Mona Lisa Smile
(reflections on scenes from a movie with a SOC 401-like message)

1) Scene 1: A painting is shown (“The Corpse”). Is it art? If so, what makes it art? Is it art just because someone says that it is?

- Theories are languages with vocabularies that include words like role, risk, and rationality. Like all languages, theories have grammars—rules that theorists follow when they relate these words in their writings.
- This course is about learning two skills: synthesizing a theorist’s ideas and contrasting these ideas to other theorists’ ideas.
  - To synthesize a theorist’s ideas is to identify the key terms in her theoretical vocabulary and to describe her grammar for using these terms.
    - “How can I tell if my synthesis is accurate?” You cannot. The most that you can do is to give a defensible synthesis in which you demonstrate your interpretation of what the theorist said.
    - “But what if my interpretation is wrong?” Interpretations are not right or wrong; they are more or less defensible.
    - “Since my opinion is never wrong, then my grade will be ‘A’ no matter what I write, right?” No. An ‘A’ indicates a defensible interpretation (i.e., a position that the theorist would agree is an accurate representation of her position). The point is not that your interpretation agrees with that from some expert (e.g., your instructor) but that you can make a convincing argument that the theorist (were she available for comment) would agree to it as a representation of her ideas.
  - To contrast two theorists’ ideas you must find an issue that both address in common (the origins of mental distress, human motivation, social change, etc.).
    - “How can I tell if two theorists address the same issue?” Again, you cannot. Just because two theorists use the same word, this does not mean that they are addressing a similar issue. For example, one theorist might write about “role models” and another about the “role of language,” and be talking about entirely different things.
    - “How can I know what each theorist would have thought of the other?” This can only be done by learning the theoretical language of each, and by seeing each according to the other’s theoretical perspective. And no, this is not easy. It’s much easier to simply have somebody else tell you what to think—to fool yourself into believing that there are experts who know the “true” theoretical interpretations and issues.

2) Scene 2: Joan’s grade is C, and her teacher (Ms. Watson) says she “was kind” in giving her such a high grade. But, Joan says, the interpretation that she gave closely follows the interpretation of a renowned art critic.

- But where did the renowned critic’s interpretation come from? Surely somebody, at some point, must decide what Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and others “really” meant…
- This course is about your interpretive skills. You will do poorly in this class unless you venture beyond the “truths” as others see them. It takes courage to step outside the boxes that others have made for you.
3) Scene 3: Ms. Watson leaves Wellesley College because she is unwilling to uncritically accept the college administrators’ position that education is meant to help students adopt the “meaning of life” that others have proscribed for them.

- Throughout Mona Lisa Smile, Ms. Watson is repeatedly accused of being subversive (i.e., of wanting her students to embrace her understanding of art and of life). Yet her actions do not bear this out. For example, when Joan gives up her opportunity to study law at Yale and chooses housewife/mother instead, Watson hugs her and sincerely wishes for her happiness.

- If it is subversive to want people to make choices, then Watson is a revolutionary. Like choices, theories are neither true nor false nor right nor wrong. Each leads one to different sets of experiences. Unless you have “tried out” more than one choice or theory, your experiences will strike you as inevitable and, as such, real.

- This is a course about many theoretical realities. If you have the courage to shed the security of your old reality and to try on others, the reality you end up with (possibly the one you began with) may be one you choose, instead of merely being the one you have been given.