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## **Adaptation or escapism? The British Royals' tribulations and the crisis of personal identity in Sue Townsend's *The Queen and I***

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### **Abstract**

*In The Queen and I (1992), English writer Sue Townsend (1946–2014) satirically imagines the abolition of the British monarchy and the subsequent social, political and even personal trials generated by their new situation. This paper<sup>1</sup> focuses on the hardships experienced by the royal family in their demoted condition, with special focus on aspects related to personal identity, such as emotional remoteness, displacement, disputes over the reputation of the (royal) name, re-naming, falsifying one's name and the invention of another identity, illness, escape mechanisms and struggles to adapt to a new life – all of these fictitious tribulations depicting the royal family in a state of crisis.*

### **Introduction**

The subject of monarchy has constantly drawn the attention of a large public, whether we refer to the media, literature, film or the field of biography.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly appealing to a wide audience, the fictionalized portrayal of the British monarchy has focused on various aspects of its public function as well as on matters of private life. Townsend's novel fictionally presents a series of difficulties faced by the royal family in 1992, which were sparked by the dramatic and sudden dismantling of the British monarchy. However, the depiction of the succeeding social, economic and emotional trauma of the royal family following political divestment is only a pretext for the portrayal of the hard life of the lower classes in which the ex-royals are included. On the other hand, the narrative mirrors some private difficulties faced by the royal family as well as some political issues that affected the reputation of the royals and the stability of the monarchy as such. Perhaps it is not accidental that the novel's action takes place in 1992, which was the Queen's "annus horribilis" because of a number of events that grieved the Queen, including the public criticism of the cost of the

royal family, the republican calls in Australia, the divorces of Princess Anne and Prince Andrew, details of the collapse of Prince Charles's marriage, and a terrible fire at Windsor Castle (Morgan, 2000, p. 100). The year is still remembered as the most distressing of her reign, a fact admitted by the Queen herself in her speech at the Guildhall in November – a speech in which she opened her heart to her people: “This is not a year I shall look back on with undiluted pleasure. In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an *Annus Horribilis*”.<sup>3</sup>

Adding to the traumas of her personal life, problems in the economy were also troubling for the Queen, who understood the difficulties her subjects were facing. It was the third year of ruthless economic recession, with high levels of unemployment, record numbers of people whose homes were repossessed, and an unprecedented number of bankruptcies in the commercial sector (Davies, 2000, p. 405).

Although anti-monarchist views have existed for a long time now<sup>4</sup>, republican calls have usually been considered weak and ineffective. However, paralleling recent public protests organized in Britain by the campaign group Republic<sup>5</sup>, Townsend's book fictionally contests the monarchy and, by doing this, signals that the authority and power of the monarchy might be steadily declining, that public dissatisfaction with the monarchy is growing or, simply, that Britain is undergoing a series of changes that could alter its nature dramatically. Still contributing greatly to the British sense of identity, the abolition of the monarchy would significantly alter political institutions as well as identity patterns, as shown by Starkey (2005). Although this scenario in which the British monarchy is removed is quite far-fetched, it may indicate that the British monarchy should adapt its nature to the evolution of society and thus respond more easily to the public calls for modernization, flexibility and adaptability. Continuation and cohesion are perhaps grounded on the concept of service which, as Marshall (2012) highlights, “means thinking of others collectively and individually as well as of yourself” (p. 217).

As far as this paper is concerned, we are less interested in the social and political crisis generated by the demotion and more focused on analysing the ways in which the destabilization of the social and political status leads to trauma at the level of personal identity. Having previously created and maintained a public self-image that was targeted at others to view, the royal family now removes this outer layer and starts focusing on those aspects of personal identity that intimately define who they are. Negotiating their identities, they untie the chains that had previously obscured their emotional content and potential for

affection, they negotiate their name(s) in order to find one that suits their new identities, they answer the calls of their most intimate desires and try to adapt to their new circumstances. It is those who remain attached to their former rank or to the roles they previously occupied who fail, as in the case of Prince Philip, whose psychological disorder shows that he is unable to attach new meaning to his newly acquired identity. On the other hand, no longer focusing on those defining features related to royalty and the political or social dimensions of their identity, some members of the ex-royal family, including the Queen, start concentrating their attention on the more private side of their existence and on those aspects that identify them as unique persons.

