

'Downton Abbey' is more myth than Masterpiece Theater

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 23, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

"Downton Abbey" has attracted so many fans that PBS showed it twice on Super Bowl Sunday so football fans would not miss an episode.

The series about the parallel lives of the downstairs servants and the upstairs aristocrats, like the Orient Express on which some long to ride and at which others prefer to hurl stones, has stirred reactions out of proportion to its Masterpiece Theater origins.

Heidi Schlumpf, the writer of [this beguiling column](#) [1], surveys varying opinions, asking "why a British period drama seems to have taken the world by storm." Is it the costumes, she muses, or is it just "a 'Desperate Housewives' with British accents for those who think they are more cultured?"

She concludes with good sense and good humor that, despite the pull of the Edwardian era in which the series begins, she doesn't "want to live 'Downton Abbey.' I just want to be entertained by it."

She notes that the acute social observer Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin feels a need to justify his viewing it as a "guilty pleasure, his Catholic guilt kicking in because the show celebrates income inequality, snottiness and *noblesse oblige*."

Writing in [The Washington Post](#) [2], Martin decries "a show about rich people who have poor people working for them. And don't seem to mind."

A month ago, English historian Simon Schama [denounced the series in Newsweek](#) [3], terming it "cultural necrophilia" as well as a "servile soap opera" and "a steaming silver tureen of snobbery."

Not to be outdone, British poet James Fenton, [writing in The New York Review of Books](#) [4], accuses the program of absurd plot twists and of upholding a long-past dynastic way of life centered on the "perpetuation of a gigantic nineteenth century house" that symbolizes the ultimately futile goals of a collapsed social order.

"Downton Abbey" might be better understood, in itself and in the politically correct criticism it evokes, as a story, that is, a Myth that in its purpose resembles the Myths that have always preserved the truths about human nature, inflected differently in varying historical and geographical conditions.

This seems like a story about the Crawley family's endgame as the monarchical ordering of society disintegrated and class distinctions. The latter included people born to live on a high level, replete with power and influence, and people born to live at a lower level, replete with limited opportunities and unlimited miseries, whose calling was to serve those above them.

Great Britain remembers and replays its long-lost grandeur on this series that fulfills one of the functions of Myth set down by Joseph Campbell: "to carry the individual through the various stages and crises of life -- that is, to help persons grasp the unfolding of life with integrity. This wholeness means that the individual will

experience significant events ... as, first, in accord with themselves, and, secondly, with their culture, as well as, thirdly, with the mysterium tremendum beyond themselves and all things."

That is the Myth of "Downton Abbey," a story of people struggling to "grasp the unfolding of life with integrity," and that goes for the seemingly deprived people downstairs as well as the seemingly entitled people upstairs. They are all coping with a massive social transition that, a century later, remains incomplete. Whether they know it consciously or not, the artists who created "Downton Abbey" have provided a Myth that helps its viewers, perhaps only at a pre-conscious level, to understand the lives that they lead in the country and in the times in which they live them.

The Myth speaks to various levels of our own American Catholic consciousness, for we have also been living through a difficult and estranging transition from the monarchical, or hierarchical, ordering of the church to a very different collegial sense of the church as a People of God. Dynastic questions and the preservation of great symbolic structures are involved, as is the notion that there are people called to live at its highest level, replete with power and influence, and people called to live at a lower level, replete with limited opportunities and unlimited miseries. If the Myth of "Downton Abbey" includes the exclusion of women from inheriting the great house, the Myth of transition in Catholicism includes the exclusion of women's aspiring to, much less, inheriting the great house of sacramental authority.

People watch the series, therefore, for reasons they do not fully understand. That is why so many people are busy searching for reasons to watch and/or praise or denounce this Myth about their own lives and experience.

The same issues are found in American life in which politics and policies have class referents, between the middle class and the super-rich, between capital and labor, between the 99 percent Occupiers and the 1 percent they view as their oppressors, between outrageously paid athletes and the ordinary people who pay extraordinary prices to keep the games going.

On many levels, "Downton Abbey" is a Myth about our own experience in the wrenching but incomplete transition from the monarchical or hierarchical ordering of church and state into the order cleaned of the old distinctions by the advent of the Space and Information Age. At some layer inside yourself, whether you are the pope or the lowliest of Catholics, whether you are the queen or a commoner, a billionaire or one of the working poor, you feel the tension of this unnamed but inexorably unfolding change. Without really knowing it, the creators of "Downton Abbey" are trying to name it for you. Forget all the conscious reasons we may raise to justify watching it. Let it fulfill its mythic role to help us grasp the universe in which we live. You don't need any excuse for that.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/29034/>

[2] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/guilty-catholic-pleasure-downton-abbey/2012/02/13/gIQABfCIBR_blog.html

[3] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/01/15/why-americans-have-fallen-for-snobby-downton-abbey.html>

[4] <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/mar/08/abbey-jumped-shark/?pagination=false>

[5] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>