

Cultural Context Sample Essay - Gender

'Understanding attitudes to gender roles can offer the reader a valuable insight into the cultural context of the text.'

Discuss how understanding attitudes to gender roles offered you a valuable insight into the cultural context of the texts you have studied as part of your comparative course. (70)

Sample Answer: (Highlighted sections show comparative links. Underlined sections refer directly to the question.)

Understanding attitudes to gender roles in Curtiz' classic film 'Casablanca', Jennifer Johnston's 'How Many Miles to Babylon?' and John B. Keane's tragic 'Sive' gave me a valuable insight into the way in which characters are restricted by their gender and have expectations imposed on them by a society which judges them very harshly should they fall short of the ideal. In some cases, this ideal is unrealistic or hypocritical, but the gender stereotypes remain, nonetheless, and the characters who achieve success in the world of the texts appear to be those who have little difficulty meeting the expectations placed on them.

Generally, when we think of gender roles in a text or texts, we think about the way in which women are restricted by living in a patriarchal society. Often, it is all too easy to ignore the way men in that society might feel restricted or pressurised by the world in which they live. One of the aspects of gender roles that I found most interesting was the way in which rigid stereotypes of masculinity affect the characters in all three texts. Whether it is Ireland in the early to mid 20th century, or the more exotic Casablanca in the 1940s, an insight I gained into the cultural context was that men in that cultural context are expected to be strong, largely unemotional, manly providers, decision makers and protectors. When the man is naturally strong, as is the case with Rick in 'Casablanca', then this is not too much of a problem.

Unlike Frederick Moore in 'BABYLON', or Mike in 'Sive', Rick is not particularly restricted by being expected to conform to the societal norms of the time. Frederick and Mike, however, struggle in their worlds in that they are gentle, and are therefore viewed as weak by the other characters in the texts. Gentleness is equated with femininity and a lack of strength.

Both Mike and Frederick are derided for their inability to live up to what is expected of a husband in their society. Alicia Moore and Mena appear to want their husbands to give in to

In these opening sentences the texts are linked and there is a direct reference to the question.

them, but at the same time scorn them for their lack of strength. When Mena tries to convince Mike to agree to the match for Sive, he admits, 'I don't know what is best', and becomes increasingly agitated at Mena's insistence that he 'be said' by her. Mena is filled with contempt for what she sees as his weakness, calling him a 'man of straw'. Alicia Moore is similarly dismissive of Frederick. His attempts to make decisions about Alec's future, from whether or not he should go away to school to whether or not he should go to war, come to nothing in the face of Alicia's steely determination. Like Mena, Alicia has little regard for her husband's feelings and no respect for his position in the household. However, she shows a depth of perception that Mena lacks in that she recognises the role she has played in emasculating her husband. On the night before Alec goes to war, Alicia tells him that 'Under other circumstances [Frederick] would have been a more adequate man.' This phrase, 'adequate man', is an interesting one. Because, like Mike, he is gentle and not authoritative, Frederick is deemed inadequate by his scornful and unfulfilled wife.

Interestingly, Rick in 'Casablanca' seems most at ease with this rigid gender stereotype. Perhaps this is because – unlike 'BABYLON' – 'Casablanca' was made in the middle of the war it features. Studying gender roles in the texts allowed me to come to an understanding about the way in which the author wanted to present the apparent restrictions placed on men by the strict gender stereotyping. During the 2nd World War it would not have done for a man to be shown as weak, indecisive or overly concerned with private happiness at a time when they were required to subjugate their own personal feelings and instead concentrate on the needs of the majority of their countrymen and allies. Rick, therefore, makes the 'correct' choice. Unlike the unhappily vacillating Mike who veers between determination that Sive shall not marry Seán Dóta and longing for the money that would come from such a match, and the terrible resignation of Frederick when he accepts that his son is going to war; Rick seems utterly sure that what he has decided what is best for society as a whole. He tells a tearful Ilsa that he is 'no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world'. Ilsa must go with Laszlo to America and – like a good and dutiful wife – be there to support him in his great work. Rick's decisive nature and his obvious strength make him an admirable figure in the world of the text.

