

The Value Transformation of Betty Warren in *Mona Lisa Smile*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes a movie entitled *Mona Lisa Smile*. It is interesting that the movie contains the message about women's liberation movement reflected through the value transformation done by one of the characters, Betty Warren, which is why we decided to emphasize on the transformation as our main focus. We attempt to reveal the process of Betty Warren's value transformation by applying two concepts, which are the concept of Angel in the House and the concept of New Woman. We find out that Warren's experience of value transformation goes through several stages, which are from believing in her old values, going against the new modern values, finding disappointment toward her old values, then having a conflict within herself, and as the result, starting to consider and absorb the new values. The analysis leads to the fact that patriarchal values can be so strong because sometimes, women themselves are subconsciously acting as the agents.

Key words: Angel in the House, Liberation, New Woman, Transformation

Movies, nowadays, can be considered as a literature. It is because, whether or not something can be considered as literature can possibly depend on how the readers read it, and also the value judgement of the readers (Eagleton, 1996, p. 8). So, we choose *Mona Lisa Smile*, a romance drama movie, as our object of the study since it presents a magnificent story. A movie critic, Ebert (2003) stated that "the movie is more observant and thoughtful than we expect . . . we get to . . . imagine ourselves as a free spirit in a closed system, and as a student whose life is forever changed . . ." This lead the movie to get into 2003 box office list on rank 46 (in total of 100 movies), beating other great movies, such as *Bad Santa*, *Love Actually*, and many more. ("2003 Yearly," n.d.)

Mona Lisa Smile is a movie that portrays a story about how a modern teacher, Katherine Watson, provides new opportunities to her students who are mostly girls in a closed patriarchal system. What we find interesting in the movie is that there is a strong message of women's liberation movement portrayed in the movie through the transformation of the conservative Betty Warren, influenced by Watson. This story of transformation somehow leads us to a curiosity of finding how Betty Warren experiences a value transformation (from believing in her old value to believing in the new ones), and we aim to show that Warren's transformation takes place through several stages and there is also an effect that comes along with the transformation.

We find it interesting that even though many studies have been done on this movie (Tara D. Britt, 2007; Widya Ivani Putri, 2011), there is no study discussing about women's liberation movement that is somehow depicted through the transformation undergone by Betty Warren, who is actually not the main character of the movie. We wish to reveal that in order for someone to do a transformation (to become someone better), there is always a price to pay. We also want to specifically point out that sometimes a patriarchal dominance can be so strong because women have subconsciously become the agents or merely puppets of the values promoted by patriarchy.

As the result, we are going to use two concepts to support our analysis, which are the concept of Angel in the House, and also the concept of New Woman. The first concept, Angel in the House is derived from the Victorian era. The 'Angel in the House', according to McDowall (2011), was actually originated as a poem written by Coventry Patmore about his wife, Emily, who has done good deeds in nurturing her family (husband and six children) and finally died of tuberculosis. The emergence of this poem triggered Victorian gentlemen expectation to have a wife

like Emily, with not only physical beauty (appearance), but also innocence of manner (attitude) and also a full respect towards the husbands' order even though it goes against her own needs. The second concept, New Woman, according to Jusova (2005), "ranked among the most controversial phenomena in late-nineteenth-century Britain . . . this new generation of (mostly middle-class) emancipated women focused their critical look on the double gender standard, fought for women's right to systematic higher education, worked to penetrate male middle-class professions, and become notorious for their unflinching outspokenness on various intellectual and sexual questions." (p. 1).

THE FORMER BETTY WARREN

Betty Warren is an upper-class girl with the qualities needed in order to be the ideal woman. This is because she is used to the patriarchal values that revolve around her life ever since she was born. First value is related to education, which is the unwritten role of a woman to prepare themselves to be a proper companion for their future husband. In the movie, every new year of academy begins, there is an annual ritual when one of the Wellesley girls will lead by saying that she represents every woman that knocks the door of learning (Wellesley College) to awaken their spirits through hard work and dedicate their lives to knowledge. The scene somehow gives an image to the viewer that the society has so long held the understanding that besides physical beauty, girls need to also shape their intelligence through education. However, it is not for the girls' own basic need, but it is interesting to find out that surprisingly, as stated by Kelly (1992) in *Revolutionary Feminism*, the main reason is because even the "domestic women also required a proper education . . . to make domestic woman a proper companion for the professional man" (p. 16), or in other words, they need to prepare themselves for their future husbands. Here, the husbands become such a huge priority, as the result of the concept of Angel in the House.

Abbey: Your husband is at a crossroads in his career.

