

# Rupkatha Journal

## On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal  
ISSN 0975-2935  
[www.rupkatha.com](http://www.rupkatha.com)

Volume V, Number 3, 2013

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# Humanizing the Queen: Reading as Self-discovery and Writing as Redemption in Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*

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## Abstract

This article looks at Alan Bennett's fictional exercise in *The Uncommon Reader* (2006/2008), which provides the British monarchy with a human face and analyses the effects of this process of humanization through reading. The introduction presents the background to Bennett's novella, with special emphasis on the monarchist and anti-monarchist trends in Britain, as well as on the increased popularity of the monarchy as a result of intensive media coverage. The first part also draws the connection between the media craze which exposes the private side of the royalty and Bennett's disclosure of the humanity of Queen Elizabeth II through the mediation of the world of literature instead of that of tabloids or television. The next section explores the potential of reading for the Queen and the ways in which reading contributes to change in matters of both private and professional life. Thus, reading becomes a factor of social and affective communion with her people and also represents a process of discovery and acquisition of insight into human nature. The last part of the novel imagines the Queen as a potential writer, so the paper also deals with writing as an act of revelation and redemption. Stimulated by reading, the Queen's decision to write "a tangential history" (119) of her times will be an invitation addressed to her people to reflect on the demoted political power of their monarch and the political evils that result from it. Apart from that, the article also discusses the possibility for self-discovery and personal achievement animated by the Queen's new passion for books.

[**Keywords:** British monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II, institution, reading, social class, humanization, human nature, redemption.]

## Introduction

Public interest in and fascination with the lives of the royals and the subject of monarchy in general has always been significant. Public attention has been all the more intense in relation to one of the most celebrated European monarchs and Britain's second-longest reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II (1952 - ). Her long reign has definitely not been an easy one, with multiple changes affecting the British society or her family over the years. She has reigned in times of post-war turmoil, has witnessed the disintegration of the Empire, and has watched over Britain as a growing multicultural nation.

Numerous royal biographers have attempted to capture the private dimension of the British monarchy, especially that of the royal head, namely, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>1</sup> Only few English writers have included the monarchy in their writings. However, the fictional works of those who did reflect some of the public concerns with

the roles of the British monarchy, and anti-monarchist views are mainly influenced by campaign group Republic.<sup>2</sup> For example, English writer Sue Townsend (1946 –) casts both a humorous and subtly sarcastic glance at the British royal family and the institution it represents in some of her novels, such as *The Queen and I* (1992), *Number Ten* (2002) or *Queen Camilla* (2006). In his novella *The Uncommon Reader* (2006/2008), English writer Alan Bennett (1934 –) is perhaps gentler and more compassionate, although the narrative also addresses some topical concerns of the British subjects related to the system of government.<sup>3</sup>

The monarchy is the oldest secular institution in Britain and probably the most renowned symbol of British identity, connoting ideas of stability, tradition, duty, dignity, order, responsibility, diligence, loyalty, or morality. Nevertheless, after the 1950s, public discussions on the relevance and suitability of the constitutional monarchy in present-day British life have excited the media and the British public in general. Critics of the monarchy argue that it is a conservative, old-fashioned and “ossified” institution that blocks change and reform, that it has outlived its times, or that it maintains social differences and the existence of hierarchies in society (Golby & Purdue 1988: 124-5). It is also said to lack adaptability to modern times, or that it is out-fashioned, undemocratic, expensive, and linked with establishment and colonial thinking. It performs purely ceremonial roles and, therefore, it is said to be impractical and ineffective. As a result, anti-monarchists, though they represent only a small part of the population, call for the abolishment of the monarchy and its replacement with a less expensive presidency (Bogdanor 1996, Oakland 2011). In this view, the monarchy is antagonistic to the definition of a modern political democracy. Vernon Bogdanor (1996) rejects these arguments and defends the positive role of the monarchy in modern democratic politics, arguing that, in fact, the British monarchy upholds democratic institutions and secures legitimacy. Hardman (2012) also praises the Queen’s shrewd judgment, which has enabled her to become a modern monarch. What is more, recent polls show that the monarchy is still popular and significant for most British people. A survey for *The Sunday Telegraph* from July 2013 showed that confidence in the future of the British monarchy is at an all-time high, with 69% of respondents believing that Prince George will, one day, become king.<sup>4</sup>

The twentieth century brought many changes to British politics, economy, and society. Multicultural and multiethnic characteristics resulting from the collapse of the empire and the subsequent immigration waves, the growing nationalism in Britain’s constituent nations, as well as EU membership constitute some of these significant changes and challenges for British identity. The British phenomenon of nostalgia marked the end of twentieth century, which was a time of introspection, nostalgia and consolidation, while efforts were made to understand the past (Bassnett 2001: 24). However, the greatest challenge between 1901 and 2000 must have been the loss of imperial confidence, paralleled by a strong sense of nostalgia, or the desire to look back to the past in order to understand the present much better.

