

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION AS SEEN IN THE FILM *MONA LISA SMILE* DIRECT BY MIKE NEWELL

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Abstract: This research analyzes the role of women in education as represented in the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) directed by Mike Newell. The study aims to identify the traditional roles imposed on women in the 1950s and to examine how these roles are constructed through cinematic representation. This research applies feminist theory, particularly Betty Friedan's concept of *The Feminine Mystique* and Stephanie Coontz's analysis of postwar domestic ideology, to explore how women's education was directed toward marriage and domestic fulfillment rather than intellectual independence or professional careers. In addition, Mario Klarer's film theory, especially the spatial and acoustic dimensions, is used to analyze how visual composition, classroom space, and sound elements reinforce gender expectations. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, using dialogues and selected scenes as primary data supported by relevant academic sources. The findings reveal several traditional educational roles, including educated companion, intelligent homemaker, consumerism agent, pressure to abandon education for marriage, decline of professional ambition, and sex-directed curriculum. The research concludes that the film critiques restrictive gender norms while simultaneously presenting education as a potential space for women's resistance, self-awareness, and empowerment.

Keywords: *Women's Education, The Feminine Mystique, Mona Lisa Smile, Mario Klarer, Film Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Film is a literary and cultural medium that reflects social realities and ideological values of a particular era (Chatman, 1978; Monaco, 2000). Beyond entertainment, film functions as a social text that constructs meaning through narrative, visual composition, and sound. One film that strongly reflects gender ideology is *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), directed by Mike Newell. Set in Wellesley College during the 1950s, the film portrays women's educational experiences

within a conservative academic institution shaped by patriarchal norms.

During the post–World War II era, American society strongly promoted domestic ideology. Women were encouraged to prioritize marriage and motherhood rather than intellectual independence or professional careers. Although higher education was accessible, it often functioned as preparation for becoming refined wives instead of autonomous individuals. Betty Friedan (1963) describes this condition as “the feminine mystique,” a cultural belief that women’s fulfillment is naturally found in domestic life. Similarly, Stephanie Coontz (1992) explains that the idealization of the nuclear family in the 1950s reinforced restrictive gender roles through social institutions, including education. Betty Friedan’s concept of *The Feminine Mystique* is employed as the primary feminist framework, while Mario Klarer’s film theory, particularly the spatial and acoustic dimensions, is used to analyze the film’s visual composition and sound structure.

The categorization of film analysis by Klarer is into three interconnected dimensions: spatial, temporal and acoustic. These dimensions serve as analytical tools for examining how visual composition, time structure and sound contribute to meaning in film.

1. Spatial Dimension

This refers to the organization of space within the film, which is a crucial element in shaping meaning and visual interpretation. According to Mario Klarer (2004), as a visual medium, film relies heavily on spatial arrangements, such as *mise-en-scène*, camera positioning and editing, to construct narrative significance. In this study, the spatial dimension encompassed the following elements:

- a. Lighting referred to the deliberate manipulation of light to create a visual atmosphere and emphasize particular meanings within a scene. Klarer explained that lighting was not merely technical, but also symbolic; it could shape mood, highlight characters and guide the viewer’s emotional response. Natural or artificial light was used to create the impression of realism, intimacy, tension or ideological contrast within the film space.
- b. Camera angle describes the positioning of the camera in relation to the subject, for example high-, eye-level, or low-angle shots. According to Klarer’s framework, camera angles served as a visual strategy to depict power relations, dominance, vulnerability or equality among characters. The choice of angle influences how the audience perceives the characters and their social or ideological positions within the

narrative.

- c. Camera movement refers to the motion of the camera during a shot and includes panning, tilting, tracking and zooming. Klarer emphasized that camera movement contributes to the dynamic construction of space by directing attention and altering perspective. Through movement, films can create dramatic intensity, follow character actions or reveal spatial relationships that would remain static in still images.
- d. Editing is the process of selecting, arranging and connecting individual shots to form a coherent visual sequence. In Klarer's theory, editing played a decisive role in shaping spatial continuity and meaning by controlling rhythm.