### **From emotional distance to affection**

In the preface to the 2012 edition of the novel, English comedienne, writer and actress Jo Brand makes reference to a common allegation used by anti-monarchists regarding the British monarchy. It refers to the fact that most members of the royal family maintain a sense of remoteness and aloofness from ordinary people, and it was only the late Princess Diana that bridged this gap and tried to adjust the monarchy to the demands of the present time or to show the more humane face of royalty. She actually tried “to drag the royals into the twentieth century” and to get them closer to the life of the common people. She also endeavoured to reduce the sense of extraordinariness attached to the royal family, thus suggesting that the royals are, after all, just like everyone else, even though ideas connected to the divine nature of the monarchy or its mission are common, or that the monarchy ensures the continuity of the nation and symbolizes the glory of its past so, ideas of change are not necessary. Princess Diana desired to give her children “a taste of normal life and an education in the lives of those less fortunate” (Townsend, 2012, p. 1), an attitude which is less associated with the values or activities attributed to the monarchy. Among other things, it is this state of normality that has often distanced the common people from the royals.<sup>6</sup>

British anti-monarchists claim that the antiquated institution of monarchy, as a concept and as a symbol, can no longer cope with the needs and challenges of contemporary life. On the one hand, the monarchy is said to have perpetuated a class system which has widened social gaps. Placed at the top of this hierarchy, the monarchy has remained unaware of, and distant from, the life of its ordinary subjects. On the other hand, leading an exclusive life, their existence is very different from that of most British people. Quite untouched by great historical events, the monarchy has largely remained the same for ages, while the population

has been affected by wars, upheavals, economic downturns, etc. It is this great distance between the mass of people and their leaders that seems to worry mounting numbers of the British population, even though in July 2013 an Ipsos Mori poll revealed that support for the monarchy was still high (77%), whereas that for a republic was as low as 17%, so the trend seems to be characteristic of a minority group only.<sup>7</sup>

However, the image of royalty is not related only to distance from its subjects. Both Brand and the novel itself show the existing distance within the royal family itself. Brand alludes to their lack of emotion in public and makes reference to the Queen's coldness when meeting her son Charles, aged six or seven, who was returning from boarding school. The two simply shook hands, and Brand suggests that it is here that the "tragedy" (Townsend, 2012, p. 2) of monarchy lies. In effect, this example is not a mere reflection of royal protocol or etiquette in public, it indicates the existence of a more critical type of distance, that which involves a lack of affection even in private settings.

The demotion of political status further leads to the fragmentation of the family. Even though they now have the possibility to get closer to each other, and there are many circumstances which could assist family closeness, the members of the royal family distance themselves emotionally from one another, each of them responding differently to the challenges of demotion. Paradoxically, in happy times the family was not a unified whole, with each member rejoicing the blessings of royalty separately. This emotional separation was facilitated by richness, because the family enjoyed spacious lodgings which favoured independence and autonomy. After the dismantling of the institution, the family suffers even more from disintegration. The formal unity is broken, and each of the ex-royals has to struggle for a daily living, although now they are physically close to each other. In other words, in former times, the royal family existed as a whole, but its members were both emotionally and physically distanced from one another. After the demotion, the cramped space forces them to get closer physically<sup>8</sup>, and there is a chance for growing affection. However, the gap is constantly widening because each of them reacts differently to the new circumstances.

Nicholas Davies (2000, p. 235) reveals that the Queen has slept alone nearly all her married life, while Prince Phillip has occupied other rooms further down the first-floor corridor, and "if neither of them has any engagements which necessitate early departures they usually meet in the breakfast room". This situation suggests that they are almost strangers to each other despite the many titles and riches that formally bind them. This exacerbated sense

of privacy is mocked by Townsend who alludes to the subsequent lack of affection between husband and wife. Both the Queen and Princess Diana were now “dreading the night to come. Neither was used to sharing either a bedroom or a bed with her husband” (Townsend, 2012, p. 29). Satirically, touching each other is not something customary. It is the smallness of their new residence in Hell Close that finally brings them closer, obliging them to come closer in space and in their thoughts about each other:

“The atmosphere between the Queen and Prince Phillip was awkward as they washed and undressed for bed. Furniture filled every room. They had to squeeze past each other with frequent apologies for touching. (...) The Queen turned towards her husband. He was still a handsome man, she thought” (Townsend, 2012, p. 31).

In line with research findings, the fictional monarch herself starts thinking that affective deprivation during childhood may have affected her children. Charles also believes that as a child he was damaged psychologically because of a lack of parental affection. This accounts for his sudden outburst of violence when he gets involved in a street fight in Hell Close. The Queen regrets that the official duties she carried out diligently created an emotional distance between her and her children:

“She had once inadvertently watched a BBC2 Bristol documentary about hooliganism (she had expected it to be about wild animals). A famous vet had drawn a connection between maternal deprivation and violence. Was that why Charles had started fighting in the street? Was it her fault? She hadn’t wanted to go on those world tours and leave Charles behind, but in those days she had believed her advisers when they assured her that British export trade would collapse without her support. Well, it had collapsed anyway, she thought bitterly. She might just as well have stayed at home with the dogs and seen Charles a couple of hours a day” (ibid., p. 77).

The novel suggests that wealth or high status estranges people whereas an average status in life or even poverty brings them closer. Despite their financial shortage, the Hell Close residents help each other whenever one of them is in need. The atmosphere in their houses is warm, friendly and suited to confession. Emotionally, the Queen moves away from her disintegrated family and becomes closer to the commoners, and even gives a helping hand

in childbirth in a neighbour's house: "The Queen had rarely felt so close to anyone before. There was something about the firelight which invites swapped confidences" (ibid., p. 102). Now, she knows more about some strangers' lives than she does about her own, since Andrew and Edward are abroad and the Queen has heard nothing from them since moving to Hell Close and Charles is imprisoned.

