Re-establishing Class Privilege: 
The Ideological Uses of Middle and Working-Class 
Female Characters in *Downton Abbey*

Abstract

This paper argues that the British period drama *Downton Abbey*, which aired between 2010 and 2015 and encountered worldwide success, uses working class and middle-class female characters to promote the aristocracy and conservative ideas, while hiding behind historical accuracy and seemingly progressive patterns of behaviour. Through a close reading of four female characters, I will demonstrate how the series’ author, Julian Fellowes, uses the show to endorse his own political agenda, as a Conservative member of the House of Lords in the British Parliament.

In the field of popular culture and television studies, it is very common to see feminist critiques of new films or TV shows that focus on men, their lives, and their issues. Hence, critics have been developing ways to measure whether films or shows are “feminist-friendly” or not, and one such example is the Bechdel test. It is named after Alison Bechdel, a cartoonist who included her theory in one of her graphic novels, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in 1985. For a film to pass the Bechdel Test, it needs to fulfil three criteria: include a minimum of two named female characters, have these characters interact with each other, and have their conversation be about something other than men.

Viewers who watched the fifty-two episodes of *Downton Abbey*, a British period drama set at the beginning of the twentieth century, which ran for six series between 2010 and 2015 and encountered worldwide success, and apply the Bechdel Test to each of them, will realise that every single episode passes the test. This is partly because there is a large number of female characters in the show, many of whom work, and, therefore, have conversations about their jobs. Indeed, the series has a very large cast that represents the people on the Earl of Grantham’s country estate, both above and below stairs – that is, the aristocratic family and the servants. Out of the seventeen main characters that appear in all six series, nine are women, which can partly account for the popularity of the series. However,
as Meri Lisa Johnson argues in her introduction to *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts it in a Box*, we have to watch and enjoy television “without being duped by it” (22), which is contrary to what happens with *Downton Abbey*, whose viewers are misled.

Indeed, *Downton Abbey* has managed to avoid feminist criticism, even though the show has been criticised for other mishaps, such as the absence of a single black character for over three series.\(^1\) *Downton Abbey* changes the traditional focalisation of period dramas on the upper classes to a focalisation that includes working class women while its many upper-class characters, like the Earl’s daughters for example, are depicted as progressive and modern.\(^2\)

Nevertheless, *Downton Abbey*, I contend, is not progressive at all and can be regarded as a conservative drama. This is something that has been largely neglected in secondary criticism. One of the rare essays devoted to analysing how *Downton Abbey* promotes conservative values, “Adopting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in *Downton Abbey*,” by Katherine Byrne, argues that the series continues the tradition of the 1980s heritage film which was then largely criticised by critics such as Higson, who interrogated their “fascination ‘with the private property, the culture, and values of a particular class’” (314). All these things can be found in *Downton Abbey*, a series which, as Byrne argues, promotes the paternalism of the upper class throughout.

In this paper, I will argue that *Downton Abbey* also continues the tradition of the heritage film in two additional ways, which as yet have been largely unexplored. First, it reinforces the values and power of David Cameron’s conservative government,\(^3\) just as heritage films did in the 1980s in relation to Margaret Thatcher’s government (Wollen 183), and, secondly, it tries to build a new vision of British identity based on outdated values of class and social hierarchy (Wollen 179). Hence, I will show how the series only appears to be modern when in fact it functions as a conservative piece of propaganda that broadcasts the beliefs of its sole author, Lord Julian Fellowes, Baron of West-Stafford, who sits on the Conservative benches of House of Lords in the British Parliament since 2011 (Sweney n.p.). To do so, I will examine how subplots involving middle-class and working-class women that appear to be feminists function to promote the aristocracy and its supremacy over the rest of the society.

