

The Downton Effect

For those of you who haven't as yet been bitten by the Downton Abbey bug, think back to 1971-75 when America was introduced to the BBC's 'Upstairs Downstairs' – a series that depicted Edwardian-era English life, complete with the unmistakable upper class divisions of the time.

There was Lady Marjorie and Richard Bellamy (Lady M was the daughter of an Earl and Countess and Richard was a Member of Parliament). The downstairs consisted of the usual assemblage of servants from Head Butler (Hudson) to Ruby, the slow but likable kitchen maid. This 68-part series sucked us in to a well-dressed and well-mannered world of yesteryear with very clear rules of and for engagement. Rulers ruled and the unruly were ruled off the grounds, cast upon the dust heap of England's caste system.

At the same time we were ogling the Bellamys' goings-on, we were also tuning in to America's version of the downstairs portion of Upstairs Downstairs at a small Astoria Queens, New York row house at 704 Hauser Street. The occupants were Archie and Edith Bunker, both more than a long stone's throw from aristocracy. It was a time of great choice. We could lose ourselves in an ultra-civilized world populated by Lords and Ladies of good breeding and non-controversial parlor chat or we could plop down in our own easy chair, pull on our slippers, unzip our minds and split a gut listening to pronouncements about the *woirld* according to America's favorite bigot, Archie.

Upstairs Downstairs and All in the Family were like reflective moons in two separate universes shining back two separate views of life. Despite that, they appealed to many of us as we struggled to make sense of an America that was going through the final stages of the Vietnam War and Watergate. They helped us forget our troubles and forgive ourselves for who we had become as a society. Without putting too fine a point on it, they were our alter egos. We were all Richard Bellamy and Lady Marjorie just as we were all Archie and Edith Bunker.

We were shedding our prejudicial skin and growing another that was more respectful and less confrontational. Little did Archie know that he was a spirit guide, helping us move beyond our own personal fears of one another as he often demonstrated with his colored neighbors, George and Isabel Sanford and his son-in-law's friend, Lionel. Archie was definitely a product of another time, one that was rapidly vanishing, but through this series (which was based on an English one, 'Till death do us part') we got a chance to complete our own metamorphosis into a new America.

Little did we know that class distinction (and class warfare), bigotry (and playing the race card) and societal envy (the 1% versus 99%) would pop up again in the first decade of the new millennium.

Enter Downton Abbey. It seems that the good old days of the English class system of rich old men who went to the right schools and married the right ladies (who would invariably look the other way while they carried on like stags in heat) were destined to be reborn. By using a truly remarkable backdrop (Highclere Castle in Hampshire, 1½ hours from London) the three-year old series offers sumptuous eye-candy for every Brit lover. Downton's players are every bit as haughty and hoity-toity as Upstairs Downstairs but have a few more down-to-earth supporting actors to take the stiffness out of the upper crust of Downton's upstairs occupants.

Downton Abbey has now given Millennials and Gen X'ers their own peek behind the curtain of civility, and they can now see for themselves what all the Upstairs Downstairs fuss was about 40 years ago. And while the series has taken the average public television viewer by storm, it has also proved once again that all dreams can become reality...if you don't actually have to *live* in reality. Will that be all, milord?

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