

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND THE FINANCIAL CRISIS OF THE WORKING CLASS IN SUE TOWNSEND'S *THE QUEEN AND I*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the ways in which English writer Sue Townsend, in "The Queen and I" (1992), mirrors the socio-economic concerns of the British population, especially related to the differing lives of two social groups placed at opposite poles of the social hierarchy. The fictional work is all the more interesting as it antagonizes the life of the upper classes, represented here by the Royal Family, and that of the lower class of workers. Townsend satirically imagines the dismantling of the British monarchy and the subsequent predicament that living among the poor generates. The article first offers a brief overview of the socio-economic changes following the Victorian era and then it looks at the patterns of social class which exist in present-day Britain. The central part of the paper investigates Townsend's portrayal of the hardships of destitution, this state of poverty being in fact the social condition which ultimately brings the royals and the lowly people together.*

**Keywords:** social class, working-class life, *The Queen*, the Royal Family, poverty.

## 1. Introduction

As Britain entered the twentieth century, there were signs that things would soon be different from the triumphalist Victorian era. In the twentieth century, Britain was affected by decolonization and the loss of Empire, immigration, regionalism and EU accession, as well as two world wars and economic recession. Among other things, the collapse of the Empire and the decline in industry generated significant social changes, as well. In Susan Bassnett's view<sup>1</sup>, the British phenomenon of nostalgia marked the end of the twentieth century, which was a time of introspection, nostalgia, consolidation, and efforts were made to understand the past. Furthermore, historical changes and developments have turned contemporary Britain into a multinational, multicultural and multiethnic society<sup>2</sup>. All of this has been accompanied by the gradual decline of the force of a fundamental pillar of British identity, the institution of monarchy.

Britain has always been regarded as a class-ridden society in which social hierarchies generated the unequal distribution of wealth. Traditionally, the highest point of this social hierarchy was dominated by the social group that had the highest status in society, especially the aristocracy (such as the royal family or the peerage) with their socio-economic and political position, wealth, breeding and privileges. The aristocracy was conventionally known for its long established power and reputation. Next to the upper classes, the middle and working classes defined a pyramidal social structure. Nonetheless, after the Victorian period ended, at the turn of the twentieth century, patterns of social class gradually changed. Even though the position of the aristocracy had been slowly destabilized since the eighteenth century, in the period following industrialism the dominant British classes were no

longer divided into upper, middle and lower classes but into middle and working classes<sup>3</sup>.

However, even the working-class concept is now somehow obsolete or has taken a new meaning. When the Conservative government crushed the miners' strike in 1984, it ended an uneconomic industry and drew a line under one of the strongest myths of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, namely the image of the English working man and woman as the backbone of the nation, an image which had underpinned all the social movements for reform for decades, from the move to universal suffrage, universal education, the growth of the trades unions, to the establishment of the National Health Service<sup>4</sup>.

The wartime films presented a vision of England as a working man's nation, but now at the start of the twenty-first century, that myth is extinct. The factories and mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire have been demolished or converted into luxury hotels, shopping centres, or leisure centres. The car plants and machine tool workshops of Coventry and Birmingham have been replaced by new housing estates, cinemas and shopping malls. As a result, Britain is no longer a manufacturing state, but one in which leisure industries play a growing role and education, once the opportunity of a small privileged group, is now a multi-million pound industry<sup>5</sup>.

The Second World War ruined Britain economically, and then the 1950s and 1960s slowly brought prosperity. The 1960s also witnessed a revolution in social manners and behaviour. Nevertheless, these two decades were bad for the British economy and lack of investment and productivity led to the 1970s' 'winter of discontent', a time when petrol supplies were limited and strikes were common<sup>6</sup>.