Contemporary debates on the significance of monarchy in present times have also been fuelled by the media. Intense media coverage of the royals has served media companies' interests, but it also reflects a publish wish or need. The monarchy, especially Queen Elizabeth II has often been criticized for keeping the distance from her people, while the British public has increasingly called for more openness, closeness, and affection from the monarch. The first media monarch<sup>5</sup>, Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901), was the first monarch who successfully used the media in her relation with people. Queen Victoria's efficacious media-making relied on representations of the Queen as an ordinary, middle-class woman with whom people could identify (Deploige & Deneckere 2006: 162), apparently aware of the importance of the act of mediation – linking and connection – with the people by means of media channels. On the other hand, the staging of the monarchy in the twentieth century contributed to the contemporary trends in demystifying the British monarch. Gradually, the Royal Family started to be presented through the medium of television (from the 1960s onwards), as accessible and similar to a normal family.

The popularization of the monarchy by opening it to its subjects by means of intense mediatisation has generated the phrase “royal soap opera” which, in Malcolm Muggeridge's view, is not beneficial for the institution. In fact, public overenthusiastic praise of the monarchy distances it from the daily concerns of the people, so “tedious adulation of the royal family is bad for them, for the public, and ultimately for the monarchical institution itself” (Muggeridge 1955/2012). Perhaps the contention that the monarchy does not lend itself to the calls of modernity can be refuted by the argument that the monarchy is inextricably linked to the past, insofar as its greatest strength lies “in its maturity and expression of pride in the nations' past achievements” (Golby & Purdue 1988: 125). Back in 1955, Muggeridge warned that the image of the monarchy perpetuated by the media and the very essence of monarchy collide. Ordinarity and institutionalization cannot function well together. As a result, “the royal family and their advisers have really got to make up their minds – do they want to be part of the mystique of the century of the common man or to be an institutional monarchy; to ride, as it were, in a glass coach or on bicycles; to provide the tabloids with a running serial or to live simply and unaffectedly among their subjects like the Dutch and Scandinavian royal families. What they cannot do is to have it both ways” (Muggeridge 1955/2012).

Biographies and the mass media reports often manipulate the public thirst for royal exposure on the premise that people want to know the human side of the monarchy. In his short novel, Alan Bennett imagines a Queen who, due to reading, becomes more aware of the world around her. Thus, the book responds to that public need of getting to know the human face of the monarch. Reading gradually humanizes the Queen and her humanity is affectionately presented to her public. Her growing fondness for reading does not mean that the monarch has been insufficiently instructed or educated on a wide variety of subjects. What the text suggests is that she lacks knowledge of human nature because of isolation from her people and ordinary life. It is this side of the monarch's personality that Bennett, by means of his fictional exercise,

wants to recover. Humanization serves the Queen in two ways. On the one hand, she gains understanding of the profound nature of humans in general and, in particular, of her own subjects. On the other hand, this new experience facilitates the disclosure of a previously hidden side of the monarch, so it also enables the Queen to get to know her own private self and thus become aware of its needs, anxiety, and desires. Having neglected her private self for so long, the sudden insight into her privacy is both amazing and enlightening.

The analysis unfolds the stages the Queen goes through, as part of a process by means of which reading leads to self-discovery and thus assists the Queen in bringing to light her potential for empathy, kindness, and humaneness. Thus, it expands her view on life and helps her gain knowledge of human nature. Additionally, reading stimulates the Queen to start writing, so it paves the way for a deeper re-evaluation of her own life and its subsequent recording.

### **Reading and Its Significance for Queen Elizabeth II**

Accidentally running into the Westminster travelling library outside Buckingham Palace because of her unruly corgis, the Queen feels it is a matter of courtesy for her to borrow a book, too. However, right from the beginning, the reader is warned that reading was not one of the monarch's pastimes, nor did she have a liking for a certain type of books. The real reason will be in fact a major impediment to the Queen's ever growing fondness for reading: her duty and position as Queen. The monarchy, though deprived of much of the substance of real political power, has retained some of its original spiritual and magical power, and symbolizes the hopes and beliefs of the people, their very identity. Nevertheless, besides being a renowned symbol of British identity, the monarchy is usually identified with the state itself, it is one of its chief institutions. Therefore, people do not really think of the monarch as a person, but as an institution that serves their interests. Thus, the Queen seems accustomed to the condition of a political instrument, allowing herself to have no hobbies, preferences or personal artistic interests: "it was in the nature of her job that she didn't have hobbies" (6). Even more, literature, reading and learning in general are often regarded as static, contemplative or imaginative activities that do not correspond to action, dynamism, and vitality. In her staff's view, state duties are thus progressive, while reading is futile, ineffectual, and idle. Even the Queen thinks at first that reading is the opposite of doing, and she certainly was a "doer" (6).

