How far does the Titanic prove the inequality and importance of social classes in Edwardian England?

The tragic sinking of the Titanic on April 15th, 1912 was an event that is still remembered today as one of the most horrific events in shipping history. Over 1500 people died while only 705 people survived. This unfortunately, isn’t at all surprising as the Titanic had only 20 lifeboats (able to carry 1178 people). There were more than 3300 people on board the Titanic. Less than a third of the people were on the lifeboats when the Titanic went down.

The three main classes of Edwardian England were The Upper Class (the very richest people including business owners of industries like coal), Second Class (doctors, lawyers and other higher paying jobs) and the working class, 80% of Britain's population, lowest paying jobs (miners for example was a highly common job of the working class). The inequality of wealth of this time was inordinate. 80% of Britain's population were working class being exploited by their first-class employers. There were 706 third class citizens on the Titanic, travelling, presumably in hopes of starting a new, better life in New York the end destination of the Titanic.

There was also a large stigma associated with the working-class citizens of Britain. The higher classes where often taught as children not to socialize with the third class as they were supposedly dirty and only to be used as servants to the rich. Their low pay and clear exploitation also show this as they are not worth any more to the extremely rich upper class. “A working-class man is always replaceable” was the belief. This meant that the workers always had to be prepared to work for less to keep their job. The poverty meant that they were working desperately and in dangerous conditions to feed their families.

The Titanic was very much advertised to the Upper Class as the “trip of a lifetime”. The Titanic’s purpose was to give as many luxuries as possible to those who could afford it (First Class). Lifeboats were removed to add more facilities for the Upper Class. Their cabins where also placed high on the ship and where much larger than the working-class cabins (this further proves the stigma of the working-class). The positioning of the cabins was meticulous so that the rich and famous would be displayed and therefore giving the Titanic a better image. There were even separate staircases for the classes of people! This further proves the division and importance of class on the Titanic. The working-class population was approximately three times larger than the upper-class population and yet they had much smaller facilities and had to share cabins with complete strangers. This again proves the importance of high class in Edwardian Britain and especially aboard the Titanic.

705 people survived the Titanic sinking and the rest died (the majority drowned but many were also killed by hypothermia). The survivors and their class also provide a crucial part of the evidence that allows us to understand the importance of social class in Edwardian Britain. When observing the following figures, it is also imperative to remember the gender roles of Edwardian Britain. Women and children were seen as very weak physically and were prioritized for lifeboats as it was believed that men were stronger and therefore had a higher chance at survival. 20 of the 23 female crew members were saved but only 192 of the 882 male crew members were saved. I believe this was due to not only prioritization but also the nature of the job of the male crew worker. Many of them were lower on the ship, (keeping it running) so it stands to reason that they would be among the first drowned. Of the 144 upper-class women aboard the Titanic 140 were saved. These women the pinnacle of high society and those that weren’t saved were most likely late or trapped. Of the 175 first class males on board only 57 were saved. These men will have been among the richest and were a priority group, the rest (although first class) would not have been rich enough and therefore worthy enough of a lifeboat. Of the 93 female second class citizens, 80 were saved but of a possible 168 male passengers only 14 were saved. This again comes down to gender roles and wealth. This is particularly evident here. Only 8% of second-class male citizens were saved. 5 of 6 first class children were saved, due to extraordinary circumstances and all second-class children were saved.

Of the working-class citizens 27 of 79 children were saved, 76 of 165 women were saved and 75 of 462 men were saved. I believe this shows the evident lack of worth the third-class citizens supposedly had. Even gender roles were ignored here, women and children were left to die and because of their placement on the ship, were the first to drown.

In my opinion, the Titanic is one of the best examples of the importance of social class in Edwardian England. My opinion is based on the obvious distaste shown towards the working class including ignored gender roles, their low placement on the ship (showing a literal hierarchy), cramped living conditions and the enforced separation rules between them and other classes. The quote “I only realised the situation was serious when I saw a third-class passenger on the first-class deck.” This implies that this is an extreme rarity proving the enforcement of a separation rule.