2. Temporal Dimension

The temporal dimension referred to the representation and manipulation of time within the filmic narrative. Klarer (2004) stated that film differed from other literary forms in its ability to visually alter time through cinematic techniques. The temporal dimension in film included the following aspects:

1. Slow and fast motion are techniques that manipulate the speed of recorded images. According to Klarer, these techniques served to intensify the emotional impact of scenes, emphasize specific moments or compress everyday actions. Slow motion draws attention to significant details, while fast motion accelerates events to create contrast or highlight routine activities.
2. Flashback referred to a narrative technique that shifted the storyline from the present to events in the past. Klarer described flashback as a method of disrupting linear chronology to provide background information, psychological depth, or narrative explanation. Through flashbacks, films reconstructed past experiences that influenced characters' motivations and the development of the plot.

3. Acoustic dimension

The acoustic dimension referred to sound as an essential cinematic element that complemented visual representation. Klarer (2004) emphasized that sound in film extended beyond dialogue and contributed significantly to narrative meaning by creating atmosphere, realism, and emotional resonance. The acoustic dimension consisted of the following elements:

- a. In film, dialogue functions as the spoken language exchanged between characters, serving as a primary vehicle for narrative progression and character development. According to Klarer, dialogue in film operates similarly to dramatic texts, revealing conflicts, ideologies and relationships while interacting closely with visual elements.
- b. The soundtrack referred to the musical accompaniment that was either specifically composed or selected for a film. Klarer observed that music shaped the audience's emotional response and guided their interpretation of scenes. Soundtracks reinforce mood, intensify drama and often signal thematic significance within the narrative.
- c. Sound effects included all non-musical and non-dialogue sounds produced by objects, environments or actions. According to Klarer, they enhanced realism and spatial depth by creating an auditory illusion of the filmic world. These sounds reinforced visual cues and strengthened the audience's immersion in the narrative setting

Despite many discussions on feminism and gender stereotypes, limited research specifically analyzes how women's roles in education in the 1950s are represented through film using both feminist and cinematic approaches. Therefore, this study aims to examine (1) how traditional roles of women in education are portrayed in *Mona Lisa Smile* and (2) how these roles are constructed through cinematic elements.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. The primary data source is the film *Mona Lisa Smile* directed by Mike Newell. The data consist of dialogues, scenes, and visual elements that represent women's roles in education. The analysis is divided into two stages. First, feminist theory, particularly Betty Friedan's concept of *The Feminine Mystique*. This research concludes that *Mona Lisa Smile* represents women's roles in education as shaped by ideological and institutional forces that confined women to domestic expectations in 1950s America. Through Betty Friedan's concept of *The Feminine Mystique*, the findings show that women's education was directed primarily toward marriage and domestic fulfillment rather than intellectual independence. Stephanie Coontz's historical perspective further explains how post-World War II family ideology normalized this domestic orientation and positioned higher education as preparation for ideal wifehood. The analysis identifies six dominant roles imposed on women in education, including educated companion, intelligent homemaker,

consumerism agent, pressure to withdraw for marriage, decline of professional ambition, and sex-directed curriculum.

Using Mario Klarer's spatial and acoustic framework, this study also demonstrates that these ideological expectations are reinforced through cinematic techniques such as classroom confinement, hierarchical spatial arrangements, framing, lighting, and controlled dialogue delivery. These elements subtly present structural gender norms as personal choices. Ultimately, the film critiques the restrictive educational system of the 1950s and portrays education as a potential space for intellectual awakening. Future research may explore similar gender representations in other historical films or apply different feminist perspectives to expand discussions on women's educational empowerment in media.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Traditional Roles and Norms in Education in the Film *Mona Lisa Smile*

Based on the research questions and objectives outlined in Chapter I, the writer has analyzed traditional roles and educational norms imposed on women as depicted in the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003). Set in the 1950s at Wellesley College, the film presents an elite women's institution that, despite its academic prestige, reinforces conservative gender expectations aligned with what Betty Friedan terms *The Feminine Mystique*. By integrating Friedan's framework with Stephanie Coontz's historical perspective, this analysis identifies how women's education was strategically shaped to support domesticity rather than professional independence.

a. Educated Companion

The educated companion is a concept of women's roles in which higher education is not seen as a means of self-development or professional achievement, but rather as a means of performing domestic roles in a more "valuable" way. The writer cited a dialogue that reflects the Educated Companion in the film *Mona Lisa Smile*.

Dialogue (1:01:19-1:01:37)

Katherine : *Then why not get married as freshmen?*

That way you could graduate without actually stepping foot on campus.