Meditating on the meaning of reading, the Queen often plays with words and her metaphorical phrasing is both humorous and ingenious. Gradually, she realizes that reading and the world of books open the way to many aspects of life she was not familiar with. When her security staff confiscate one of her books fearing it might be a dangerous device, the Queen adds that it may be a device, but one meant to "ignite the imagination" (34). Similarly, amazed at the limitlessness of literature and so, of human nature, she reflects that literature is "a vast country to the far borders of which I am journeying but cannot possibly reach" (48). At the same time, reading is opposite to briefing. She is regularly made summaries of events by her secretaries, but now she realizes that reality is

much too complex to be caught in those abstracted terms without distorting or curtailing it. Briefing is “the antithesis of reading. Briefing is terse, factual and to the point. Reading is untidy, discursive and perpetually inviting. Briefing closes down a subject, reading opens it up” (22). The definitions actually reflect the basic dichotomy between the duties of her official position and the delights of reading. The former category, duty, is associated with briefness, curtness and order, while the latter, reading, is rambling, imaginative, and denies order. Having discovered the promise of books to unfold the entire horizon of human nature for her to discover, the Queen feels that reading is contagious, so she wants everyone else, even her chauffeur, to start reading more.

Soon enough, reading comes to be “her element” (31), or her second nature. It becomes a state of bliss, in fact her only instance of complete happiness, as the Duke of Edinburgh enviously observes. However, for the Queen, “it was true; she was. She enjoyed reading like nothing else and devoured books at an astonishing rate” (46-7). She treats reading very seriously, just as she does with everything else in her private or professional life. Reading is also associated with learning and cognition. It is only late in her life that the Queen gains understanding of the profoundness and multiplicity of the human spirit. As a result, she calls herself an “opsimath” (49) assisted by her “amanuensis” (49), Norman Seakins, in this process of (self)-discovery.

Reading unfolds an entire universe she has not been aware of, so her new activity replaces her official duties. Gradually, even reading turns from a pastime into a need and a duty, a reverberation of her position which has always called on a dutiful mindset. Perceiving reading as a duty becomes necessary since this inevitably brings about the successful handling and completion of the event. The perception of reading as a duty also offers the excuse which could enable her to “set about it with a clear conscience, with the pleasure, if pleasure there was, incidental” (30). Reading absorbs her to such an extent that she even starts reading religious texts at the lectern during church service, or reads stories to primary school children. The fact that the Queen includes reading in all her official visits and public engagements has a twofold implication. On the one hand, it is her chance to reveal a less known part of herself to her people, a more familiar and warmer self, and thus she gets closer to them. On the other hand, she is constantly silenced in political life by her ministers and advisers, so now she can make herself heard. Reading in public is thus a nostalgic yearning for a more active role in politics.

Equally, even some of her greatest distractions are replaced by reading, as it happens with her great love for dogs. The Queen's warm affection for dogs and horses is well known. However, in the novel, since the household is rather critical concerning her literary enthusiasm, she seizes every opportunity when she is out of the house to secretly engage in reading, to the obvious dissatisfaction of her corgis: “(...) once she was out of sight of the house Her Majesty sank onto the nearest seat and took out her book. Occasionally she threw a bored biscuit in the direction of her dogs, but there was none of that ball-throwing, stick-fetching and orchestrated frenzy that used to enliven their perambulations” (35).

The Queen's conventionalism, social condescension, as well as her lack of familiarity with the world outside her position and class become obvious right from the beginning of her experience with reading. Her first reading choices are influenced by prejudice of social belonging and so they include only books written by upper-class people or people holding honorary titles, like dames Ivy Compton-Burnett or Nancy Mitford.

Moreover, the Queen inevitably associates value and worth with high birth and status, so she believes writers from upper ranks of the society must certainly write well and be popular, so she is unable to separate social and political prestige from artistic talent. Her first reading is one of dame Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels, which she finds hard going and rather dry, probably because it dealt with the lives of middle-class people, a world she knew nothing of. English novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884 – 1969)<sup>6</sup> was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1967, so the Queen feels confident that she “can read that” (8). At first, the Queen does no longer want to borrow another book but, as a doer, upon entering the library again she feels that since she was there “it was perhaps easier *to do it than not*” (12; my emphasis).

Her second reading choice shows a Queen who is nostalgic about past times, when the upper classes were more powerful and influential in society. Her clinging to the past ironically confirms the allegations of the monarchy's contenders, according to which the British monarchy is obsolete, antiquated, backward-looking and obsessed with maintaining wealth and status. For example, the Queen starts reading Nancy Mitford's (1904 – 1973) *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). Mitford's novels commonly “evoke a lost world of English upper-class elegance and endearing eccentricity”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the two novels seem very well connected because they have some kind of relation with her status.