The Queen's unyielding self-control in public has often been regarded as indicative of a lack of compassion and aloofness from her subjects, an attitude which is opposed to allowing oneself "to feel". The Queen herself is conscious of her unemotional nature, wishing she could be more affectionate and so, closer to her people:

"It was true, she did keep a tight grip on herself. Would she go to her grave without experiencing an emotional breakdown? Was it better for one to hang onto the dictates of one's upbringing: good manners, control and self-discipline, or to behave how one felt and scream in the street like a demented harridan?" (ibid., p. 104)

Her adaptation to her new status allows herself to feel, including the letting out of her misery, anguish and sadness. Her intentional scream is a once-in-a-lifetime act of rebellion against the censorship of desires, emotions, feelings and personal needs. Townsend hyperbolically describes the turmoil caused by the scream in the entire neighbourhood in order to highlight the unusual character of her call for freedom:

"What must it feel like to open one's mouth and scream? (...) She tried again. 'Aaaaargh!' Quite satisfactory. And again, 'Aaaaaaaaargh!!!!' Her throat opened wide and the Queen could feel the scream travel up her lungs, overflow her windpipe and roar out of her mouth like a British lion. The scream woke Phillip, it brought people running to the Queen's front door" (ibid., p. 105).

However, by the end of the novel, the Queen totally gives in to emotion and her mother's death signifies both an act of liberation from the past and the open manifestation of emotion and affection. By abandoning herself to grief and allowing herself "to have a good cry" (ibid., p. 226), a radical step is taken towards a new life.

**Naming: the reputation of a name and the crisis of identity**

A dynastic name cannot be dissociated from its historical connotations, socio-cultural and political meanings or other types of affiliations, so its importance from the perspective of national identity cannot be neglected. However, as we will show, naming turns into an issue in Townsend's novel not only from the perspective of defending and maintaining connections with a valued collective history that goes far beyond the individual level to reach that of a nation's identity represented and typified by a monarch, but also from the view of personal identity and the way in which re-naming and falsifying one's name coincides with asserting another identity that takes pride precisely in its uniqueness and separation from a historically recognized group. It is the drama at the level of their personal lives that makes the ex-royals in the novel redefine their identities, starting with their names, in the same way as they did in the past, when it seemed imperative to adopt new surnames which were more clearly associated with national identity.

Royalty exudes status, privilege, recognition, a sense of extraordinariness and reputation. All of this is inextricably linked with naming, which also supports royal status. Royal surnames are tokens of greatness and power, and guarantors of favourable repute. Two critical events in recent British history are associated with the identity of the royal family from this perspective and, since the monarchy is one of the most significant institutions that embody Britishness, with that of the country. The first crisis goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century when the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha vs. Windsor naming controversy exercised the public. The close bond that the British people had with the German people still existed in 1901, echoing the myth of English purity founded on the pan-Germanic bond that saw the Anglo-Saxons united both in language, temperament and physical characteristics (Broich and Bassnett, 2001, p. 20). For others, the identification of the British Royal Family with their German ancestry, relations and names was troublesome and it brought into question the loyalty and patriotism of the Royal Family (Golby and Purdue, 1988, p. 96). Especially in the context of World War I, Germanophobia reached hysterical levels and people started voicing the need for a British King whose pure British blood would evoke a genuine national consciousness. Though reluctant at first, after repeated attacks on his supposedly alien origins, King George V (1910–1936) realized the necessity to impress upon the nation the British nature of the dynasty. The names of the Royal Family had to be anglicized, so he chose the name of Windsor to replace the former name Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Thus, in 1917, The Royal Family dropped their German name and connections, thus reinventing themselves as British people.

Closer to Elizabeth II's reign (1952–), the second crisis refers to the dispute over the Windsor/Mountbatten names. With a Greek and German background, Prince Phillip became a British citizen in 1947, when he gave up his claims to the Greek and Danish thrones, adopting the surname Mountbatten (Panton, 2011, p. 369). In the novel, the unhappiness of the demoted family is further fuelled by Phillip's reigniting of the old controversy related to his family name. The past is brought to life again when he insists that his family should adopt his family name, a fact which would strengthen or add force to the ancient symbolism associated with the royal family. Naming is also connected to pride and reputation and so, by reasserting his ancestry he wants to resume his impaired personal identity and masculinity and identify himself by his family's name.

In fact, just like the Windsors did, his family adopted the surname Mountbatten during World War I, as a replacement of the Battenberg name, in order to appease anti-German feeling. Quick-tempered and patronizing, Philip makes use of the Queen's demotion in order to enliven his own sense of authority, masculinity and control which had been suppressed for so many years. The issue is also related to the influence exerted by Phillip's uncle on his nephew. According to some critics, Lord Louis Mountbatten had always interfered in their relationship, and had advised Phillip behind the scenes. For example, Mountbatten had secretly wished to connect his family with the House of Windsor and had taken every opportunity to achieve his target (Davies, 2000, p. 45).

