

A household of one: reconceptualization of the family in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003)

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Abstract

The traditional view maintains that celibacy is antithetical to the notion of family. Supposedly starting from the union of two heterosexual adults, a traditional nuclear family is built when the couple gives birth to a progeny. Remaining single is thus a considerable obstacle to such a family pattern. Modern debates, however, focus on the diversity of families according to the definition of a family as the sets of relationships people create to assure social reproduction. This paper aims at intervening in those debates through a feminist study of two movies, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Mona Lisa Smile*. Set in highly conservative societies amidst the heyday of the ‘Cult of Domesticity’, the stories feature dissenting figures of single female teachers. Very popular among their students, those women are remarkable for their unconventional teaching and the values they embody. Very soon, the teachers’ communities realize that these women are far more inspiring and influential than expected. In this sense, the movies raise important questions regarding values transmission, care and mentoring, which are inherent to the notion of family. This paper will attempt to shed light on the construction of the family enacted by the characters. Their explicit rejection of normative models and adoption of other forms of family relationships reveal that family can better assure its social reproduction function when it is not centered on imposed structures such as marriage. In fact, the family has to be founded on chosen sets of relationships that enable empowerment and the fulfillment of each individual.

Keywords: Family, tradition, singlehood, women, social reproduction.

Introduction

The omnipresent representation of families in the media, literature, screen, and stage is a characteristic of the contemporary world. As far as screen is concerned, countless shows, dramas, sitcoms and movies bombard viewers around the world with competing ideologies

surrounding the family. Such a situation testifies to the continuing importance and complexity of the family as a concept. This paper aims at contributing to current debates on the family with a view to building understanding of the way it is constructed and represented in various contexts. Two movies, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), though not well-known to be so, belong to the category of family-representing movies. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* gravitates around the representation of the relationship between Miss Jean Brodie and her female students. Brodie dedicates herself to providing them with more than just teaching. Similarly, *Mona Lisa Smile* portrays Miss Watson who decides to enlighten her students through subjects that go beyond the scope of the syllabus. In an oblique way, those movies deal with fundamental questions regarding the definition of a family and its functions. Through a feminist analysis, the objective of this paper is to shed light on the (re)conceptualization of the family articulated in the two movies. Indeed, they demonstrate that the main function of the family, which is social reproduction, can be assured by non-blood-related people who have enough commitment to do it. Furthermore, normative family models can be obstacles to such a basic function. The films maintain that other types of relationships, namely mentorship and friendship, can better achieve social reproduction.

1. Theoretical foundation

As this paper focuses on filmographic representation of family structures and functions, the major theories that are used revolve around modern conceptualizations of the family and social reproduction theory. Defining the multidimensional concept of family has long been a challenge to social scientists. Researchers maintain that the predominance of the traditional marital-bond-based family, referred to as ‘conjugal family’ (Cherlin 2012, 580) has been supplanted by other patterns of family which include “various other kin, friends, and even pets.” (Ponzetti et al. 2003, 550). In fact, the definition of family is determined by structure, ideology and process (Ponzetti et al. 2003, 550). More recently, researchers have agreed that it is difficult to find a definition that encompasses all types of family. It has thus been argued that “family is each individual’s interpretation of who their kin are”. The basic argument is that meanings and interpretations have no connection to rules, norms, or culture. Thus, the definition of family is based on the individual’s “local subculture and his or her own reality (Ponzetti et al. 2003, 550).”

In this paper, Ponzetti et al.’s definition of family is used as it resonates with the representation of family structure in the two movies. They assert that a family is a close

relationship which is characterized by “strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time” (Ponzetti et al. 2003, 551). Such relationships may include groupings of people who may not have formal recognition as family. In terms of function, the family is a “unit of social reproduction. As opposed to biological reproduction, social reproduction refers to a wide range of activities that maintain existing life and ... reproduce the next generation.” (Laslette and Brenner, qtd. in Fox 2001, 276).

Pierre Bourdieu argues that social reproduction is “the intergenerational transmission of physical and symbolic property” between generations (Nash, qtd. in Girton 2019, 11-12). Property, also called capital, is transferred from generation to generation through families and can be divided into several types such as economic, cultural or social. Economic capital refers to the material and financial property of a person. Cultural capital concerns the beliefs, knowledge, and skills that are passed down from generation to generation. Social capital is likewise “focused on the attainment of socially transmitted knowledge and emphasizes one’s network of social relations which provides the individual access to these forms of knowledge” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch qtd. in Girton 2019, 12). Put in more practical terms, social reproduction designates “feeding, clothing, and otherwise looking after people’s subsistence needs, as well as nurturing and socializing children and emotionally supporting adults” (Fox 2001, 276). The sets of relationships regarded as family focus on those activities with a view to sustaining life in the present and the future.