The heritage film is analysed in Tana Wollen’s essay, in which she looks at screen fictions such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *A Passage to India* (1982) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1982), and argues that these productions were part of “a wider enterprise, namely the reconstruction of national identity” (179) and that “in making sense of the past these fictions also have an instance in the present” (180). Both points are applicable to *Downton Abbey*’s treatment of history because it is, obviously, partial, as historical themes are taken “outside of history and into ‘story’” (Bromley 60), thus creating a new form, a new vision of the theme. The choice of historical themes which are included, or excluded, and how these
themes are treated in the series, make the series convey a certain vision of the past, which I shall show through the analysis of four of its female characters.

Gwen and Daisy represent the working-class. Gwen is a maid at Downton Abbey in Series One, but she leaves the show because she leaves service to become a secretary, and only returns for a brief appearance in Series Six. As for Daisy, she is one of the main characters. She is at first a kitchen girl and becomes an assistant cook as well as a student. The middle class is the least represented class on the show. Indeed, most characters belong either to the aristocratic family upstairs (and, therefore, to the upper class) or to the servants (albeit the working class) downstairs. Nevertheless, two female representatives of the middle class are undoubtedly worth analysing: Isobel, a cousin of the Crawleys of Downton Abbey, and Sarah, a teacher in the school of Downton village and the most subversive character in the series.

1. Using Education to Promote the Role of the Upper Class

At the beginning of the series, Gwen Harding is a housemaid at Downton. During one of the first episodes, we learn that she is taking a correspondence course to learn to type because she wants to become a secretary, which astonishes the whole household, even though at the beginning of the twentieth century, being a secretary was not unusual. Typewriters had been invented more than half a century earlier and typing definitely was a woman’s job. Nevertheless, the other characters on the show are astounded because they all think that it is preferable to have a position in service rather than to be a secretary. Despite their opinion, Gwen manages to find a position as a secretary and, thus, leaves the show at the end of the first series. Thereafter, she is only referred to once to say that she got married (Series 4, Episode 2), and the viewers do not know anything more about what becomes of her until the fourth episode of the last series, when she makes a last appearance. She comes back at Downton as a guest to tell the Crawleys about her project of opening a college for women from modest backgrounds, which is a very progressive project.

Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, colleges for women existed and were becoming more common. The first college for women, Girton College, Cambridge, had been founded half a century earlier, in 1869, by Emily Davies, a feminist from the Langham Place Group (Jones n.p.). However, even though the State spent a lot of money on universities, attending university still cost a lot (Anderson n.p.), and therefore, university students came from the wealthier classes (that is the middle and the upper class). Therefore, Gwen’s idea seems to be very modern. Moreover, she tells the Crawleys that after she got her job as a secretary, she moved into local government, which makes her the only character on the show who is actively involved in politics. However, the series does not allow the audience
to witness her involvement in politics, thus making this information trivial, even though it could have been a solid storyline for this working-class character.

Gwen’s return in the series is not to expand her character, but rather it is to show that the Crawleys share open-minded ideas about education, as they are shown supporting Gwen’s project and accepting to give her financial help. Katherine Byrne argues that Fellowes considers his series as a “fable for social responsibility and order,” a society in which “the individual exists to serve others and is an indispensable part of the running of the whole machine” (315). The dynamics of the relationship between the Crawleys and Gwen and its development between Series One and Series Six illustrate this idea perfectly. Gwen used to serve the upper-class family, but, eventually, they serve her projects. As a result, the series pictures all these individuals, despite their difference in social background, as pursuing one common goal, which is the common good of the society they live in. Consequently, the upper class is portrayed as generous, as its representatives show they care for the rest of the society. In addition, this subplot shows how seemingly feminist ideas (in this case, opening a college for women with little money) are used for other purposes on the show, as this working-class character is not used to show what working-class women could do, but only used as a pretext to depict the upper-class as open-minded and progressive. In the following section, I will show that Daisy’s character is also used to illustrate the supposedly important role the upper class plays in society. I will also demonstrate how this character reinforces the legitimacy of the place of the upper class at the very top of the social scale.