He's competing for promotion against two rivals, Smith and Jones.

To get the edge, you have wisely decided to invite the boss...

...and his wife to a dinner . . . Then, surprise... your husband's called to say that Smith, Jones and their wives... have been invited at the boss's request.

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

(Levy raises hand)

Abbey: Yes?

Levy: File for divorce?

Abbey: 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 an easy A... but the grade that matters the most is the one he (husband) gives you, not me.

As another support, from the text above, it can be seen how even the teacher herself, who is the educator of the young generation, has really held the belief that education for women is not more than just a tool to fulfill their future husbands requirements over an ideal wife. Because of this, no wonder the Wellesley girls, especially Warren as a really obedient girl, grow up by holding the beliefs that come from patriarchal society. The patriarchal society portrayed in the movie can be said as a product of the concept of the Angel in the House, where one of the related stereotypes silently stated that all women including Warren are, as stated by Gorsky (1992), expected to have particular traits or can also be said as strength which are "pure, charming, sympathetic, domestic, self-sacrificing, obedient, selfless . . ." (p. 25) that make themselves deserve to get a husband.

Second value, it is not necessary for a woman to get higher education or career opportunity since it is unimportant for a soon-to-be-housewife. The issue about pursuing higher education or career opportunity can be seen from a scene in which Warren and one of her friends, Broadwynn, talk about Broadwynn's plan to go to a law school.

Broadwynn: I've got a secret to tell you. You swear you won't gab to anyone? I got accepted early to Yale Law School.

Warren: To what?! Why?! You don't want to be a lawyer.

Broadwynn: Maybe I do.

From the text, it is interesting that Warren and Broadwynn, as two of the smartest girls in Wellesley College, has also unconsciously absorbed the value established by the society that indirectly says that women are expected not to strive for any higher education or career opportunity since it is not necessarily needed by a soon-to-be-housewife, and as the result, they do not really think about it anyway. The same concern about marriage also existed as a sort of unwritten rule way before the feminism rose. A woman should be socially and economically dependable to men and should only become a housewife. (Gorsky, 1992, p. 2).

Besides the values related to education issues, there are also values related to marriage, which is the only goal of a woman's life. Education is just one of the tools to help the women to reach this goal. Firstly, there is a value about how the society portrays an unmarried woman as unnatural. Betty Warren also has the same opinion about this and she shows it clearly to Giselle Levy, one of her friends who is a more modern-thinking student.

Levy: Women like Katherine Watson don't get married because they choose not to.

Warren: No woman chooses to live without a home, unless she's sleeping with her Italian professor.

This kind of belief about marriage that Warren strongly holds is undoubtedly as a result of how the patriarchal society has play its role so well. According to the value, it is unquestionable that a woman is a dependent creature and that is why, a woman needs to socially maintain a good relationship with men since, according to Gorsky (1992) "women who maintain socially acceptable relationship with men are 'good' . . ." (p. 2).

Secondly, even though a woman has get married, she should know how to place herself since she will experience some differences. Not only the marriage will make her unable to attend school and study as much as she wants, it will also demand her to be ready to hold all responsibility as a wife as much as a student.

Warren: *Married Wellesley girls have become quite adept at balancing obligations. One hears such comments as:*

"I baste the chicken with one hand and outline the paper with the other. "

While our mothers were called to work for Lady Liberty... it is our duty, nay, obligation to reclaim our place in the home... bearing the children that will carry our traditions into the future.

The quotation shows Warren's editorial that reflects how a married Wellesley girl has to show full responsibility to be a good housewife. Even though to dig for knowledge and finish education in Wellesley College is important, but a girl should never clean her hands off households just for the sake of striving a straight A in school subjects, like stated by McDowall (2011), "domestic cares of the household were expected to be kept hidden from the Victorian gentleman." Referring back to the first quotation in the beginning of this subchapter, it seems that even the education world shows respect to this unwritten destiny of a woman's life. Another important point is, even a flash of thought about divorce is so taboo for a married woman to think of. Since these patriarchal values have been revolving in a life of domestic and obedient girl like Betty Warren, she rejects all the values that go against the ones that she believes.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW VALUES AND THE REJECTION

For a girl like Warren, who is raised in the conservative society, the values that bind her has been like a religion. She never acts supportive toward all the new teachings or values that go against the ones she is holding, including the values that the new lecturer, Watson, brings. First is the value about the opportunity of getting on a higher step of education or even having a career life for woman that she tries to teach to Broadwynn.

Broadwynn: I want a home, a family. It's not something I'll sacrifice.