Another insight I gained into the cultural context of the three texts was that these attitudes to gender roles are slow to change. The younger men in each of the texts are subject to the same pressures and expectations as their older counterparts. The expectation is that they should be striving to become authoritative figures in their

private and public lives. Again, we see that this is a struggle for some of them. If we look at Alec Moore, Liam Scwab and Jan Brandel, it is evident that none of them possess the full complement of manly strengths that will ensure their ascending to a position of power in the world of the text. Alec Moore is undoubtedly the least successful of the three in living up to his society's expectations. His mother is disappointed by his similarity to his father and, just as she both bullies Frederick into giving into her demands and subsequently despises him for doing so, so she becomes increasingly contemptuous of her son. There is a telling conversation between them when she raises the notion of their travelling to Europe together. Alicia begins by saying that he has grown into 'a young man' but then browbeats him into the trip and belittles his rather half-hearted objection. She adds that he is to stop seeing Jerry and finally sends him off to do a menial task, calling him 'a good boy' as he silently acquiesces. The implication is that by giving into her demands, Alec has been downgraded from 'young man' to 'boy'. Alec continues to disappoint his mother, to the extent that she finally sends him to war in an effort to make herself appear the selfless and noble mother of a serving soldier. Of course, the army is no place for a man such as Alec. Like Alicia, Major Glendinning is scornful of Alec's lack of manliness and does his best to turn Alec into the sort of man who will be viewed with respect in the military. He fails, and Alec remains a gentle figure, neither respected by his men nor capable of saving Jerry when the latter is sentenced to death for desertion. Like Alicia, Major Glendinning gives up on Alec when he fails to take charge of Jerry's official execution and instead gives his beloved friend an earlier and more merciful death. As he sits in his prison cell, Alec reflects that the major 'will never make a man of me now'.

In 'Casablanca' we are also presented with a young man who lacks the strength to take control of his life and protect a loved one. The Hungarian couple – Jan and Annina Brandel – are desperate to escape to America but Jan is unable to secure them an exit visa. He lacks money and guile and is no match for the unscrupulous men who run Casablanca. Believing there is no other option, Annina is on the brink of sleeping with Capt. Renault in order to get a visa, but she turns to Rick for advice before so doing. Rick is the authority figure: the stoic, powerful, decisive man. In a comment that is reminiscent of Alicia's remark to Alec, although far more affectionately meant, Annina tells Rick that Jan is 'such a boy' that she feels she must take charge and keep her intentions secret. Rick – the epitome of manly power -steps up and saves the day by fixing the roulette table so that Jan believes he has won enough money to buy the visas. I found it interesting that Rick does this rather than give the money to Annina; it suggests that the man must be left with his dignity and the belief that he has protected

his wife.

Liam Scuab in 'Sive' is stronger and more forceful than Alec Moore or Jan Brandel, but ultimately he is equally unsuccessful in taking control. He does his best to stand up to Mike and Mena and bravely challenges the couple in their own house but is defeated because Mike is head of the household and therefore has the final say in what happens to the members of his family. Mena may be the driving force, but even she realizes that the match will not take place without Mike's agreement and so it is he who throws Liam Scuab out of the house and gives his consent – albeit reluctantly – to the marriage between Sive and Seán Dóta. While Alec and Jan are viewed as too boyish and therefore too weak to take control, Liam Scuab's difficulty stems from his youth and lack of status; his views are of little importance compared to the 'man of the house' whose word is law. It seems clear in all three texts that men's lives are greatly affected by the societal norms and by the expectations placed on them. We do feel, however, that Liam Scuab will at least gain status as he grows older and earns enough money to with dreadful clarity how the world in which he lives treats such men. Jan Brandel is fortunate in having a wife who does not despise him for being 'such a boy', and we feel that she will probably continue to support him and protect his dignity, unlike Alicia Moore who comes to view her son with the same thinly-veiled contempt as she views her husband.

Another insight I gained into the cultural context of the three texts is the similarity between female stereotypes in each of the texts. Women are restricted by the gender roles imposed on them in 'Casablanca', 'Sive' and 'Babylon'. They are objectified to a certain extent in all three texts. Rick treats his lover Yvonne with callous disregard, and Capt. Renault chides him for being so 'extravagant, throwing away women like that'. Capt. Renault exploits women, trading sexual favours for exit visas, and Rick seems generally tolerant of such behaviour, much like Nanna when she tells Sive that Sean Dota's vicious pass at her is just the way all men, old or young, behave. Women seem to have little power in the world of the texts. Before he knows the identity of the woman accompanying Laszlo to Casablanca, Rick wonders why he doesn't just leave her and flee alone as it would be easier. Capt. Renault replies that he 'has seen the woman' and implies that she is so attractive that Laszlo will want to keep her with him. Ilsa's beauty is her greatest asset, and the director ensures that we are constantly reminded of this. Her costumes are stylish and elegant, and she is shot in flatteringly soft focus in the close-ups. Like Sive, Ilsa's beauty makes her an object of desire, but Ilsa is more fortunate in that the men who want her for their own are both decent and