2. Rejection of normative family models in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Mona Lisa Smile*

A close look at the major discourses articulated by the institutions depicted in the movies show that the ideology underpinning women’s roles, marriage and family life is the “Cult of Domesticity” which is taken as the norm. Put simply, “Cult of Domesticity” or “True Womanhood” is a set of standards dating back to the mid-19th century. It dictates that women’s value is “based upon their ability to stay home and perform their duties as wives and mothers, and their willingness to abide by a series of very specific virtues.” (Wigington). Those virtues include piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

At the beginning of *Mona Lisa Smile*, the “Cult of Domesticity” is deeply rooted in the students’ mentalities. The first conversations the viewer witnesses in Wellesley¹’s dormitory are about the girls’ aspirations. Each female student’s ultimate objective is to find the man of her dreams, get married and have children. Betty Warren, the school’s editorial writer for the College newspaper is engaged to be married to Lenny; Joan has a steady date and soon after gets engaged to Tommy. Connie, ‘the plain’ girl of the group has only one wish: like the beautiful ones, she also wants to find a husband. The arrival in Wellesley of the heroine, the single teacher Katherine Watson, is an occasion for the female students to rethink their dream of marriage. At this stage however, her presence seems to remind them that the essence of womanhood is to become a wife and a mother; as Joan says: “Everybody should want marriage and family”.

Wellesley’s curriculum itself promotes the “Cult of Domesticity”. On one occasion, the students are told explicitly that “the only responsibility you will have later is to look after your husband and your children”. As such, the subjects taught to them include how to be a lady in all circumstances, in gestures, posture, and language. Significantly, in order to urge her students to take the course more seriously, the teacher tells them that “the only grade that matters is the one your husband will give you”.

In the same vein, Marcia Blaine School for girls, where Jean Brodie teaches, is characterized by conservative values. The movie opens with a mass at the school’s chapel and a close-up on an excerpt from the Bible which reads “Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies proverbs XXI.10”. Such details clearly allude to the Christian dimension of the education offered to the young girls. The ideal of the biblical virtuous woman is obviously the basis of the “Cult of Domesticity” outlined earlier.

As mentioned above, sexual purity is one of the four virtues completing the “Cult of Domesticity”. Once discovered by the College alumnae, Amanda Armstrong’s secret act in providing Wellesley students with contraception devices is considered immoral as it goes against their “pride on propriety”. Given that the institution’s role is to make true women of their students, the girls are expected to remain chaste before their wedding night.

¹ Wellesley is the name of the college the female characters attend. Even though the story is fictional, the movie was shot at the real Wellesley College, Massachusetts, USA. Founded in 1870, Wellesley is a private women's liberal arts college, considered as a leader in providing excellent education for women who will make a difference in the world.

A brief allusion to birth control is also made by Jean Brodie when she advises a woman to consider adopting Marie Stopes' family planning program to avoid unwanted pregnancy. The woman insists that she chooses to follow her Church's guidance about female fruitfulness which, according to Jean, is a way for the Church to have control of her body. This scene depicts how birth control was considered taboo since it offered women some control over reproduction within marriage.

Nevertheless, in parallel with the pervading domesticity ideology promoted by the two institutions, the real experience of normative family models is extremely negative. Indeed, the major unifying point between the two movies is the subversive messages they convey concerning marriage and family in highly conservative settings. All the families represented in the two movies are dysfunctional.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the only marriage-based family unit that is presented to the viewer is that of Teddy Lloyd, the art teacher. The opening scene of the movie shows two men who are infatuated with Jean Brodie, one of them is Teddy. From his attitude, one would not suspect that he is a married man; yet, we learn right after, when Brodie ironically congratulates him for the birth of his fourth child, that Teddy is married and is a father of four small children. Materially, one has no clear indication of whether Teddy is able to meet his family's needs; the only hint to his shaky financial situation is his small, dark and grim studio. The most emphasized detail regarding Teddy Lloyd, which constitutes the master plot of the movie, is that he is obsessed with a woman, other than his wife, Jean Brodie. Such an obsession pervades his life, as revealed by the symbolically charged painting discovered by the students: all the portraits he makes, including those of his wife and children, bear the face of Jean Brodie. Even though his qualities as a husband and a father are not explicitly delineated in the movie, one can say that such a quasi-pathological obsession is enough to call his commitment to his marriage and family into question.