Watson: No one's asking you to sacrifice that, Joan. I just want you to understand that you can do both.

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

Based on the text above, Watson brings along new values that she believes to the conservative Wellesley College. Depicted from her conversation with Warren's friend, Broadwynn above, the forward thinker, Watson, believes that a marriage is just one of so many choices a woman can possibly have in her plate and she tries to open Broadwynn's eyes about the opportunity she has in front of her. However, Warren somehow feels distracted since a new figure shows up and states new possible choices a woman can have, a possibility for a woman to be free in dedicating her life to knowledge and pursuing a career life (instead of playing the role she is destined to). In contradictory with Watson's ideology about a woman with many possible opportunities, Warren thinks of marriage as a precious dream come true and a woman is lucky enough to be able to cherish the chance in her life.

Warren: Wake up, Joanie, wake up. Wake up. Okay, don't get up. Don't hear what I have to say about Tommy and Spencer... looking at an engagement ring for you.

Broadwynn: You're sure?

Warren: That's everything we always wanted, huh? . . . You're going to be Mrs. Tommy Donegal.

Warren's statement in the text above supports the stereotypes related to the concept of Angel in the House that indirectly says that being a good housewife is a woman's nature. She obviously tries to show Broadwynn that a woman does not have any other possible dream that is more beautiful than marriage, which also means that she shows rejection towards Watson's idea about opening new opportunities in education or pursuing career life that a woman can aim for.

Secondly, Warren shows even stronger rejection towards Watson's belief about a woman who can always have the right to be happy, no matter whatever they do.

Broadwynn: Beautiful! You've got everything you've ever dreamed of.

Warren: You will too.

Broadwynn: I've got a secret to tell you. You swear you won't gab to anyone? I got accepted early to Yale Law School.

Warren: To what?! Why?! You don't want to be a lawyer.

Broadwynn: Maybe I do . . . we never thought I'd get in.

Warren: Who's "we"?

Broadwynn: Miss Watson. She practically filled out my application for me.

Warren: You've got to be kidding me! What right does she have? You're getting married!

Broadwynn: First of all, there's no ring on this finger. Second, I can do both. I can.

Warren: You are this close to getting everything you ever wanted. And this close to losing it.

The conversation of Warren and Broadwynn above depicts Warren's detestation of Watson and her modern thinking she tries to plant on conservative Wellesley girls' mind, specifically through Broadwynn. By showing consideration about the idealized image of a woman who will feel completion after playing her role when getting to be a housewife, Warren, again, highlights the 'dependence' of a woman promoted by the stereotypes from Victorian era that is taught by the conservative patriarchal society and underestimates any sort of consideration about defying the norms related to the values, including a consideration of a way to reach higher education or career life.

Thirdly, Warren also build a huge wall over a point of view that is indirectly promoted by Watson about an unmarried woman as a free woman.

Student: I go first. Why aren't you married?

Watson: Well... That's poisonous. I'm not married because... I'm not.

Dunbar: Have you got a boyfriend?

Watson: Yes

Dunbar: You know, if you were mine, I'd never let you go.

Watson: I wouldn't have asked your permission.

There is no wonder that Warren considers Watson as unnatural because, based on the text, Watson proclaims the new unwritten perspective that sees an unmarried woman as naturally a free happy woman. Watson seems to have the similar belief with what feminism has so long been promoting, a belief which according to Gorsky (1992), "implies a philosophical questioning of traditional values and ideas, from women's intellectual and emotional capacities to male-female relationships to the ways women and men think, act, and feel" (p. 1). From the following text based on Warren's editorial, it is quite obvious that Warren proclaims a 'war' upon Watson's belief about unmarried woman as a free woman.

Warren: *One must pause to consider why Miss Katherine Watson instructor in the Art History Department has decided to declare war on the holy sacrament of marriage. Her subversive and political teachings encourage our Wellesley girls to reject the roles they were born to fill.*

Based on the quotations above, Warren somehow sees Watson's modern way of thinking and teaching as unbearable since it goes against what she sees as ideal. For a girl who was born in a strict conservative society, she is so used to the image of an ideal or good woman who has the feminine traits as expected by the society which are pure, dispassionate, and submissive, and many else. Because of that, she immediately categorizes Watson's ground-breaking way of thinking and teaching about unmarried woman as 'subversive'. However, the interesting part is, the text somehow shows that even though Warren has silently proclaimed her detestation over Watson and her point of views, she somehow also has thought deeper about Watson and her subversiveness. It can be seen through how she expresses her concern about Watson's choice of singleness as just a cliché reason for an unmarried woman to cover the fact that no men want her. Warren's thoughts about Watson modern behavior even goes deeper that they begin to lead Warren to consideration over what she has underestimated before.