Betty : *Don't disregard our tradition just because you're subversive.*

Katherine : *Don't disrespect this class just because you're married.*

Betty : *Don't disrespect me just because you're not.*

Betty's authority in the classroom discussion is implicitly reinforced by her marital status

his is further supported by Coontz (2011), who notes that in the 1950s, a woman's education was often viewed as a 'social lubricant.' In the film, Betty's pride in being married while still a student demonstrates how the institution prioritizes producing wives who can navigate high-society circles for their husbands' professional benefit. This aligns with Friedan's criticism that women's education is designed to support men's futures, not women's self-actualization.

b. Intelligent Comemakers

The concept intelligent homemaker refers to the role of educated women who use their knowledge and formal education primarily to take care of the household and educate their children. This concept was seen in a dialogue scene where Nancy Abbey taught household skills related to successful homemaking in Economic Class.

Dialogue (28:28-29:43)

Nancy : You've carefully planned your meal, set your table and arranged for a baby sitter.

Giselle : Oh, we have a babies!

Connie : Yes, and I have twins!

Nancy : Then, surprise. It's and your husband's called to say that Smith and Jones and their wives.. have been invited at the boss's request.

Nancy : Ever the Wellesley girl.. You keep your cool and understand.. that the boss is probably testing you as much as your husband. What next?

Giselle : File for divorce?

Nancy : That's very funny. But the thing is, it's not a joke. A few years from now your sole responsibility... Will be taking care of your husband and children. You may all be here...for easy A...but the grade that matters the most is one he gives you, not me. You'll need to.

Giselle : Whatever you do...don't put the boss's wife next to your husband.

Betty : Why not?

Giselle : She's screwing him.

The concept of the 'intelligent homemaker' refers to educated women who use their knowledge and formal education primarily for household management and childcare. This concept can be seen in a scene from Economic Class, in which Nancy Abbey teaches household skills related to successful homemaking. Coontz (2011) refers to this phenomenon as the 'professionalization of the domestic sphere'. By presenting domestic tasks as being as complex and professional as running a business, educational institutions have convinced intelligent women that they do not need a career outside the home.

c. Consumerism Agent

Consumerism agents refer to the role of women who are positioned as the primary managers of household consumption needs. This concept is portrayed in a classroom scene when Katherine Watson presents several slides containing advertisements that depict women in domestic roles.

Dialogue (1:09:17-1:11:06)

Connie : That's just an advertisement

Katherine : Quiet! Today you just listen.

What will the future scholar see when they study us?

A portrait of woman today? There you are ladies.

The perfect likeness of Wellesley graduate.

Katherine : Magna cum laude, doing exactly what she was trained to do. Slide.

A Rhodes scholar. I wonder if recite Chaucer while she presses her husband's shirts. Slide.

Katherine : Now, you physics majors can calculate the mass and volume.. of every meat loaf you make.

Katherine : I didn't realize that by demanding excellence.. I would be challenging.. What did it say? What did it say? "The roles you were born to fill."

These dialogues illustrate how women's knowledge and education are not directed toward professional achievement, but instead toward adapting to an ideal domestic standard shaped by social expectations. Coontz (2011) argues that the economy of the 1950s was heavily dependent on this role, in which educated women became the main target of the 'appliance revolution'. By focusing their intelligence on choosing household goods, the capitalist structure ensured that women remained satisfied consumers rather than becoming professional competitors in the workplace. Katherine's statement, "The roles you were born to fill," emphasizes how consumer culture replaced women's search for intellectual meaning with domestic material fulfillment.

d. The pressure to "drop out" for marriage

The pressure to "drop out" for marriage refers to the social and institutional expectation that women should abandon their higher education and professional aspirations once they decide to marry. According to this concept, marriage and academic or career ambitions are considered incompatible, meaning that education is viewed as a temporary phase rather than a lifelong goal. This idea is most clearly illustrated by the character of Joan Brandwyn, one of Katherine Watson's most gifted students.