Infidelity likewise characterizes the marriage of one of the main protagonists of *Mona Lisa Smile*. A few months after their wedding, Betty Warren is estranged from her husband, who spends more and more nights out because of his so-called work. Such a situation becomes a source of frustration, anger and despair for Betty who has devoted all her life to becoming the perfect wife. Soon after, she discovers that Lenny is having an affair; she thus asks for a divorce without the approval of her mother. As a matter -of -fact, the role of the mother in Betty Warren's story is evidence of the inefficiency of the normative family in *Mona Lisa*

Smile. The first time Betty realizes that her marriage is in deep trouble is when Lenny leaves her alone during a night party, pretending once again that he has business to deal with. That night, too upset to go home alone, Betty goes to her parents' place to look for comfort. Her mother, however, refuses to let her stay, saying: "You go home, put on some make-up and patiently wait for your husband". Shocked by her words, Betty replies: "But isn't this my home?" and her mother answers "Your home is now your husband's". This brief but meaningful conversation between Betty and her mother shows how her biological family fails to perform its most basic role, that of supporting its members in difficult times.

In line with this negative portrayal of normative marriage and family experience, the movie showcases utter rejections of such models. In fact, the fame of the two movies *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Mona Lisa Smile* in large part lies in their depiction of single women. In popular culture, the name of Jean Brodie has become synonymous with spinsterhood (Hanson 2012). Jean Brodie refuses the proposals of her two suitors in the movie, Teddy Lloyd and Gordon Lowther. The reason why she rejects Teddy Lloyd even though she does not seem insensitive to his charm is obviously the fact that the latter is married. It is her relationship with Lowther which better reveals Jean's attitude towards normative models. Lowther is looking for a wife and is very much attracted to Jean. He takes her on boat trips on Sundays, goes with her on outings with her students and talks about art with her. He never really declares his love to Jean, however, until she has problems with the school's principal. When he says that he wants her to be his wife, Jean answers, "Why can't you be my lover?" Clearly, Jean is not against an intimate relationship with him, but it is marriage that she does not want.

Similarly, Katherine Watson refuses Paul Brennan's marriage proposal after some time of steady dating. A few months after Katherine's stay at Wellesley, Paul realizes that he cannot live away from her. He comes to Wellesley one night and offers her an engagement ring. Taken by surprise, Katherine does not immediately react; only a few hours later does she reveal to him that she cannot accept his proposal. She gives the ring back and significantly says, "I do not say 'no' to you", implying that she is not rejecting the man and the possibility of a relationship with him, it is marriage that she says no to.

Katherine Watson's unmarried status is viewed as a rejection of motherhood: "I guess she never wanted children" Betty Warren says. This shows how important it is for the girls to get married before having children. With her belief in traditional values, Betty has concluded that a woman does not want to be a mother if she has made the choice to remain single. The girls

have obviously assimilated the idea that motherhood is the next step after marriage. In the movie, however, there is no mention of whether Katherine Watson wants children.

All this comes down to saying that normative family patterns do not lead to social reproduction in the two films. Like the Mona Lisa smile, the title of and a key motif in the movie, they are just institutions which mask the real experience. When Betty Warren announces her decision to divorce to her mother and her mother urges her to stay for one more year with Lenny, she says: “Mona Lisa smiles and she appears happy”, and adds that appearance is sometimes deceitful. Betty is here alluding to the way the institution of marriage functions: it projects a semblance of happiness, but behind the tradition is a totally different experience.

3. Mentorship, friendship and social reproduction in the two movies

The existing literature on *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Mona Lisa Smile* intersects on the dominance of the themes of teachers’ roles, mentorship and female friendship in both films. (Gogberashvili 2014, Thomsen 1993, Putri 2011). One major aspect that has not been explored, however is the family/social reproduction dimension inherent to education represented in the two films. Indeed, on the diegetic level, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Mona Lisa Smile* show that both friendship and mentorship assure essential social reproductive functions: looking after people’s subsistence needs, educating and supporting one another.

3.1 Mentorship in *Mona Lisa Smile* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Broadly speaking, mentoring is “a reciprocal, dynamic relationship between mentor (or mentoring team) and mentee that promotes the satisfaction and development of both” (Pfund 2017, 2). On a more functional level, mentoring is a “collaborative learning relationship that proceeds through purposeful stages over time and has the primary goal of helping mentees acquire useful skills needed for life.” (Pfund 2017, 2). Ragins and Kram’s definition can further enlighten one’s understanding of the concept: “at its best, mentoring can be a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development. Its effects can be remarkable, profound and enduring; mentoring relationships have the capacity to transform individual groups, organizations and communities” (qtd. in Pfund). In the two movies, mentorship assures the social reproduction function because it makes essential knowledge and cultural transmission possible.

