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British Film and Literature

28 July 2016

A Room with a View and Cultural Conservatism

History shows that the people of England have undergone drastic changes over the past century. Back in the Edwardian era, the British were very culturally conservative, unlike the countries surrounding them. They promoted a bourgeois notion of national identity in their museums, but many stressed that it had little relation to their everyday life. This was emblematic of their attitude as a whole, in that they thrived off being seen as being very elegant and lavish but might be perceived as snobbish or narcissistic. Women were also harshly criticized if their actions and beliefs didn’t align with that of society. The film *A Room with a View*, directed by James Ivory, portrays the English culture wonderfully, particularly the roles of women in the early 20th century, and the stark difference of theirs and other European cultures. The movie was made during the Thatcherism Era, in which many new beliefs were espoused. These revolved around the opposition of liberalism and non-British, and the pro-British. *A Room with a* View is about a young woman, Lucy Honeychurch, traveling on vacation in Italy, a much less limiting country, with her older cousin, Charlotte Bartlett, who is a very conventional, restrictive English woman. Lucy meets George, an Italian man around her age who is very carefree, and assertive, in contrast to the personality of Charlotte. While Charlotte tries to enforce her conservative opinions into Lucy, Lucy can’t seem to deny what she is feeling towards George throughout the film. The film underscores the idea of the inability to control whom one falls in love with, and that one cannot be judged by his or her cultural background. In comparison to real life, the film can be described as culturally conservative to a certain magnitude, in that it is definitely exhibited throughout the film, but the significance is directed on the overcoming of the conservatism.

The first time we are introduced to the cultural conservatism of the British is when the two women meet the Emerson’s, the father and his son, George. Charlotte and Lucy complain about not having a window in their room so they can have a view and the Emerson’s offer to exchange for their room, which has their desired room feature. I was astounded by how Charlotte got offended by such a courteous, gentlemanly gesture. She possibly could have assumed that Mr. Emerson only provided the service in hopes that he would get a returned favor, but it just goes to show the extent of her reserved lifestyle. Furthermore, she seemed overly expressive of her ways of thinking to Lucy, which I believe to be her way of trying to manipulate Lucy. This is another suggestion of conservatism, in regards to Charlotte’s tendency to repress others, and not allow them to have their own views and opinions. Charlotte was the epitome of conservatism within the film. After she caught Lucy being kissed by George, she quickly stops the scene before it progressed further and went into a tirade about her irrelevant story of her own experiences of a man who seemed to hurt her emotionally. Even after her cousin’s suppression, Lucy seemed to stay drawn to George, possibly attracted to his unique personality that she has never experienced before. Later in the film, Lucy is to be married to an English man named Cecil, who is a dull, scholarly, egotistical English man. Conforming to the conventional English stereotype, Cecil is very reserved. He asks Lucy if he can kiss her, and when she accepts, he does it in a self-conscious and awkward fashion so as to not offend her, but ends up making the entire scene unbearable to watch due to the discomfort caused to both parties. A notable fact about the film that suggests conservatism is that many scenes include the notion of having to ask to do something, rather than having the audacity or common social knowledge to just go ahead and do it.

The Italians’ culture and social norms are depicted much different in the film from the British. When George approaches Lucy, he is self-assured and assertive, whereas Cecil is very unconfident and attempts to ask the lady for permission. This is not only a case of self-confidence issues for Cecil but also showcases the cultural difference between the two. The Italians are very upfront with their emotions, and will act upon their emotions, given an opportunity. That is exactly what the unreserved George Emerson does when he takes Lucy by surprise and kisses her without making any conversation. At this point in the film, Lucy is still ambiguous of how she feels about the Italian’s straightforwardness; she is still influenced by her conservative cousin and tries to follow the ways of the traditional British ways. It was interesting to note how the British female roles in this film responded to many things that may not be as serious to people of other cultures, but resemble red flags in their eyes. From watching the movie, I’ve noticed that the women were to act very elegant and not very forward when approaching men, fitting to the conventional beliefs. According to the British Library UK website, “a young girl was not expected to focus too obviously on finding a husband. Being ‘forward’ in the company of men suggested a worrying sexual appetite. Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction.” This quote talks directly about women’s roles in the Edwardian Era, in which they were very reserved towards approaching men and were likely to marry men for wealth and prestige. This also holds true to how the English advocated for a bourgeoisie facade for others to see and that they would like to marry into riches, propping up their image. They were also believed to hold a lot of innocence.

Things took a turn when it got to the point in the film where Lucy’s cultural conservatism was challenged. For instance, when she accidentally saw all the men taking a bath at the lake, running around bare naked and wrestling with each other in a playful manner. After her confrontations with George, she heads back to London to marry Cecil in an attempt to embrace her conservatism. However, George manages to move to London, and Lucy is forced to battle her love for him because she knows he’s the exact opposite of what she had in mind of her future love. Her first step in tearing down her conservative walls built in by her cousin and other probable relatives in her life was to break off the marriage with Cecil and telling him how much they didn’t belong together. I thought the film did an excellent job in creating this scenario that provokes Lucy to confront her intentions and stop running away from her problems, which seemed to do a lot in the film. In the end, she realizes she can’t run away to Greece because she was only running away from her true love. Her love with George is symbolic of her breakaway from conservatism. The Emerson’s act as outsiders to the protagonists in this film and seem to hold values and traits that aren’t present in the females. In the end, Lucy learns the importance of these virtues and she shifts her entire outlook.

Women in the Edwardian era were still unequivocal to men in their roles in society, and this film clearly depicts their cultural conservatism. Although convention varies between countries, this film definitely contained high depths of it in some aspects, particularly in the roles of females. It suggested that the British society as a whole had a lot of women who couldn’t rationally think for them and were accustomed to following the system. The whole conception of Lucy breaking out of this mind trap, as if it were some kind of portal into a new dimension to change her perception, was very intriguing to me. All in all, the extent to which *A Room with a View* is described culturally conservative entirely depended on Charlotte’s coercing of Lucy and Lucy’s response to her. In this case, the film showcased a high intensity of traditionalism. A good amount showed that the female gender is socially restricted and the repressed British contrasted with the Italians. In the end, Lucy was almost converted in a sense and even Charlotte was taken by surprise when she realized how flawed her way of life was and that she couldn’t manipulate Lucy anymore. Moreover, this film raised the question of whether or not cultural background truly matters in a case of love and tackled on female rights issues. This movie did an excellent job of exposing the problems of being too conservative to the point where it gets in the way of your vision of love and it absolutely portrayed the overshadowing of it throughout the film. *A Room with a View* is culturally conservative, to an above average extent, only because there is so much freethinking within the film to balance out against the constrained philosophies.

Works Cited

http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century