THE TRANSITION

As a domestic and obedient girl, Betty Warren is considered as an ideal woman based on the qualities determined by the society she lives in, qualities which a good girl is required to have. Because of that, new modern set of values will definitely distracts her. Since Warren chooses to always act sarcastic to the values that her new lecturer, Watson, brings instead of ignoring them, it means that she has thought about them anyway since she spends her time to criticize on Watson's subversiveness. Supported by the fact that Warren begins to feel disappointment toward the old values she has been dedicating her life to, Watson's principles which are reflected through her teaching as well as her lifestyle begin to sneak into Warren's consideration and then leads her to a conflict within herself.

The disappointment of Warren begins without even she realized. Firstly, her disappointment starts appearing through her own husband. As a newly married woman, Warren feels a pride of completion because she finally gets everything she ever needs to be a good housewife. However, she has to face the fact that not everything about marriage is as blissful as what people tell her.

Spencer: I just got a call. They need me in New York tomorrow.

Warren: Joan and Tommy are here. Can't you leave in the morning?

Spencer: Then I'd miss the meeting.

Since household is all that a woman should take care of in house, Warren finds it disappointing that the society's values require no woman to be a busy body over her husband's stuff outside the house because it is his own business as a breadwinner. This role is identical as aimed by the Victorian gentlemen in Victorian era, that a woman should have beauty (appearance) and good manner (attitude; outspokenness is considered as rebellious), and also with a full respect towards the husbands' order even though it goes against her own needs (she has to sacrifice her own needs and prioritize her husband's first in order to please him), similar with what Coventry Patmore write about his wife, Emily, in the poem *Angel in the House* (McDowall, 2011). However, Warren can

no longer bear the fact that there are also many dark sides about marriage that nobody in her conventional society has taught her.

Warren: Excuse me. Have you seen Spencer? I can't find him anywhere.

Donegal: Actually, Spencer asked me to take you home. He has this meeting...

Warren: . . . In New York. Thank you.

Mrs. Warren: Honey, what are you doing here?

Warren: I'm staying the night.

Mrs. Warren: Spencer won't mind?

Warren: Spencer won't notice. He's in New York again. Working.

Mrs. Warren: He's working hard for both of you.

Warren: Don't lie for him, Mother. He does it so well for himself.

Mrs. Warren: You're going to turn around, go home, fix your face, and wait for your husband. This is the bargain you made, Elizabeth. We all did.

Warren: So you're not gonna let me stay in my own house?

Mrs. Warren: Spencer's house is your house now. Believe me, it's for your own good.

The first text above seems to give an image of how Warren actually finds out a wall between her husband and her that leads her to the feeling of being left alone. Second disappointment, depicted through the second text, comes from her mother who seems to be a cheering supporter of what her husband does toward her, instead of offering protection.

Facing the disappointments toward those patriarchal values she used to prioritize, Warren tries to look closer to herself. She eventually finds herself trapped in a conflict between what she always sees as ideal and what can bring her the real happiness which then lead her to express her disappointment to some people, who can barely be said as the right cause of her disappointment.

Warren: It must be torturous running after a man who doesn't care about you... who's in love with someone else, who hates you! He hates you!

Broadwynn: Betty...

Warren: ... and it hurts! He doesn't want me . . . he doesn't sleep with me.

He...

Levy: I know.

First is to her friend, Levy. The quotation above shows Warren's pity on Levy who is ignored by the person she loves, Professor Bill Dunbar, but interestingly, the text above actually depicts Warren's anger toward her own condition instead of her friend's, Levy. Levy, who has found out about the affair of Betty's husband, instantly understand Warren's judgemental attitude toward her. Warren just cannot seem to express her disappointment to the right target.

Second, not only does Warren show her disappointment by pouring it into Levy, Warren also tries to express her disappointment of her old values toward her mother, the one who used to be her role model, who has taught her about the values.

Mrs. Warren: I've spoken with Mrs. Jones. There will be no divorce.

There's always a period of adjustment. I've assured her that you will try for a year.

Warren: Look at this, Mother. (refers to the picture of MonaLisa)

Mrs. Warren: Spencer will try as well. According to her, he's really very upset. You should call him.

Warren: She's smiling. Is she happy?

Mrs. Warren: The important thing is not to tell anyone.

Warren: She looks happy. So, what does it matter? . . . Let me tell you something. Not everything is as it seem.