Margaret Thatcher's prime-ministership (1979–1990) is still remembered as unique from political and socio-economic viewpoints. Britain's economic problems were made much worse as a result of the global recession of the 1970s which followed a rise in oil prices. The 1970s was a period when structural problems became increasingly apparent in labour disputes organized by the trade unions. The failure of the Labour government to deal effectively with these prepared the ground for the Thatcher government's more radical approach based once on the *laissez-faire* economic ideas of the Victorian liberals. Old staple industries were privatized, exposed to market forces or even closed down. The most dramatic incident was the miners' strike of 1984–1985. Faced with large scale closure and privatization, the miners' leaders organized mass protests across the country which, in some cases, turned into violent riots. Between 1980 and 1983, one quarter of Britain's manufacturing industry disappeared. This was matched by a rise in sector service jobs, in banking and finance, shops, offices, etc. In some ways, Thatcherism is a curious mixture of ideas that do not belong together: belief

in free markets, financial discipline, monetarism, rolling back the state, disempowering local authorities, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, privatization and populism (with increasing emphasis on law, order, and nationalism). Thatcher's goals were the reduction of public spending, the stimulation of private enterprise and an end to the power of unions. With the 1990s, the period when John Major was the British prime minister, we come closer to the society depicted by Townsend in her novel.

## 2. Social classes in contemporary Britain

If we are to look back to the social structure of eighteenth-century England, we observe that the period was a golden age for the British peerage since economic wealth, social power, and political authority were all at their peak<sup>7</sup>. However, since then, aristocracy as a class has declined sharply, with more and more public voices demanding the replacement of inherited position and collective status with individual opportunity and merit. In the twentieth century, education facilitated social mobility (with people moving upwards out of the social class into which they were born) and the upper class fused more and more with the middle class as a result of the loss of aristocratic privilege<sup>8</sup>.

Certain factors are usually considered in order to establish class distinctions, such as: material wealth, the ownership of land and property, control of production means, education, job or professional status, accent and dialect, birth and breeding, even lifestyle<sup>9</sup>. The range of these factors has constantly broadened, thus transgressing old class distinctions defined in terms of birth, property and inherited wealth.

As Halsey<sup>10</sup> showed in the 1980s, the structure of social class in Britain has changed. With upper classes decreasing in number and power, the dominant social classes nowadays are: middle, lower-middle and working classes. The middle class is composed of professional, managerial, administrative occupational groups and higher technicians, or the 'service class'. The lower-middle social group includes non-manual employees, small property owners, self-employed artisans and lower-grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers, the so-called blue-collar elite. The working class is made up of industrial manual workers (quite reduced in number since Britain's industry has declined dramatically) and skilled, semiskilled or unskilled agricultural workers. Due to intensified bureaucratization trends, the development of a middle class of technical and clerical employees has taken shape.

As a result, the British population today largely consists of a middle class (60%) and a working class (40%). In 2009, of the 28.9 million employed people, the large majority worked in the services sector, a smaller proportion in industry, while diminishing numbers were employed in agriculture. According to polls, the British themselves feel they are turning increasingly

into a middle class, while the concept of class itself is equally a matter of different social attitudes and a matter of occupation and financial position<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. The Royals living among the poor and the hardships of working-class life

In Townsend's novel, social criticism intersperses with criticism of the British monarchy. What the author suggests through the dramatic demise of the British monarchy is in fact the accomplishment of a troubling concern of the British subjects, namely the annulment of social inequality as a continuing feature of internal life. This dissolution of social differences is meant to ease ideological and social tensions and thus create a climate of equality, that is, identical access to public wealth and political power. In the novel, Republican Prime Minister Jack Barker envisages a classless society of a communist or socialist type where the means of production and subsistence belong to the community as a whole. Moreover, there will be no president to govern the country, so "the British people will be their own figure-head, all fifty-seven million of them" (p. 12)<sup>12</sup>. In Barker's view, the monarchy has maintained social imbalance which, in its turn, has hindered progress: "What your family has perpetuated (...) is a hierarchy, with you at the top and others, inevitably, below you. Our country is class ridden as a result. Class fear has strangled us, Mr Windsor. Our country has been stagnating at the same rate as your family has been capitalizing on its wealth and power. I am merely bringing this imbalance to an end" (p. 12). As a result of the demotion, the royal family is stripped of its titles and possessions and its members are sent to live under curfew in a poor neighbourhood, Hellebore Close (perhaps suggesting 'close to hell'), among working-class people<sup>13</sup>.

