

Social Setting – Key Moment – Sive and Casablanca

A)

The text I have studied as part of my comparative course is John B. Keane's tragic play, Sive. A key moment which I believe shows the way the social setting affects the characters' lives occurs in Act 1 Scene 3. Unbeknownst to her niece, Sive's unloving and unscrupulous aunt Mena has agreed to the matchmaker's plan to sell the innocent young girl in marriage to the lecherous old farmer Seán Dóta in exchange for £200. Sive is deeply in love with a young man called Liam Scuab, but is slightly suspicious that there is a plan afoot which involves her and Seán Dóta. Her worst fears are realised one afternoon when she arrives home from school late – her bicycle had a puncture again - and Mena gets her alone in order to explain the plan and attempt to persuade her to agree with it.

It is startling to a modern audience that Mena could consider such a thing, and even at the time Sive was written, matchmaking had almost completely died out. Still, as Liam Scuab tells Sive, it was considered useful in some remote country places where people may not have had many opportunities to meet a potential spouse. However, Sive has made her feelings on the topic clear in an earlier conversation with Liam, so we are well aware that her attitudes and values are not those of earlier generations.

Mena tells Sive that she 'won't have much more of that schooling now' as she forces the girl to sit down, and Sive is bewildered. Education is important to Sive, but Mena grew up in poverty and did not have the luxury of the level of education that is being offered to her niece, a girl of around eighteen years of age. Mena has already expressed her annoyance that Sive is not out working with a farmer instead of filling her head with 'high notions'.

Mena carries on quickly, telling Sive how lucky she is to have the chance to marry so well and to have 'the handling of thousands and the fine clothes and perfumery'. For most of the people in the text, money is hugely important. Small farmers still struggle to make a living, so any chance to make money would seem very attractive indeed.

Sive's agitation is obvious as she 'shakes her head continually' and begs Mena not to ask her to marry Sean Dota. Despite Sive's obvious distress, it could be argued that Mena is not being quite as cruel as she appears in this key moment. After all, as she says, she would have jumped at the chance to marry such a wealthy man, regardless of his age. Mena's poverty-stricken upbringing meant that she would have done anything to get away and have a chance

of a better life. The young girl and the older woman are worlds apart in their view of life, and it is plain that they will not come to an easy agreement.

Mena changes tack now when she realises that simple persuasion won't work. She cunningly makes a reference to Sive's birth, saying the girl will change her mind when she thinks of the way she was born. Sive's illegitimacy has been a source of tension already in the play, and it illustrates yet another aspect of the social setting of the text. In an Ireland where adherence to the values of the Catholic church was paramount, having a child outside of wedlock was a source of shame. In the eyes of many people in rural Ireland at the time, Sive would have been a poor prospect for marriage because of the double drawbacks of having no money to bring to the marriage and for having what Mena calls 'the slur and the doubt' hanging over her.

Mena slyly and cruelly tries to break Sive's spirit by telling her that her father abandoned her mother and 'was never a father'. She tells Sive that her mother died of shame as a result. To her chagrin, Sive - a more modern woman than her aunt - is not as crushed as she expected by this story, and just wants to know about her father and what he was like. Now Mena shows her true colours, turning viciously on Sive and telling her that she is 'a bye-child, a common bye-child – a bastard!' This harsh language is very shocking for the audience, and gives us a startling insight into the values of many people of the time. Through no fault of her own, Sive is labelled and castigated because her parents were not married.

At this stage, Mena drops all pretence at kindness and 'roughly pushes [Sive] back in her chair' when the distraught girl attempts to get up. Mena announces that Sive will not be going to school any more, nor will she be sharing a bedroom with Nanna. She denounces romance as 'rameish and blather' and tells Sive to go to her room and think about what she has said. Sive instinctively makes to go to her old room, but stops short when she remembers Mena's instructions, and exits instead by the far door to Mena's room. This shows us two important aspects of the social setting of the text. First, even though Sive is almost a grown woman, she has no power or independence in the home. Her life is not her own to control and she must obey her aunt's orders, no matter how unfair they may be or how much she dislikes them. Women and children did not have as much freedom to choose as they do nowadays. It is difficult to imagine any 21st century Irish girl meekly accepting her lot the way Sive does! Second, we see that in this harsh world, romance is seen as an unnecessary luxury. Mena has not known romance in her own life, so sees no reason why Sive should have any in hers. She places more value on money and land than on words of love.

The audience is left shaken by this encounter between the pair, and wondering how Sive can possibly fight such an unscrupulous and determined opponent as Mena. Although this is not a comfortable scene, it gives us a very clear insight into the social setting of the text and the way it affects the lives of the characters.

B)

Another text I have studied as part of my comparative course is the film Casablanca, a romantic drama directed by Michael Curtiz. A key moment in the film which I believe shows the effects the social setting has on the characters' lives occurs when Ilsa goes to Rick's apartment on her own late at night to try to persuade him to give her the letters of transit. This is similar to the key moment discussed in Sive in that two of the principal characters are alone together, one badly wants something from the other, there is a threat of violence, and secrets from the past are revealed.

