

# Downton Abbey Deserves a Second Viewing

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Save



The cast of Downton Abbey. Courtesy of PBS



By Jeffrey A. Tucker

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## *Commentary*

One's first exposure to the long series "Downton Abbey" can be a sensory overload. The recreation of the period that begins in 1912 is so

compelling. The costuming is perfect, which I know because I understand menswear. Most period movies get it wrong.

The cinematography is dreamy. The magnificent estate that is the main setting of action is overwhelming in its beauty. The customs and manners are charming, as is the relationship between the upstairs and downstairs.

It's like taking a tour of the real thing and nothing happens that betrays its fictional basis. It feels like a true window into a time and place, so much so that the big themes can be lost on the viewer. That's simply because it takes so long to get past one's awe even to see that there is a theme at all.

That theme stands out on a second viewing, even from the first episode in which the news of the day is the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. That news reveals the essential drama over the future of the title (Earl of Grantham) as well as the resources to run the estate that were acquired by marriage. The two are tied in the entail.

Two successors to the title were killed in the sinking, and the next in line, whom they did not know, stands to inherit that entire package, thus making the entire family subject to a distant relative they did not know. The one path to saving it all is a marriage of the Earl's daughter Mary to the cousin but that possibility is fraught with uncertainty.

All that romantic and succession drama aside, this series is really about the ways in which the modern world born in the second decade of the 20th century ate all that came before, including its political forms, its manners, its social hierarchies, its stability and faith, and its genteel spirit.

The devastation of the *Titanic* becomes the symbol it has always occupied: the loss of faith in progress, the carnage created by the presumption of control, and the hubris of wealth and technology.

"I thought it was supposed to be unsinkable," says one of the daughters. Lord Grantham, responds with: "Every mountain is

unclimbable until someone climbs it; so every ship is unsinkable until it sinks.”

The sinkable ship is the Old World represented by the culture of Downton itself.

The rest of the series follows from that, plunging straight into the ghastly and seriously misnamed Great War in 1914. The implicit critique of this catastrophe is devastating, so much so that this show should be listed among the antiwar classics. We see the population-wide frenzy of a society with a mission, even to the point of sacrificing a generation of young men and calling it progress. Men who don't sign up to kill and be killed are called cowards by the young women. Men who are terrified and try to flee the bloodshed all around them are shot for desertion and permanently disgraced. Those who survive never recover former innocence.

Along the way, we are witness to the unfolding of technological progress from electricity to the automobile to the telephone and flight. With that came new expectations of social progress for all classes, alongside political reforms like the vote for women and the rise of state control over medicine. The family at Downton is forced to adapt, just as the entire world did.

“The world was in a dream before the war,” says Lord Grantham, “but now it's woken up and said goodbye to it. And so must we.”

It's all here in this series. It therefore serves as a brilliant lesson in history, covering that critical turning point from what was called the Belle Epoque into the technocratic killing fields of 20th-century politics, society, and culture. The more you understand about the actual history, the more the series makes sense. But even if you do not understand this history, the series serves as a wonderful tutorial into changing and changed times.

The character development is as good as any I've seen in long-running series. Most people like to talk about the upstairs of the house, the beautiful people with the titles, clothing, social connections, and

emotional dramas over marriage and reputation. Equally as interesting are the fascinating people in the downstairs, where the virtues, foibles, insecurities, and outright evil are more presciently on display.

The head butler Charles Carson keeps the house running according to strict protocols over routines, manners, roles, morals, and decorum. He is an ideal type with a voice to match but his human side is revealed early on as a song-and-dance partner from a former life shows up to blackmail him. The secret is revealed but the scandal is minor at best and everyone moves on. His task is a grand one because the culture of the downstairs is decidedly less decorous than the upstairs, so he is forever having to decide just how much rottenness he should tolerate. The answer is almost always: too much.

The head housekeeper Elsie Hughes is matronly and kind, and reliably honest. She stands in sharp contrast to the pernicious and troubled lady's maid to the Earl's wife. Sarah O'Brien hides it well in front of the family but she is scheming, bitter, and malicious to the point that she makes the viewer deeply uncomfortable. She is close enough to the family to sow all kinds of conflicts, subtly dripping poison in people's ears. Yes, we've all known someone like her from work or family.

O'Brien is in league with the ultimate rotten man of Thomas Barrow. Handsome, talented, and highly intelligent, he has no morals at all and is always up to no good. He gets away with it because he plays the part well, despite his known issues with sexual dysphoria. In the world of business, he would likely work his way up to be the chief operations officer, seemingly indispensable but actually a killer of talent and sower of discord, the truth about whom is discovered only once it is too late.

There are others who are fascinating such as the kitchen assistant Daisy, sweet but easily led into trouble. Her conscience always prevails in the end. William Mason, a second footman who considers his position to be a huge social advance over farm life, is in love with her but cannot seem to attract her attention. Mrs. Patmore is the chef

with failing eyesight and an officious manner, and, while she is sympathetic, it is never obvious why she holds such an exalted position.

One of the more fascinating characters is John Bates, with whom the Earl served in some earlier war who is now limp in one leg (which he tries to cure with a brace, another failed technology). He is earnest and loyal to a fault, and spends his life being punished for it. He is taken in as valet to Lord Grantham despite his injury but his mysterious past catches up to him, including two years in jail for a crime he did not commit.

As it turns out, he was covering for his wife Vera, who emerges as the most evil person in the entire series. Greedy and malicious, Vera Bates has no moral compass, even to the point of blackmailing her husband to wreck his position at Downton. As an archetype, she is the compelling embodiment of every man's worst nightmare, a pitiless woman who thinks only of what she can pillage from others, and is willing to destroy anyone or anything that stands in the way, even her own devoted husband who spent years both providing for her and covering her crimes.

Her evil is only made operational by her husband's goodness, on which she can depend without fail. Thus does she take every advantage no matter how much suffering she imposes. Not very often is such a gendered character portrayed in movies. Unlike most people in the show, even the menacing Thomas, there is no redemption for her.

Again, the upstairs portion of the house has plenty of equally compelling characters but it is the downstairs that offers the most stark portrayals, all easily recognizable, including Gwen Harding, the housemaid with the right kind of ambition, and the ungrateful Edna Braithwaite, who hates her job and is hoping that the forces of history wipe out the whole of the aristocracy.

Others in the show toy with socialist ideas but are taught by the unfolding of events that such ideological longings only destroy what is

beautiful and true.

The most wonderful character of all is the Dowager Countess, who represents the best of the Old World and its values. An idealist who is also perfectly practical, she is given the best lines and the highest place of honor in the show. It is left to her to explain why the house must maintain the old ways:

“For years I’ve watched governments take control of our lives,” she says, “and their argument is always the same: fewer costs and greater efficiency. But the result is the same too: less control by the people and more controlled by the state, until the individual’s own wishes count for nothing. That is what I consider my duty to resist. ... See, the point of a so-called great family is to protect our freedoms. That is why the Barons made King John sign the Magna Carta.”

Freedom is precisely what slips away gradually from the first episode to the last, and there is the underlying theme of the show and the lasting lesson.

We live in times with a great ambition worldwide to recover lost freedoms. In order to achieve that, we need to have culture-wide knowledge of how it happened and what we left behind in the name of progress. A rewatch of this wonderful series is a great place to start.

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