

## Cultural Context

“A reader can feel uncomfortable with the values and attitudes presented in texts.”

Discuss this statement in relation to three texts on your comparative course.

Subheadings:

Power

Money

Gender

*References to question are underlined, while comparative links are highlighted.*

Studying the cultural context in in Curtiz' classic film 'Casablanca', Jennifer Johnston's novel 'How Many Miles to Babylon?' and John B. Keane's tragic play 'Sive' provided me with interesting insights into the attitudes and values of the society in each text. However, I would most certainly not like to live in the world of any of these texts as their attitudes and values make their societies restrictive and unequal. I felt uncomfortable with the way in which **power** was abused, **money** was regarded as the most important driving factor behind many of the characters' choices and **gender roles** clearly showed the double standards of the societies in the texts. While we may suffer from some of these negative mindsets in our society today, I don't believe we accept them to the same extent as the characters in the three texts I studied.

The aspect of the cultural context which made me feel most uneasy was the way in which power is often equated with corruption and a callous disregard for the individual in each of the texts. The only note of hope lies in the moral power of certain characters. However, I was disturbed by the fact that it is only in 'Casablanca' that moral authority seems to prevail over the unappealing and corrupt individuals who are in charge.

In all three texts, those who hold the most power are the unappealing characters.

Upsettingly, the weak perish and the strong survive. In 'Sive' and 'Babylon' it is disturbing to see that family members – those who should use their power to protect those in their care – abuse their position and use the weaker characters for their own ends. Mena uses her position as Sive's guardian to bully and threaten her into a match with the lecherous Seán Dóta while Alicia Moore similarly browbeats Alec into going to war so she can be the mother of a brave hero. Alec is particularly unfortunate in that he falls victim to both Alicia and, later, Major Glendenning, an antagonistic force even more powerful than Alicia in that he

has the power of life and death over those in his charge. He regularly reminds Alec of this, saying he will have no hesitation in 'meting out the ultimate' should his authority be challenged. Sive, at least, is not threatened with death should she refuse to obey Mena, while Alec is, as are Rick and Laszlo in 'Casablanca'. In 'Casablanca', as in 'Babylon', we see military might bearing down on the individual. I found this portrayal of such power less unsettling than that in 'Babylon', however, in that Strasser and his men are the enemy and as such would not be expected to show much mercy to those over whom they have power, whereas Major Glendinning represents an authority which is as willing to sacrifice its own men as those of the enemy. There is almost a certain glamour and excitement associated with fighting such power, unlike the sad and sordid bullying both Mena and Alicia engage in and the utterly callous attitude exhibited by Major Glendinning when he tells Alec that the soldiers are not men: 'Not to me. Not to the General Staff, not to the War Office'. However, in both 'Casablanca' and 'Babylon', it is fair to say that the individual means nothing against the faceless power of the military, and that is a more depressing and uncomfortable view of the cultural context than that in 'Sive'. Mena, for all her faults and for all her greed and selfishness, believed on some level that Sive would be benefitting from a marriage to such a wealthy man.

The principal difference in the portrayal of power and its abuse in 'Casablanca', 'Sive' and 'Babylon' is that in 'Casablanca' moral authority does win the day. Rick and Laszlo are representatives of this moral authority and are stronger characters than are Alec, Jerry, Sive, Nanna or even Liam Scuab, all of whom attempt to fight corrupt authority figures in their respective worlds. One reason for Rick and Laszlo's strength is that they have powerful support, unlike Alec, Sive or Liam Scuab. This is exemplified most clearly in the marvellously stirring 'Battle of the Anthems' scene, where Laszlo leads the patron of Rick's bar in a rousing rendition of the Marseillaise, symbolically drowning the Germans' soldiers' song. I was left feeling less uncomfortable about the abuse of power in 'Casablanca' than in the other two texts because of this victory of moral authority. However, as the film was made in 1942, the dreadful threat of Nazi power remains despite Ilsa and Laszlo's escape, as does the military might of Glendinning and his ilk in 'Babylon'.

Money plays an important role in the cultural contexts of each of the three texts. It affects the choices the characters make and can even be the factor that determines whether they will live or die. In 'Casablanca', money is everything. Those who have it can buy an exit visa and fly to freedom. Those who don't must stay in Casablanca and 'wait and wait and wait...'.

*Note: I managed to save this essay from my old computer, but parts of it were missing. I don't have time to rewrite the section on money now, but you should be able to construct it yourself from your notes. Think of people buying and selling others and compare Rick's attitude to Mena's. He doesn't care about money and refuses to 'sell' Sam to Ferrari, for example. In Babylon, Jerry's mother is keen for him to go to war as she will get a regular pay packet if he does. Etc.*

Another aspect of the cultural context which made me feel deeply uncomfortable was the way in which 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. I found this a very negative aspect of the cultural context, particularly as the women seem to accept that this is the way

things are. 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.

The final aspect of the cultural context which unsettled me a great deal 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 Scuib 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 disturbing 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. Sadly, while I found this a most unpleasant aspect of the cultural context, it is – unfortunately – one which still exists to a degree in our own society.

In conclusion, then, although the tension and conflict in each text is largely driven by the pressures and restrictions placed on the characters by their respective cultural contexts and

this is what makes each story so compelling, the overall impression created by the study of the respective societies is a negative one and left me profoundly glad that – whatever our society's faults may be – we are not limited to the same extent by such rigid and unfair values and attitudes.

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