

The Role of a Woman in the Family and Society in Mona Lisa Smile

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Abstract

The 2003 American movie “Mona Lisa Smile” set in 1950s focuses on upper class American society and gives a vivid picture of certain social issues of the period. These include stereotypes about the role of a teacher, art and beliefs about the “right” social order and the place of women and men in it.

Keywords: obligation of women in the family and society, teacher and woman stereotypes, women in marriage

Synopsis

The story takes place at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in 1953-1954. A progressive teacher, Katherine Watson, arrives at the prestigious, conservative all-women college of Wellesley to teach Art History. The students are among the brightest women in the country and have absorbed the course reading list before Katherine’s first lecture. To gain their attention she puts the textbook aside and instead asks her students to consider their own responses to contemporary art. Although the students are initially confused by her teaching style, they soon become fascinated by her ideas on art and on life. (Roberts.R, 2004)

However, her students’ main aim is not to gain an education, but the ‘greater’ prize of a husband. Katherine, instead, tries to open her students’ minds to their freedom to do whatever they want with their lives. She encourages her students to believe in themselves, to study to become career professionals, and to improve their economic futures. She argues that women could do more things in life than solely adopt the roles of wives and mothers. (Mona Lisa Smile). Moreover, Katherine is sure that woman can actually do both, be a wife and a mother and pursue her carrier as well.

Although Katherine becomes a role model for the girls, her independent ideas are not in line with the Wellesleyan psychology as well as the society in general and she chooses to leave after a year. As she departs her students run after her car, to show their affection and to thank for her lessons. (Mona Lisa Smile)

Analysis

Katherine Watson, the film’s central character, is an unmarried, 30 years old, independent teacher who came to Wellesley “not to fit in but to make a difference”. She is not only a feminist opposing disregarding position of a woman

in a society, she is also a face of a new teacher who rejects orthodox methods of teaching strictly according to syllabus and textbook but rather challenging students “to open their minds to new ideas”, to have their own views, wishes, aspirations, decisions. She also questions “high art” as being the only art form and opened the way to a contemporary art for discussions.

Katherine Watson is a woman who believes that a woman should fully express herself and is strong enough to choose the way of life she wants and to handle with the family and carrier at the same time. For her it is not necessary to sacrifice home and family in order to pursue one’s goals but rather “can do both”. She is the one who encourages her students to continue their studies and establish themselves instead of doing what others (society) want them and expect them to do.

When she reads Betty Warren’s attack, Katherine is so disappointed, unsatisfied, angry, that she is on the way to give up. She is disappointed because she thought that Wellesley college was “a place for tomorrow’s leaders, not their wives” and being only a wife and a mother is not a priority she can agree with (Eberts, 2003).

Today you just listen. What will future scholars see when they study us, a portrait of women today? There you are ladies: the perfect likeness of a Wellesley graduate, Magna Cum Laude, doing exactly what she was trained to do. Slide - a Rhodes Scholar, I wonder if she recites Chaucer while she presses her husband’s shirts. Slide - hehe, now you physics majors can calculate the mass and volume of every meatloaf you make. Slide - A girdle to set you free. What does that mean? What does that mean? What does it mean? I give up, you win. The smartest women in the country, I didn’t realize that by demanding excellence I would be challenging.... the roles you were born to fill...

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Photos from (Mona Lisa Smile)

In the end Katherine rejects the offer to continue her lectures on the strict conditional bases, as she is not the woman who “asks for permission” and will not tolerate restrictions and orthodox ways of teaching and living and also because she more or less “made the difference” and now was ready to “find new walls to break down and new ideas to replace them with”...

“Unlike the typical heroes of movies about inspiring teachers, however, she doesn’t think the answer lies in exuberance, freedom and letting it all hang out, but in actually studying and doing the work, and she despairs when competent students throw away their futures (as she sees it) for marriage to men who have already started to cheat before their wedding days.” (Eberts, 2003)



Photo taken from: <https://www.google.ge/search?q=mona+lisa+smile>

Betty Warren strongly believes that the only happiness of a woman is to have a family and “high grade” from the husband. When she arrives at Katherine’s class after missing several classes after her marriage, she is sure she will be forgiven the absence as “most of the faculty turn their heads when the married students miss a class or two.” And when Katherine refuses to employ this double standard, Betty aggressively starts attacking her teacher in different ways among them through editorials: (Monroe, 2010)

While our mothers were called to the workforce for Lady Liberty, it is our duty—nay, obligation—to reclaim our place in the home, bearing the children that will carry our traditions into the future. One must pause to consider why Miss Katherine Watson, instructor in the art history department has decided to declare war on the holy sacrament of marriage. Her subversive and political teachings encourage our Wellesley girls to reject the roles they were born to fill.

