

Exploration of the Noble Spirit in Downton Abbey

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Abstract

Downton Abbey is an ancient costume historical play produced by British ITV, mainly describing the noble life of the upper class in England during the early 20th century. It gives a vivid expression to the noble spirit which contains three aspects : the strong patriotic sense, the deep-rooted social responsibility and the good moral cultivation, revealing that these profound British cultures are the indispensable factors for the nation to make greater and greater progress. .

Keywords

Downton Abbey; noble spirit; strong patriotic sense; deep-rooted social responsibility; good moral cultivation.

1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief Account of Downton Abbey

Downton Abbey, famous as an ancient costume historical play produced by British ITV, relates a story of the nobility lived Downton Abbey, representing the ups and downs of the whole family in the early 20th century. The characters' uncertain and changeable destinies in Downton Abbey are closely related with the dynamic society at that time, showing that the personal situation varies with the social environment. Those historical events, such as the industrial revolution, the World War I, the election campaign, the trade union movement, the feminist movement and so on all have great influence on every character, reflecting the real changes of the nobility and how their valuable spirits come into being as the time passing by. We can see that the origin of the noble spirit is a kind of historical accumulation. In Downton Abbey, the noble spirits, the complicated characters, British humors and elegance go through the whole story. Undoubtedly, it is admitted that Downton Abbey is the most popular British TV series during recent ten years, which have been granted many awards including the Emmys, the Oscars, the Grammys and so on, receiving the highest praise all over the world.

1.2 An General Overview of Downton Abbey

Downton Abbey employs a modern visual and method to represent a kind of classical culture, leaving a deep impression on people. Since appearing on the screen, it has drawn much attention to the scholars home and abroad for its exquisite language, enormous family story, suspenseful and mysterious plot and those ambivalent and complicated personalities. Thus many researches have been made from different perspectives on its themes, characters, culinary culture, marriage, gorgeous costume, aristocrat life, meaningful conversation and its translation and so on, for example, the article Analysis of British Culture in Downton Abbey written by Fang Xiao; Critical Discourse Analysis of Conversations in Downton Abbey by Geng Xiaomei; A Brief Exploration of English Aristocrat Culture through the Ideas of the Characters in Downtown Abbey about Marriage by Zhang Yan; The Aristocracy of Consciousness: Connoisseurship in Modern Literature by Slaughter, R.L. etc. Based on those previous studies, this article will make a further exploration of the noble spirit in Downton Abbey, revealing the profound British culture and its significance.

2. The Essence of the Noble Spirit

The nobility is a special stratum in ancient times. During the middle ages, people in the stratum are the controllers of rights, the holders of wealth, the dominantes of the society in Europe. British nobility is typical of these characters, thus being the representative of nobility. With the passage of time and development of society, the nobility is not only the symbol of status and title, but also a kind of profound culture and model that the citizens are willing to follow. Rich as they are, the nobility are brave enough to fight against enemies in order to keep the country safe; they have their own freedom and will to do the right thing; they are knowledgeable, elegant, modest and far-sighted; they understand how to respect and help others. This is how the noble spirit gradually come into being.

The noble spirit is in pursuit of the principle that virtue is the most important taint than any others and the will of independence and freedom is the center of it. And now the essence of the noble spirit mainly lies in its strong patriotic sense, deep—rooted social responsibility and good moral cultivation, which has been manifested completely and vividly in Downton Abbey. It will be discussed in details in the following parts.

3. The Realization of the Noble Spirit in Downton Abbey

3.1 The Strong Patriotic Sense

The nobility are keen on politics. They get to know the events happened in the world through newspaper or broadcast everyday and participate actively in state affairs. They have their definite standpoints and their own principles, offering the nation many practical suggestions and advice and contributing great to the construction of the country.