The identity of the Windsor dynasty has rested on its name, as well, and the Queen has tried to maintain this heritage. In the novel, she ponders sadly on this naming issue and realizes that Mountbatten's influence on Phillip had been terribly strong, and continued even after his death, transforming the subject into a very significant competition over power:

“The Queen stared into the gas flames. She had thought that this Windsor/Mountbatten conflict had been laid to rest long ago, but now it had reared its ugly head again. It was Louis Mountbatten's fault. That odious snob had persuaded the Bishop of Carlisle to comment, on the occasion of Charlie's birth, that he did not like to think of a child born in wedlock being deprived of its father's name. (...) Louis Mountbatten's campaign to glorify his family name and make it that of the reigning house had started in earnest. The Queen had been torn between her husband's and Louis Mountbatten's wishes and those of King George V, who had founded the House of Windsor in perpetuity” (Townsend, 2012, pp. 54–55).



Thus, aware of their distinct positions, later on in the novel, the Queen reasserts her superior status and authority over the Duke of Edinburgh and insists that she was the “head of the dynasty”, not Phillip (*ibid.*, p. 127), and that dynasty was Windsor, the one which best symbolized the British nation and its values. The Queen’s allegiance to her family history is a sign of her continued attachment to those features that define the traditional values associated with the British monarchy and which, in turn, express key values at the core of Britishness.

At the other pole, some members of the royal family start denying their royal ancestry and refute their allegiance to it. By renouncing the Windsor name, and its past glory, they believe they can escape the troublesome present. In response to his parents’ dispute over their family name, Charles distances himself from his family and invents another identity by taking up his great-grandmother’s family name, Teck.<sup>9</sup> He uses his new name in prison (““You Prince Charles?” Charles said, ‘No, I’m Charlie Teck”” (*ibid.*, p. 74)), thus totally dismissing his former identity, an act that could have seriously affected his father if he had known about the disavowal of his ancestry. His brother, Prince Edward, also renounces his former name and wittily combines parts of his parents’ surnames so as to form a new one, Windmount, as if to satisfy both of his parents’ desires to pass on the lineage of their blood, though in a fractured manner and as a matter of practical compromise. Nevertheless, his new identity is a form of disguise and escape meant to keep his royal legacy at a distance and set the grounds for a new beginning away from any royal connection.

Even the Queen starts hiding her former status from the commoners so as to fit in the group more easily and thus reduce the social and cultural gap that exists between the royals and the commoners. Language itself is an obstacle in communication, with the royals being often ridiculed for their “posh” (*ibid.*, p. 19) accent which, at first, confuses the Hell Close residents to the point of considering their language a foreign one. The Queen’s English, also called Received Pronunciation<sup>10</sup>, contrasts sharply with the language spoken in Hell Close, where linguistic deviations in grammar, spelling, punctuation and word choice are common. Associated with correctness, formality and high levels of education, the Queen’s English also conveys prestige or authority and has connotations of intelligence and dependability. The Queen decides to keep silent rather than engage in conversation with a Hell Close neighbour, a member of the poor underclass, in order to avoid being mocked again or just to avoid misunderstandings.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, she is aware that her language would, once again, be taken as a prerogative of a privileged class, so she disavows her former loyalty to her class by refusing

to use Received Pronunciation. By doing so, she censors or suppresses her education, former socio-political status and her entire past. The more she realizes the gap that exists between her family and the common people the more displaced and confused she feels, so the question of belonging acutely troubles her:

“The Queen nodded, reluctant to open her mouth and advertise her class. Her accent was proving to be rather a bother. Should she try to modify it? And her grammar was a nuisance. Should she throw in a few double negatives? It was terribly difficult to work out where she belonged any more (...)” (ibid., p. 120).

Hence, in order to fit in the new environment, she is ready to break away from her former social and political standing as well as from her educational background and gradually adapts to the changes brought about by the new lowly condition.

### **Facing the reality or escaping it: adaptation vs. illness**

If the Queen is hard-headed, resolute and always shows a down-to-earth attitude, most members of the royal family cannot cope with the demotion in status and power. The Queen and Princess Anne manage to adapt to the new situation, while the Queen Mother, Prince Phillip and Prince Charles prefer to escape the unpleasant reality in different ways. Escape mechanisms range from plunging into fantasy or the past, daydreaming, faking happiness, or performing pleasant activities like gardening. In Prince Phillip’s case escapism does not function completely and the demotion seems to be a traumatic experience so he is run down by depression. Engaged in various types of delusion, the other family members try to block disappointment, while the Queen remains sober-minded and realistic. Her attitude seems to be the best option, since the avoidance of the reality ultimately brings about excessive idealism, inability to cope with the reality, illness and even death.