The Queen now has the occasion to observe and understand the life of her subjects by living among them. All the social problems she knew nothing about are now painfully present in front of her eyes. What is more, she herself comes to experience the social and economic effects of her government's policies. She realizes that behind palace doors she lived a privileged existence whereas most of the people suffered from poverty, unemployment, lack of education, humiliation, and misery. In fact, Townsend imagines a rather dramatic social situation by mixing members of the highest ranks of society with people from the lowest class who, obviously, have nothing in common.

The living conditions are harsh in council estates and when the Windsors first catch sight of the neighbourhood they are appalled by the small, gloomy, squalid, smelly, cold, and run-down houses. The strange appearance of the people reminds the Queen of the stories she heard as a child about "goblins and witches, of strange lands populated by sinister people" (p. 18).

The former expensive living of the Windsors contrasts sharply with the poverty of the Hell Close (as most people call the estate) residents who got clothes from charity shops and often worried about the financial resources for the next day. The Queen thought the place “*is Hell*”, now that she finally perceived its real state, which was opposite to the one she had formed when, on official occasions “she had visited many council estates – had opened community centres, had driven through the bunting and the cheering crowds, alighted from the car, walked on red carpets, been given a posy by a two-year-old in a ‘Mothercare’ party frock, been greeted by tongue-tied dignitaries, pulled a cord, revealed a plaque, signed the visitors’ book. Then, carpet, car, drive to helicopter and up, up and away” (p. 17). The great gap between the harsh reality and the carefully organised, picture-perfect visits she had taken is shocking for the Queen. It suggests that the reality had been disguised or masked so as to render a sense of order and welfare of the common people. Moreover, it sadly indicates that the monarch is totally cut off from the real life of the people, living “up and away” (p. 17) from the grim existence of common people.

Townsend suggests that what is nothing but the reality seems, for the Queen, odd, strange, out of the ordinary, even impossible. Not only are her government’s policies wrong, but she is unaware of the existence of poverty: “She’d seen the odd documentary on BBC2 about urban poverty, heard unattractive poor people talk in broken sentences about their dreadful lives, but she’d regarded such programmes as sociological curiosities, on a par with watching the circumcision ceremonies of Amazonian Indians, so far away that it didn’t really matter” (p. 17).

The working-class life is described as low and abject: the women are vulgar, dressed cheaply and vulgarly, their appearance is rough and their living conditions are rugged, almost primitive because of constant money shortage, their manners are rough, their language is incorrect and broken, they have cheap tastes, turbulent love lives, and petty concerns. The estate exudes all of this persistent condition of poverty and uncivilized existence: “It stank. Somebody in the Close was burning car tyres. The acrid smoke drifted sluggishly over a rooftop. Not one house in the Close had its full complement of windows. Fences were broken, or gone. Gardens were full of rubbish, black plastic bags had been split by ravenous dogs, televisions flickered and blared. A man lay under a wreck of a car which was jacked up on bricks. Other men squatted close by, aiming torches and watching, men with outdated haircuts and tattoos, their cigarettes cupped in their hands. A woman in white stilettos ran down the road after a boy toddler, naked apart from his vest. She yanked the child by his fat little arm back into the house” (pp. 17-18).