Dialogue (1:31:29-1:32:35)

- Joan* : *It was my choice. Not to go.
He would have supported it.*
- Katherine* : *But you don't have to choose.*
- Joan* : *No, I have to. I want a home, I want a family.
It's not something I'll sacrifice.*
- Katherine* : *No one asking you to sacrifice that, Joan. I just want you to understand that
you can do both. And marriage is not becomes obstacle for woman to get
education and maybe that education make you become a lawyer.*
- Joan* : *Think I'll wake up one day and not being a lawyer?*
- Katherine* : *Yes, I'm afraid you will.*
- Joan* : *Not as much as I'd regret not having a family. Not being there to raise
them. I know exactly what I'm doing, and it doesn't make me any less smart.*
- Joan* : *This must seem terrible to you.*
- Katherine* : *I didn't say that.*
- Joan* : *Sure you did. You always do. You stand in class and tell us to look beyond
the image, but you don't. To you, a housewife is someone who sold her soul
for center hall colonial. She has no depth, no intellect, no interest. You are
the want who said, I could do anything I wanted. This is what I want.*
- Katherine* : *Congratulation. Be happy.*

This dialogue illustrates how the pressure to 'drop out' for marriage operates not only through directed prohibition, but also through deeply internalized social values. Joan explicitly frames marriage and family as choices that require sacrifice, stating, "I have to", which suggests that pursuing both education and family life is not perceived as a realistic option within her social context.

Coontz (2011) adds that this pressure is reinforced by the 'early marriage crusade,' in which academic institutions often view the engagement of female students as a successful 'social graduation'. In the context of the film, Joan feels that her law degree from Yale is no longer relevant after she secures her marriage, reflecting Friedan's argument that women are encouraged to view education as only a temporary phase before assuming their primary identity as wives. This scene also reveals the emotional complexity of this pressure. Joan refuses to be labelled either a victim or unintelligent, insisting that her choice does not make her "less intelligent". This reinforces Friedan's criticism that the feminine mystique convinces women to voluntarily withdraw from education and professional ambition by redefining domestic life as the most meaningful and honorable goal. Through Joan's character, the film depicts how the pressure to 'leave education' for marriage becomes normalized and internalized as a personal choice, rather than being recognized as a structural limitation.

e. The decline of professional ambition

The decline in professional ambition refers to social and institutional conditions in which women's intellectual abilities and educational achievements are not directed toward long-term careers or leadership roles, but are considered secondary to marriage and domestic life. In this context, women's higher education is not designed to encourage professional ambition, but rather to hone personal qualities considered appropriate for prospective wives. This ideology is most clearly expressed in the dialogue between Katherine Watson and Professor Bill Dunbar after Katherine becomes increasingly frustrated with her students' lack of ambition.

Dialogue (1:12:40-1:13:00)

Katherine : Goddamn it! It's brilliant, really. A perfect ruse. A finishing school disguised as a college. They got me.

Bill : What do you expect? Katherine : More. More. I thought it was a place for tomorrow's leaders, not their wives.

Bill : Calm down, please.

Katherine : No, I will not!

This conversation reveals the decline of professional ambition within the institutional structure of Wellesley College. Katherine's statement that Wellesley is a "training school disguised as a college" highlights how higher education for women is presented as prestigious while there is quiet suppression of professional leadership ambitions. While the students were intelligent and academically capable, the institution did not encourage them to pursue ambitions beyond marriage. Katherine's disappointment echoes Friedan's critique that women's education often serves social appearance rather than professional preparation, being symbolic rather than functional. The phrase 'tomorrow's leaders, not their wives' highlights the central problem of diminished ambition women are educated in an elite environment, yet they are not expected to use their education to compete in the public or professional sphere.

According to Coontz, the 1950s educational system functioned as a barrier by convincing women that professional success was a threat to their "femininity" and their chances of a happy marriage. In the film, Bill's dismissive attitude represents this systemic barrier; he doesn't see the lack of ambition as a problem because the era's ideology, as Coontz argues, viewed a woman's career not as an opportunity, but as a potential "maladjustment" to her domestic destiny.

f. Sex-directed Education

The concept of sex-directed education is an educational system in which learning, discipline and intellectual development are structured according to traditional gender roles. In this model, women's education is not intended to foster autonomy, leadership or professional ambition, but rather to reinforce femininity, marriage and social conformity. Betty Friedan criticizes this form of education as a mechanism that channels women's intellectual potential into socially approved domestic roles, while discouraging deviation from prescribed norms. In *Mona Lisa Smile*, sex-directed education is most clearly represented through the conflict between Katherine Watson and President Carr, where institutional authority openly defends an educational philosophy rooted in gender expectations.

Dialogue (1:11:54-1:12:30)

Katherine : These girls... Are you proud, President Carr?