Though the demotion concerns particularly her own position, the Queen deals with the demise of royal status pragmatically and copes best with the difficult challenge. She confronts the reality and mentally exercises the firm, dignified, war-like attitude she must exhibit despite the dire circumstances, an attitude befitting a monarch: “I must consider myself a prisoner of war. I must be brave, I must maintain my own high standards” (ibid., p. 28).

The Queen’s sense of dignity and her dignified spirit have often been commented on. In the novel, despite the humiliating circumstances she experiences, the Queen acts in a

stately and decorous manner, showing that even if the royal title has been taken away from her, she does not forsake her ennobling character: “The Queen straightened her back, adjusted her handbag on her arm and stepped onto the balcony” (ibid., p. 9). Though she had never been so humble socially – as the title of chapter 3 suggests – and the sight of her new home was discouraging, the Queen braced up, “adjusted her headscarf and straightened her back” (ibid., p. 14), ready to confront the new situation with a dignified bearing, moral and emotional firmness and unyielding determination.

Although she was untrained in many trivial activities like opening the door, making tea, opening a can, or dressing herself, the difference between the Queen and most royals is that she understands she must try to learn doing all those things she is not familiar with. When her sister, Margaret, declares she does not know how to peel potatoes – and the task may serve only as an example for many others – the Queen admits she does not know either, but that “one has to try” (ibid., p. 129). Very determined to become acquainted with all the duties of her new life, she regrets not having been taught “to do the dirty work” (ibid., p. 225). She realizes that being able to deal with the duties of low life by herself would make adaptation possible, both for her and her family and that adaptation secured their survival.

The marital relation of the royal couple is said to have been affected by their different political roles. Prince Phillip has stubbornly tried to counteract political domination by the Queen with authority in private life. Davies (2000, p. 119) points out that

“he loves to appear to be in control, especially of the Queen. Particularly in his early years, when inspecting factories and shopping malls, Phillip would snap loudly so everyone could hear, ‘This is a bloody waste of time,’ and even ‘Let’s go’”.

Now, the Queen imagines that their new life would make Phillip rejoice with freedom. Although he noisily expresses his dissatisfaction with his diminished status, it appears to be only a red herring, because it is the loss of his fortune which really debilitates him morally. Now they are on equal terms and the Queen hopes they could make plans together, away from protocol, control and terms of subordination, leaving behind the time when

“she had (always) had to placate Phillip; he had resented walking one step behind her. His personality was not in tune with playing second fiddle. He was a whole quarrelling orchestra” (Townsend, 2012, p. 39).

Practical and always looking for solutions, the Queen resists being traumatized, whereas for Prince Phillip the demotion is depressing. He is shocked right from the start, unable to speak when he sees their grim new home and the shock blurs his senses and his perception of reality. Staring speechlessly, he imagines he is watching a performance in which

“a street lamp flickered into life, casting a theatrical glow over his dilapidated future home. It continued to flicker as though it belonged in the theatre and was auctioning for a storm at sea” (ibid., p. 20).

Philip’s proverbial bossy, boisterous, tempestuous, aggressive attitude comes to the surface when he finally speaks, showing his rejection of the possibility to live in such a house and, as a consequence, of his entire life away from royalty: “‘It’s abso-bloody-lutely impossible. I refuse. I’d sooner live in a bloody<sup>12</sup> ditch’” (ibid., p. 20). From that moment on, Phillip’s physical and moral deterioration starts leaving painful marks. He refuses the “hideous reality of being a commoner in a cold house” and plunges in the fantastic world of “royal dreamland” (ibid., p. 41). Soon, he denies the existence of Hell Close altogether (ibid., p. 58) and, as a result, his own existence there, taking to bed and starving himself. Diagnosed with clinical depression, he refuses the grimness of the present and lives in the wonderful past, his single activity being that of reading books about himself, books that revealed a Prince in full vigour. It is known that Prince Phillip’s remarks have often been outspoken, unprincely, brazen, or tactless and some of the titles mentioned by Townsend (*The Wit of Prince Phillip*, *More Wit of Prince Phillip*, ibid., p. 149) are similar to those of real books on the market that contain his hilarious comments over the years, such as *The Duke of Hazard: The Wit and Wisdom of Prince Phillip* by Phil Dampier and Ashley Walton (2006) or *Prince Phillip: Wise Words and Golden Gaffes* (2012) by the same journalists. His self-esteem is now maintained by recalling glorious moments of the past when he functioned as the serving partner of the reigning monarch. The book *Prince Phillip Speaks* probably refers to Richard Ollard’s collection entitled *Prince Phillip Speaks: Selected Speeches 1956–1959* (1960).<sup>13</sup> Convinced that the demotion ruined his life, Phillip’s escape from the present is ultimately a strategy to preserve his sense of self-worth and personal value even if it simply disguises his self-delusion and inadaptability and, therefore, will not work for long.