Because she feels like a novice reader, she starts with some easy readings as an alternative to the difficult subjects of political rule which occupy most of her time. Reading is supposed to be comforting, relaxing, and funny, so complex narratives like those written by George Eliot or Henry James could have put her off, thinking that “books (...) were work” (13). The Queen is particularly devoted to work and her country, but now she feels that she needs a substitute for work. She quickly discovers that one book leads to another, so her reading list becomes quite diverse, including a wide range of writers from all times or who belong to various nationalities, such as Sylvia Plath, Winifred Holtby, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Alice Munro, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, or Gerard Genet. At first, she starts with easy readings, under the close supervision and guidance of Norman Seakins, a former servant in the royal kitchen, who is promoted by the Queen as page and brought into waiting in recognition of his intelligence. However, she soon feels ready to inquire into classic texts written by Honoré de Balzac, Ivan Turgenev, Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, texts written by gay authors (Mary Renault, Denton Welch etc.), as well as historical accounts and religious texts.

Though reading becomes the Queen's new duty, which is performed diligently and assiduously, her attendants oppose reading to the performance of royal responsibility and consider that the Queen's reading habit is out of order. In the end of the novel, when they learn of the Queen's plans to become a writer, her advisers are all the more shocked. However, the Queen draws attention to a historical fact which reveals that her passion for books is not unprecedented in the history of the British monarchy. Thus, Queen Elizabeth I (1558 – 1603) was also an "avid reader" (90); similarly, King Henry VIII (1509 – 1547) wrote a theological treatise entitled *Defence of the Seven Sacraments* as far back as 1521, which secured him the title of Defender of the Faith. Besides, more recently, Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901) also showed literary talent in her *Leaves from a Highland Journal* (1858/1884). By giving these examples, the Queen wants to show that reading, writing or books in general are not antagonistic to the performance of political duty. On the contrary, they assist the monarch in expanding his/her knowledge of the world and then transfer the newly acquired understanding to the realm of political action.

Her attendants believe that her important position is totally opposed to art and they cannot perceive the existence of another side of her personality outside the demands of state duty. Norman is one of the few people who perceive the real person behind the royal mask. He sees her as an "old lady" (18), her royal position being reduced to nothing by her seniority. Having worked in an old people's home, for him old people are just like patients who need "to be humoured" (18). As the embodiment and reflection of the century-old institution of the monarchy, the Queen is commonly perceived as everlasting and ancient, too. But this has nothing to do with her old age as a person, and it is this kind of human seniority that Norman feels compassion for. Nevertheless, he will soon learn that the sharpness of character counterbalances her age.

Having travelled around the world extensively, the Queen possesses knowledge of the world in a pragmatic manner. Skilled in solving pub quizzes, she takes her answers from the real world she has travelled in. In other words, her knowledge derives from acquaintance with the visible world, a world seen during her tours, especially in the Commonwealth countries she presides over. However, this kind of factual knowledge does not correspond to the type of understanding engendered by the world of books. Wondering where this reading appetite came from, she reflects again on her extensive travelling and contact with the "real thing" (30), and yet she understands that she has no real knowledge of "what people are like" (30), or of their inner universe.

### **Reading, from an Elitist Practice to a Factor of Social and Emotional Communion**

In Britain, the notion of class has always represented a powerful force, while social issues have constantly been of central importance to the British population. Britain has commonly been defined as a class-ridden society in which social hierarchies have generated the unequal possession of wealth (Halsey 1981) and social differences have affected most aspects of British life (Reid 1998, Saunders 2001, Roberts 2011). In terms of the concentration of wealth, Britain is one of the most unequal societies in Europe (Gallie



1983: 10). Republicans in Britain strongly believe that the monarchy preserves social imbalance. The royals are placed at the top of the hierarchy and this denies the possibility of making wealth evenly accessible to all people. In their view, class fear and inequality impede progress. Yet, after the decline of the aristocracy, the class structure has been affected by change. For instance, the working class has steadily increased in number and importance (McKibbin 1994). Now, the British population mainly consists of a middle class (60%) and a working class (40%) (Oakland 2011: 187), so the class structure is less rigid, the upper levels are constantly declining and an underclass has emerged.

Bennett tackles the immense social gaps that exist between the top of the hierarchy and the lower levels by playing with physical dimensions. Literature sometimes reflects social hierarchies and the Queen's understanding of Jane Austen is impaired because she cannot understand the minute social distinctions depicted in her novels. Her exclusive position places her beyond any awareness of minuscule social differences, which are metaphorically described in terms of discrepancies between grandness and smallness. For her, Jane Austen's characters seem to be nothing but mere ants, just as her subjects are, since "there was such a chasm between the monarch and even her grandest subject that the social differences beyond that were somewhat telescoped" (75).

Therefore, the gigantic social distance has kept her away from her people, who are dehumanized and seen as a colony of tiny ants she knew nothing about. But the social gap is diminished and so is the human distance after she gains knowledge of both literature and human nature. Gradually, those ants transform into real human beings, developing "individuality and charm" (76).