More than just teachers, Katherine and Jean assume remarkable mentoring roles: they teach many other skills they judge more useful for life than the ones prescribed by the curricula. On the first day of her Art History class at Wellesley, Katherine discovers that her students are used to merely memorizing what is written in books and are convinced that this is knowledge acquisition which is the objective of university learning. One of the key scenes in the movie is when Joan comes to see Katherine to ask why she got bad grades in Art History. The latter tells her that Joan has simply repeated the opinion of someone else in order to answer the question; and that if Katherine wanted such a thing, she would have just bought his books. Joan learns for the first time that having and voicing one's own opinion is more important than knowing others'. From their first encounter, she tells the girls: "There's no textbook telling you what to think".

Subsequently, Katherine changes her course content and teaching methods so as to focus on one essential skill: critical thinking. Critical thinking, generally defined "as a thoughtful and reasonable process whose main purpose is to make sensible decisions about what to believe or what to do." (Enciso et al. 2017, 80). One aspect of critical thinking which contributes to social reproduction is its life-long and sustainable effect. In fact, possessing critical thinking skills will help the students in the present and the future. As scientists say: "Researchers on critical thinking defend its fundamental role in all different fields and knowledge domains, as well as in all life settings where human beings develop, such as work, education, family, friends, and community" (Moseley et al. 10; Butler qtd. in Enciso et al. 2017, 81). Change is inherent to human development, problems faced at various stages of life have different dimensions, and therefore, critical thinking is the only way to effectively solve them (Enciso et al. 2017, 82). In order to develop her students' critical thinking skills, Katherine Watson challenges them through questions, discussions and creative work. She clearly says: "I want you to think for yourself, to see the world through different eyes".

Similarly, Jean Brodie modifies elements of the curricula and prescribed pedagogy in order to elicit reasoning and personal response from her students. The very first classroom scene of the movie presents Jean Brodie inciting her students to do everything to avoid "petrification". She alludes here to intellectual petrification, or the crushing of critical thinking by rote learning. She tries to do that by avoiding passive absorption and exposing students to real experience. In fact, hands-on learning has been proven to be a sure way to acquire experience, which is "a critical element in understanding what is learned" (Schank 1995, 4). This characteristic of

learning by doing leads to the acquisition of lifelong skills, as it makes labelling possible. According to Schank, “this labelling process is what we refer to as indexing. Indexing means taking an experience and giving it a name [...which] is likely to lead to better reminding” (5). When her superior asks her to justify the fact that she teaches “passion, precocity and recklessness” to her students, Jean clearly says education means opening to students “all possibilities of life”. In other words, for her education is first of all about teaching people to think and experience things for themselves. Like Katherine, Jean endeavours to offer her students skills that will stay with them and continue to serve them later in life.

Another aspect of personal development inherent to mentoring occurs outside the classroom setting. Jean Brodie is blamed by the Head of Marcia Blaine School for spending week-ends with her students, that is to say for privileging informal teacher/student interaction. In fact, those moments deemed dangerous by the conservative staff are occasions for “the Brodie set” to work on their personal development and cultural enrichment. Alongside cultural activities, Jean endeavours to make the girls figure out the kind of adults they will become. The most recurrent messages she tries to convey to her students are based on inspiration and empowerment. She constantly reminds them that they need to aim for excellence, to become the “*crème de la crème*” or “distinguished” women later.

The moments Katherine spends with her students outside the classroom are likewise occasions for mentoring. It is during their meeting in Katherine’s workshop that the latter encourages Joan to fulfil her potential by going to Yale Law School. It is an epiphanic moment for Joan who has never thought that it is possible to become more than an educated wife and mother. Furthermore, Katherine’s encouragements enable Joan to be confident in her capacities as a woman given the fact that it is mostly men who are admitted to Yale Law School. Ultimately, she manages to convince Joan to apply, and Joan is admitted to Yale. The last but probably the most important element of Joan’s personal development is the exercise of her personal choice. When she is confronted with the choice of whether to follow her husband to Chicago or undertake Law studies, Katherine tells her that she does not need to choose and can do both. Joan however decides to choose and confidently opts for following her husband because, as she says, family is more important for her than anything else.