Next to the Queen, Princess Anne is also a doer, who adapts to the new life or, better said, chooses to confront the new situation with strength of character and practicality. In fact, we may say she is the closest to the commoners, revealing a practical, worldly, adaptable, realistic and modest nature. Refusing to complain about their new degraded social situation and the dirty cold house she receives, she believes that “it’s a roof over one’s head. (...) It’s better than being put up against a wall and shot” (ibid., p. 87). Her last comment may be an exaggerated reaction to the suffocating media attention she generally receives or the result of a type of pragmatic awareness of people’s rage when they no longer support a certain system of government. What Princess Anne understands is that one must necessarily accept and adapt to the present if one wants to survive, without any emotional drama attached to the situation. Terribly realistic, she is the only member of the royal family who does not bring expensive antiques into the new home, a fact which makes her neighbour observe that she is very much like “ordinary people” (ibid., p. 89). As a child, the Princess was probably more energetic than her older brother Charles given that she resembled their father more in temperament and her sensible, intrepid nature seems to have made her the Queen’s favourite. “The Princess Royal was something of a tomboy – physical, no-nonsense and not given to introspection”.<sup>14</sup> In the novel, Charles is portrayed as her opposite, a quite ineffectual, idealistic and romantic Prince. He himself feels inferior to Anne’s vitality and constructive spirit and senses the Queen’s preference:

“He felt useless and stupid. There was something about Anne that made him feel...he groped for the word...foolish? No. Effete? Yes. Nearer the mark. Unlike him, she despised the speculative, preferring practical, down-to-earth solutions to everyday problems. In the past she had openly mocked his attempts to make sense of the world” (ibid., p. 87).

Townsend probably wants to suggest that Anne’s way of thinking is a prolongation of that defining the Queen, embodying a type of down-to-earth, hard-headed, pragmatic and enterprising attitude that ultimately ensures the continued existence of the family, or maybe even that the royals must favour action instead of inactivity, idleness or apathy for the handling of everyday matters, be they personal or state-related. This idea may thus be a fictionalized representation of the public plea for more socio-economic action and involvement on the part of the royals. It reinforces the idea that the monarchy or the

government needs people of this kind in order to implement the appropriate plans and solutions for the state's wellbeing.

Right from the beginning of the novel, The Queen Mother is portrayed as obsessed with the idea of being loved by the people. Her constant smiling and waving at her people suggests her impossibility of coping with reality outside the scope of an affectionate relationship. This relation with her subjects may have been a compensation for the years in which she lived without the love of her husband: "The Queen Mother needed people to love her. People loving her was plasma; without it, she would die" (ibid., p. 62). Her reaction to the people's insults makes her appear senile, but in fact it shows that she chose to put on the mask of joyfulness in order to be able to handle all the hardships and the crises that might appear in life. When the ex-royals are asked to take their leave from the crowd gathered in front of Buckingham Palace, "the Queen Mother smiled and waved as was her habit. She was too old to change now" (ibid., p. 10).

As a maid, Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon was of no royal origin, but she was the descendant of a rich Scottish landowning family. All through her life she showed strength despite her sweetness and cheerfulness in public and she gave King George VI (1937–1952) the power which enabled him to become a beloved king. Her staff commented on her strength: "She's as tough as old boots but we all love her dearly" (Davies, 2000, p. 47). In *Hell Close*, the old Queen Mother appears to be over-excited about everything, despite the appalling living conditions, and this indicates that she needed to falsify reality in order to survive. Reluctant to accept the change in people's affection and the subsequent demotion in status, she blindly refuses to face adversity, disguising her misery behind a smile. Imagining that she lives in 1953, she abandons the harsh present for the sweet memories of the past, an escape mechanism which does enable her to keep away from misery and suffering but which ultimately suggests that the absurd clinging to the past is ineffectual and doomed to fail.

### **Eco-living, the joys of a simple life and the call of freedom**

For Prince Charles' family members the new home and the entire situation seems appalling, whereas Prince Charles enjoys the prospects of "the simple life" (Townsend, 2012, p. 16), finally able to transfer his interest from politics to farming and the protection of nature. Townsend depicts Prince Charles as an environmental fanatic and a keen cultivator and softly satirizes his public involvement that advocates environmental protection. It is well-known that Prince Charles is an active promoter of the preservation of genuine human bonds with nature,

the conservation of nature and the maintenance of traditional habitats, practices and values. For instance, the media have stressed Prince Charles' fondness for Romania, where he is involved in conservation projects, including the rehabilitation of several Saxon villages from the twelfth century, some of which are designated UNESCO heritage sites. A promoter of Romania's heritage abroad, he even owns two properties in the village of Valea Zălanului, Covasna region, including an old house which he completely renovated.<sup>15</sup> His ecological enthusiasm is also presented in the documentary "Wild Carpathia 1" (2011) produced by the Travel Channel, which depicts the "last great wilderness of Europe"<sup>16</sup>, as highlighted by Victoria Hillman, a National Geographic Explorer and Research Director for the Transylvanian Wildlife Project. In the documentary the Prince speaks about the beauty of this unique eco-system and the necessity of preserving it. What is more, the Prince even traces his lineage back in Romania's past, declaring that "the genealogy shows I am descended from Vlad the Impaler, so I do have a bit of a stake in the country".<sup>17</sup>