Delving into the causes of her new passion after fifty years on the throne, she realizes it must be related to her position, which has overemphasized duty at the expense of closeness to common people. But it is also connected to social rank insofar as reading annuls differences of status and erases social hierarchies: "Books did not defer. All readers were equal" (31). Reading makes her nostalgic about the childhood years when, on a few occasions, the two sisters went out on the streets and mixed unrecognized with the common people. Reading now evokes her secret longing for ordinariness, anonymousness, and equality. It was indeed a new need after leading a privileged life. Reading was "anonymous; it was shared; it was common" (31).

The Queen seizes this single opportunity in her life when, totally immersed in the world of books, "she could go unrecognized" (31). The fact that she values equality also results in treating her subjects impartially, and this is reflected in her reading practice, as well. For her, "all books were the same" (48) and her key-virtue, duty, enables her to treat them in an unprejudiced manner, just as she does with people.

However, in her relation with Norman, after she successfully passes the initial contact stages with books, she starts to associate reading with superiority or domination in point of age and status. Although Norman had been the initial guide to her reading, she gradually felt she was outgrowing and out-reading him (71). On the one hand, he could not compete with her experience and life anymore and it was thus her exclusive privilege to reach a point of progress on her own. After having opened the door to this

amazing universe, Norman lets the Queen enjoy the world of books by herself and inquire more deeply into human nature and her own self. The Queen is now “conducting lengthier discussions with herself and putting more and more of her thoughts on paper” (72-3). On the other hand, she easily gives up Norman’s assistance because she understands that it is her own task to face up to the reality that was taking shape in front of her eyes, her own new path she needed to walk on.

### **Reading as a Process of Acquiring Insight into Human Nature**

On the other hand, her new habit might be a nostalgic surrogate for her more active political role which is now a feature of the past. Deprived of real political power, she substitutes politics with arts in order to approach her people and her own private self in a different way.

The former social and political dimension of her self grows extinct, leaving room for a brand new private self. Reading allows her to plunge into the depth of her own self, and it also coincides with entering “other lives” (61). Now, she grows conscious of the inner lives of others, and this leads to improved knowledge of her own inner life. The discovery of her private self is inextricably linked with reading and the world of books. Literature makes her look deep down into her soul and, as she discovers that she has dedicated her entire life to state affairs solely, she now notices aspects that no longer satisfy her. Literature assists and promotes a new beginning, one which goes astray from political function and facilitates discovery of individuality and essential human nature. While reciting Philip Larkin’s poem “The Trees” in public, she was actually “addressing (...) herself too. It was her life she was calling upon, the new beginning hers” (60). Reading opens up a whole new world for her, related both to the perception of the world around and the universe inside.

The more she reads the more she realizes the complexity of human experience contained in books. One book leads to another, and the world of fiction opens up an infinite universe of experiences, events, and significations. Her former ignorance of reading impaired her knowledge of human nature which, in its turn, led to affective and communicational fissures with her people and people in general. If people from her entourage consider that reading is a waste of time, the Queen considers that time spent reading is precious, valuable, and enriching, because of her growing insight into human nature.

Having gained more comprehension of human nature, she becomes more considerate about people’s feelings and starts acting more carefully with her servants, attendants and people in general. Reading makes her more sympathetic and takes her closer to people’s hearts: “Previously she wouldn’t have cared what the maid thought or that she might have hurt her feelings, only now she did and coming back to the chair she wondered why. That this access of consideration might have something to do with books (...) did not at that moment occur to her” (50).

Her better grasp of human nature generated by her contact with the world of books leads to the revelation of the “human side” (80) of the monarch. She seems less spontaneous and more formal during her official engagements, when in fact she is only more compassionate and perceptive concerning human nature. Her penetration of the hidden nature of things makes her feel “almost maternal” (80) in her relation with people. As her subjects kneel in front of her during ceremonies, she observes aspects she previously took no notice of; now, she “looks down on the tops of people’s heads a good deal and from that perspective even the most unsympathetic personality seems touching: the beginnings of a bald patch, the hair growing over the collar” (80). Her official contacts with her people often disclosed a perfect world because it had been carefully arranged by her staff in advance to look like that. Now, the Queen observes human frailty, weakness, infirmity and imperfection and this is distressful for her because it corresponds to the revelation of the less pleasant side of life, too.

Reading tenderises and softens her up. In the past, absorbed by her duty, she was oblivious of what people around her were doing or saying, but “if she took note of it now it was because she knew more of people’s feelings than she used to and could put herself in someone else’s place” (106). Now, due to reading, she develops an ability which is often uncharacteristic of politicians, namely, empathy. That is why her equerries take her motherly attitude and the disclosure of her human side as a clear indication of senility. In effect, they are also reluctant to witness a radical change in the monarch’s position from a symbolic existence as impersonal head of state to a human being.

Her growing discernment of inner character coincides with an increasing indifference to appearances. The Queen’s passion for clothes grows extinct and she starts wearing the same outfit twice or even thrice. Formerly keen on decorum and etiquette, the Queen now realizes the relevance of inner life and what is inside as opposed to the shallow import of appearances.