2. Delegitimizing Labour to Promote the Conservatives and Nobility

Daisy is one of the characters whose development is the most dramatic throughout the series. She is first an uneducated kitchen maid and the victim of her boss’s reproaches, and eventually becomes an educated assistant cook. She seems to embody the type of working-class women Virginia Woolf describes in her 1930 essay “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild,” which shows that through education, the lower classes of society gained in awareness and re-evaluation of their lives:

They read at meals; they read before going to the mill. […] They read with the indiscriminate greed of a hungry appetite that crams itself with toffee and beef and tarts and vinegar and champagne all in one gulp. Naturally, such reading led to argument. The younger generation […] had the temerity to doubt whether to sew straight-stiches into men’s hat brims should be the sole aim and end of a woman’s life. They started arguments and even held rudimentary debating societies on the floor of the factory. (144–145)
This account summarises what Daisy starts doing from Series Three onwards: she starts reading and studying, later she is helped and influenced by Sarah Bunting, a school teacher (further analysed in section 4), and she will not accept that her opinions are not heard. However, every time Daisy takes a stand, it is useless, as she never manages to make anything change, and the decision is always shown to be in the hands of and dependent on the goodwill of the aristocratic Crawleys.

The first time that she has her voice heard is in the first episode of Series Three, when she decides to go on strike because the Crawleys have not hired a new kitchen maid even though her supervisor, Mrs Patmore, had told her they would. Daisy wants to be considered as a proper assistant cook and refuses to work until a new kitchen maid is hired. Even though she is called Mrs Patmore’s “assistant” and receives a raise, she is still angry because, as she tells Mrs Patmore she “kept [her] in with a dishonest representation,” as no additional help is hired, and goes on strike. Or at least, that is what she first intends to do, as she stops her strike and goes back to work even though Mrs Patmore is “not responding to [her] protest.” Nonetheless, a new kitchen maid is hired a few episodes later, as the finances of the family find themselves in a better state due to a sudden inheritance.

As a result, the situation downstairs is shown as being influenced only by the will of the people upstairs, and Daisy’s strike is represented as silly and unable to achieve any influence on the situation. Hence, the series sides with the political right by depicting striking as a purposeless practice unable to influence the people in charge. The political partiality is even clearer if we look at the situation today in Britain: even though the Conservative government does not claim to be opposed to strikes, it does attempt to limit their occurrence. In 2015, Sajid Javid, as the Conservative Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, introduced a reform of trade unions that would diminish the right to strike through a series of new laws that, at the same time, endangered the finances of the Labour Party (Wintour n.p.). In reaction to this, trade union representatives wrote in protest to The Guardian newspaper, arguing that the Conservatives were about “to fundamentally shift the balance of power toward government and employers” (Letters n.p.). In Downton Abbey, the balance of power is, due to the period the story is set in, in favour of the employers. However, the series does not include some changes in the balance of power that were beginning to take place at that time: trade unions started to appear, and could have appeared in the series, like they do in others. For example, in the remake of the nineteen-seventies show Upstairs, Downstairs which aired between 2010 and 2012, a housemaid complains about her working and living conditions and, with the help of a union for women working in service, she manages to make things change (Series Two, Episode Three). Therefore, in Upstairs, Downstairs, the working class is shown as have some power, while in Downton Abbey their welfare depends on the upper class. Additionally, since they all seem fairly happy, their upper-class employers are shown to be good and benevolent employers.
Indeed, none of the characters who are servants really complain about their situation, even though some accounts of the period testify that that work could be very harsh. *The Psychology of the Servant Problem*, written by Violet Mary Firth and published in 1925, argues that “being a servant is very painful to one’s self-respect and no amount of money will compensate that injury to anyone who had independence of spirit” (qtd. in Hunter n.p.), a resentment that is only reflected sporadically by two characters: Daisy by her strike that only lasts for one episode and Moseley who complains about his job title. Nonetheless, both characters wish to continue to work for the Crawleys, even though both have opportunities to work elsewhere, as Daisy’s father-in-law asks her to work with him on his farm and Moseley is offered a job as a teacher in Series Six, a job which he eventually accepts even though he says that he would be glad to return to Downton to lend a hand whenever he is needed. Thus, characters who could be used to show opposition to the supremacy of the upper class are instead used to further convey a feeling of sympathy towards them.