Her views are shared by president Carr who is proud that “Half of them [the students] are already married, and the other half, oh just give it a month or so”, Betty’s mother who obliges her daughter to be an obedient wife notwithstanding her husband Spenser’s affairs and not to “wash her dirty laundry in public, Nancy Abbey, a Wellesley teacher, who strongly believes that “A few years from now your (student’s) sole responsibility will be taking care of your husband and children” (Eberts, 2003) and most of the students and dominant part of the society.

“Wellesley girls who are married have become quite adept at balancing their obligations. One hears such comments as, “I’m able to baste the chicken with one hand and outline the paper with the other.”

However, her attitude radically changes after her un-

happy marriage and refusal of her own mother to get her back “divorced” and insisting to go and to calmly wait to her “betraying husband”. Encouraged by Katherine’s teaching, which she rejected before, Betty even decides to file for divorce and makes up her mind to leave Massachusetts and go to another state to study law notwithstanding her mother’s strong opposition.



Photo from (*Mona Lisa Smile*)

Joan Brandwyn, Katherine’s student and a friend of Betty is another key character. She is a balance between the two extremes and an intelligent pre-law major at Wellesley. Although Katherine actively tries to persuade her to attend law school, even helps her to fill the application and she is in fact accepted, she gets married and refuses Yale University. Joan is a smart girl who manages to be accepted at the Yale law but not smart enough to choose it over marriage. (Eberts, 2003) When Katherine shows up at Joan’s door for a final persuasion, Joan boldly and impenitently replies:

Do you think I’ll wake up one morning and regret not being a lawyer...Not as much as I’d regret not having a family, not being there to raise them. I know exactly what I’m doing and it doesn’t make me any less smart. This must seem terrible to you...You stand in class and tell us to look beyond the image, but you don’t. To you a housewife is someone who sold her soul for a center hall colonial. She has no depth, no intellect, no interests. You’re the one who said I could do anything I wanted. This is what I want.

Although she seems to be disappointed by Joan’s decision, as Bill, a friend of Katherine, mentioned she failed her, she respects her decision because it was taken by Joan herself, it was her own choice and wishes her happiness by whole heart.

Joan’s character essentially communicates that marriage, motherhood, and homemaking really are all fine and good so long as you’re doing it because you genuinely want it, because that is what will ultimately fulfill you, and not because anyone told you that you should be those things.



Photo from (*Mona Lisa Smile*)

Mona Lisa Smile also depicts another important issues of the 1950s, namely the post war situation when a lot of families, like Giselle Levy’s, have been broken because of the growing apart after war and like Katherine herself, who broke up with her boyfriend, a Hollywood star, after the war as he, actually both, changed.

Giselle Levy represents an interesting character, with her free lifestyle, not opposing who does not obey the rules of the society, like Katherine, but unlike her she is just leading her own life without trying to “make a difference”.

And finally I want to end this paper with words of Betty Warren, fully depicting Katherine’s character.

My teacher, Katherine Watson, lived by her own definition, and would not compromise that. Not even for Wellesley. I dedicate this, my last editorial, to an extraordinary woman who lived by example and compelled us all to see the world through new eyes. By the time you read this, she’ll be sailing to Europe, where I know she’ll find new walls to break down and new ideas to replace them with. I’ve heard her called a quitter for leaving, an aimless wanderer. But not all who wander are aimless. Especially not those who seek truth beyond tradition; beyond definition; beyond the image.

From my point of view, Katherine achieved her goal, she made a difference. Women like her, and generally people like her, representing the “minorities”, made a difference and prepared a strong base for the new social order that started after the turbulent 1960s, the order that enjoys the freedom and equality of gender and race.



Photo from <https://www.google.ge/search?q=mona+lisa+smile>

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