### **Writing as an Act of Redemption**

Writing often involves self-discovery, as well as abundance of human feelings and ideas. The Queen grows fascinated with the world of writers who, naturally, unfolded so much of the richness of human nature that she herself could now take part in. Her inability to establish meaningful communication with them when she had met them in the past is the outcome of her deficient awareness of or contact with genuine human nature. Earlier in her life, she had met Masfield and Walter de la Mare, T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, but “she had read so little of what they had written that she could not find anything to say” (21).

Before long, reading makes her feel the need to write, as well. If reading assisted her in the discovery of so many things she had been neglectful or unaware of, writing could take her one step further. At first, writing represents note-taking, as she starts taking out excerpts she likes. After a year, she feels prompted to take down her own comments and thoughts that are sparked off by what she reads.

Imagining the Queen as a writer does not merely reflect the human potential for creativity and self-expression. It looks at the humane side of the British head of state and subverts the political role of the British monarch who no longer takes her position as primordial and replaces former state duties and principles with a totally different view of life. Late in her life, after serving her people for more than fifty years, the Queen realizes she has had no time for herself. Moreover, though she has loyally dedicated her time and effort to matters connected to the nation and the state, she has not really succeeded in getting to know her people beyond their status as royal subjects. Still, it is perhaps even more painful that she formerly paid no attention to her own needs, desires and wishes, lacking time or interest in apprehending her own private self. Her all-embracing and fast-paced reading leads to the accumulation of knowledge, while her desire to start writing also coincides with the need to redeem her own life.

If, among other things, books are a reflection of the world, then reading contributes to acquiring insight into the many significations of this world. Reading and writing – as processes that facilitate access to the depths of human nature – assist the Queen to start seeing people the way they really are. Unaware of it, she wants to offset the regret of having discovered this universe late in her life with starting to write. It is a redemptive act of making up for the time spent primarily with state interests. It is also an act of disclosing and reinstating the political truth. She feels it is the right time to unmask the deceptions and trickery of the political world and so, to make amends for its abuses.

Writing is often a voyage of self-discovery, as echoed by the Queen's reflection that "authors (...) were probably best met with in the pages of their novels" (53). Through her writing, her people will thus have the chance to get to know the deeper nature of their Queen. Authors embody the "Living Word" (54), so it is through them and their works that the Queen gets the chance to explore the depths of creation, human nature, and human experience. The beginning of the writing experience is the outcome of her extensive reading. At first, writing is only the accompaniment of reading; with her pencil in her hand, the Queen takes notes, makes comments, constantly keeping her critical spirit alive.

Nevertheless, jotting down comments or extracting quotations from books no longer satisfy the Queen. The possession of a "voice" turns into a metaphor for the free expression and disclosure of the Queen's thoughts, ideas, desires, knowledge, or experiences. The Queen realizes she has "no voice" (99), despite her long time in the office and her reputation. What she feels is that she is not uniquely identifiable by her people, that there is no sense of distinctiveness which could show her for what she really is. Observing that writers had a voice which emanated from their writings, the Queen understands that writing could give her a voice, individuality, a new sense of authority and that creation could pave the way to eternity. It is no longer the type of social superiority which is specific to her position, but a kind of authority that arises from the true expression of her inner self. Writing denies commonness and anonymity, and it also rejects imitation. This is because it is not a mere reflection of it, it is life itself. Writing is a

creative, transformative and redemptive process which could enable her to find her own life in it. She meditates that “you don’t put your life into your books. You find it there” (102). It is creation then that helps her grasp, reclaim, understand and thus redeem her life.

Determined to have her own “voice”, it soon turns out that writing could suit her even better because she would no longer be a mere spectator to others’ lives, but a doer, a position which was closer to her obligation, that of being operative. The complexity of her life makes her attendants think she is a “living archive” (103), with piles of archived material being stored in royal libraries, as well as in her memory. Yet, despite the accumulated records related to her activity, she becomes aware that those experiences as such have not left an impressive mark upon her, so she is “trying to remember what it was like” (103). Writing will help her recall and revive those events she piled up in her mind.

As we have mentioned, the Queen feels that reading, by uncovering so much of the profoundness of human nature, has determined her to show keen awareness of and kind regard for other people’s feelings, warm-heartedness, and compassion. However, she believes that writing asks for toughness, sharpness, and hardiness on the part of the writer. Reading helped her discover the world, but writing signifies revealing the world as she sees it. The writing process coincides with an act of courage since it is the medium for the disclosure of what she thought, experienced, and felt in her personal and professional activity.