In the final series, Daisy is also responsible for one of the rare acts of rebellion that are represented on the show. When the estate on which her father-in-law is a tenant is sold, he is unsure whether he will be allowed to continue to work there. Daisy considers this to demonstrate a lack of respect towards a trustworthy farmer and pleads her cause at an auction where the former owners of the estate sell most of their belongings:

Daisy: Excuse me, but you’re the new landowner?
New owner: I am.
Daisy: So it’s you who insists on serving notice to men who’ve given their whole life to the land.
Robert Crawley: Daisy?
Daisy: You bout out families who’ve been here for generations. What gives you the right to do that?
Former owner: Mrs Mason, there’s really no […].
Daisy: I’m afraid I don’t think you’re the one to tell me.
Cora Crawley: Daisy, pull yourself together. What do you think you’re doing?
Daisy: A man who sells his wedding presents. Do you know what it meant for a farmer to give half a crown? Or don’t you care?
Robert Crawley: Daisy, stop this at once!
Daisy: I’m sorry m’Lord, but no. Mr Mason has given his whole life to this farm, like his father, and grandfather before him, but where’s the gratitude? […].
New owner: Good day Mrs Mason. You have not helped your cause. (Series Six, Episode One)

In only a few lines, Daisy manages to object to a variety of things. She first criticises the upper class’s disregard of hard workers like Mr Mason and protests against the fact that these tenants have no say in their future and no rights because they have no wealth. As she says, she feels that “the system’s slanted against us,
that the men in charge will always be the men in charge” (Series Five, Episode Seven) but she shows that she refuses to accept it. In addition, she rejects the superiority of the upper class and of her own employer, Robert Crawley, as she tells him “no.” By doing so, Daisy refuses to indulge the belief that a difference in status means a difference in rights, especially in regard to the right to freedom of expression. Furthermore, she comments on the differences between the realities of the upper and lower class, by asking if they understand “what it meant for farmers to give half a crown,” once again objecting to the unfairness of these differences. Through her discourse, she conveys a left-wing point of view, opposed to the privileges of the wealthy and of the upper class.

However, Daisy’s rebellion does not have any positive results, as the new owner refuses to keep Mr Mason, her father-in-law, as a tenant, and as the rest of the staff at Downton condemn her for speaking up against their employers’ judgement. Thus, no other character supports her action, and, consequently, the series does not appear to support it either. Moreover, the Crawleys finally (and again) rescue Daisy and Mr Mason, as they refuse to fire the former for her insubordination and give a tenancy on their estate to the latter. Due to these events, Daisy is, eventually, grateful to the upper class, as she says, “Yesterday I thought I hated her [Cora Crawley], and today she’s saved our lives” (Series Six, Episode Four), and, thus, the only working-class character who rebels against the power of the upper classes abandons the fight and accepts the superiority of the aristocracy. She also abandons the Labour Party because they are only “limp[ing] from crisis to crisis” while “they were going to do so much when they came in” (Series Five, Episode Seven), although she was one of the only characters shown to support them, in Series Five.

In short, Daisy can be regarded as a character who fights for change unnecessarily, and, therefore, legitimates the superiority of the upper class. Today in Britain, nobility still enjoys unelected power, and, thus, “natural superiority,” through the House of Lords, where Julian Fellowes sits. The House of Lords is the second largest legislature in the world, with its 859 members who are not elected (Gold n.p.). Today, the Labour Party’s official policy is to create an elected House of Lords (“Elected Senate would replace House of Lords under Labour”), which would endanger this “natural superiority” that the nobility still takes advantage of. In this way, the House of Lords is threatened by change if Labour comes into power. Through Daisy’s useless strike, her complaints about the Labour government and her eventual faith in the Crawleys, Fellowes attempts to show the inefficiency of Labour and of socialism, and the righteousness of those with titles who compose the House of Lords where he too sits.
3. ‘Moving Up’ into the Aristocracy

