time," *The Daily Beast*, 19th Mar 2013 <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/19/downton-abbey-season-3-becomes-top-rated-pbs-drama-of-all-time.html>> June 2013.

is a difference between reality and television: “It will be important to remember that an apparently direct or iconic representation of reality is more accurately a metaphorical reconstruction of that reality in the terms of the television medium.”¹⁰³

Downton Abbey is an illusory representation of the post-Edwardian era and a portrayal of the respective society. The TV series is actually a fantasy that is supposed to fulfil our idyllic vision of the lives of the upper class. Nevertheless, it is well aware of our obsessions and it is not afraid to mock them in a way typical for postmodern age. Illustrated on the character of Countess Violet and her witty comments, it also serves as a critique of the cliché plot lines and patterns typical for such series.

Finally, class division within contemporary British society is not nearly as important as it used to be, however, it did not vanish entirely. People still perceive the differences between classes, even if they do not openly say so. The privileged still regard their class status as something exclusive and they feel the need to defend it in the society. As for the much wider lower classes, despite it is natural for them to dream about a better life (in the upper class), they like to see that some traditions remain unchanged. Furthermore, television as a medium and the popular culture it helped to create blur the boundaries between classes and help to keep the lower classes' prospects for a better life real. Therefore, it seems reasonable to label the current British social system as 'class division-free society', but it would be premature to talk about a 'classless society'.

¹⁰³ Fiske and Hartley 48.

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