Deconstructing Downton Abbey: The House that Masterpiece Built

Nicole Flynn, South Dakota State University
It’s the moment Masterpiece devotees have been waiting for. Downton Abbey enters its final season with the premiere of Season 6 on Sunday, January 3, at 8pm (7 MT) on SDPB1.

The final season comes not a minute too soon for legions of faithful viewers who have longingly awaited a return to the dramatic, decorous universe of the aristocratic Crawley family and their contingent of (mostly) dutiful servants. Since its British premiere in 2010 and its 2011 stateside debut, Downton Abbey has achieved a level of critical and popular success by which forthcoming period dramas are destined to be measured. The production has amassed dozens of BAFTA, Emmy and Golden Globe nominations and awards and capped the Guinness World Record for television’s “Highest Critical Review Ratings.” In the U.S., the English entertainment import was the second most-watched program on Super Bowl Sunday and is the most-watched PBS program ever.

Yankee fervor for Downton runs wide and deep. The Edwardian-era world of Lord and Lady Grantham, their adult daughters and their personal attendants has inspired in certain U.S. circles a revival of the high-society 20th century British aesthetic. From demure sets of “Lady Mary Pajamas,” to manor house replica lamps, online outfitters proffer early 1900s apparel and household furnishings. Self-professed American fans of the show include rapper P. Diddy, who confesses to crying at the deaths of favorite characters, and comedian Patton Oswalt, who hosts Downton Abbey viewing parties.

And while American football may not yet rank as a national sport in the U.K., the series will be redolently represented in Pasadena, CA as a florally festooned model of Highclere Castle (the real-life setting for Downton Abbey) floats its way down the 2016 Rose Bowl parade route. Americans are simply mad for Downton Abbey. But as Carson himself might inquire, ample eyebrows vaulted toward the estate’s 50-foot ceilings: “Why on Earth all the fluff and hullaballoo?”

Callie Hisek, who teaches acting, directing, and theatre history in the Department of Theatre at the University of South Dakota, suggests Downton Abbey’s main appeal is in its twin offerings of escapism and relatable characters. According to Hisek, “Downton Abbey is historical, fictional, honest, and portrays a life that many of us dream about being a part of – even if only for a moment. Each of the characters in this show represents the best and worst of what it means to be human, but again, they are honest.”

Like its popular 1970s Masterpiece predecessor, Upstairs Downstairs, Downton Abbey dramatizes, to great voyeuristic success, the interdependent lives of the gentry and the men and women who dress, feed, and, at times, collude and couple with them. “The show also capitalizes on the vicarious pleasures of seeing how the other half lives—both the luxury of the Crawleys and their milieu and the secret lives of the underclass,” says Assistant Professor of English Nicole Flynn, who specializes in twentieth century British literature and theatre at South Dakota State University. “We get to occupy both positions in the class structure simultaneously while being transported back to a beautiful and exciting moment in history. What’s not to love?”

The blurring of the societal delineations that separate the elite from the staff at Downton, set amidst the historical scrim of a rapidly modernizing England, provide an agile plot device and lend irresistible tension to the narrative frame. Storylines sparkle with mischief and possibility when social order runs askew and longstanding class boundaries are busted: Tom Branson marries Sybil Crawley and no longer chauffeurs the family car but drives business decisions for the estate. Dirty secrets are divulged and amorous capers compacted as maids and ladies conspire in dressing room mirrors. Some British critics have chided
writer and creator Julian Fellowes for distorting an entrenched class system by portraying implausibly sympathetic upper-class characters colluding with servants. While Hisek says she understands the point, ultimately the theme of shared humanity trumps social class divisions. “This idea can be seen in the relationship between Robert and Bates,” says Hisek. “They served together in the war and even though class and rank still play a part in service, when someone saves your life, is there for you in a time of need or crisis, you don’t forget that. Robert believed in Bates because of Bates’ character. That is at the core of all of this. Yes, there is rank, class, wealth, and power – but in the end all of these characters are humans. You can never overlook loyalty, faith, love, and companionship.”

For Flynn, the vanishing Victorian era and emerging modernism make for especially engaging television. “The dramatic changes that occurred in England in the early twentieth century make it one of the most exciting periods to explore,” says Flynn. “In only a few decades, everything changed. All the new technologies—electricity, cars, trains, telegraphs, telephones, gramophones, moving pictures, birth control, penicillin, ammonium nitrate (for fertilizer to feed the world or chemical weapons to destroy it)—created shockwaves throughout the culture, revolutionizing the way people communicated, thought, and lived.”

Moreover, according to Flynn, *Downton Abbey* captures the early 20th century spirit of breaching convention. “Questioning the unquestionable is a theme introduced at the very beginning of the show and this is the heart of modernization,” says Flynn. “The show constructs many situations that beckon this kind of questioning: Mary, after eluding her arranged marriage to Patrick, embarks on a five season quest to choose her own mate; when Rose’s parents choose to divorce, we sense the social and professional devastation that this decision could usher in. The show repeatedly demonstrates why such changes occurred and the effect they had on a variety of individuals within society.”

Additionally, as a contemporary television production, *Downton Abbey* defies some outmoded storytelling tropes by normalizing characters often overlooked or exaggerated for effect. Elders have emotional lives: dethroned Russian prince Igor Kuragin carries a long-standing torch for the Dowager Countess; Dr. Clarkson yearns for Isobel Crawley. Meanwhile, underbutler Thomas Barrow possesses dimension and motivation beyond his sexuality. “Everyone knows ‘what’ he is and though they dislike him, this is, on the surface anyway, unrelated to his sexuality,” says Flynn. In a sense, the contemporary production mirrors mores unraveling during the period it depicts. “The Edwardian Era could be seen as progressive, or at least the new ruling class was less severe in their moral conduct,” says Hisek. “It is because of this that when issues of race, gender, LGBT, and class emerged they were handled differently.”

Both Hisek and Flynn appreciate *Downton’s* stagecraft and attention to the finer points of the era. “Something that audiences have come to love about *Downton Abbey* is its authentic nature and believability,” says Hisek. “When working on period shows, actors, directors, and designers take great care in creating that life.” Flynn adds: “In particular, I think the fashion draws the viewer in with its breadth and detail, deftly adds dimension to characters, and presents a tidy metaphor for the social and economic divisions and transformations of the period.”

Julian Fellowes has remarked, “the spine of the story is love,” and executive producer Gareth Neame has said, “Relationships [in *Downton Abbey*] are more straightforward. There was no texting or Tinder.” As the lords, ladies, maids and manservants of the house go forth into a future world uncertain to them but known to us, viewers have one last season to admire them in all their finery and avarice, adversity and courage.