President : Yes, actually, I am.

Katherine : Well, you should be, I guess. Half of them are married.

The other half, give it a month or so. It's really only a matter of time.

They're biding time until somebody proposes!

President : A hundred years ago, it was inconceivable for a woman to be a college graduate. Perhaps you should look back to see how far we've come.

Katherine : These girls... Are you proud, President Carr?

President : Yes, actually, I am.

Katherine : Well, you should be, I guess. Half of them are married. The other half, give it a month or so. It's really only a matter of time. They're biding time until somebody proposes!

President : A hundred years ago, it was inconceivable for a woman to be a college graduate. Perhaps you should look back to see how far we've come.

This dialogue explicitly reveals how sex-segregated education operates at an institutional level. President Carr's pride in the students' marital status demonstrates that success at Wellesley is measured by adherence to traditional feminine roles rather than intellectual or professional growth. In this context, education functions as a refinement process a "socially acceptable delay" before domestic life—reinforcing Friedan's argument that academic pursuits for women were often secondary to their primary identity as future wives.

In *A Strange Stirring*, Coontz argues that elite women's colleges in the 1950s did not aim to oppress women through ignorance; rather, they sought to "contain" women's high intelligence so that it remained "safe" for the domestic status quo. This strategy ensured that while female students were granted access to rigorous academic environments, their

intellectual energy was channeled back into the private sphere, preventing them from challenging male dominance in public leadership.

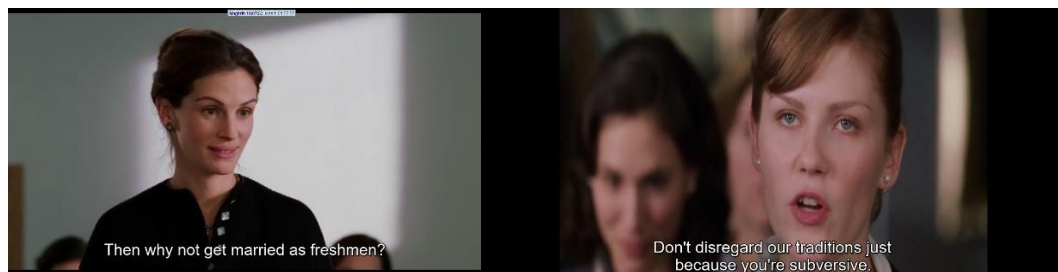
Through this lens, President Carr's defensive response to Katherine, reminding her how far women have progressed is a definitive example of this containment. She views education as an end in itself, a way to domesticate female brilliance so it remains a supportive "ornament" to marriage rather than a tool for professional autonomy. Ultimately, *Mona Lisa Smile* demonstrates how sex-directed education functions as a tool of social control, ensuring that women's achievements serve traditional expectations instead of individual liberation.

2. The Portrayal of Woman's Roles in Education in the 1950s in the Film *Mona Lisa Smile*

This research examines how *Mona Lisa Smile* represents and critiques women's roles in education in 1950s America. By identifying traditional educational norms imposed on women, the analysis explores how these roles are constructed and contested through narrative development and cinematic techniques.

a. Educated Companion

This scene depicted the role of women as educated companions through its spatial and acoustic dimensions. Rather than relying solely on dialogue, the film constructed meaning through visual composition, camera focus and vocal delivery, emphasizing the ideological conflict surrounding women's education.



Picture 1. Questioning the idea of getting married (1:01:19)

Picture 2. Subversive (1:01:28)

The scene was set in a classroom, a space associated with intellectual authority and academic legitimacy. Katherine Watson was positioned at the front of the class, highlighting her role as an instructor and challenger of institutional norms. The students were seated uniformly, visually reinforcing conformity. The camera's focus shifted to Betty Warren

through a close-up shot when she stated, "Don't disregard our traditions just because you're subversive." This close-up emphasized her facial expression and tone, allowing the audience to perceive her confidence and moral certainty. The blurred background subtly isolated her from the other students, suggesting her position as a spokesperson for traditional values.