The scene begins with Rick finding, to his surprise, that Ilsa has come to his apartment uninvited. Like Sive when Mena talks to her after school, Rick did not expect to be having a conversation with Ilsa at this time, but he recovers from his surprise more quickly than does Sive. He cynically remarks that he knew she would come back to him, but didn't expect it to happen so soon.

Both Mena and Ilsa want something in these key moments, and they want it badly. For Mena, the £200 she will get if Sive marries Seán Dóta means security and freedom from the fear of poverty, while Ilsa desperately needs the letters of transit from Rick so that Laszlo can escape the Germans. We see here how the social setting has affected the characters. Ilsa lives in a world that is so hostile and dangerous that she is willing to do almost anything to get away from it. The stakes are higher for her than they are for Mena, of course, in that this is a matter of life and death. While Mena is hoping to improve her life, Ilsa is simply trying to preserve hers, as well as her husband's.

In both texts, we see that the characters live in worlds which are, to varying degrees, violent. In Sive, Mena pushes Sive roughly into the chair, and throws her schoolbag across the room while speaking in the harshest tones to the vulnerable young girl. Similarly, Ilsa is so desperate to get her way that she pulls out a pistol and threatens to shoot Rick if he does not hand over the letters of transit. There are a number of significant differences between the texts at these points, however. The first is the attitude of the women in each case. Mena

hates Sive, but Ilsa loves Rick. It is hard for the viewer to believe that she would really kill him if he did not comply. She is under a great deal of pressure - and the camera zooms in to show a close-up of her strained face at this point - but Ilsa has done nothing so far to show that she would harm the man who means so much to her. This impression is reinforced by the playing of their love song, 'As Time Goes By' in the background. Also, Rick - unlike Sive - is not in the least intimidated by this introduction of a note of violence. While Sive attempts to flee Mena's attack on her, Rick walks towards Ilsa and encourages her to shoot him, saying bitterly 'You'll be doing me a favour'. It is interesting to note the different ways the characters respond to violent situations. Sive has been so browbeaten by Mena throughout her life that she bends to the other's will, but Rick is a product of a much different world, and is therefore strong enough to stand up for himself. I found it interesting that, although *Casablanca* is set against the backdrop of war and death, the threat of violence in this key moment is less frightening than is Mena's physical intimidation of Sive. Violence - or the threat of it - in *Casablanca* is presented in a more civilized way than it is in the harsh and brutal world of *Sive*.

When Ilsa realises how much she has hurt Rick by abandoning him in Paris, she breaks down in tears and turns away. We wonder how Rick, who ignored her distress when she came to him the night before to try to tell her story, will react to this. This is where we see the most striking difference between the two key moments. Seeing Ilsa's distress, Rick moves to comfort her. Their love theme plays once more as he holds her in his arms and prepares to allow her to tell him the whole story. In *Casablanca*, love and romance play a very important role. While there are those in the film who do not hold it in high regard, the principal characters do, unlike Mena who dismisses it all as 'rameish and blather'.

It is interesting to notice the attitude towards marriage in both of these key moments. Mena, herself a partner in an unhappy marriage, views it simply as a business transaction and encourages Sive to do the same. Similarly, Ilsa is not committed to the idea of marriage and is willing to leave Laszlo and go with Rick if he will have her. This would have been quite shocking to an audience in the 1940s, and we can see Rick struggling to decide what it is best to do when Ilsa admits that she doesn't know what is right any more and asks him to do the thinking for both of them. The principal difference between the social setting of the texts at this point is that Ilsa is ready to leave her marriage because she loves Rick so much, and he loves her equally, while Mena sees no way out of her marriage and instead pins her future happiness on the money she hopes to make from the match between Sive and Sean Dota.

The role of women is similar in both texts. As we can see in the key moments, women do not

have a great deal of power and must rely on the men in their lives to take care of them. Mena tells Sive that she managed to escape the poverty of her father's home by marrying Mike, and she urges Sive to accept that her only chance of power lies in marrying well. Although Ilsa may initially appear more independent – she turns up at Rick's apartment with a gun – we soon see that in the world of Casablanca, women do not hold the power. Ilsa is torn between Rick and Laszlo but admits freely that she is unable to decide what she should do. She subjugates her will to Rick's when she asks him to do the thinking for both of them. Women in both texts have little power of their own and must resort to guile and a partnership with a man in order to get what they want.

This key moment in Casablanca ends with both Ilsa and Rick in one another's arms. This is a far more uplifting outcome than the bleak isolation Sive faces as she walks, distressed and alone, away from the room she shared with the only person in the family who could comfort her, and towards a place where she will be even more firmly under Mena's control. It seems that the social setting in Casablanca offers the characters more chances of happiness than does the social setting in Sive.