When the World War I broke out, they felt that it was the time and duty to protect the nation. All of them showed their concerns and responsibilities towards the country and they gave their strength in different ways. Some of them took part in the war to fight bravely with the enemies; those who could not join in the war provided the soldiers with considerate cares and spiritual comforts. The lord Grantham in Downton Abbey were eager to go to the battlefield upon receiving the news, even though he was old, he had a young and passionate heart. He put on his military uniform, preparing well at any times. When he received the news to be recruited as a colonel, he was very pleased and said, “Well if Haig’s involved, it means I’m back in the army properly. Churchill went back to the front after the Gallipoli business, if he can do it, why shouldn’t me?” In face of danger towards country, he showed no fears and retreats at all but to take actions to defend the people and the nation. This is the noble spirit, representing the strong patriotic sense. As for Mrs Grantham, she offered the estate to let the wounded soldiers live in, asking the doctors to take good care of them. She tried her best to do what she could to lessen the pain and sorrow of those soldiers, contributing all her strength to the country. Her kindness, graceful style and broad bosom are typical of the noble spirit. And Mathew, as the only heir of Downton Abbey, fought in the war at all cost, even his life. He was hurt badly, but never giving up. The cruel war did not reduce a little of his will and hope at all. His brave and courage are the representation of the noble spirit. Lady Mary, the eldest daughter of lord Grantham, sung for those wounded soldiers and helped them cheer up. When she got the news that Mathew was missing in the war, she sang, “Sometimes when I feel bad. And things look blue. I wish a pal I had. Say one like you. Someone within my heart. To build a throne. Someone we would never part. To call my own. If you were the only girl in the world. And I were the only boy. Nothing else would matter in the world today. We could go on loving in the same old way.” This song expressed her regretful and sorrowful mind. At night, she prayed for them without any prejudice, safe and sound being her best wishes. Lady Edith, the second daughter of lord Grantham, took care of those soldiers by herself, assisting them clean and bind up their wounds patiently, bringing them with water and food. She regarded this as her responsibility and honor to contribute her strength in the tough time of country. Lady Sybil, the youngest daughter of lord Grantham, also wanted herself to be worthy instead of doing nothing. She was not afraid of being mocked and willing to ask what she did not know. She

learned how to cook and went to the nursing class, being a qualified nurse and helping take care of those wounded soldiers.

Facing with the emergency of the nation, they united together to fight with the enemies and did all the things that they could in different ways, abandoning the concept of hierarchy and any prejudice. Their strong patriotic sense signified the noble spirit, going through the whole story, giving rise to the deep thinking of all the audience.

3.2 The Deep-rooted Social Responsibility

Although the strict hierarchy exists in Britain all the time, it does not affect the personalities and communications between them. Their deep-rooted social responsibilities let them express themselves bravely, which improves their characters and promotes the development of society. In Downton Abbey, the nobility and the servants are not only friends, but also family. Everyone has their own will and freedom, and they are equal in personalities. They all know how to respect and help each other, getting well along with each other to make the family and the society more harmonious and peaceful. This is one trait of the noble spirit.

The lord Grantham hires Mr. Bates as his valet even though he is a cripple. Some of them puts forwards their objection, while the lord Grantham trusts him and insists that Mr. Bates have the ability to do the job which proves to be true later. Because of Grantham's wisdom and foresight, Mr. Bates gets his job and become an indispensable member of the family. When Mr. Bates is accused of murdering, all of them make every effort to help him. The whole Downton Abbey is surrounded by a sorrowful and depressive atmosphere because they all believe that Mr. Bates is wronged and not guilty. The lord Grantham uses his relations and authority to help testify Mr. Bates' innocence, firmly believing in Mr. Bates. What else can be more valuable than trust? This is where the noble spirit lies. In the end, Mr. Bates is released under the justice and effort of the whole family and society.

Mrs. Grantham is a kind and helpful American woman in Downton Abbey. She treats others equally and honestly, giving persons the positive energy and offering her help as much as possible. When she gets the news that the servants in Downton Abbey give the food to those homeless persons, she does not blame them but to praise them, and work together with them to distribute the food. When her valet does something wrong, she communicates with them and help them to analyze the reason and their plights, deepening the relationship between them through understanding. Her good behavior affects the whole family, telling them what should the nobility must do and what are their responsibilities.

Mathew is the person who has his own thoughts and will. He does not want to be the heir of Downton Abbey all of a sudden, and even objects the schedule that his marriage is planned by others. This is also the reason why he refuses to accept the money of Downton Abbey and the arranged marriage at first. He has the faith that he can gain what he wants through hard working rather than by inheriting the property and he can do the things following by his own heart. He has the spirit of independence and self-reliance, which makes him become the out-stander in society and the major member of the family, leading the people to the strong and prosperous road.