By presenting a prince who is exclusively interested in gardening, and less worried about the confused state of his country, the desperate situation of his family, or his wife, Townsend suggests that he is more interested in the environment than the state, so politics has no place in his future plans. In fact, this idea draws on rumours perpetuated by the media according to which Prince Charles is not really eager to take over the throne, or that the Britons themselves seem to favour his son, William, to be next king. However, following the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, his popularity seems to have increased, with 44% of polled people preferring Charles to William for succession to the throne.<sup>18</sup> However, Prince Charles' position as "king in waiting" has not been easy, as royal commentator Richard Fitzwilliams underlined:

"The Prince has had to endure an unbelievably long apprenticeship. You aren't the leader, you are in waiting, you have to create your own role. He has done that wonderfully well but he can appear fogeyish".<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps tired of the long wait, the prince has created a new role for himself, that of a staunch environmentalist in which his conservative nature can take a more active role. Townsend's fictional scenario may simply suggest that Prince Charles' weakened interest in state politics is only natural considering his long apprenticeship and that a radical change is inevitable. Lacking vigour and energy in politics because he has no place of his own in it, the

Prince in the novel transfers his vitality from the realm of politics to that of agriculture, where he can freely exercise his abilities.

Quickly renouncing royal etiquette, Charles changes his hairstyle, gathers his hair in a ponytail and keeps repeating he has never been happier. Interested in a natural mode of living, he takes up gardening, starts spending most of his time in his garden, waking up

“every morning at six, clumping around the garden in his wellingtons. (...) She (Diana) dreaded the autumn when he apparently expected her to preserve and pickle. He had asked her to start collecting empty jars, anticipating a glut of home grown produce” (Townsend, 2012, p. 140).

His passion for gardening seems to widen the affective gap between the spouses, and his last words whispered to Diana before being imprisoned utterly disappoint his wife who will eventually look for affection outside marriage:

“she tried once more to decipher the message Charles had mouthed to her as he was being led away to prison. It had looked like, ‘Water the Gro-Bags,’ but he couldn’t have been thinking about his stupid garden, could he? Not at such a tragic moment” (ibid., p. 188).

There is one aspect though which still binds Charles and Diana, namely their love of freedom. Diana gets accustomed to the medley life of the ghetto and sees Charles’ involvement in street fighting as something very exciting and manly. Very happy to live among the commoners, she feels this life is liberating, freeing her from the constraints imposed by royal status. Now, she finally feels “animated” (ibid., p. 73).

In his turn, away from the former demanding duties of royalty, Prince Charles starts yearning for freedom. Charged with affray and imprisoned, he realizes the double meaning of imprisonment and wishes he could escape both. The first one is the imprisonment of potential kingship, but it is fortunate that this one seems extinct. In prison, he mentally catalogues all the Kings and Queens of England, finally reaching his mother and then “he came to an empty space. At some time in the future, after his mother’s death, it would have been him: captive in quite a different prison” (ibid., p. 77). At the same time, he also longs for liberation from



prison only to make another dream come true, that of setting himself free from the imprisonment he feels within his own family.

In order to further reinforce the significance of the radical change, Townsend imagines a total break with the past in Prince Charles's case. Encouraged by a cellmate's poem entitled "Outside", Charles keeps thinking of freedom and eventually manages to escape, making his way to "freedom and the North" (ibid., p. 238). Both Charles and Andrew choose remote places to begin new lives, a suggestion of their ardent desires to get away from all connections with their past, including their family, country, and royal heritage. A modern replica of Robinson Crusoe, Prince Charles is eager to live in Scotland's highlands, ready to live scantily, satisfied with "a peat fire, a bed of heather" and "simple food" (ibid., p. 258). Townsend satirically relocates the environmentalist Prince in the wilderness he often speaks so fondly of, but she imagines a situation in which he must manage living on his own, without the assistance of money, titles, and privileges, in a condition which is very similar to that of a hermit.

