

S T U D Y   G U I D E

F I L M  
E D U C A T I O N



julia roberts

kirsten dunst

julia stiles

maggie gyllenhaal

mona lisa smile

## teachers' notes

This study guide has been designed to cover Key Stages 3-5 in a broad range of subjects including English/Media Studies, History and Citizenship. Although each task has been designated to a particular age group, they are adaptable across the Key Stages. Words highlighted in bold are defined in 'Key Words'.

### keywords

**genre** the categories of literature and film (horror, romance, science fiction etc.).

**biography** the story of someone's life.

**suffrage** the movement to extend the right to vote to include women.

**franchise** the right to vote.

**segregation** the law in America that kept blacks and whites apart, with separate public amenities and seats on public transport.

**pedagogy** the science of teaching.

**nuclear family** the ideal family consisting of housewife-mother, father and two children (a girl and a boy), as depicted in advertising of the time.



## film information

Director: Mike Newell

Key Cast: Julia Roberts, Kirsten Dunst, Julia Stiles, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Marcia Gay Harden.

Running Time: 125 mins

Release date: March 12 2004

Cert: 12A (contains moderate sex references)

[www.monalisasmile.co.uk](http://www.monalisasmile.co.uk)

## film synopsis

Progressive teacher Katherine Watson (Julia Roberts) arrives at the prestigious, conservative all-women college of Wellesley in the autumn of 1953 to teach History of Art. The students are amongst the brightest women in the country, and have absorbed the course reading-list before Katherine's first lecture. To gain their attention she throws the textbook out of the window and instead asks them to consider their own responses to contemporary art. Although the students are, at first, confused and dismissive of her teaching style they soon become fascinated by her ideas on art and on life.



However, the aim of the students is not just to gain an education, but also the 'greater' prize of a husband. This era is on the cusp of change with regards the role of women: it is post-war but pre-feminism and the conflict between tradition and modernity are embodied in the characters' struggles to find their own way in life.

Although Katherine becomes a role model for the girls, independent thought is not in line with the Wellesian philosophy and she seems to be battling not only the out-moded customs of the institution, but also the repressive view of society as a whole.

## bibliography

The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill, 1869, an essay from 'On Liberty and other Writings', Cambridge University Press, 1989

A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792, Penguin edition published 1992

Feminism for Beginners, Sophie Grillet, Piccadilly Press, 1997

Leonardo da Vinci, Kenneth Clark, Penguin, 1989

The Oxford History of Western Art, ed. Martin Kemp, Oxford University Press, 2000

On women's studies:  
[www.thewomenslibrary.ac.uk](http://www.thewomenslibrary.ac.uk)

General Information:  
[www.wellesley.edu](http://www.wellesley.edu)  
[www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship)  
[www.monalisasmile.co.uk](http://www.monalisasmile.co.uk)  
[www.artcyclopedia.com](http://www.artcyclopedia.com)  
[www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)

## genre and stereotyping

The story of a woman who challenged the minds of the brightest students in the country to open themselves to a different idea and go on a journey they never imagined.

task

### KS3 english/media studies

*Mona Lisa Smile* is about an all-women's college in 1950s America.

Watch the trailer for the film at: [www.monalisasmile.co.uk](http://www.monalisasmile.co.uk)

What are your preconceptions about the film? What do you think its main themes will be?

In groups, brainstorm what you think its genre will be.

Who do you think the film is aimed at? Why?



When writing the screenplay Lawrence Konner and Mark Rosenthal researched the era by visiting the college in New England and looked in the Wellesley archives for photos of actual students who had attended the college in the 1950s: 'We made up stories to go with each of the photos,' says Rosenthal.

task

### KS3/4 english/media studies

Look at the portraits below and, in groups, decide what their lives are like and invent a short **biography** for each image (note to teachers: you could contrast these pictures with ones from different eras or cultures, including the present day). When you have made up your biographies explain to the rest of the class why you have come up with this particular background story. Have you been influenced by the clothes that they are wearing? What does the image suggest in terms of period in history/culture? What about their expressions? Do you think they are happy with their lives?

*'Do you smile to tempt a lover,  
Mona Lisa, or is this your way to  
hide a broken heart?'*

(from the song 'Mona Lisa'  
sung by Seal)

task

### KS5 media studies

Since this film is primarily about women, can it automatically be classified as a 'chick-flick'? How might the studio market it for a particular audience (look at the film's website)? Might the way films are marketed be considered sexist?