Writing is an act of revelation because it triggers awareness of the possibility of achievement for human life and, especially, for her own life. The decisive moment occurs during her eightieth celebration party where she invites all those members of the Privy Council who have advised her during her long reign. Talking to her advisers, she recalls a life which was “crowded with incident” (111), and yet one in which the Queen’s image was that of a dutiful, dignified, stable, balanced, pleasant, and respectable monarch. Her life seemed smooth and lacked anything shocking or outrageous on her part. Nevertheless, her decision to speak up what has been left unsaid is first presented as an act of counteracting the wasteful passing of time. After spending more than fifty years on the throne, she feels that all her knowledge and experience could be wasted if they were not communicated and shared. She understands clearly that the time has come to go one step further in her experience with books and “try to become a writer” (112). Though her advisers believe that an autobiography would be a sensational bestseller that could please the public and they simply recommend her to tell her story, to their unpleasant surprise, they learn that the Queen is about to do something shocking at last: she plans to write “something more radical. More ... challenging” (113). Her attendants would prefer factual observations and presentations of events with a sensational touch, while her option is to filter memories of her private and political life through the sieve of remembrance and close scrutiny.

Her book could be beneficial in two ways. Firstly, though the world of politicians might not necessarily agree with her decision, her account could complement her political activity by bringing to light, clarifying, and exposing unknown aspects of

political life. Secondly, it would show the monarch's human side, the less familiar part of her personality. Inevitably, though she does not look for ingratiating herself with the public, her work could attract significant waves of affection from her people.

Now she becomes aware that the speed of life and her official duties have not allowed her to reflect and ponder on her own life and its many experiences. Her model for the type of writing she is planning is Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). She is fascinated by the possibility brought about by writing to look back on her life carefully and then revisit this life as an act of redemption by means of "analysis and reflection" (115). Uninterested in "facile reminiscence" (116), she plans to write something "more thoughtful" (116), which could become food for thought for those around her. By retrieving the memory of past events, just as Proust does with the aid of madeleines, she could re-experience, re-examine and then express things that had been left hidden, covered, or unsaid. By activating her memory of significant events in her life, she could evoke powerful feelings, impressions, or beliefs of times past and thus acquire new knowledge of them.

The Queen does not necessarily intend to set down her personal life and its momentous events. Instead, writing will help her express, though less directly, her dissatisfaction with the world of politics. What her advisers fear is that she might actually start revealing state affairs or criticize the political system. Their apprehensions are not very distant from what the Queen intends, as she makes it clear that great political leaders or historical events in British history will be investigated critically and carefully pondered upon. Nonetheless, it is the exposure of foul or vile secrets that they fear, since the Queen "has met and indeed entertained many visiting heads of state, some of them unspeakable crooks and blackguards and their wives not much better" (117).

She knows that she has witnessed and supported the contemptible side of political life, though unwillingly, by keeping it secret, so writing will enable her to put things right, to amend things, and thus her confession will also be redemptive. The key-word defining the world of politics is dirt. She feels that, from a political point of view, she has been used and that she has secretly upheld the human degradation she has faced. In politics, she has had to maintain the appearance of cleanliness amidst foul play: "one has given one's white-gloved hand to hands that were steeped in blood and conversed politely with men who have personally slaughtered children" (117). Her act of confession will help her take revenge on a deceptive past which deluded both the others and herself.

The imagery employed by the Queen to describe the area of politics and her involvement in it reinforces the foulness of politics and the Queen's sharpness and keen awareness of political affairs. Though she has not revealed this before, her language clearly shows that she has always been conscious of dirty politics, but her weakened political power did not allow her to take action. In point of visual imagery, the purity and innocence suggested by the colour of her gloves contrast sharply with the filthiness of the political class, the bloodstained conscience of many politicians making up a dishonest, unscrupulous, and squalid world: "one had waded through excrement and gore; to be

Queen, I have often thought the one essential item of equipment a pair of thigh-length boots” (117). Politics is associated with a battlefield which is full of bloodshed, murder, and violence, with the monarch as a politically clean, spotless, and uncluttered passive participant in the conflict.

Making use of olfactory images, the Queen also metaphorically imagines the world of politics as a fetid environment. If we find blood where one would look for order, justice, and security, then one would also find evil-smelling dealings in the same political world. First of all, she could not be held accountable for the political misery because she does not have much power left, but still, she realizes that things have often gone wrong: “I have (...) been forced to participate if only passively in decisions I consider ill-advised and often shameful” (118). Secondly, the Queen is frequently nothing but a witness to decisions which have already been taken, so she is an innocent observer of shameful political actions. Deprived of real political power, the monarch has been used as a “deodorant” (118) in foul politics so as to cover the contemptible odour of dirty government: “sometimes one has felt like a scented candle, sent in to perfume a regime, or aerate a policy, monarchy these days just a government-issue deodorant” (118). Too often used as an instrument to sweeten the ‘odour’ of rank politics, the Queen has not been blind to the scam, and shame has constantly accompanied her.

Precisely because she prefers to write a book which could provide food for thought, she wants it to be a “roundabout book” (119), one which does not criticize or blame directly, but one which is challenging and thought-provoking, voluntarily ambiguous, oblique, and circuitous. Now, finally speaking clearly about things which have been left unspoken, she wants to teach them a lesson, but she wants it to be a mild, gentle, yet intelligent one based on E.M. Forster’s literary advice: “tell all the truth but tell it slant, success in circuit lies” (119).

