

Mona Lisa Smile: Girls Losing Out in School and Society

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An America at war has always turned to its women for leadership, whether on the battlefield or doing the work that they were usually barred access from. With the return of soldiers after World War II, women who had contributed to the hum of the American workforce by doing traditionally male jobs were forced to recoil into the corsets they had put aside. Helping them squeeze back in were overseers of what was at that time one of the nation's most conservative schools, Wellesley College in Massachusetts. It is this setting of well-manicured lawns and perfectly coiffed heads that Catherine Watson – played by America's highest paid actress, Julia Roberts – comes to in the hopes of making a difference in the movie *Mona Lisa Smile*, directed by Mike Newell. As Professor Watson attempts to reach the country's richest and seemingly most intellectual girls, we begin to see the beginnings of a standard Hollywood feel-good movie. Yet what develops from the somewhat feeble plot is an eye-opening look at the psyche of female students in a single-sex institution of propriety in the nineteen fifties and its impact on their lives after college education.

From her first step into the lecture hall, Art History Professor Catherine Watson encounters a class defined by textbook driven intellect and students who lack personal opinion on not only art but also their place in the world. Boxed in by the ideas and opinions of their male-dominated reference books, the girls see art as they are told to see it. Without mention, it is understood that the previous professor followed a rigid syllabus which focused on works that were considered to be classics. Pushing their minds into the realm of Picasso and other modern artists, Professor Watson reclaims control of a classroom where students once spit out textbook descriptions of paintings as if it were their home address. “What is art? What makes it good and bad? And who decides?”, Professor Watson asks her class of young women. In this way, she encourages the women to look at not only art, but also at themselves as pawns in a highly gendered world. Ultimately however, it is Professor Watson – who in exchange for her liberating influence on her students – gets restricted and controlled as a female professor.

Professor Watson's character keeps the film from leaning toward triteness; She is an intelligent woman who, in the midst of helping others move beyond their male defined roles, is also figuring herself out. Though one might comment that this characteristic weakens her role as a radical leader/teaching figure, it is important to remember that she goes just to the edge of pushing her students too far before realizing that in doing so, she is somehow playing the part of the male-oriented superpower they need to combat. It is then that she gains the respect of the students and makes them self-reflect on their options for the future. More importantly, the women in the film learn how to make choices independently, even though they realize that some of their choices will turn heads.

In the film, the two forces that stymie the growth of the women as students and human beings are their mothers and the glass ceiling that society has canopied over them. For all their efforts in school, the students still have one goal: to get married. In

marrying, they believe they are getting the good life and taking on the role that was meant for them. In preparation for this profession, the students attend an easy-A etiquette course where they learn how to set the table and manage the dinner menu when there are unexpected dinner guests. Making their husbands lives as easy as possible, women of this school graduate to use their home economic skills and obscure their mastery of academic subjects.

Accused of declaring war against marriage after she reprimands a student who missed classes due to her honeymoon, Professor Watson wonders why the girls attend school at all. Distraught by the idea that the talented women before her eyes are going to succumb to positions they are severely over-qualified for, or worse, that solely involve taking care of men, Professor Watson tries to bridge things half-way. Professor Watson encourages Joan (played by actress Julia Stiles) to apply to Harvard's law school – a school she has quietly expressed interest in – by covertly handing her an admissions application during an exam. Later, Professor Watson finds that, much to her dismay, the student will be traveling with her newly married husband to the University of Pennsylvania where he will be studying, instead of accepting her admission to Harvard, where only five women had been accepted. Attempting to mend the debacle, Professor Watson researches law schools in the Philadelphia area so Joan can enjoy the best of both worlds. Unfortunately, the student is not ready to go against the grain nor is she willing to have her professor interfere with her dreams of a home and family.

Throughout the movie, I, like Professor Watson, wondered how such smart women could forego their talents and abilities to become housewives. Taking into account the status of women at the time, I, as a twenty-first century woman, was still fixated by the paradox perpetuated by school and society. I would like to think that things are radically different now. But, regardless of how far we believe we have come from that time, it is important to also examine whether we have come far enough. Since the enactment of Title IX in 1972, women make up the majority of students in colleges and universities and amazing progress in breaking down barriers for female students has been made (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2002). Yet according to the American Civil Liberties Union, discrimination in the educational opportunities for males and females still exist.

