

**“In any cultural context, deeply embedded values and attitudes can be difficult to change.”**

**Compare the extent to which the above statement is valid in relation to your understanding of the cultural context in the texts on your comparative course.**

**(2013 A Q1)**

In all three of the texts I have studied as part of my comparative course, ‘Brooklyn’ directed by John Crowley, ‘Wuthering Heights’ (WH) by Emily Brontë and ‘By the Bog of Cats’ (BTBOC) by Marina Carr, the rigidity of long held attitudes and deep-rooted values prove impossible for the characters to alter time and again. In ‘WH’ the deep personal connection between Catherine and Heathcliff fails to overcome the value their 18th century society places on social class, while in BTBOC a similar bond between Carthage and Hester is destroyed by their culture’s attitude towards Hester Swane and her “tinker blood”. Only in Brooklyn does the main character, Eilis, succeed to some extent in shaking loose the repressive chains of traditional values to find happiness with her husband Tony in the more progressive setting of 1950s New York.

In both ‘BTBOC’ and ‘WH’, property and land are valued unflinchingly to an almost religious extent by the texts’ rural inhabitants. This becomes obvious in ‘BTBOC’ when Carthage marries Caroline Cassidy, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, over Hester, a woman with whom he has been involved for many years. Hester spends the majority of the text attempting to alter Carthage’s attitude towards land, which he covets above all else. By the end it is apparent she has been unable to rid him of his deeply embedded instinct to choose land over love. Her final words to him assure him that “you’ll remember me, Carthage, when the dust settles, when ya grow tired scouring acres and bank balances” but it is difficult to see Carthage shaking loose the land fever which has been bred into him by his forefathers on the bog. Carthage’s obsession with land is mirrored in ‘WH’ by Heathcliff’s quest to obtain the Heights and Thruscross Grange. In the second half of the novel he gives up all hope of moral redemption in pursuit of the Grange, simply because “I want the triumph of seeing my descendant fairly lord of their estates”. While, unlike Carthage,

Heathcliff pursues acres for revenge, the land lust that defines both men is the same. Both are victims of an inherited obsession which can not be changed for the good of those they love, or in Heathcliff's case: their descendants. This value can be seen to a lesser, more positive extent in 'Brooklyn' when Tony takes pride in securing the land on Long Island to build himself and Eilis a home. He shows the land to Eilis in the hope that its inherent value will convince her to marry him. As the camera frames a nervous Tony from over Eilis' shoulder we are unsure whether this gesture has served to impress or disgust a woman with little time for cultural tradition, but as the camera pans out and the couple embrace it becomes clear that the age old value of land still holds a place in her heart.

The attitude towards social class in the cultural contexts of both 'WH' and 'BTBOC' is a deeply ingrained and highly prejudicial one. The main character's choice of spouse reveals, in both texts, a strongly held societal belief in the importance of social order and the value placed upon upward social movement. In 'WH', Catherine chooses Edgar Linton over her soulmate Heathcliff because of Linton's favourable social standing and wealth. According to Catherine "it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now". Despite her love for him, he is penniless and thus unacceptable suitor. Catherine's decision to marry Edgar is instinctual and comes from years of social conditioning. This is true also of Carthage in 'BTBOC'. He agrees to marry Caroline who is set to inherit a large amount of land, over the mother of his child, Hester, who owns nothing but "a caravan on the side of a bog". Carthage's urge to move upwards on the social hierarchy of the bog of cats is as natural as Catherine's need to be "the greatest woman in the neighbourhood" of Wuthering Heights and is born out of the same imbedded social attitude. Social class becomes a factor in 'Brooklyn' when Eilis is increasingly pushed towards Jim. Her mother's observation that "he'll be in that big house on his own" is a subtle hint as to just how desirable a son in law Jim is. To satisfy the values of those in Enniscorthy, Eilis is expected to marry Jim and live prosperously in "that big house". However, unlike Carthage in 'BTBOC' or Catherine in 'WH', Eilis overcomes this attitude by returning to America, even if she doesn't manage to change it.

All three of these texts reveal a cultural context in which women are repressed by deep-rooted societal attitudes and values. This is particularly clear in 'BTBOC' and can be seen through the characters' attitudes towards the marriage of Carthage and Caroline. In his wedding day speech, her father Xavier says he "can't think of a better man than Carthage Kilbride to take over the care of my only child", laying bare a culture in which women are passed from one man to another to be provided for. This quote encapsulates the powerlessness of female characters which is mirrored in 'WH'. By attempting to fulfil her own personal goals, Catherine is deemed by her confidant Nelly

Dean to be “ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying”. These duties are rigid and unchanging in the worlds of both of these texts and both Catherine and Caroline anticipate a life in which they must serve their husband because, in Xavier Cassidy’s words they have been reared up “for another man’s benefit.” Catherine, despite her fiery character, can not change society’s preconditions and neither can Caroline’s view that Carthage’s bond with Hester is “more important and real than anything we have”. Brooklyn is unique among the three texts in the way it portrays a female character successfully overcoming societal misogyny by challenging attitudes towards the role of Women. Unlike Caroline or Catherine, Eilis is able to use marriage to empower herself to escape the repressive world of Enniscorthy. When she is confronted by her old boss Ms Kelly, who attempts to blackmail her by revealing her secret marriage in America (one which would be unacceptable to the people of Enniscorthy) she proudly announces that her name “is Eilis Fiorello” before telling her mother the truth and returning to America.

It seems clear to me that the challenges facing the characters of ‘Brooklyn’, ‘WH’ and ‘BTBOC’ all have their roots in the deeply embedded values and attitudes held by the cultures they live in. In none of these three texts do the characters manage to change them. In ‘WH’ Catherine must marry Edgar to uphold the social order, despite the passion she has for Heathcliff. Conversely in ‘BTBOC’ the very same societal order prevents Hester from marrying Carthage and moving up the social ladder. Heathcliff and Carthage themselves are both consumed by an inbred land lust which prevents them from obtaining happiness, swapping it in favour of the acres their cultural context values. Meanwhile we see the unwitting Caroline and the discontent Catherine condemned to live “for another man’s benefit” for the rest of their lives. Among my three texts, Brooklyn stands out as the only one in which the main character overcomes embedded norms to live the life she wants for herself. But even Eilis can not change the way her cultural context looks upon her decision to abandon wealth, land, and a good husband in favour of love and freedom in New York. She is forced to forsake her relationship with her mother and flee her hometown, showing us beyond all doubt that deeply embedded attitudes can be difficult to change.