The Intersection of Class, Gender, and Sexuality in *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society*

This essay will discuss relations of power in 1950s America as represented in the two movies *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society*, engaging in considerations of class, gender, and sexuality. According to a Cultural Studies perspective, a media text is always political, hence the “study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics” (Kneller 10). On the same note, Stuart Hall writes that everyone is “situated” (446), remarking the crucial role of the social, political, and economic context in shaping an individual’s subjectivity. To comprehend a media text, the events it involves, and the characters it portrays, one should therefore analyze it in the context in which it was produced as well as that in which it is set.

Before delving into the discussion of what the two movies reveal, it is important to highlight what they fail to display. In particular, considering the all-white casts of both movies, it is pivotal to consider the absence of diversity in the representation of race. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregation in schools unconstitutional. However, since the ruling applied to public schools only, private academies such as Welton academy, the fictional school in which *Dead Poets Society* is set, and Wellesley College, the real university that serves as setting for *Mona Lisa Smile*, could afford to remain segregated. Not even one non-white character figures in either movie. When the film was being shot, students at Wellesley College harshly criticized the lack of minority characters in the cast. However, the producers justified their choice of only picking white actors as due to their intention of providing a faithful representation of a 1950s all-girl private school. As support for this statement, the college issued a press release that reported that 99 percent of the student body in the academic year 1953-1954 was made of Caucasians (“Wellesley College”). It seems that for once the lack of racial diversity is not to be attributed to media misrepresentation but to the presentation of a truthful portrayal of society. For what concerns *Dead Poets Society*, one can only speculate that the film does not include African-American, Latino, or members of other minorities in the script willfully, misrepresenting the real social
situation, given that Welton academy is a fictional setting. Whatever the case, not only the lack of representation of members of non-white ethnical groups in media but also their absence from upper-class society, indicates that the white elite holds the power, as the social class that can afford to send its children to the best schools in the first place, and that then becomes the subject of mainstream cinema.

Marxism speaks of hegemony as the power of one social group, the capitalist class, over another, the proletariat, kept by assigning to the factory worker dull and repetitive tasks that cause the subject to become alienated from itself, other subjects, and his or her own work. When it comes to social relationships among people, however, it is inaccurate to reduce them to class, ultimately defining them through income differences. In fact, drawing from Hall’s discussion on black cultural politics, it appears interesting to note how the subject is defined at the intersection of his or her race, class, gender, and ethnicity (444). Although Hall describes the situation of black subjects, this essay will apply the same consideration to the formation of white individuality.

The background to both Mona Lisa Smile and Dead Poets Society is America in the 1950s, an age of enormous socio-political change. The 1950s signal the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement, a time of crucial shifts in women’s understanding of their subjectivities and significance in society, which set the ground for the normative changes over women’s rights achieved in the 1960s and onwards, such as the right to abortion, equal pay, and paid maternity leave. One fundamental book in this learning process was Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, published in 1949, where the authoress described how the identity of the woman is essentialized through the myth of the “eternal feminine” (ix). De Beauvoir laments the definition of women “in virtue of their anatomy and physiology” (xiv), pointing to the delineation of a woman’s subjectivity through male eyes, similarly to Laura Mulvey’s later reflection on how the “male gaze” creates an identity for the woman who only becomes “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (6).
De Beauvoir also underlines that women are socialized into inferiority since a young age, being educated differently from men and taught to respect power. In *Mona Lisa Smile*, Wellesley students attend a specific class to learn good manners, where they are taught how to handle glitches in life in the house, such as unexpected guests for dinner, and always appear perfect in social situations. Women are taught that perfection is especially important as well as expected from them when it comes to providing the best service to one’s husband, because, as Nancy, Ms. Watson’s roommate and teacher of that class remarks, “the grade that matters the most is the one he gives you.” Significantly, not only do the young women need to attend the class as part of their curricula, but they are also full believers in the significance of those kinds of lessons for their future. As Betty points out in the school’s newspaper article where she denounces Ms. Watson’s “unorthodox teaching methods,” her female classmates and herself were “born” to fulfill certain “roles,” specifically that of the wife and of the mother.