honourable men, unlike the lecherous Sean Dota. Similarly, Alicia Moore's beauty makes her desirable, despite her imperious and downright cruel nature. Alec's piano teacher is enchanted by her, and even Jerry comments on her attractiveness, telling Alec that she reminds him of Helen of Troy. The implication is that her power stems from her beauty. Frederick echoes this sentiment, and goes further by reflecting maliciously that 'To be a beautiful woman must be a terrible thing' as beauty fades with age and Alicia will eventually be left with none of her power. Even though the three women in the text are desired for their beauty, none of them is free to do exactly as she wishes, and all of their fortunes are tied to the men in their lives. It is clear that in all three texts, women's relative powerlessness means that they do not have as much control over their own futures as they desire. Ilsa herself says as much to Rick, telling him 'You'll have to think for both of us, for all of us', when she cannot decide whether or not she should stay with Laszlo.

A rather disturbing insight into the cultural context of all three texts was the way in which women are also forced to deal with the double standards when it comes to morality and sexual freedom. Men are not judged harshly for exploiting women or sleeping with them outside of wedlock, but the women most certainly are. Renault is viewed as a loveable rogue and a man-about-town for ensuring that beautiful women are forced to exchange sexual favours for freedom, and Rick is not judged for sleeping with Yvonne, while she on the other hand is portrayed as a promiscuous drunk. There is a telling moment in the film when Rick instructs his barman, Sacha, to bring the belligerent and intoxicated Yvonne home but warns him to 'come right back'. Sacha's face registers his disappointment as he had clearly planned to take advantage of the drunken, spurned Yvonne. However, he is not portrayed in a negative fashion as a result; the fault – it is implied – would be purely Yvonne's and would be further evidence of her loose morals. This dreadful double standard is also seen in 'Sive' in that Sive's mother is castigated for sleeping with her boyfriend and falling pregnant, so much so that 'the slur and the doubt' passes to her innocent daughter and she is viewed as tainted goods. Although Mike distrusts Liam Scuab as a result of his cousin's behavior, there is no sense that Liam's family are shamed in the way that Sive's are, just as there is no sense that Rick, Renault or Sacha are morally compromised by their behavior. Similarly, in 'Babylon',

Alicia Moore's life is greatly affected by the fact that she fell pregnant outside of wedlock.

Admittedly, she is neither as vulnerable as the needy Yvonne nor even remotely as innocent as Sive, but it is interesting nonetheless that her sexual morality is seen as questionable and that she was forced to marry a man she didn't love in order to conceal her shame. Women in the three texts are undoubtedly restricted by gender inequality in matters of sexual morality.

What, then, is expected of women in the three texts? Plainly, their role is to be beautiful, gentle and chaste until marriage, after which time they must be loving, loyal, dependent wives and mothers. Those who do not adhere to this stereotype are viewed harshly by their contemporaries. Mena is taunted by Nanna for her inability to have children: Nanna accuses her of being 'drier than the hobs of hell' and takes every opportunity to throw Mena's childlessness in her face. Alicia Moore, on the other hand, is lauded by her peers for her grace, beauty and skill as a hostess. That she despises her husband and treats her son as a pawn in the 'terrible game' that is her marriage appears to go unnoticed as she keeps up the façade of wife and mother. Both Mena and Alicia are deeply unhappy in their marriages but both women would lack status and financial security were they to leave their husbands. Similarly, Ilsa stays with Laszlo even though she loves Rick as the institution of marriage is more important than personal happiness, and her job is to support her husband in his work. Rick points this duty out to Ilsa, telling her to leave with him because she is 'part of his work' and 'the thing that keeps him going'. While Ilsa might not be as financially vulnerable as Alicia or Mena were she to leave her husband, the society of the time would frown on her doing so nonetheless, and she would not be as worthy of respect as a heroine. Curtiz is careful to acknowledge this viewpoint and ensures, for example, that we never see any direct evidence of Rick and Ilsa doing more than exchanging a kiss once she and Laszlo arrive in Casablanca together.

Through my study of the cultural context of the texts, I found it fascinating to learn how much gender roles restrict the characters' lives in all three texts. Regardless of their personalities or private desires, they are expected to conform to a societal norm, even if doing so makes them deeply unhappy. Failure to conform to these stereotypes is viewed harshly and any character who cannot fulfil the expectations placed on him or her is deemed a failure in the wider sense.

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