The soft, balanced lighting in the scene reflected the normalized and unquestioned nature of traditional gender ideology within the institution. This visual neutrality served to reinforce the notion that conservative expectations towards women's education were natural and respectable rather than oppressive. In terms of the dialogue, it was delivered in a calm but assertive tone, particularly by Betty Warren. Despite her position as a student, her voice carried authority, indicating how deeply institutional values had been internalized by the women themselves. The absence of background music during the exchange intensified the confrontation's realism, directing full attention to the ideological tension expressed through speech. Katherine's measured but firm response contrasted with Betty's controlled tone, aurally representing the conflict between progressive ideas and traditional norms.

The film portrayed women's education as being valued not for professional or intellectual independence, but for refining women to be suitable companions within marriage. By employing Klarer's cinematic dimensions, the scene demonstrated how Mona Lisa Smile constructed the role of women as educated companions as a socially sanctioned ideal, reinforcing Friedan's argument that education for women in the 1950s was designed to support domestic roles.

b. Intelligent Homemaker

The film's portrayal of women's education is clear in the Nancy Abbey Economics class, which is a simulation of domestic life. The classroom is transformed into a site for domestic preparation, where Nancy Abbey is positioned as an unquestioned figure of authority. This reinforces the legitimacy of domestic expertise and suggests that the "true" use of a woman's intellect is the management of household crises. The students are arranged in a compact, rigid formation, dressed in conservative attire that communicates collective conformity. The static camera movement and limited visual depth suggest a lack of alternative perspectives, reflecting how women's roles are spatially confined within domestic boundaries. Instead of opening an intellectual frontier, the classroom becomes a controlled environment

that rehearses future domestic performances.



Picture 3. Giselle's sarcastic interruption (29:03)

In the acoustic dimension, dialogue is the primary vehicle for ideological transmission, dominating the scene. Nancy Abbey's speech is delivered in a calm yet authoritative tone, emphasizing a sense of certainty and inevitability. She speaks her specific statement regarding the students' 'sole responsibility' without hesitation, reinforcing the idea that domesticity is a destined path rather than an optional choice. Giselle's sarcastic interruption, "File for divorce?", briefly disrupts the lesson's serious tone, but this resistance is swiftly neutralized by Abbey's firm and controlling response. The absence of background music further emphasizes the didactic nature of the exchange, forcing the audience to focus entirely on the spoken message and the teacher's instructional authority.



Picture 4. Nancy Abbey's Domestic Economics Class (29:15)

Through these spatial and acoustic elements, the film ultimately presents the role of the 'intelligent homemaker' as the ideal outcome of 1950s higher education. This cinematic construction aligns with Betty Friedan's critique in that it shows intellectual capacity being redirected towards rationalizing domestic roles. By depicting the teaching of dinner party logistics and social etiquette in a classroom setting, the film visually and sonically captures the

'adjustment' of women to the domestic sphere, effectively demonstrating how the educational system actively produced the very confinement that Friedan described.

c. Consumerism agent

The cinematic portrayal of women as agents of consumerism is vividly depicted through the spatial and acoustic dimensions of the scene featuring projected advertisements in the classroom. From a spatial perspective, the classroom functions as a symbolic battleground where consumer ideology is visually transmitted through the dominance of projected images. The advertisement for 'Flex-Form Girdles', with its paradoxical slogan 'A girdle to set you free', dominates the visual frame, drawing the audience's focus away from the academic environment and towards the ideological authority of the image. The lighting further intensifies this visual hierarchy; the dimming of the classroom in favor of the brightly illuminated projection suggests that consumer culture effectively overshadows intellectual space. Within this arrangement, Katherine Watson's figure is partially obscured by the projection, symbolizing how the intellectual authority of women in the 1950s was subordinated to consumption-based femininity. The static camera framing and juxtaposition of medium shots of Katherine with close-ups of the advertisement create visual tension, reinforcing the rigidity of these institutionalized social expectations.



Picture 5. Advertisement (1:10:13)

In the acoustic dimension, the scene relies on Katherine's voice, which is both controlled and ironic, to challenge the cheerful, persuasive language of the advertisements. According to Klarer's theory that speech carries deep ideological weight, Katherine's vocal delivery highlights the dissonance between critical academic awareness and the normalized messaging of the 'feminine mystique'. The absence of background music amplifies this effect, directing the audience's full attention to the stark contrast between the visual imagery and the academic setting through the strategic use of silence.

d. The Pressure to “Drop out” for Marriage

In this section, the pressure on women to “drop out” for marriage was portrayed in this scene. The analysis focuses on the conversation between Joan Brandwyn and Katherine Watson, illustrating how marriage takes priority over education and work.