## a social history of women

*Woman is the lesser man* - Tennyson

### the right to vote

The equal right to vote in elections to decide the government was an idea that had sprung from the French Revolution of 1789. The **suffrage** movement (the movement that sought to extend the **franchise** to include women) caused controversy and debate throughout the nineteenth century and was not resolved until the twentieth.

#### task

##### KS3 citizenship

In groups come up with your own definitions of the terms '**franchise**', '**suffrage**' and 'human rights'. Now compare your answers to dictionary definitions. How much do they differ?

The last national elections had the lowest recorded turn out (that is the number of people who actually took the opportunity to vote). Why do people bother to vote? What can be done to encourage more people to take an interest in politics?

#### task

##### KS4/5 media studies/citizenship

How would you define feminism? If you are female can you describe yourself as a feminist? Can males describe themselves as feminists? Do you think that there is still a need for reform for women, or has equality been achieved? Do Katherine Watson's beliefs define her as a feminist?

### education

It wasn't until 1853, with the establishment of Cheltenham Ladies' College, that the need for sufficient education for women was acknowledged and it was 1880 before women could take degrees at the University of London. In America, Vassar was the first women's college and opened in 1865.

### work and war

The onset of World War One meant that women were needed to fill in jobs for men who were away fighting in the war. This proved to the general population that women could work as hard as men and deserved to have the right to vote, and women over the age of 30 were finally granted the right to vote in 1918.

### feminism

The term became part of the English language in the 1890s, from France. The two central ideas within feminism are:

- throughout history women have suffered systematic social, political and economic disadvantages
- these disadvantages must be corrected

The suffragist movements really gathered momentum in the early twentieth century: in Britain shock tactics were used including marches, demonstrations, chaining members to railings, breaking windows and even storming the House of Commons. Those who were sent to prison often went on hunger strikes. One woman threw herself in front of the King's horse to draw attention to the movement.

task

**KS4/5 english/media studies**

One of the major catalysts for women achieving equality with men was in the invention of the pill in the 1960s, an oral contraceptive that allowed a woman to take control of her own fertility, and thereby plan her life. In *Mona Lisa Smile* Amanda Armstrong (played by Juliet Stevenson), the school nurse, is sacked because she gives contraception to the girls. In groups imagine that you are the board of governors: debate whether or not Amanda's actions deserve dismissal. Remember to keep in mind the college's reputation when deciding on your course of action.



**post-feminism**

When the lifestyle feminists chimed in that feminism had gone just far enough in giving them the right to “*have it all*’, i.e. money, sex and fashion, it would have been inexcusable to remain silent...*The career woman does not know if she is to do her job like a man or like herself...is she supposed to endure harassment or kick ass and take names? Is motherhood a privilege or a punishment?... It’s time to get angry again.*” (from *The Whole Woman*, Germaine Greer, Transworld (London: 2000), pp. 1-4)

Greer is angry because of the confused message of what constitutes femininity that young women receive today. Maggie Gyllenhaal, who plays the adventurous Giselle, sees the relevance of this feminine battle today: ‘She’s [Giselle’s] dealing with something that affects a lot of women my age today, which is how to be sexy and also be intellectual. We’re still expected to be one or the other. Why can’t we be both?’

task

**KS4 history/citizenship**

Make a list of the expected roles of women in the 1950s. How are they different from your perception of women’s roles today?

The tradition of hoop-rolling (reconstructed in the film) still continues at modern-day Wellesley: ‘*Originally, the winner of the hoop-rolling race was said to be the first to marry. That changed in the 1980s. The winner was deemed to become the first CEO of a major corporation. Today she is said to be the first to realise her dreams – whatever they may be.*’ (Quoted from publicity material). How does the ‘prize’ of the hoop-rolling race reflect each era?

**context**

By 1953 women’s rights worldwide had come a long way, but in America there was still civil unrest because of another form of inequality: racism and **segregation**. It wasn’t until 1965 that the law banned segregation of whites and blacks. In the film *Mona Lisa Smile* there are no ethnic characters; they are noticeable by their absence.

task

**KS5 media studies**

How does the film comment on the wider political context of the time, without it directly addressing it? On the film’s website watch the clip entitled ‘Do I look like her?’ how does the clip liken the character of Giselle to Katherine?

## pedagogy



*'Are you threatening me?'*

*'I'm educating you.'*

*'I thought that was my job.'*

### task

#### KS3/4 english/citizenship

**Pedagogy** is the science of teaching. What constitutes 'good' teaching? In groups decide what you think the elements of good teaching are. Drama task: act out scenes with examples of good and bad teaching (draw on your own experience). Find evidence from the film that depicts the change in teaching styles that Katherine adopts.

