

How useful is *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* to historians of Thatcher's first administration?



Word Count: 1988

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A. Plan of Investigation. (149 words)

Establishing the usefulness of The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole novel to historians studying Margaret Thatcher's first administration requires a focus on feminism, war and socio-economy, all conveyed apolitically by author Sue Townsend.

The era saw a clear break away from consensus politics towards the conviction politics that would dominate the 1980s. The introduction of "New Right" Conservatism under Thatcher resulted in a radical rethinking of party politics, in both Labour and Conservative parties; although the reforms' impact was not confined to the working classes, the latter was the most affected by the changes.

The novel can be used as a starting point if the assertions are tested against a wider range of evidence, such as Post-War: A History of Europe since 1945 by historian Tony Judt. Using Sue Townsend's comical work of fiction (written from an adolescent's perspective) to study Thatcher's first administration is unorthodox yet surprisingly effective.

B. Summary of Evidence. (594 words)

Margaret Thatcher became the first female British Prime Minister on May the 4th, 1979. Fuelled by a will to reverse the United Kingdom's economic decline since the days of the Empire, she was determined for the country to affirm a higher level of influence and leadership. Her level of conviction became clear when she stated that "the Lady's not for turning"¹.

In terms of **socio-economy**, the application of Thatcher's policies began by increasing interest rates to slow down the increase of the currency supply, thereby diminishing inflation. She favoured indirect taxation over income taxes; Value Added Tax was brusquely raised to 15%, with a resultant short-term rise in inflation². The manufacturing sector of businesses was particularly affected; unemployment passed two million, doubling the one million under the previous Labour government. She was to deal with Britain's working classes, notorious for their participation in the unions' strikes.

In terms of **feminism**, Thatcher cheerfully traded on housewifely knowledge to emphasise her appeal at the beginning of her political career. In the year that she was elected Prime Minister, she stated that "the women of this country have never had a prime minister who knew the things they know, never, never. And the things that we know are very different from what men know."³ Her election as the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain earned her a prominent place in the history of the women's movement. However, Thatcher was at the head of a Conservative party disregarding feminist values; resultant was a lack of commitment towards achieving gender equality and heightening women's social status.

In terms of the **Falklands War**, a wave of patriotic support for Thatcher swept through the United Kingdom, despite the economical and social turmoil the country faced at that time. Thatcher's government was unanimously backed when she decided to

¹ Margaret Thatcher, October 10th 1980, *Speech to the Conservative Party Conference*

² Office for National Statistics (Jim O'Donoghue, Carol McDonnell, Martin Placek), January 2006, "Consumer Price Inflation 1947-2004", *Economic Trends* 626, HMSO

³ Quoted by Zoe Williams, October 21st 2004, "The Accidental Feminist", *The Guardian*

retaliate against the Argentine forces immediately after their first attack⁴. The decision strengthened support for Thatcherism, and facilitated her victory in the 1983 General Election which prior to the war was by no means certain. The Falklands Conflict inadvertently affected British lifestyle, regardless of social status and wealth.

In *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, author Sue Townsend portrays Adrian as a child of the Thatcher era, first emerging in the early 1980's aged 13¾, growing up in Leicester. Townsend's choice of location is particularly meaningful: Thatcher regarded the city as a "great centre of industry and commerce"⁵. She even stated that "if we are to win on a national scale and win well, we have to win this city."⁶ Thatcher started a tour of Leicestershire in 1979; she visited the city clothing firm Grahame Gardner Ltd. on Stamford Street, "rousing the faithful in an address to party workers."⁷

Adrian is a vain and serious teenager, dreaming of becoming a published writer. He suffers from tonsillitis, his parents' marital problems, his being questioned, misunderstood, and bullied by the infamous Barry Kent, and his love for his academic and beautiful classmate Pandora Braithwaite. He feels wiser and more responsible than his entourage; he highly disapproves of his parents' chaotic relationship, their smoking and apathetic behaviour.

Townsend targets Thatcher's government in many aspects; the Falklands War, to which Adrian's father is initially uncaring, feminism, playing a significant role within the household after his mother's attitude towards housework and domestic duty dramatically changes, and his parents' constant unemployment. Although Adrian's naivety detaches him from his entourage and the world as a whole, his perspective does not undermine an accurate and contemporary depiction of the socio-economical and political events during Thatcher's first administration.

