
POWER

Cultural Context in 'Sive', 'How Many Miles to Babylon?' and 'Casablanca'
Aoife O'Driscoll 2013

NOTE

- It is important that your selected aspects of cultural context are dealt with separately.
 - Power, gender and money are closely intertwined in the texts, but if you are dealing with gender and money as aspects of the cultural context, then your approach to power in the texts must focus on a different sort of power.
 - Think in terms of power structures (class, military might etc.) and / or moral power.
-

IN ALL THREE TEXTS...

- Those in power are unappealing characters.
 - Power is equated with callous disregard for the individual.
 - The only note of hope lies in the moral power of certain characters.
 - However, this does not prove sufficient to bring about a happy ending in 'Sive' or 'How Many Miles to Babylon?'
 - Only in 'Casablanca' do we see a note of hope.
-

SIVE

- People like the Glavins have traditionally had little power in Irish society, but that is changing.
 - Mena, in particular, hungers for the power that an elevated position in society might bring. She tells Sive that if she marries Sean Dota she will be able to lord it over her neighbours with her 'head in the air'.
 - The Ireland of the play is changing and those who previously had little power - small farmers like Mike - are coming into their own. He is delighted by this, telling Mena that 'the boot is on the other foot now'.
-

-
- Pats Bocock comments on this shift in the balance of power too, saying that 'The small man with the one cow and the pig and the bit of bog is coming into his own'.
 - Pats wonders if this newfound status and power in society will be accompanied by any sort of moral authority: 'What way will he rule? What way will he hold up under the new riches?'
 - The answer seems to be that those ascending to a more powerful position will be corrupted. Pats points at Sean Dota, saying 'The likes of him will be the new lords of the land. God help the land.'
-

-
- There is little hope of any sort of moral authority in Sive. Those who are in positions of power in the play do nothing to help those who are vulnerable.
 - Mena bullies and hounds Sive.
 - Mena and Thomasheen bully and threaten Nanna.
 - Mena, Sean Dota and Thomasheen show no respect for Pats Bocock and Carthalawn, even though they have always been welcome in the Glavin household in the past.
 - There are characters with moral power, but they are defeated. The powerful, amoral characters eventually drive Sive to her death.
 - We are left with the image of Nanna weeping over the body of her dead granddaughter: an image which gives a clear message that moral authority is not enough in the world of this text.
-

HOW MANY MILES TO BABYLON?

- Like 'Sive', HMMTB presents us with a world in which those in power have little regard for the rights of the individual.
 - In both texts, the power rests in the hands of the least appealing characters. The weak perish and the strong survive.
 - Moral authority is powerless in the face of the determination of characters such as Alicia and Major Glendinning.
 - Major Glendinning is the face of military power in the text. He has subjugated his humanity and views the men in his charge as little more than cattle.
-

-
- In the final pages of the book, Major Glendinning informs Alec of an impending attack. He says that for it to succeed 'there must be no flaw in the machinery'.
 - When Alec objects to this description, saying 'We are men', Major Glendinning's reply is a stark 'Not to me. Not to the General Staff, not to the War Office'.
 - The individual means nothing against the faceless power of the military, and that is an even more frightening and depressing view of this aspect of the cultural context of the text than that seen 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 wealthy man, and would undoubtedly have been willing to go through with the match if their positions had been reversed. The British army, on the other hand, has no regard whatsoever for the fate of individual soldiers.
-

-
- In both 'Sive' and HMMTB, the central characters are pushed into a situation where the only way they can regain any measure of power over their own fate is by choosing death.
 - Moral authority counts for little in either text, and the bleak message seems to be that power corrupts and there is little the righteous can do in the face of cruelty, greed and determination.
-

CASABLANCA

- In this text, as in HMMTB, we see military might bearing down on the individual.
 - As in 'Sive' and HMMTB, power is equated with corruption.
 - There is a difference between the power in 'Casablanca' and that in HMMTB, however. Major Glendinning has nothing to gain personally by wielding his power. Captain Renault does use his power for personal gain, coercing beautiful women to sleep with him in order to get exit visas. In this way, he is more like those in power in 'Sive' than in HMMTB. He is certainly a more suave and personable character than Sean Dota, and more charming by far than Mena or Thomasheen, but his motives and his abuse of power are equally reprehensible when examined closely. However, the view taken by the authors of both texts is very different, and thus we are encouraged to think far more kindly of Renault than we do of the antagonists in 'Sive'.
-

-
- The principal difference between 'Casablanca' and the other two texts is that in 'Casablanca' moral authority does win the day. Rick and Laszlo, as representatives of this moral authority, are far stronger characters than are Alec, Jerry, Sive, Nanna or even Liam Scuab. While Liam Scuab does have the courage to stand up to Mike and Mena, he is otherwise powerless and therefore cannot succeed. Rick, on the other hand, is a powerful and influential man in Casablanca and is therefore in a position to put the weight of his status in that society behind his moral choices.
 - Laszlo, similarly, has the support of a large number of loyal followers in Casablanca, and is able to call on their support. This is exemplified most clearly in the marvellously stirring 'Battle of the Anthems' scene.
-

CONCLUSION

- While we are presented with a negative view of power in all three texts, each does show us that characters can retain their integrity and moral authority even in the face of corruption. Unfortunately, the message that we are left with at the end of 'Sive' and HMMTB is that such resistance to the abuse of power is admirable, it is not enough to save the individual. In 'Casablanca', however the outlook is far more positive. Although the protagonists are not destined to have a fairytale happy ending, their fate is far less bleak than that of the protagonists in the other two texts, and Rick's moral authority succeeds in gaining Laszlo and Ilsa's freedom. Even the morally dubious Capt. Renault is won over by Rick's actions and, in another positive message, joins him in exile as they seek another base from which to continue the fight for freedom.
-