The character of Katherine Watson has a definite philosophy of teaching and of life. It is partly defined by the conflicts that come up in the film: between the conventional expectations of society and Katherine's belief that women should have the same freedoms that men have. Realising her students' potential, she decides not to teach from the textbook and instead insists that they think independently. She exposes them to exciting contemporary art (Jackson Pollock, see page 8), telling them that they are 'not required to like it; just consider it.'

This kind of teaching is called progressive. Compare this style with the teaching style that is described in this extract from Charles Dickens' mid-nineteenth century novel *Hard Times*:

*'NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service upon these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'*

(Ch.1, p. 5, *Everyman*, London: 1994)

### task

#### KS3/4 english/media studies

Make a list in the table opposite of the differences between the types of **pedagogy**.

Traditional	Progressive



**task**

**KS3/4 citizenship**

Why is education important? Is it (or should it be) a human right to be educated? Imagine you are part of an organisation that is to open a new school. What do you think should be part of the curriculum? Should it be strictly academic subjects, or vocational studies? Perhaps there should be practical courses (how to take out a mortgage; how to go on a date etc.). Pick a subject each and try to justify teaching it in your school.

**task**

**KS3/4 media studies**

In the film *Mona Lisa Smile* we see the girls being given a lesson in how to prepare dinner for their husband's boss. What does this imply about the expected role of women? The subjects that the girls learn at college all seem to be 'arts' based: History of Art, Italian and Etiquette. The sciences have traditionally been seen as 'male' subjects. Why do you think this is? Make two lists: one of subjects that you perceive as 'female' and the other as 'male'. What characteristics make up your idea of 'female' and 'male'?

**task**

**KS5 media studies**

Look at the Wellesley College website ([www.wellesley.edu](http://www.wellesley.edu)). What kind of impression is it trying to convey and how does it respond to being the subject of a major Hollywood movie? Imagine that you are the Public Relations officer for a production company that wants to make a film about your school or college. Outline your proposal, emphasising the benefits that the film would have for the institution and address it to the head.

## gender stereotyping: representation and identity

*'I thought I was headed to a place that would turn out tomorrow's leaders, not their wives.'*



da Vinci

### art and the façade

The title of the film refers to the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a Renaissance artist and inventor. One of the reasons the painting is so famous is because of Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile: is she really smiling? The technical term for this painting technique is sfumato, which means soft and blurry. If you look directly at her smile it seems to disappear, when you look away it reappears. The poster for the film is of the four main female characters gazing at a painting: they have similarly indefinable expressions (see the front cover of the study guide).

### task

#### KS3/4 english/media studies

Look at the portrait of the Mona Lisa. Fellow teacher Bill Dunbar (Dominic West) calls Katherine Mona Lisa: what link is the director trying to make between the painting and the claustrophobic lives of women in the 1950s?

The film shows the 1950s 'ideal' woman as one that is pretty and house-proud, and emphasising her husband's career over her own. Women have historically been portrayed as 'trophy wives', as an appendage to a man; their own existence is only qualified by the presence of a husband. This is the ideal that Betty strives for, but that she finds impossible to achieve in reality: her smile begins to crack.



### task

#### KS4/5 english

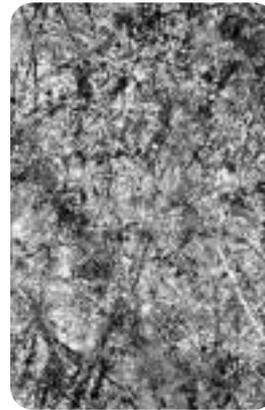
*'It's your choice ladies; you can conform to what people expect of you or you can -  
' - be ourselves, I know.'*

The freedom that Katherine gives her students is the chance to break out of the expected template that the girls have for their lives. This is demonstrated metaphorically in the paint-by-numbers 'Sunflowers' scene, in which the whole class have painted their own versions of Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers', in their own individual way. Of all the girls Joan has the potential to go far, yet she decides to take the conventional route and get married. She justifies her decision by saying that it was her choice to marry and not go to law school. Write a diary entry for Joan on the day that she finds out that she has been accepted at Yale: what thoughts are going through her head? Do you think that she is in any conflict?

task

**KS5 extension media studies**

A Jackson Pollock painting is used as a springboard for opening up the students' minds. How can art influence people? How can a visual image change people's perception of the world? Look at the pictures opposite and discuss what they may be commenting on and whether or not they make you think any differently.



