

Murray Hill Institute

Women Transforming Culture

Newsletter

March 2004

Volume 1, Number 1

Cultural Corner

Mona Lisa Smile – A Review

The latest Julia Roberts movie, *Mona Lisa Smile*, which is currently in the theaters, is a college-girl movie set in 1953-54 at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Julia Roberts plays Katherine Watson, a “progressive” art history instructor from Berkeley, who hopes to make a difference in the world by helping to educate the smartest women in the country.

The message that the movie seems to promote is a somewhat affectionate but censorious trip back to a fifties view of the world where the academic establishment (as represented by Wellesley) is not ready to look at modern art as a subject for serious study, and the only real goal for a Wellesley girl is to be engaged or married before graduation. Although the movie adapts history unfairly to achieve its agenda, the final messages are not as clear as one would expect.

The primary mistakes are those of chronology. First of all, Wellesley College was itself quite progressive long before the 1950's. (This reviewer entered Wellesley in 1968 as a major in art history. I have checked with several older alumnae who were there in the forties and fifties to see if

there could have been such a radical change in 15 years-they say no.) Although marriage and family were normal expectations even for a Wellesley graduate in 1954, it would not have been too surprising for a graduate to continue in law school, medical school, or go into professional work of some other kind. Picasso and modern art were certainly part of the curriculum, although not on the syllabus of Art 100 then or later, as modern art fell into a different course because there simply would have been too much material for one year. The Wellesley College community justly has objected to this incorrect portrayal of its own character in its alumnae magazine.

Another anachronism is the character played by Julia Roberts. Her costuming, behavior and mode of speech are characteristic of the seventies rather than the 50's. Her character seems to have dropped into the movie from twenty years into the future instead of merely from California. And, although she at times loses her temper and is self-assertive (in one scene she storms into a fellow professor's class yelling “To hell with Wellesley”), she is unsure of herself personally, and her own desires.

In her first class, the students have read the entire syllabus-worth of material, and, without being asked to contribute, identify and comment correctly on each slide. She is left speechless. No art history professor I ever encountered at Wellesley would have been at a loss for words to add, elucidate or fabricate information about their images if necessary to fill time. Even if by some miracle the students had read the entire text before the first class, they never would have been rude to the professor as they are in the movie—not even in the seventies, let alone the fifties.

Despite warnings that the Italian professor (Dominic West) “sleeps with his students,” she succumbs to his charms partly because he seems to be “modern” like herself, but finds truth in the concept: *falsus in unum, falsus in omnibus*. The movie seems accidentally to make the point that this affair, like another with one of his students, was detrimental to the woman involved. It is only fair to point out that another student marries (albeit for wrong reasons), and has an even worse experience. The viewer is supposed to be outraged that a sympathetic character who is the school nurse, a lesbian, is fired for handing out birth-control devices. It was in fact, as the college president says, against the law.

Her encouragement to the “smart” girl, Joan, (played by Julia Stiles) to go to Yale Law School begins with her giving her an application. When Joan chooses to marry and not to go to law school – not even a lesser one near her husband’s graduate school, Miss Watson is clearly disappointed. Joan replies, “You said you

wanted me to be happy. This is what will make me happy, and I won’t be any the less smart.” It proves that someone who is intelligent and confident of her own vocation can make the decision not to go into the professional world. Although this is contrasted with a girl who marries and becomes miserable (because her husband is unfaithful), it is the smart and confident girl who is in control of her life and her vocational choices.

This surprising plug for the choice of being a wife and mother is strengthened by the parting conversation between Katherine Watson and the Italian professor. Hurt by her rejection, he counters by telling her that she did not come to Wellesley to make the students “all they could be,” but rather she came to make them “like (herself.)” Touché.

After the movie seems to dispel the idea that the married woman “sells her soul for a center-hall colonial,” the credits use advertisements from the 50’s that re-instate that concept again: (“This Christmas, she’ll be happier with a Hoover!”)

Despite the anachronisms, which can be annoying and distracting, and the expected agenda of feminism and libertinism, which come and go, the movie is enjoyable. The different “types” of school girls, reminiscent of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, or other school movies, are well-drawn and fun. The fact that the movie presents not only the expected feminist viewpoint but also the opposite point of view is refreshing and leaves the viewer thinking.

The **Cultural Corner** movie review was written by Sarah Phelps Smith, Ph.D.