## **Conclusion**

The dismantling of the monarchy imagined by Townsend is a humorous fictional exercise that may seem unrelated to the reality. However, the concerns it expresses mirror many of the anti-monarchist views which exist in Britain. The literary representation of these issues may undermine the authority of the British monarchy but Townsend chastises the institution with mild humour and discloses some essential aspects related to the political scene, socio-economic phenomena, and the education and daily life of the lower British classes. By annulling the great social distance between the royals and the commoners, the novel also reveals the dramatic experience of the royal family and their struggle to adapt to their new humble circumstances. As we have shown, the situation shatters the harmony of the royal family or, better said, uncovers some disguised conflicts and difficulties of the family unit concerning their private and public life. For some of the royals the loss of status is debilitating and impossible to accept, further leading to illness and death, perhaps symbolically suggesting either that the adaptation to modern times is unavoidable and that the dysfunctional and ineffectual components of this system of government are doomed to perish sooner or later. On the other hand, despite the socio-economic turmoil generated by the demotion, the new condition turns into a positive personal experience for some members of the family who discover the joys of freedom, self-expression, sociability, human closeness

and practicality. For them, life outside the limits of royalty marks a new beginning defined by new values and principles.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I also developed some other central aspects related to Townsend's novel in two previous articles. The article entitled *Dismantling the Monarchy. The British Monarchy between Tradition and Modernity* in Sue Townsend's *The Queen and I* (published in *Contemporary Perspectives on European Integration between Tradition and Modernity*, coordinated by Iulian Boldea and Cornel Sigmirean, Târgu-Mureș: Editura Universității "Petru Maior", 2013, pp. 654–666) analyses aspects concerning the fictional political and social demotion of the British monarchy. In *Socio-economic Hardship and the Financial Crisis of the Working Class* in Sue Townsend's *The Queen and I* (published in *Speech and Context. International Journal of Linguistics, Semiotics and Literary Science*, vol. 2, no. 5, pp. 96–106) the focus is on the major socio-economic concerns of the British population as revealed by means of this fictional exercise. In Culea, Mihaela, 2013. *Humanizing the Queen: Reading as Self-discovery and Writing as Redemption* in Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader* (published in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 5, pp. 91–108, <http://rupkatha.com/v5n3.php>) the discussion focuses on the monarch's status as a literary character in view of a process of "humanization" ingenerated by the Queen's earnest preoccupation with the world of books.

<sup>2</sup> For a very interesting analysis of monarchy films that have also attracted a large audience see Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's (2015) exploration of the ways in which these films "invoke a global audience for monarchical spectacle" (p. 163). From another perspective, Mandy Merck (2013) discusses melodrama and the glamour of celebrity in relation to Stephen Frears's 2006 movie *The Queen*, which significantly increased the popularity of the monarchy. Besides novels and films, royal biographies have also engaged the attention of a wide public that could become familiarized with aspects related to the monarchy's public and private roles. A detailed overview of the biographical and historical writing about the British monarchy from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II can be found in David Cannadine's well-documented study (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Queen Elizabeth II's *Annus Horribilis* speech, 24 November 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See Taylor, A., 1999. *Down with the Crown: British Anti-monarchism and Debates about Royalty since 1790*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> For example the demonstrations staged in 2012 during the Diamond Jubilee celebrations by campaign group Republic, as presented by Wallis, Holly, 2012. *Diamond Jubilee v Republican Britain*. On BBC News, 27 May 2012. Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18161083>>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the theme of the "Royal Baby Poll" at <<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3234/Royal-Baby-Poll.aspx>>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Even the architectural structure of the houses in Hell Close encourages communication and human interaction. The party wall which unites the semi-detached houses brings people closer and fosters social closeness despite the fact that it reduces intimacy.

<sup>9</sup> Mary of Teck (1867–1953) was George V's wife, Queen of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, Empress of India. Having experienced many dramatic incidents in her family, she remained a shy, composed, modest person, preferring a quiet domestic life in a cottage in Sandringham, as shown by Cannon and Hargreaves (2001, p. 352).

<sup>10</sup> Also see the article written by Dr Bernard Lamb in October 2010, God Save the Queen's English: Our Language is under Threat from Ignorance, Inverted Snobbery and Deliberate 'Dumbing down', published in *The Independent*, for more details about the contemporary threats to the use of Standard English to which Townsend also critically alludes.

<sup>11</sup> Like the ones caused by the different pronunciation or the usage of articles: "an axe" vs. "a axe", "arse" vs. "house" (p. 21), etc.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the novel illustrates that "bloody" seems to be his favourite insulting word, also suggested by the excerpts offered by Davies (2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Ollard, Richard, 1960. *Prince Phillip Speaks: Selected Speeches 1956–1959*. London: Collins.

<sup>14</sup> A very interesting presentation of Prince Charles' relationship with his siblings is given by journalist Neil Tweedie in his article A Family Affair: Prince Charles and His Siblings. In *The Telegraph*, 10 November 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Vasiliu, Oana, 2012. Prince Charles to Promote Transylvania in documentary film. In *Business Review*, 9 July 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Hillman, Victoria, 2013. Returning to Transylvania: Europe's Last Great Wilderness. On National Geographic Voices, 4 June 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, Victoria; Hough, Andrew, 2012. Prince Charles, heir to Dracula's blood line. In *The Telegraph*, 5 November 2012.

<sup>18</sup> More information can be found in Bond, Anthony, 2012. Charles Should Be King Say Brits Who No Longer Want the Crown to Skip a Generation. In *Daily Mail* online, 10 June 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Savage, Jared, 2012. Prince Charles: A King in waiting. In *New Zealand Herald*, 9 November 2012.

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