The working class is not the only social group which is used in Downton Abbey to strengthen the dominant place of the upper class and nobility on the social ladder. As already mentioned, the middle class is the least represented strata of society in Downton Abbey, even though at the time the story is set, the beginning of the twentieth century, they made up around fifteen to twenty percent of the population whereas the upper class (broadly represented on the show) only constituted five percent of the British people (Mougel 80). Isobel and Matthew Crawley are the first middle-class characters who appear on the show. They arrive at Downton in the second episode of the series, because Matthew is to become the heir of the Earl of Grantham5 and his mother, Isobel, accompanies him.

They are both presented as being different from the aristocratic Crawleys as they are both willing to work: Matthew is a lawyer and wants to go on working even though he is to become the next Earl of Grantham after Robert’s death, and Isobel, who was trained to be a nurse, wishes to make herself useful by volunteering in Downton village’s hospital. Even though their upper-class cousins do not welcome these ideas, Matthew and Isobel are “determined not to change,” as Matthew himself says (Series One, Episode Four). However, as Katherine Byrne notes, Matthew quickly changes his mind and fully becomes part of the aristocracy (319). As a character, Matthew represents the sceptical part of the middle class, as he arrives at Downton and only “see[s] the absurdity of the whole thing” but he eventually is happy to abandon his class and move up in society, into a better class.

Isobel, on the other hand, seems to remain a progressive middle-class representative, happy to challenge the conservative ideas of the aristocracy, and particularly the Dowager Countess, her rival throughout the show. They are shown having endless arguments throughout the six series of the show: Isobel’s progressive middle-class opinions versus the traditional beliefs of the Dowager Countess. They argue when Isobel volunteers as a nurse at the hospital, when Isobel takes charge of transforming the abbey into a convalescent home for wounded soldiers during the First World War6, and when Isobel devotes herself to helping prostitutes improve their lives. Indeed, at the time, some establishments called “rescue homes” aimed at giving skills to ex-prostitutes and assisting them to find a new place in society. In A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Age of Empire, Louis A. Jackson traces the history of the regulation of sexual behaviour between 1820 and 1920. She explains that these rescue home were habitually run by nuns, but that volunteers also gave some help, and those volunteers were often considered to be feminists because they openly helped women who were exploited by men and helped change the awareness of all women (91‒92). Concluding that Isobel Crawley is a feminist character would be too extreme, but her storyline hints at the feminist tradition, making her look all the more progressive.
Not only does she help prostitutes, but she also does it under her own roof, as she decides to hire Ethel, a former maid at Downton Abbey who has fallen into prostitution, as her cook to take her off the streets. This, once again, leads to a disagreement with the Crawleys. As Rebeccah Housel notes in *Downton Abbey and Philosophy*, “Isobel is a progressive, outspoken and independent woman devoted to helping the sick and the poor. Isobel is Mill’s ideal” (White 26). British philosopher John Stuart Mill promoted charity and social justice, and also was an active advocate for equality between men and women— he was also the first member of Parliament to ask for women’s suffrage. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he argues that,

> The principle which regulates the existing social restrictions between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (219)

This desire for equality between the sexes is also part of Isobel’s character. In the series, whenever little steps are made towards gender equality, she is the first one to encourage them. She encourages Sybil Crawley in her desire to work and become a nurse, claims Edith Crawley is right to have her voice heard by becoming a journalist and applauds the innovations Mary Crawley brings to the estate. However, she seems more concerned about bringing innovation into the lives of her upper-class relatives than into the lives of the members of the working class around her. For instance, even though her gesture of hiring Ethel as her cook appears to be very generous, it does not help her become independent: she is back in the world of service, depending on the middle or upper classes to hire her. Therefore, Isobel does not challenge the class system.