Sex discrimination, both overt and subtle, still takes place in American schools. Particularly poignant are the statistics behind both in-class communication and career guidance. American university professor and researcher David Sadker (as cited in "The Miseducation of College Women," 2001) points to the miseducation of women during class interaction. According to Sadker, women are not as active as their male counterparts when it comes to class discussions and thus need to be pulled into them by the teacher. Males, who are coached to demand attention and be outspoken, need less attention than females do. If girls are not encouraged, Sadker claims, it is likely that being a less active participant will carry over into their careers, salaries, and promotions. Specifically probing college environments, others have found that classrooms are designed more for "separate knowers," a more male-patterned style of learning which

includes instinctively disagreeing, asking questions, and individual rather than group oriented problem solving (Clayton, 2001).

Though I believe that improvements in co-ed environments are the key to solving gender bias in education, the all-female class I attended here at Penn made me more able to communicate my opinions and, at the same time, be less worried about being on the defensive. However, I do not attribute my ease of communication to a less challenge-ridden context. In fact, because I was able to communicate more effectively and openly, I felt more comfortable being the “separate knower” in my own way. Guiding that feeling was a sense of being valued in the learning environment. I would be hard-pressed to remember feeling such independence in a mixed classroom environment.

Equally pressing is the issue of sex discrimination in career guidance in our schools. In the film, career guidance was a denial game and, when actually given, was compounded with lessons on how to be a good wife. Professor Watson inculcated in her students that a career mattered more than having dinner on the table by five. She may have been slightly ahead of her time, or in the wrong setting, but some statistics would show that our current teachers and counselors are still back in the nineteen fifties when counseling girls about their futures. Sadker (as cited in “The Miseducation of College Women,” 2001) states that on top of praising boys more often in the classroom, teachers steer girls away from courses that lead to high-tech jobs and high-paying careers. The gender gap in mathematics is declining but there is still a stagnant gender gap in science. Moreover, of the girls who are highly competent in math and science, few are likely to actually pursue a career in these fields. As educators, we need to encourage students both inside and outside of these classrooms and dispel the idea that courses or careers in the fields of math and science are primarily for men (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2002). In fact, studies report that teacher support is an important factor in a girl’s decision to pursue education and employment in these areas (American Association of University Women Foundation, 1992).

In my culture, science is a very appropriate field for women. Growing up Indian, it was ingrained in me from a young age that I could, and should, be a doctor. I commend my parents, and other South Asian parents for having that conviction for their sons and daughters, especially given the hierarchical and sexist system of beliefs that are passed on from generation to generation. Though it was tiresome to explain to my parents that medicine was not in my future, I sometimes wonder if, given the right push by my teachers, maybe my sister or I would have explored a career in health. Nevertheless, I have chosen the traditionally female field of teaching, where other female students are being steered. Like nursing and office technology, when females enter these careers they also are being steered away from higher-paid jobs and thus being doubly undervalued (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2002). Going back to my own personal example, I can’t help but wonder how being female *and* a minority affected my life choices. This is a topic that I feel *Mona Lisa Smile* did not, but could have explored, rather than scattering a few characters of color in the background scenes.

Continued sex discrimination exists in all levels of education in the United States. We have not come far enough. As an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I plan to be aware of myself and my peers and root out instances of sex discrimination. However, educational institutions also need to make drastic changes to achieve this goal, the first of which are increased funding and vigilance. Like Professor Watson, I will be facing not only the pre-conceived notions of my students and peers, but also those of their mothers and fathers and the cultures to which they belong.

Very recently, researchers at Harvard University found that Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa appears jovial when one stares at the background of the painting and much more somber when you look directly at her mouth. It is unclear why in the film a male teacher and later romantic partner of Professor Watson's gives her that name. Perhaps he sees the incongruousness in her face and character as the school year goes on and recognizes the inner battle she faces as she tries to assert change at the college. What is clear for us in our time is that staring at the problem point-blank provides a different understanding of the notion of progress. Gender bias in education has not dissipated and it has, as some would argue, taken on a new face in the promotion of single-sex schools. It is peripheral to claim that we have made major strides in education for females. We must stare the persisting issues in the face and realize that inequality has yet to be abolished, even in its most subdued manifestations.

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