Picture 6. Joan's Decision (1:31:37)

In terms of spatial dimension, the scene shifts from a structured academic environment to an outdoor transitional setting, which acts as a bridge between the institution and the private sphere. This location symbolizes Joan's figurative exit from the intellectual world as she moves towards a domestic future. The film uses medium close-ups to emphasize Joan's emotional certainty when she says, “I want a home, a family. It's not something I'll sacrifice”, the film employs a technique identified by Mario Klarer as a means of heightening psychological intimacy. This intimate focus effectively conceals the systemic social pressures of the 1950s, presenting the decision to abandon her studies as a genuine personal choice rather than the result of institutional coercion.



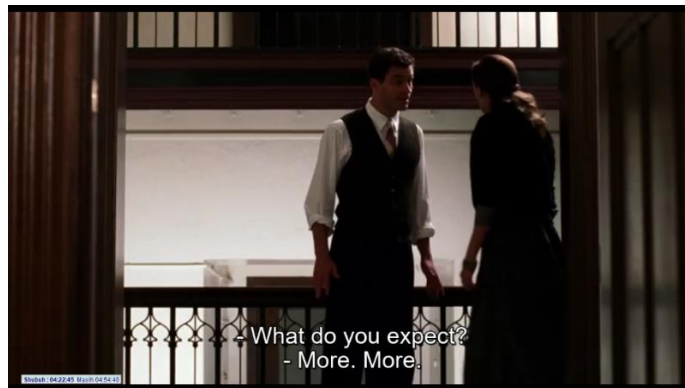
Picture 7. The Warning Against Domestic Sacrifice (1:32:12)

In terms of acoustic dimension, the scene relies on a minimalist restraint that intensifies the perceived realism of Joan's choice to leave. The total absence of background music compels the audience to focus solely on the weight of the dialogue, reinforcing the idea that Joan's departure is a rational and settled matter. Joan's steady, resolute vocal delivery

contrasts with Katherine's hesitant tone, positioning the former as the dominant authority in the conversation. This reversal of vocal power illustrates how deeply the 'feminine mystique' has been internalized, with an intellectually gifted student using her rhetorical skill to justify her exit from higher education. Ultimately, these cinematic elements portray the decision to trade an academic future for a wedding ring as a 'natural' life path, echoing Betty Friedan's critique of how 1950s society encouraged women to forfeit their potential in favor of domestic fulfilment.

e. The Decline of Professional Ambition

In this section, the decline of professional ambition was portrayed in this scene. The analysis focused on the confrontation between Katherine Watson and Bill Dunbar in the upper corridor of Wellesley College.



Picture 8. Katherine Confronts Bill in the Classroom (1:12:51)

From a spatial perspective, the scene was set in an elevated interior corridor overlooking the college's central hall. This rigid, symmetrical architectural setting was enclosed by wooden panels and iron railings. The structured design of the space symbolized institutional authority and hierarchy. Unlike the open and dynamic classroom scenes, in which ideas were debated collectively, this corridor served as a transitional and restrictive space, visually reflecting the narrowing of ambition.

The camera predominantly used medium shots to position Katherine and Bill facing each other, yet physically separated. This spatial gap reinforced the ideological conflict between them. Although they occupied the same academic environment, they represented conflicting visions of its purpose. Katherine believed that Wellesley should prepare women to be "tomorrow's leaders", whereas Bill's acceptance of institutional norms implied that women

were primarily being prepared to be future wives.

When Katherine said, 'I thought it was a place for tomorrow's leaders, not their wives,' the framing visually confined her within the architectural structure. The vertical lines of the balcony railing and the surrounding walls created a sense of confinement, suggesting that the institution itself limited female ambition. According to Klarer, spatial arrangement and mise-en-scène contribute to meaning by visually encoding power relations. In this case, the institutional space overshadowed Katherine's progressive vision, reinforcing the idea that professional ambition was constrained by the institution's structure.

The elevated setting also symbolized perspective and realization. Positioned above the main hall, the scene suggested a metaphorical moment of clarity. However, rather than facilitating transformation, the rigid architecture emphasized that the system remained unchanged. Thus, the space itself became a visual metaphor for institutional resistance to female leadership.