She hopes that her book will “transcend its circumstances and stand on its own” (119), or that it could be regarded as “a tangential history of its time” (119). It will not mirror her life only, or solely, but rather the life of the times she has been an eyewitness to. Certainly, due to her important position in world politics, she has observed, participated in and experienced decisive events she could now bring to light. From this perspective, the Queen’s accounts could contribute, in public life, to a better understanding of history. As a recording of past and present events, her written work will be a valuable source for the understanding of politics and changes in ideology, mentality, or social life.

In her personal life, writing will also reveal untrodden paths of her private self. If reading has initially opened the door to happiness, it is writing that will completely assist the Queen in finding the road not taken, the road to happiness, thus fulfilling the condition she herself noted earlier in her notebooks, according to which “one recipe for happiness is to have no sense of entitlement” (73). Consequently, as the end of the novel suggests, liberation from social privilege and political status opens the way to personal freedom. Writing in itself, no matter the subject, will be an act of freedom from all the constraints and tasks traditionally established for her by others.

The result of this enlivening process of recollection and investigation is that she could understand her own life and maybe rescue and liberate her own private self. As an act of self-expression, writing might compensate for the unsatisfactory aspects of her life. Writing would redeem a life of excessive performance of duty, conformism, self-possession, rigorousness, or emotional austerity. It would facilitate her to free herself from the captivity of social distinction and sovereign leadership. It is her personal act of rebellion, which, in fact, corresponds to her inner call for equality and ordinariness insofar as it could break down the barriers of superior socio-economic and political privilege and advantage.

The novel's open ending invites at least two possible readings. Complementing the Prime Minister's comment that the Duke of Windsor<sup>8</sup> wrote a book, *A King's Story* (1951), from the position of an abdicated monarch, the Queen seems eager to change the topic of the conversation, but her reaction also suggests that she might have in mind giving up the throne, too. This would be caused by her new passion for books, with the clear intention to dedicate all her time and efforts to writing: "Oh, did I not say that? (...) But ... why do you think you're all here?" (121)

## Conclusions

As some reviews of the novel emphasized<sup>9</sup>, the novel discloses the potential of reading to change lives. For the Queen, her new reading hobby gradually transforms into a duty, then into a personal aesthetic and cognitive need and, finally, into a new way of living. However, the novel does more than that. By presenting an uncommon reader, namely, Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, Bennett's novella invites us to see the monarch in a position we are not familiar with, nor is she. The (fictional) disclosure and presentation of the human side of the monarch is not totally novel since the book market is flooded with apparently sensational biographies of the royal family, which promise to capture the most intimate aspects of the royals' lives. By humanizing the monarch, Bennett also directs attention to some other essential issues, such as the excessive institutionalization of the monarchy or political failure paralleled by the Queen's declining role in the political world.

Writing is also connected to a special type of atonement. It is due to writing that the Queen's life becomes redeemable, so creation fills a void maintained by status and wealth. Reading and writing engender a new life for the Queen or they help her see the world differently. Writing becomes an opportunity to reconcile past and present, good and bad, or dissatisfaction and contentment. It is an act of personal reparation for the political damage she has suffered. Through writing, she can make amends for the weakened position she has had in politics and for all those occasions when she has functioned as a witness to dirty politics or as an instrument used for the carrying out of vile political actions. In point of personal life, writing will ultimately benefit her individuality and essential human nature.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Davies 2000, Rhodes 2011, Paterson 2011, Bradford 2012, Pimlott 2012, Hardman 2012, Marr 2012, or Harvard's 2012 seeming fictional autobiographical novel of Queen Elizabeth II.

<sup>2</sup> See more at <<http://www.republic.org.uk/>>. Web. 5 October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> These issues are developed in another article, "Revisiting British royalty myths in Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*", submitted for publication in *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/10206708/Confidence-in-British-monarchy-at-all-time-high-poll-shows.html>>. Web. 23 October 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See Plunkett, John. *Queen Victoria. First Media Monarch*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Web. 5 October 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/130377/Dame-Ivy-Compton-Burnett>>.

<sup>7</sup> English novelist, essayist and historian who received the honorary title of CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 1972. Web. 3 October 2013. <<http://www.nancymitford.com/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Former King Edward VIII (January – December 1936), who was given the title Duke of Windsor after his abdication on 10 December 1936 because he could no longer reconcile his private life with his political duties as King. See more at <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/edward\\_viii\\_king.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/edward_viii_king.shtml)>. Web. 3 October 2013.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://theuncommonreader.tumblr.com/post/16685097901/the-uncommon-reader-by-alan-bennett>>, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/may/29/uncommon-reader-alan-bennett-review>>, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/30/books/30kaku.html>>. Web. 14 September 2013.

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