The rules of patriarchy are reiterated in both movies in different ways. In fact, while the men in *Dead Poets Society* are destined to go on to take up their fathers’ professions, the women in *Mona Lisa Smile* are destined to follow in the footsteps of their mothers, getting married and putting the needs of the family before their individual aspirations. In *Dead Poets Society* patriarchy is represented by the director of the school beating Dalton to punish him, as well as by Neil’s father establishing that the boy will move on to Harvard for college while his wife looks at her child with tears in her eyes but keeping quiet, not daring to oppose her husband’s decision. In *Mona Lisa Smile*, the dependence of the woman on a male patriarchal system is much more evident, if only because the protagonists of the story are all women. The character that most internalized the rules of the system and strictly applies them to her life is Betty, whose goal in life is to get married, becoming a wife and a mother. Her dream seems to be fulfilled when she finally stands in her brand new kitchen in the apartment she shares with her husband, and can invite her friends for dinner, applying the precepts society has taught her to her role as the perfect housewife. Betty is defined in opposition to “subversive” art history teacher Katherine Watson,
who is not married, and has come to Wellesley from liberal Oakland hoping to “make a difference,” as she points out herself at the end of the movie. Betty’s best friend, Joan, also believes she will get married and start a family, but before settling for this life, encouraged by Ms. Watson, she analyzes her options exploring her sense of identity, differently from Betty. In the end, in a reversal of roles, Joan gets married to Tommy, while Betty divorces her cheating husband. Both characters succeed in breaking stereotypes, one in accepting the system consciously instead than having it be imposed on her, and the other in having the courage to escape from that same system when she is no longer respected as a woman.

Both movies attributed great importance to the revival of history, one through pictorial art and the other through poetry, establishing a strong link to tradition while at the same time breaking with it. The two movies are set in the conservative environment of private schools, and both begin with the school year’s inauguration ceremony, set in a church, the first symbol of conservative power. In Dead Poets Society, students enter the church in an ordered line, holding the school banners, in a first illustration of the disciplined structure of the academy. Furthermore, if the setting had not made it clear, in his speech during the ceremony, Mr. Nolan, the director the school, reminds students of the high standards of the academy, whose mission is to form students to continue their studies at Ivy League institutions. Then, to emphasize the concept once again, he has students recite the “four pillars” of the school: tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence. In Mona Lisa Smile, one episode that illustrates the strictness of societal order consists of Betty’s remark that only “the right people” can define what art is. Ms. Watson is not one of those people, because she is not a member of the elite to which well-off Wellesley students belong. Betty, having been educated into fitting the societal hierarchy, does not want to accept Ms. Watson as the exception to the rule. In fact, to her there should be no exception to the rule, although, as mentioned earlier, in the end she understands that she was wrong.
The maintenance of a conservative structure also concerns the characters’ sexual identities. In fact, both movies mainly feature heterosexual character engaged in heterosexual relationships. The school nurse in *Mona Lisa Smile*, Amanda Armstrong, is a lesbian who had been in a relationship with another teacher at Wellesley until her recent death. The viewer is informed of Amanda’s sexual orientations unexpectedly, when Nancy gossips about it in a disapproving tone with Katherine. In fact, this detail seems irrelevant, if not in the characterization of Amanda’s character as a feminist who, precisely because of her anti-patriarchal attitude is let go by the school when she distributes free condoms on campus. Another character whose sexuality seems in flux is Giselle, the most progressive girl in the group of Wellesley students, who however seems to have a very complex relationship with sex regardless of which gender she decides to date, possibly due to her unstable family history, considering that her parents are divorced. In any case, aside from these two characters there is no trace of queerness in the entire movie.

Also in *Dead Poets Society* the only acknowledged sexual orientation is heterosexuality. The few romantic relationships presented are in agreement with the dominant ideology, established between people of the same social background and the same sex. The only character whose sexuality might be seen unstable is Neil Perry. However, if Neil is really gay, as the actor that plays it, Robert Sean Leonard claimed in an interview with Tim Parks, the viewer can only detect his homosexuality according to stereotypical expectations of a gay character’s features and behaviors. Neil is presented as a hypersensitive boy in conflict with his father because he is passionate about theater rather than about school and a respectful future career in medicine or law. Moreover, Neil has a particularly close relationship with his roommate Todd, who also appears to have a stereotypical homosexual connotation, considering his shyness and insecurity. In the end, Neil, as the typical romantic, ends up committing suicide, because he feels overwhelmed by his father’s prohibitions and by not having control over his life. Regardless of his sexual orientation, over which one can only speculate, and that
in any case is not represented positively considering the tragic ending, Neil is in love with something that the system does not accept. The boy has decided that acting is going to be his future, hence picking art over science or any other “serious” business that allows one to become rich and famous. However, his choice of defying the system merely leads him to kill himself, as if death were the only way out of a trapping tradition that does not permit one to shape his or her own identity.