Hard living has left visible marks on the physical aspect of the people, the roughness of their physical appearance being a mere reflection of their rough lives, just as the look of the royals is indicative of their former luxurious living. Gazing at Princess Diana, Wilf Toby is shocked to see physical delicacy and smoothness for the first time in his life: "he'd never seen such a beautiful woman up close, in the flesh. He'd seen her photograph in the paper every day, but nothing had prepared him for the fresh face, the soft skin, the shy blue eyes, the warm damp lips. All the women Wilf knew had hard, rough-looking faces, *as though life had battered them mercilessly*. (...) He looked at her hands. Pale, long fingers with rosy nails" (my emphasis; p. 51). The immense difference of status and living standard makes Spiggy, the carpet fitter, think of the dissimilarity between him and the royals in terms of the distinction between humans and animals. Fully exposed to the hardships of securing a living for themselves, the hard working low-class members are metaphorically reduced to a bestial condition: "He looked at their hands and compared them to his own. Shamed for a moment, he hid his hands in the pockets of his overalls. He felt himself to be a lumbering beast. Whereas they had a shine on their bodies, sort of like they were covered in glass. Protected, like" (p. 63). On the other hand, the royals had lived far from the difficulties of real life, but this made them live less, or experience life itself less intensely or authentically: "Spiggy's body was an illustrated map: accidents at work, fights, neglect, poverty, all had left visible reminders that Spiggy *had lived*" (my emphasis; p. 63).

The most important problem for these people is unemployment and job shortage, even for types of jobs which require little qualification and are usually associated with the low classes. Even for the job of chicken slaughterer the number of applicants is quite big and Toby Threadgold does not manage to get the job with 144 applicants in front of him. George Beresford, a skilled worker, had worked as a shop-fitter, but remained out of work because of the economic recession.

The financial situation is equally hard for pensioners, too. The Queen Mother's neighbour, Philomena Toussaint takes great pains with daily expenditure, preferring to put on warm clothes rather than turn the heater on and keeping empty packs of food in her cupboard only to have the impression that there is enough food for decent living. In fact, she hardly manages to get by, saving up food and money though her pension is awfully small. Philomena Toussaint seems to be the Queen Mother's counterpart, and her character emphasises more suggestively the vices of high life. Though poor, she leads a very dignified life and accepts to take care of the old lady on condition that four regulations are respected, namely no drinking, gambling, drug taking or blasphemy (p. 71). The situation also

shows that sometimes the highly educated people could be very degenerate, while the poor ordinary people, though lacking erudition, lived according to strict moral standards.

The Queen, Prince Phillip and the Queen Mother receive the same pension as Philomena, which inevitably leads to money shortage, and the Queen herself is eagerly waiting for pension day. Quite spectacularly, the other younger members of the family are also thrown to the lowest point of the social hierarchy and live on state benefits. The pressure of poverty is so painful that the Queen prays to have her pension paid sooner since she “dreaded the weekend ahead. How did one feed oneself, one’s husband and one’s dog on two pounds and ten pence which was all she had (...)?” (pp. 125-126). Her situation is, indeed, incredible for an ex-royal, but it is also illustrative of the typical living standard of the poor.

An argument used by anti-monarchists is that the royals are social parasites. Living on their subjects’ work, they are unable to produce anything that could contribute to Britain’s progress, except for performing ceremonial and ambassadorial functions. In Townsend’s novel, PM Barker encourages them to find jobs so as to secure their living, but most of them prove indeed that they are socially ineffectual and they display no intention to earn their living. Again, it is the Queen who truly understands that work is essential for human life, and she regrets she was not taught to work. In fact, she refers to the ability to do tedious tasks, trivial chores and simple manual work. She realizes that work makes one useful for the community and that, in turn, contributes to identity-formation. She understands that work gives meaning to one’s life after listening to George Beresford’s ‘ode’ to work: “ ‘I’m not happy if I’m not working. It’s not just the money,’ he said. (...) ‘It’s just the feeling of ... it’s somebody needin’ you ... I mean, what are you if you’re not workin?’” (p. 225).

Davies<sup>14</sup> comments on the Queen’s unfitness for work and the lifestyle of the common people, especially when, as a Princess, she had led a closed, privileged life, separated from the real society of her British subjects: “She had lived the life of a cloistered Princess, surrounded by royalty, residing in palaces and castles, cut off from ordinary people, never mixing or meeting anyone who didn’t first bow or curtsy to her. She had never gone shopping, never been to a market, never waited in a queue, never been on a crowded bus, train or underground railway. (...) She had never had to do a day’s work, never washed a dish or dusted or cleaned or even made a bed or a cup of tea or coffee, let alone prepare or cook a meal. She had no idea of the value of money for there had never been a need to know”.