Lady Mary, as the eldest daughter, knows her responsibility clearly, thus sometimes she has to do something she does not like in order to keep the reputation and property of Downton Abbey. But on the other hand, she has a deep consciousness of equality and how to respect others. She helps the servants Anna and Bates get married and offers them the place and environment to stay together. She envies this kind of marriage united by the true love and respects both of them even though they are her servants. She treats them as her friends and family to whom she can tell anything from the bottom of heart. It is her noble spirit that makes them equal, honest and faithful with each other.

Though Sybil is the youngest daughter in Downton Abbey, she is very independent, fond of politics and having her own standpoints. She is in pursuit of freedom and equality, full of passions and motivations to take charge of her own marriage and life by herself. She is brave enough to love Tom

who is the chauffeur of her family, taking no notice of the hierarchy and prejudice. Her behaviors is right the way the nobility should do.

All of the nobility shows their deep-rooted social responsibilities through their grace and wise behaviors, helping those people in trouble and persuading them to be an honest and justice self, which brings the society with good culture.

3.3 The Good Moral Cultivation

The nobility receive good education when they are born. Their illustrious and wealthy family provides the excellent condition for them being a good man. They are knowledgeable, elegant, graceful, helpful, far-sighted and innovative, etc. Their good moral cultivation is the example of the country and the direction of the nation, becoming an important part of the noble spirit.

Mathew, knowledgeable and farsighted, helps the Downton Abbey get through the fate of going bankrupt. He catches up with the pace of times, understanding the tendency of the development in the world and taking measures to keep the Downton Abbey running effectively. He is smart to change the old way of managing the Downton Abbey, pointing out its weaknesses and disadvantages in a proper and severe way, employing the new method to manage it. His thoughts are innovative and practical, which are turned out to be right and perfect later. It is just because of his foresight and prevision that the Downton Abbey can exist in a long term. On the other hand, he has his own moral standards, never receiving or inhering those property without reason. For example, when he gets the news that Mr. Swire has appointed him as one of his inheritors, he feels very shocked and sorry for what he once did to his daughter who was deeply in love with him. He finds he could not accept the money, because he is not the son-in-law of Mr. Swire and he has not make his daughter happy. If he accepts the property, his conscientiousness will be blamed for the rest of his whole life and his moral standards not permit it, just as he said in the play, "When Mr. Swire made it, he didn't know I'd broken his daughter's heart. If I kept that money, I would be no better than a common criminal."

Mrs Grantham is an intelligent woman who totally approves of the conceptions and measures put forward by Mathew as She said to Lord Grantham, "It seems to me your plan adds up to carrying on as if nothing's changed, to spend Mathew's money keeping up the illusion, then, when we're fallen into a bottomless pit of debt, we'll sell up and go. So yes, I believe Mathew is right." She has the foresight and sagacity to make up the right decisions, offering others the correct direction and positive energy. She dare speak out her opinions and objects those old conventions. She is not only a great mother, but also a shrew hostess and a capable leader of the society. What is more, she is very helpful, elegant and kind. She regards her valet as the best loyal confidant and tries her best to support her when she is in trouble. She appreciates everything that the servants have done for her and for her family, with a heart full of gracefulness and responsibilities, which is the definite manifestation of the noble spirit.

Mary is a talented and special girl, receiving good education and singing very well. When the Downton Abbey is surrounded by the horrible and depressive condition, she sings for them and does what she can to cheer them up. She looks strong outside, but gentle and lovable inward. When she gets the news that Mathew has been engaged to Miss Swire, she has to pretend to be happy for them and gives them best wishes in front of them although she loves Mathew very much. She chooses not to interrupt and break their marriage, living her own life and being happy for their happiness. And on the question of revolution in Downton Abbey, she completely supports the idea of Mathew, which demonstrates her wisdom and prevision. She dare say something different to her father, "We need build something that will last, Papa, not stand by and watch it crumble into dust." After Mathew's death, the responsibility of managing Down Abbey falls on her. She undertakes the important task and overcomes every obstacles and hardships bravely, continuing to finish what Mathew has not done bearing his thoughts and projects in mind. As a new woman in new society, she is the representative of the new era, capable of doing those significant and crucial careers, being successful and popular and contributing to the society as much as possible.