On the text above, it shows how Warren's disappointment has lead her to reach the point where she is literally questioning for her own happiness. Warren intends to show her mother that just because a girl looks happy, does not mean she really is happy. However, what we consider as interesting is, Warren does not seem to pour all the output of the conflict within herself to the right target or the

root cause, which is the authority of the patriarchal system itself, but she expresses all the disappointment to fellow women, who are actually fellow victims of the tradition. This is because women, including Warren, have subconsciously become the agents/puppets of patriarchy by carrying the tradition and that is why, Warren does not even realize the existence of patriarchy that has been so long marginalized the women.

THE NEW BETTY WARREN

In the previous subchapter, we discuss Warren's disappointments which lead her to a conflict within herself that brings her into a dilemmatic condition between her disappointment of the old values itself and her hesitation of the new values. Warren still seems too weak to be able to channel her disappointment to the right target. In this chapter, we want to show that, supported by the injection of new modern values that a new figure, the lecturer, Katherine Watson brings, Warren finally gets her mind opened and makes her decision to shoot the root cause of her disappointment by leaving all the old values behind and becoming a new person with new values that she used to go against for.

Firstly, Warren finally sees the opportunity of a woman to be happy in other way than getting marriage as highly considerable.

Mrs. Warren: Elizabeth, I don't see Spencer.

Warren: Excuse me, Mother. Miss Watson, can you help me get in touch with your friend in Greenwich Village?

Mrs. Warren: What do you need in Greenwich Village?

Warren: An apartment. I filed for a divorce this morning. And since we know I'm not welcome at your house... You remember Giselle Levy? What did you call her? "A New York kite." That's it. Well, we're going to be roommates.

Watson: Greenwich Village?

Warren: Yeah. For a while. Then, who knows? Maybe law school. Yale, even.

The quotation above depicts how Warren has changed, from a girl who lives by the rules and obligation to a girl who is completely courageous to take action without being suppressed by any idealized image that she used to believe. Warren finally has the guts to define her own happiness, which she cannot find in her marriage. To be specific, an opportunity to get a higher education is finally being considered by Warren as another possible way to get her personal happiness. She decides to start living by the example given by Watson. It indicates that, from believing in the old traditional values established by the conventional society she lives in, Warren opens her eyes to new perspective of how a marriage has been set as an overrated precious dream come true. Warren's new principles on values about both woman's role in education or career opportunity and marriage resemble new women's principle as pictured by the concept of new woman. It is stated by Jusova (2005) that "number of them (women) refused the traditional marriage scenario, opting for a single lifestyle and professional career instead" (p. 1).

Secondly, the quotation also shows the change of Warren's state of feeling. Based on the text above, Warren's decision to ignore her mom and choose to leave instead shows how she feels more secure and free comparing to herself in my discussion on the previous subchapter, when she was still married, with all the conflict and emptiness she used to feel. However, by starting a new chapter of her life that can possibly be a brighter one, it also means that Warren needs to lose her comfort zone, which is from being the part of the dominant society with major power (patriarchy) to being the outsiders (the ones that she used to call as 'subversive'). This is the price that she has to pay in order to try another way to gain her personal happiness.

CONCLUSION

This thesis discuss about the process of a transformation, to be specific, the transformation of value which is experienced by Betty Warren in the movie, *Mona Lisa Smile*. This transformation somehow closely related to women's movement which is well known as feminist movement since

Warren is also being met by typical struggle as faced by former feminist. Thus, we use two concepts to analyze the discussion; the concept of Angel in the House and also the concept of New Woman.

The second chapter verifies that the process of Betty Warren's value transformation goes through several stages. The first subchapter shows Warren's fierce belief of her old values related to education and marriage issues which are promoted by the conventional patriarchal society she lives in. The next subchapter shows the continued process, which is Betty Warren's rejection toward the new values that come along with the new forward-thinking lecturer, Katherine Watson, in her conservative school, Wellesley College. The third subchapter shows the transition that Warren experiences afterwards, in which Warren finds disappointment towards her old values, which leads her to a conflict within herself and a mistake in expressing the output of the conflict to the fellow victims. Finally, the last subchapter gives the image of the new Warren after she absorbs the new values. This subchapter shows the new Warren, who has become the type of woman she used to go against for.

To conclude, the analysis has proven that in order for someone to do a transformation to become someone better, there will always be a price to pay. The analysis also indicates that sometimes, a patriarchal system can be so strong because women have subconsciously become the agents, who carry the values of the tradition established by patriarchal society through generations.

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