Hard life is also connected to the ability and skill to deal with many jobs and services on one’s own. The commoners are self-trained in many professional activities and even perform medical assistance when needed

(like Violet Toby's midwifery skills), or technical support (like Spiggy's plumbing skills). These people are pretty much trained with doing everything in the household, thus avoiding to contract services provided by plumbers, carpenters, mechanics, undertakers or midwives because they could not afford such expenses.

Poverty is even more painful because of bureaucratic arrangements neglectful of the people's needs. Very much like its neighbouring family, the royal family runs out of money and is in a desperate financial situation, whereas the procedure of the Department of Social Security is cumbersome. Accustomed to have easy access to money, the royals are shocked by the time delay even in situations of crisis. The Queen is unaware that there are many claim forms to be completed, and that the time span from request, to approval and delivery of financial assistance is contrary to the common notion of emergency. The royals confront with the absurdity of a system they had once implemented or, at least, led, according to which "starvation was not official policy" (p. 108). The Queen presents her situation to the DSS clerk, conscious that her condition, which is a routine circumstance in her neighbours' life, hit a terrible low point, one close to starvation. She also realizes that poverty is the worst possible social condition: "'We are penniless. I have been forced to borrow from my mother; but now my mother is also penniless. As is my entire family. I have been forced to rely on the charity of neighbours. But I cannot continue to do so. My neighbours are...'. The Queen paused. 'Socially disadvantaged' supplied Dorkin. 'No, they are *poor*,' said the Queen. 'They, like me, lack money'" (p. 106). At the DSS office, even desperate cases are seldom offered emergency payment, and the Queen herself is escorted out of the institution by the security guard because the clerk takes her for a mad woman<sup>15</sup>.

The bureaucratic machinery is very intricate and sometimes works against the interests of the underprivileged whom it should assist. The Department of Social Security offers financial support with great difficulty, and people have great trouble with filling in the necessary forms. Townsend signals that the system is too elaborate, even absurdly structured, a system which is indifferent and even reluctant to the needs of the people. The ordinary man and the administration of the government seem two irreconcilable forces. The claimants are usually low-class people who cannot handle the language of the documents and the calculations they are asked to do, so many people fill in countless forms again and again, hopeful that they might actually get the desperately needed benefits. Though theoretically many types of benefits are meant to help the population, in practice perhaps only a small number of claimants actually obtains financial support. Even Prince Charles, who is cultured and quite "good at sums" apparently completes the claim forms incorrectly twice, so "he sat down at the kitchen



table to try again, but the computations were beyond him. What he did work out was that they could not claim Housing Benefit until their Income Support was known; and they could not claim Income Support until their Housing Benefit was assessed. And then there was Family Credit, which they were yet to benefit from, but which seemed to be included in the total sum. Charles was reminded of Alice in Wonderland as he struggled to make sense of it all. Like her, he was adrift in a surreal landscape. He received letters asking him to telephone but when he did nobody answered. He wrote letters but got no reply. There was nothing he could but to return the third set of forms and wait for the state to give him the benefits it had promised" (p. 141). Meanwhile, there is no other option but to struggle with poverty.

Inevitably, wealth and social standing influence social relationships. Only rich people are treated hospitably by salespersons or shop managers, and the Queen is stunned to see how unsociably she is treated by the butcher – while buying some bones to make broth – as compared to a “well-dressed man” who buys “three pounds of fillet steak” (p. 125).

Demotion, poverty and living among the socially disadvantaged brought chaos into the royal family and even led to its disintegration, while living itself turns into a question of survival: “‘Things are pretty frightful, actually,’ said the Queen. ‘I have no money; British Telecom is threatening me with disconnection; my mother thinks she is living in 1953; my husband is starving himself to death; my daughter has embarked on an affair with my carpet fitter; my son is due in court on Thursday; and my dog has fleas and is turning into a hooligan’” (p. 168). Direst poverty makes the Queen collect fruits and vegetables from the market floor, at the end of the day when the stale food is thrown away by traders.