In terms of the acoustic dimension, the scene relies heavily on dialogue and minimal background sound. The absence of dramatic music directs the audience's attention entirely towards the ideological tension embedded in the conversation. In line with Klarer's assertion that restrained sound design can heighten realism, the film prioritizes spoken language as the main means of conveying meaning. The exchange 'What do you expect?' followed by Katherine's response 'More. More', is delivered with controlled intensity. The repetition of the word 'more' emphasizes dissatisfaction and unrealized potential acoustically. This brevity increases the impact of her statement, suggesting that women deserve opportunities far beyond marriage and domestic life.

Katherine's tone is firm and assertive, contrasting with Bill's defensive and measured responses. This creates an acoustic imbalance that reveals the conflicting perspectives within the institution. Although Katherine's voice conveys conviction, the calm, rational tone of the conversation prevents emotional escalation. This presents the ideological limitations as a normalized reality rather than dramatized oppression.



Picture 9. Katherine Expectation (1:12:53)

In terms of the acoustic dimension, the scene relies on dialogue with minimal background sound. This directs the focus towards the ideological tension of the conversation rather than dramatic flair. According to Klarer, this restrained sound design enhances the sense of realism, enabling the spoken exchange to become the main means of conveying meaning. The repetition of “More. More”, delivered with controlled intensity, emphasizes a sense of dissatisfaction and unrealized potential beyond the domestic sphere.

The contrast between Katherine’s assertive tone and Bill’s measured, defensive responses creates an acoustic imbalance that highlights conflicting institutional perspectives. By maintaining a calm and rational tone throughout, the film avoids emotional escalation and presents ideological limitations as a normalized social reality rather than an overt conflict. The steady pacing and quiet setting further depict the decline of women's professional ambition as a gradual institutional outcome, suggesting that gender expectations in the 1950s operated through subtle redirection rather than overt rejection.

f. Sex-Directed Education

In terms of spatial dimensions, the scene is set in President Carr’s formal office. Dark wood, classical décor and a central bust sculpture visually establish an environment of institutional authority and historical tradition. Unlike the classroom, this space is rigid and hierarchical. President Carr is seated behind a desk, while Katherine is framed standing, often off-centre. This spatial arrangement reinforces Carr’s role as guardian of conservative academic values. The office symbolizes a 'finishing school' environment, where Wellesley's classical *mise-en-scène* suggests that the purpose of education is to culturally refine women for marriage rather than prepare them for professional careers. Medium shots capture Katherine’s frustration at her students' rapid transition to domestic life, while steady,

composed close-ups of President Carr validate the institution's ideological stability.



Picture 10. President Carr's Office and Institutional Authority (1:12:05)



Picture 11. Sex Directed Education (1:12:14)

The absence of background music creates an acoustic environment that frames the ideological clash as a formal, normalized discussion rather than a heated confrontation. Katherine's urgent tone reflects her concern about the decline of career-oriented goals among her students, whereas President Carr's calm, measured delivery embodies institutional confidence. By maintaining such vocal control, Carr presents the transition to marriage as a dignified and logical conclusion to a Wellesley education. This cinematic combination of hierarchical framing and aural restraint portrays 'sex-directed' education as a subtle system that redirects intellectual independence towards supportive marital roles. It presents the containment of women's aspirations as the intentional fulfilment of institutional design.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that *Mona Lisa Smile* represents women's roles in education as shaped by ideological and institutional forces that confined women to domestic expectations in 1950s America. Through Betty Friedan's concept of *The Feminine Mystique*, the findings show that women's education was directed primarily toward marriage and domestic fulfillment rather than intellectual independence. Stephanie Coontz's historical perspective further explains how post-World War II family ideology normalized this domestic orientation and positioned higher education as preparation for ideal wifehood. The analysis identifies six dominant roles imposed on women in education, including educated companion, intelligent homemaker, consumerism agent, pressure to withdraw for marriage, decline of professional ambition, and sex-directed curriculum.

Using Mario Klarer's spatial and acoustic framework, this study also demonstrates that these ideological expectations are reinforced through cinematic techniques such as classroom confinement, hierarchical spatial arrangements, framing, lighting, and controlled dialogue delivery. These elements subtly present structural gender norms as personal choices. Ultimately, the film critiques the restrictive educational system of the 1950s and portrays education as a potential space for intellectual awakening. Future research may explore similar gender representations in other historical films or apply different feminist perspectives to expand discussions on women's educational empowerment in media.

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