In addition, Isobel’s interest in charity work and helping others disappears in Series Five and Six. She is still involved in the hospital, but she no longer takes care of the patients like a working or middle-class nurse. Instead, she is on the hospital board with her upper-class relatives. Therefore, like her son Matthew, she seems to move out of her class and become closer to the upper class. Furthermore, in the final series, Isobel becomes “Lady Merton,” when she decides to marry Lord Merton, Mary Crawley’s godfather. By doing so, she officially moves into the aristocratic circle (once again, like Matthew before her), and she also renounces her independence, a trait that made her such an emblematic and unique character.
4. Undermining Progressive Ideas

Another significant character in *Downton Abbey* is Sarah Bunting. She certainly is the most subversive character in the series, and therefore, plays an important role in this analysis, even though she can only be seen in a few episodes of Series Four and Five. She appears for the first time in the series when she attends a political meeting, and it is soon obvious that she is a supporter of the political left, unlike the Crawleys and a lot of working-class characters. From the start, Sarah is shown as different from the other characters, as she is the only one who claims to have an interest in politics – what is more, left-wing politics. She does not hide her opinions, even if they are not shared by the people she is with.

Sarah’s straightforward opinions lead to two arguments at Downton, when Sarah is there as a guest. She is invited on several occasions as a friend of Tom’s, Robert’s son-in-law and a former chauffeur. It appears that she comes to see him, not the rest of the family, since, she says, “as a rule, [she doesn’t] really warm up to their type,” that is, to the aristocracy (Series Four, Episode Eight), and she does not try to be liked by them either, as the scene quoted below illustrates. The first argument occurs when the party is having a conversation about the war memorial that is about to be installed in the village, and that Robert finances:

Sarah: I’m not convinced that these memorials are a good idea, but I suppose that’s a different issue [...] a stone edifice in the centre of the green to remind us forever of death and a pointless war [...] What’s the good of that? To say nothing of the waste of money.
Robert: Forgive me, but you’re talking nonsense.
Isobel: Forgive me, but I suppose she’s allowed an opinion.
Robert: She is not allowed an opinion. Not in this house.
Tom: I think what she meant is [...].
Robert: She is your friend, so of course you must defend her.
Tom: But was the war worth fighting for? What did it achieve beyond the Russian Revolution which you hate?
Sarah: Millions of men dead and no more justice than there was before (Series Five, Episode One).

This is one of the rare moments in the series where Robert (who embodies the aristocracy) is shown to lose his temper and his open-mindedness, as he does not allow a middle-class teacher to criticise the British government and the country’s decision to participate in the war because he feels it is his duty to support Britain. The series makes it clear that Robert is not at fault during the scene quoted above. Instead, Sarah is the sole character who is made to appear irritating and disrespectful to the viewers, causing her to be disliked – even hated – by some viewers. A review written after one of the arguments Sarah has with the Crawleys asks whether Sarah Bunting is “the most hated character on TV,” and quotes some virulent reactions of the audience. One viewer tweeted “I’m trying to remember
the last time I hated a character as much as I hate Sarah Bunting” and another called her “quite rude” and advised her not to show up for free dinners at Downton if she hates the rich (Buckman n.p.).

This response from the audience is not only due to the dialogues, which present Sarah as very abrupt, but also due to the way the scenes with Sarah and the Crawleys are filmed. Viewers are prevented from identifying with Sarah and encouraged to identify with the Crawleys, even though the typical viewer is more likely to have more in common with Sarah Bunting than with a representative of the aristocracy. Sarah’s arguments with the Crawleys happen during two dinner scenes in Series Five. In such scenes, except for a few shots that show the entire party, the camera is always positioned at the level of someone dining. These scenes are, therefore, filmed from the point of view of those around the table, and the perspective created is thus that of the upper class. Never are these scenes filmed from the point of view of the representatives of the working class who are serving dinner. The viewers are also encouraged to look as the guests and family around the table do, as the camera is often placed between two characters. However, the camera is rarely placed between Sarah and another character and she is only filmed during arguments. Thus, she is represented as an intruder who only criticises her hosts. The viewers are encouraged to share the Crawleys’ view of Sarah and, thus, their opinion of her, when the camera shows her from their perspective. During the second argument, Sarah claims that she thinks that the family has no interest in their staff, and that “Lord Grantham would like us serfs to stay in our allotted place from cradle to grave” (Series Five, Episode Four). Robert reacts vehemently and asks her to leave, and at that moment, most of the audience, being manipulated by the series, also wants her to leave. Thus, the only female character openly opposed to the aristocratic way of life is presented as a nuisance, and she is rapidly removed from the plot. In addition, even though she claims to be opposed to the Crawleys’ way of life, she is also represented as being interested in it, as in the ninth episode of Series Four, she asks Tom to show her around the house and to tell her about its ornaments. Moreover, she tells him that she is “flattered to be asked” to dinner at Downton (Series Five, Episode Four), and therefore, it is fair to raise the question of whether, despite her political views, Sarah secretly envies the upper class. The series would thus imply that the middle class’s political views stem from envying the upper class, and, consequently, question the legitimacy of these political views.