⁴ Editorial Team, April 19th 1982, "The Empire Strikes Back - The Falklands Crisis", *Newsweek Cover*

⁵ Quoted by the Editorial Team, April 20th 1979, "We must win in Leicester", *Leicester Mercury*

⁶ Margaret Thatcher, April 19th 1979, *Speech to the Leicester Conservatives*

⁷ Richard Whitmore, April 19th 1979, *BBC Nine O'Clock News*

C. Evaluation of Sources. (395 Words)

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole is a **valuable** source due to its **origin**: it is a contemporary view by the author Sue Townsend which addresses themes such as materialism, the Falklands War, unemployment and feminism during the Thatcher era. The protagonist Adrian Mole is an adolescent born of two working-class parents confronted to the above aspects of Thatcher's first administration; the source's relevance is therefore extremely valuable: Townsend provides a purposely cynical portrayal of the social obstacles Thatcher faced during her first administration, and the working-class' response to her reforms and ambitions.

However, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* has its **limitations**; it is clear that Townsend's primary **purpose** when writing the novel was to entertain rather than scrupulously attack or inform. Although the novel addresses the themes accurately and humorously, Townsend has exaggerated certain aspects of Thatcher's government in order to add a slightly more enticing touch to her writing: for instance the late 70's divorce rates⁸ (74,000 divorces for 404,000 weddings) leads us to acknowledge that the Moles' marital turmoil would have been untypical at the time. Although the novel is widely enjoyed by adults, its target audience is adolescent readers: the novel's informative value will thus have suffered due self-censorship from Townsend. The true nature and the more solemn aspects of the themes are therefore not dealt with, such as the British casualties of the Falklands War⁹ and so on.

Post-War: A History of Europe Since 1945 by historian Tony Judt is a very **valuable** source in terms of its **origin**: it is a widespread and comprehensive recollection of European historical facts after the Second World War. Its status as a serious academic work is well established, winner of the 2006 Arthur Ross Book Award and described as "truly superb" by historian Ian Kershaw. Its factual relevance can therefore be trusted to a

⁸ Office for National Statistics, August 21st 2001, "Divorce rate lowest for 22 years", *BBC News*

⁹ Ministry of Defence, October 1st 2004, *Falkland Islands History Roll of Honour*

greater extent than a novel, enabling to address the investigation's question in more detail.

However, *Post-War: A History of Europe Since 1945* is also a **limited** source in terms of the relevance to the investigation's **purpose**: a summary of European history after the Second World War is considerably less informative than a pure focus upon Thatcher's first administration. Another limitation is emotional bias: Judt's noticeable Marxist agenda in terms of his literary style was emphasised when the *Sunday Times* referred to him as "sometimes personal" in his take, and that the writing contributed "fresh and incisive opinions".

D. Analysis. (650 words)

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole provides a fictitious, opinionated view on Thatcher's premiership. Aspects of materialism, socio-economy, war and feminism are evoked in the novel, as they were central to the era. Do the Mole perceptions reflect the popular attitudes of the British working-class at the beginning of the Thatcher era, or have they been exaggerated for comic effect?

Novels are last-resort sources when studying history; the general consensus is that historians are more adequately qualified than novelists to analyse, interpret and convey events. Novels therefore provide a fruitful line of historical investigation, if they are established as valuable sources despite distortion: self-censorship and bias often limit the reader's trust towards the validity of the events, or how accurately they are portrayed.

Materialism

Townsend abundant refers to consumerism and materialism, especially through Nigel's family. Adrian is bitterly astonished by the possessions they own: "[...] I have been living in poverty [...]. Nigel's father has worked like a slave to create a modern environment for *his* family. [...] Nigel's mother buys a pair of high heels every week."