Both *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society*, however, also challenge the conservativism of society. Although Katherine Watson teaches art history, she gives the subject her own twist in discussing modern art that has a significance for the present rather than old, “textbook” artists. *Dead Poets Society*, instead, challenges tradition through the words of dead authors that are very much part of tradition. Mr. Keating encourages his students to think for themselves. Symbolically, he has them rip out the introduction to their poetry book, suggesting that poetry cannot be defined through set in stone formulae, trying to lead his students to shape their own opinions and individualities. In other scenes, Keating tries to show to his students different perspectives on the world. For example, in one scene he asks them to stand on his desk, and looks at them from below in a reversal of roles, while in another he has them march as soldiers first, to then explain that they should learn to set their own pace in life, and not always conform. In all aforementioned occasions, however, Mr. Keating and his students appear to be watched by a dominant power, in a system that resembles the “Panopticon” described by Foucault.

In the scene when students rip out their poetry books’ introductions the camera takes the point of view of another professor for a few seconds, before the viewer sees him enter the room to scold the students. The same happens in the march scene in the courtyard, when the camera sets on students’ feet as they synchronize and then begin to set “their own stride,” focusing on a behavior that challenges the rule.

Ms. Watson, like Mr. Keating, gives her students the opportunity to choose if they want to conform to the system or become their own persons. Like Keating, she also employs art to spur a reaction from students that involves the expression of their personal opinions rather than going along
with the textbook. When she does this experiment, she is opposed by the system, embodied by Betty. However, opposition does not come only from Betty, who is young and still in the process of shaping her identity, but also by the president of the school, the greatest bearer of power in the Wellesley system. This happens in two instances, first, at the beginning of the movie, when the president warns her not to deviate from the syllabus if she wants to teach in such a prestigious school as Wellesley, and then again at the end. Both Mr. Keating and Ms. Watson challenge tradition in their teaching methods that the system, impersonated by the directors of the schools, defines “unorthodox.” It is interesting to note that the challenge to tradition, hence to the dominant power, comes from the system itself.

Therefore, challenges to the system do not originate only within the student body, from which one would expect revolution, but from the teachers themselves. However, in Dead Poets Society the struggle happens within the same upper-class environment, and Keating is legitimized by his background as a Welton alumnus, while Ms. Watson comes from a different environment, much less pompous, hence much less disciplined than her students’.

Surprisingly, at the end of the film Ms. Watson is invited to continue teaching at Wellesley, even if she is told that she will only be allowed to do so if she follows the syllabus, gets her lessons approved, and keeps a professional relationship with faculty and students alike. Instead, Mr. Keating is fired, although his students honor him. As Keating explains to Dolton, “there is a time for daring, there’s a time for caution,” because when one upsets the system, one loses the opportunities that the system offers only to those that accept to conform, such as receiving an education or keeping a job at a prestigious institution. In the end, Dead Poets Society shows that the system cannot be defeated, and that in fact whoever tries to oppose it will be crushed. Instead, Mona Lisa Smile surprises the viewer by letting Ms. Watson stay, Betty leave her husband, and women characters overall construct their own identities, whose definition involves an ongoing dialogue rather than a one-way relationship with the patriarchal system. As Stuart Hall points out in his discussion of the possibilities that the postmodern
age offers to minorities for cultural production and definition of new identities, “cultural hegemony is
never about pure victory or pure domination,” but rather “about shifting the balance of power in the
relations of culture” (468).

To conclude, let us apply to the films here analyzed both Hall’s previous consideration and his
warning not to replace “invisibility” with “a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility,” but
rather to build a conversation between the cultural text produced by minorities and mainstream culture
(Hall 468). Considering that *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society* are set in the 1950s, close to the
time when critics began to talk about a postmodern age, it does not appear too out of this world to point
out that in the comparison of the two movies women seem too have more power than men do. At least,
they appear to decide for themselves even if in situations of tight constraint, as in when Ms. Watson
chooses to set off for Europe rather than staying and either trying to fight the system or abiding by its
rules. Perhaps this happens because women are not directly compared to men as they would have been
in a film about a mixed-gender school, and most likely, because being white and members of the upper
class, these women already start off as powerful subjects in society. However, it is possible that the
movie is reworking concepts of identity and hegemony through postmodernist lenses, although a
revolution of the power structure that places women above men certainly did not characterize 1950s
society, and perhaps even fails to mirror today’s world.
Works Cited