Much of these people’s adversity was caused by the economic recession of 1991–1992. Brought about by high interest rates, falling house prices and the pound sterling’s weakness, 1992 was a tough year for most British people. Manufacturing was also down, together with construction, trade, or housing. The novel shows the downturn in the economy contributed to dramatic job shortage and the bankruptcy of many shops in town. The Queen herself is amazed by the “proliferation of ‘For Sale’ signs” (p. 176) in town, which implies that economic activity was bad.

It is thus hardly surprising that poverty generates “a constant state of crisis” (p. 175) in Hell Close<sup>16</sup>. People are always in a hurry, looking for jobs or errands, calling social assistance offices like the DSS or the Housing Benefit, taking care of their rowdy children, searching for solutions to survive. However, low life is not represented as being completely dark and meagre. There are two things the royals, especially the Queen, come to appreciate about this type of life. First of all, despite their hard living, the slum residents are very helpful, charitable and supportive of each other.

They help the royals move in, clean their houses, repair house fittings, but also lend a hand in case of more solemn family events like funerals. Their humane nature is emphasized, and they never expect or accept financial rewards for their work. Secondly, they are open-hearted, direct, straightforward, sincere, an attitude which was unfamiliar to the royals who were self-restrained, cold, self-controlled, ceremonious, conventional and aloof. Here, "one used to speak his mind. It was inconvenient at times, but one felt strangely good afterwards" (p. 130), which coincides with the free expression of the self.

The middle class is also briefly depicted in the novel, represented by Fitzroy Toussaint, having a university degree, living in the suburbs, which provides better living standards than the ghetto, driving his own car, and now working as an insolvency accountant and earning a good salary. He is the only representative of the middle class who actually penetrates the royals' exclusive group and his interest in cars and fashion quickly enables him to become Princess Diana's lover.

The novel also illustrates that Britain has transformed from a manufacturing country into one in which leisure industries have become profitable. As a result, there are fewer work places, and the state is interested in services and the entertainment sectors instead of production or investment in infrastructure. For instance, the town streets were hardly paved while the Council invested money in opening an "electronic zoo" (p 117). Changing times engendered changing mores and attitudes, even though the economic situation was deteriorating.

#### 4. Conclusions

Perhaps the social group depicted by Townsend may seem a minority, and the situations presented may appear to be exaggerations of the socio-economic reality, but the fictional exercise signals two aspects. First, by dismantling the monarchy it mirrors the anti-monarchic trend which exists in contemporary Britain and it presents some of its grievances. Second, the novel depicts the hard life of the quite numerous working class, and by reducing and even annulling the social distance between the rich and the poor it promotes a society where social divisions are diminishing. Ultimately, by exposing the harsh living of the lower classes, the novel makes a plea for the rejuvenation of socio-economic conditions in Britain.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bassnett, 2001, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Oakland, 2011, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Halsey, 1981, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Bassnett, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>*idem*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Dargie, 2007, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup>Scott, 2008, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup>Oakland, 2011, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup>*ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup>Halsey, 1981, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Oakland, 2011, p. 187.

<sup>12</sup>All quotations given in this article are taken from the 2012 edition: TOWNSEND, Sue. *The Queen and I*. With a Foreword by Jo Brand. London: Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>13</sup>In fact, many of them belong to the so-called underclass which includes the permanently unemployed, the long-term unemployed, and the very poor [Oakland, 2011, p. 185].

<sup>14</sup>Davies, 2000, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup>Townsend also subtly mocks some proverbial characteristics of Britishness, such as the famous and rather eccentric love of the British for dogs. This is what saves the Queen from being totally destitute for she obtains some money only after bitterly complaining that her dog is starving. Instead, claimants without necessary identification documents do not receive financial support, a situation which bitterly suggests that the British love dogs more than they love humans.

<sup>16</sup>However, poverty seems to be extending to the entire spectrum of the English population. In town, sales are down and the poverty of most English people contrasts with the financial potency of the Japanese, who will eventually take over Britain due to its economic might. Sales targets are achieved when the Japanese go shopping in London, as the Princess of Japan does.

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