Conclusion

An analysis of these four characters shows how deceitful are seemingly progressive patterns of behaviour in *Downton Abbey*. Characters who seem to be rebellious and subversive end up supporting the system as it is – or, rather, as it was – and
characters who convey opinions that are closer to common British twenty-first-century beliefs and values are condemned as being obnoxious and ousted from the show. As Byrne argues, the show tends to promote paternalism. I believe that along with this paternalism, the series promotes an outdated model of the society, but it does so by intentionally yet covertly supporting conservative values, and by using characters such as those analysed in this essay to give an appearance of progress and modernity to the story. The show’s nostalgia for the past and admiration for upper-class traditions and values are clear; what is less apparent is the classism that is inherent in the characterization of “progressive” and “rebellious” women from the working and middle classes. These women’s main function is to validate Julian Fellowes’s conservative views and, thus, convey his own political and ideological ideals. *Downton Abbey*’s depiction of British history is biased. Consequently, British and foreign viewers need to keep in mind that Fellowes’s portrayal of British society at the beginning of the twentieth century is in fact a romanticised version of history and the British class system. The society represented in the series is not progressive even by the standards of the period in which it is set.

**Notes**

1. The only recurring black character on the show only appears on the fourth episode of Series Four, and only plays a part in four episodes of the series.
2. The three daughters of the Earl all acquire a job, even though they are aristocrats and, as such, should not traditionally work in a beginning-of-the-twentieth-century setting: the eldest, Mary, starts to act as the manager and agent of the estate in the fourth series, the youngest, Sybil, becomes a nurse during the very first episode, and Edith becomes a journalist in Series Two, and eventually becomes the owner of the paper.
3. David Cameron’s Conservative government was in power during the six years of the broadcast of *Downton Abbey*.
4. Her employer agrees to improve the living as well as the working conditions of the servants as, for example, she provides one bed for each servant instead of one large bed for two.
5. The beginning of the series includes a very Austen-like plotline, as the Earl of Grantham and his wife only have three daughters who cannot inherit because they are not men. The heir to Robert’s fortune was, thus, his cousin, but as the series opens, we are told that he died in the sinking of the Titanic (a clever way to let the audience know that the story is set in 1912 at the beginning of Series One). Therefore, Matthew Crawley, a distant cousin is to inherit the Earldom, the Abbey and the money.
6 The second series of the show, nicknamed “Downton at War” is dedicated to the five years of the First World War, and represents the trenches as well as the consequences of the war inside Britain. In fact, Highclere Castle, the “real” Downton Abbey, really was transformed into a convalescent home according to the current Countess of Carnarvon (see https://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/March2012/2012Television/page1.php).

7 That was another subversive event in the plot: Sybil, Robert’s youngest daughter, decides to marry the Irish chauffeur and to go and live with him in Ireland, thus abandoning her status and, with it, her privileges. However, that rebellious storyline is cut short by Sybil and Tom’s return to Downton and Sybil’s death in childbirth. Moreover, the once socialist and anti-aristocracy rebel Tom stays at Downton as its tenant, hence indulging the Crawleys’ way of life.

References


Filmography