Pollock



Van Gogh



**further points for discussion**

- should paintings look like 'real life'?
- what is the point of representational paintings in the age of photography?
- some people dismiss modern art by saying that 'a child could do it'. Is this a fair comment on Pollock's technique?
- people have been using paint for thousands of years. Will paint be used for the next thousand? Or will other technologies supersede it?
- in 1987 Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' sold for \$39.9 million. Is the painting worth this amount of money?

## female role models

'Women need heroes.'

### KS3/4 history/citizenship

How far do you think the statement 'Women need heroes' is true? What about the wording might indicate that it is sexist? Discuss what constitutes a hero (or heroine). NB: Teachers, it would be useful to show students pictures of the women listed.

Here is a list of women who could be considered heroic:

	Qualities	Achievements
Joan of Arc		
Indira Gandhi		
Mary Wollstonecraft		
Florence Nightingale		
Emmeline Pankhurst		
Marie Curie		
Margaret Thatcher		
Jane Austen		
Hillary Clinton		
Madeline Albright		
Germaine Greer		
Marie Stopes		

How many of their achievements can you identify? Think of some other modern female role models: what qualities do they have that make them remarkable?

task



### KS4 english/media studies

When we talk of the hero or heroine of a book, we often mean the main character. In the film *Mona Lisa Smile* Katherine is the obvious candidate for the title of heroine. How many characteristics of a heroine that you identified does she possess? Can any of the other characters be considered heroines?

task

## culture and context

### events in 1953

- March Stalin dies
- April Watson and Crick discover DNA
- May Hillary and Norgay climb Mount Everest
- June Americans Ethel and Julius Rosenberg executed for spying
- June Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II
- August USSR tests Atomic bomb

task

**KS4/5 media studies**

What is popular culture? In groups, brainstorm the elements that make up a culture. You will probably come up with something like this:

```

graph TD
    PC[POPULAR CULTURE] --- F[fashion]
    PC --- M[media]
    PC --- MD[music & dance]
    PC --- CE[current events]
    PC --- AD[art & design]
            
```

The film *Mona Lisa Smile* is set in 1953 in New England, America. The setting can be gathered without the audience having to be explicitly told. How does the director communicate setting and era to his audience?

### birth of the 'teenager'

The reuniting of couples after the Second World War led to the baby boom of the late 1940s. The rise of the global economy meant that more people were richer than in pre-war times and the 'not quite child, not quite adult', who still lived at home, had more free time than ever. The explosion of mass media (in the form of television, magazines and cheap singles) fuelled the growth of a 'niche' commercial market. It was the birth of the teenager.

1954 saw the symbols of rebellion in rock 'n' roll and films like *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando, as youth culture diverged from the perfect **nuclear family** as portrayed in advertisements.

Although younger girls had more freedom than their mothers had had, women's place was still seen as being in the home. This is reflected in fashion of the time: although, with the invention of nylon, clothes were more comfortable and practical, there were still restrictions: women were expected to wear sculpted bras, girdles and stockings. Producer of *Mona Lisa Smile* Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas said: '*The costumes in this movie are a metaphor for the story, the foundations and the corsets dictate the feminine ideal that defined the 1950s.*'



task

**KS4/5 media studies**

The music for the film is mostly early 1950s music recorded by modern artists (Macy Gray sings 'Santa Baby', originally sung by Eartha Kitt), they often have overtones of sexual awakening: 'I'm Beginning to See the Light' (sung by Kelly Rowland), for example. How might this decision to re-record classics serve as a metaphor for the changing times of the era? Watch the trailer for the film again: once without the soundtrack and once with it. How is the music used to enhance the characters' emotional highs and lows in the film?

The logo for Film Education. The word "FILM" is written in a stylized, red, blocky font with a white outline, set against a dark, horizontal rectangular background. Below "FILM", the word "EDUCATION" is written in a simple, black, sans-serif font.

Film Education has endeavoured to seek permission and clear copyright on all the illustrations and text reproduced in this study guide and given accreditation where necessary. In the event of any omissions please contact Film Education with any information which may be deemed appropriate for future editions.

Film Education is the unique link between education and the UK film industry. It facilitates the study and use of film and cinema across the curriculum, creating, developing and sustaining a literate audience through the understanding and enjoyment of film.

For further information contact:

Film Education, 21-22 Poland Street, London W1F 8QQ

T 020 7851 9450 F 020 7439 3218

E [postbox@filmeducation.org](mailto:postbox@filmeducation.org)

W [www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org)

Written by Rachel Roberts

Produced by Film Education for Columbia TriStar

©2004 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Designed by Beatwax