Betty’s meetings with Katherine, though sometimes characterized by hostilities, are also moments of consciousness-raising and growth. A large majority of the discussions between the professor and her student revolve around the importance of marriage for women. At the

beginning, Betty who is the only married student of the group cannot understand why a woman like Katherine Watson would break up her engagement and refuse to get married. The teacher's discourses however try to lead her to see marriage differently. In one of their conversations, Katherine tells her that "all relations do not end in marriage" and "marriage should not dictate the way she is going to lead her life". Those interactions have in one way or another transformed Betty's vision as the latter has the courage to stand up to her mother's pressure and put an end to her marriage after discovering Lenny's adultery.

As quoted above, mentorship is a relationship with mutual effects on the mentor as well as on the mentee. The reciprocity of mentorship is represented by Jean Brodie's self-awareness towards the end of the movie. When Sandy accuses her of killing Mary, she admits that she feels responsible for teaching that "service to a cause is a privilege". Indeed, Mary goes off to war following Jean's inspiring speech about the girls being prepared "to serve, suffer and sacrifice" for the day they will be called to war. Even though guilt is not a positive experience, it invites self-reflection (Hoffman). It thus lets us consider the possibility that Brodie would not repeat her mistake in the future to avoid causing harm to one of her students again.

3.2 Friendship in the two movies

Friendship is another relationship around which the two stories revolve and which contributes to social reproduction. Associated with the ancient Greek term *philia*, friendship "is a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy." (Bennett). The kind of intimacy characteristic of friendship is what philosophers call the bond of trust (Bennett).

In the two movies, we can find teacher/student friendship but also friendship among students. Those relationships fulfil some life-maintaining functions typical of social reproduction, namely nurturance and support. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, nurturance is visible through most of Jean Brodie's interactions with her "girls". She continuously offers pieces of advice regarding soft skills and manners including the way to stand up, to tie shoe laces, to get dressed and to remain neat. On a more symbolic level, Jean's nurturing role is captured by the picnics she has with the students. On one occasion, instead of having lunch at the school's restaurant, Jean and the girls are picnicking under a tree outside. Significantly, the teacher

serves a new type of food to the girls, “*pâté de foie gras*”, and lectures a bit about French culture. This short but intense scene captures the essence of nurturance in the sense that it consists of both upbringing and nourishing.

Similarly, Katherine’s friendship with her students is a key motif in the movie. Midway through the novel, Betty and Joan invite Katherine to one of their highly selective secret sorority meetings. Under the effects of alcohol, all student/teacher barriers fall: students are allowed to ask personal questions to teachers and vice versa. But the most significant friendship moment in the movie is towards the end when Joan announces her decision to follow her husband to Chicago and not to go to Yale. Even though Katherine thinks that Joan might regret her choice later, as a good friend, she shows support and wishes Joan a lot of happiness as she hugs her.

Support is also the foundation of the friendship between Giselle and Betty. At the beginning of the movie, Giselle is very different from her three friends as she is the only one who is not interested in the pursuit of marriage. She is also the one who does not adhere to the conservatism of her society: she has sex before marriage, uses contraception, commits adultery and sleeps with her Italian professor. Giselle is not affected by Betty’s constant moralizing criticisms. Even when Betty is very aggressive towards her, Giselle shows understanding and support. Indeed, one morning, when Giselle goes back to the dormitory after having spent the night with her married lover, Betty insults her by calling her a prostitute that all men sleep with and throw away after. Giselle does not talk back, instead she takes Betty into her arms and tries to calm and comfort her. Giselle does not take Betty’s insults personally because she understands that Betty’s marriage is going through crisis and she is letting off steam. Later on, when Betty leaves her husband, her plan is to go to New York to study Law and share an apartment with Giselle. Significantly, Betty announces this decision to her mother at the end of the academic year saying “I am going to share an apartment with Giselle, the girl you called New York yuppie since your home is closed to me.” Betty’s last words to her mother forcefully capture the role of friends in the movie; they replace biological family members by offering what individuals need in difficult moments: support.

Conclusion

Since family is an inseparable part of humanity, it is sometimes taken for granted as a natural phenomenon. It has however undergone so many transformations that it has become the

object of representations throughout the ages. The two movies discussed in this paper offer a portrayal which incites us to change our point of views regarding the family. The main message that recurs in the two movies is that family relationships founded on traditional normative models are derailed from their essential function which is social reproduction. Thus, we see the major female characters rebelling against those normative models. They give us to understand that friendship and mentorship are better conduits of social reproduction. Such discourses may not be totally new, but they trigger more questions such as: with the constant evolution it undergoes, what the family would look like two or three centuries from now? What is sure is that cinema will certainly have a lot to say about it.

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