4. The Significance of the Noble Spirit in Downton Abbey

Since the essence of the noble spirit lies in its strong patriotic sense, deep-rooted social responsibility and good moral cultivation, the significance of it can be counted as the following two parts : promoting the development of nation; setting a good example for citizens.

4.1 Promoting the Development of Nation

The noble spirit is a complicated and multiple system included the brave and honest attitude towards life, the superiority and responsibility of society and some other traits. It does not mean that the nobility has to keep an arrogant gesture to be looked up by other people, but a kind and warm-hearted image closed to civilian, being the leader and model of them. During the period of Victoria, the queen often goes into the folk to talk with the people, live with the people and understand their life with heart and mind, which makes the herself very popular and respectable among the people. Thus, she can lead the nation and the people setting food on the prosperous road.

In Downton Abbey, it is the nobility who offer the chances for the people to realize their self-worth and contribute their strength to the nation. The foresight and sagacity of nobility give the right direction of society, promoting the economical, cultural and political development. They make up the wise and sensible decisions to bring the people with new ideas and new sight to view the world. For example, Mathew employs the innovative method to update the management of Downton Abbey, avoiding its fate of coming to an end. And later, Downton Abbey becomes better and better, richer and richer rather than sink into decadence. It does great benefits to the economics, setting up a good atmosphere and reflection in the whole nation. Besides, the nobility must be open and aboveboard, establishing their elegant and kind images to gain the supports and approve of the people. They are the pioneers to some extent in economics, culture, politics and all the aspects of life. Standing on the highest moral point, they are the representations and the developing direction of the country, helping the nation to make further progress.

4.2 Setting a Good Example for Citizens

The good moral cultivation of the noble spirit contributes to the formation of gentility which is the indispensable character of the nobility and their value and ideal of life. In public, the gentlemen should be justice, rigorous, full of love and passions; in private life, they are the loyal servants of the nation and the God. Nowadays, “gentility” is not a word representing a stratum any more, but a pursuit of those fine qualities in the social principal value. The essence of the noble spirit, including the strong patriotic sense, the deep-rooted social responsibility and the good moral cultivation, is the best manifestation of the gentility.

The people learn from the nobility, aiming high and striving for the best. They respect the nobility and imitate their behavior, hoping too keep the same pace with the nobility’s lifestyle and ideas. Unlike the other European country, the stratum in Britain is not invariable, just as the conception put forward by Professor Qian Chengdan, “ Open the Elite”, which means that everyone can get his position and come into the upper class through hard work. It is just because of the strict hierarchical notion that everyone makes every effort to enter into the nobility and be the person like them, which continually pours into the new blood and innovative ideas, helping the nobility gain further progress. In Downton Abbey, the servants respect the their masters and do the thing according to their standards, striving to be the perfect and improve their characters, thus making themselves be qualified for the job and be the worthy men. They gradually know how to communicate with others in a proper way and what should say and what should not. Those private information, family, age, incomes and so on is seldom to be talked, which will violate their politeness principle. Although they receive no high education, they have their own unique opinions and thoughts to some questions and understands the social etiquette, grace and elegant but not frivolous. What is more, they are keen on the public careers, having their strong faith and brave spirit to maintain the dignity and interest of the nation. During the whole process, the influence of the nobility can not be ignored. It is the noble spirit that sets good example and model for them.

5. Conclusion

The nobility with its unique standards of behavior and value, becomes the core of culture and economics in Britain. It is not just a historical conception, but also contains the profound foundation, which can affect the whole nation, especially its noble spirit of the strong patriotic sense, deep-rooted social responsibility and good moral cultivation. The noble spirit in Downton Abbey has been represented vividly and completely, offering us a perfect explanation of its essence. From the above analysis, we can see the importance and influence of the noble spirit in the life and in the country, not only providing positive energy, but also promoting the development of the nation. It is the spirit that everyone should pursue and learn, no matter in the past or nowadays. Just as Shakespeare once said, "Three years can make a man rich, but three generations can not make a nobleman.", thus it is a long way for us to gain and absorb the essence of the noble spirit.

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