Townsend's representation of Nigel's family is accurate as the possessions reflect an obsession with joining the *nouveaux riches*, or the "new rich". It is equally accurate as a dichotomy between the rich and poor characterised Thatcher's premiership; economical Britain "[...] as a *society* [...] suffered meltdown, with catastrophic long-term consequences. [...] Thatcher did serious harm to the fabric of British public life. Citizens were transmuted into shareholders, or 'stakeholders', their relationship to one another and to the collectivity measured in assets and claims rather than in services or obligations."¹⁰

The Falklands War

¹⁰ Tony Judt, 2005, *Postwar - A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin Group (USA), p.543

Townsend references the 1982 Falklands War, fought between Great Britain and Argentina, disputing the sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, to which Adrian's father is uncaring:

“10 a.m. Woke my father up to tell him Argentina has invaded the Falklands. [...] When I pointed out that they were eight thousand miles away he got back into bed and pulled the covers over his head.”

However, Adrian's father does not reflect the popular attitude: it is widely believed Thatcher led Great Britain to victory. Thatcher states that “nothing remains more vividly” in her mind than “when Britain fought and won the Falklands War.”¹¹ The conflict vociferously contributed to Thatcher's re-election: buoyed by her recent victory, “in which she had established a party monopoly upon ‘patriotism’ and displayed once again her unusual taste for confrontation, Mrs. Thatcher won the election of June 1983.”¹²

Unemployment

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole references unemployment when Principal Scruton claims that “somebody had entered his office [...] and written ‘three million unemployed’ in her cleavage” as an act of vandalism.

Townsend's reference to unemployment figures is adequate as they astronomically rose after Thatcher applied both the Indirect Taxation and the 15% increase on Value Added Tax policies. Unemployment reached an official figure of 3.6 million in 1982, though the criteria used to define who was employed or not was highly altered, allowing some to estimate that unemployment figures rose to 5 million.

Feminism

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole references feminism through Adrian's mother Pauline. She finds her views to parallel Germaine Greer's rather than Thatcher's. Townsend references Greer when Pauline develops a will for feminist uprising:

¹¹ Margaret Thatcher, 1995, *The Downing Street Years*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, p.175

¹² Tony Judt, 2005, *Postwar - A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin Group (USA), p.546

“My mother is reading *The Female Eunuch*, by Germaine Greer. [...] it is the sort of book that changes your life.”

Adrian and his father as victims of Pauline’s rising feminist attitude:

“My mother has gone to a woman’s workshop on assertiveness training. Men aren’t allowed. [...] my mother came home and started bossing us around.”

The female Prime Minister’s premiership saw outreaching feminist feelings across the country. Feminist author Wilkinson claims that “many feminists have found it difficult to embrace Margaret Thatcher and what she came to represent. Indeed it has become the conventional wisdom within some intellectual circles to portray her as positively anti-feminist.”¹³

¹³ Helen Wilkinson (Edited by Natasha Walter), 1992, “The Thatcher Legacy”, *On the Move: Feminism for a New Generation*, Virago Press Ltd

E. Conclusion. (200 words)

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole represents the themes of materialism and feminism accurately. It is important to acknowledge the fact that all themes are perceived through the eyes of a young adolescent in inner-conflict: although Townsend portrays materialism and feminism realistically, Adrian's perception of Thatcher's first administration is often naïve and founded upon frivolous aspects of the above themes.

However, it is equally important to note that Townsend does not deal with the Falklands War and unemployment as effectively as with materialism and feminism: the Falklands War is for example only referenced through Adrian's father's reaction to the event. The reaction itself does not reflect the popular attitude towards the war; Townsend therefore does not address the Falklands War effectively in the novel, but merely in passing and for comical effect. Townsend addresses unemployment more effectively than the Falklands War, but the main flaw lies in the unemployment figures: officially, unemployment reached 3.6 million in 1982, but was estimated at 5 million. The novel only mentions 3 million unemployed, without providing a deeper interpretation of the matter. Historians should therefore use novels in addition to other sources to form a fuller, more accurate picture before reaching a final judgment.

Sample History Internal Assessment by student at IST via www.activehistory.co.uk

F. List of Sources.

Ministry of Defence, October 1st 2004, *Falkland Islands History Roll of Honour*

Quoted by the Editorial Team, April 20th 1979, “We must win in Leicester”, *Leicester Mercury*

Editorial Team, April 19th 1982, “The Empire Strikes Back - The Falklands Crisis”, *Newsweek Cover*

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