Paradise Road - Study Notes

Overview:

Beginning in February 1942 with the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, Paradise Road tells the story of a group of women from diverse backgrounds who struggle to endure the conditions of a Japanese prisoner of war camp on Sumatra. The film clearly establishes at its start the arrogance and overconfidence of the British towards the Japanese attack. “We’re ready and waiting for them,” one of the men says at the start. While others dismiss the possibility of a Japanese victory with racist insults such as, “they’re all cross eyed, you know,” and “they all have white sticks and guide dogs.”

The opening credits also include a set of pictures which establish the imperial setting of the film. They are shots of British life in South East Asia, including this one to the left of a successful hunting party. What this tells us about is the British attitude of being in charge. It’s this attitude that leads to the arrogant belief that anything other than victory over the Japanese was impossible.

But the opening credits also establish another pervasive cultural phenomenon: it’s men who know and do things. They are the experts, the people of action - women are not. Apart from Mrs Pike, it’s men who make the racist slurs at the start and dismiss the Japanese attack. Topsy Merrit and Adrienne Pargiter both question this, with Topsy asking why an army that blew away Pearl Harbour couldn’t easily overrun Singapore. But these objections are patronisingly swept away with a ‘My dear ladies....’ comment that really means ‘you don’t know what your talking about’. In the background, we see Rosemary and her husband are dancing. Dennis says Rosemary is “beautiful.” Rosemary calls him beautiful too which unsettles Dennis: “You can’t say that about a man!” No, this is a man’s world in which women must follow.

All that changes and yet it doesn’t change. When the women from Singapore are rounded up and incarcerated in a POW camp, life is dramatically altered. Suddenly they need to cope on their own without men. And they must cope with each other. There is tension between the groups of women. There are the English speaking women, and the Dutch speaking women (wives and daughters of Dutch colonial plantation owners from Sumatra, plus a group of Dutch nuns). There are also women from different social classes: they are English ladies like Adrienne, Mrs Roberts, Rosemary, Mrs Pike and Mrs Dickson and people who don’t belong to their class (practically everybody else) like Daisy. Adrienne says to Daisy later in the film: “We never mixed with missionaries - we were taught to look down on them.” So the women must learn to navigate these problems with each other in order to survive this conflict. And yet it is still a man’s world, because not only do the women need to survive each other, they need to survive their treatment at the hands of the male Japanese soldiers. Daisy has seen the actions of the Japanese army in China and says, “The people they despised most were Europeans, then prisoners, then women.”

The film is a true ensemble drama. It’s not the heroic story of one person’s capacity to survive unendurable conditions, but rather the history of a group of women who make
different choices to cope with life in the camp. At one point a number of women decide to become courtesans to the Japanese officers. Sister Wilhelminia doesn’t judge them for this. “I’m not their judge,” she says. “If they want to survive, maybe they will this way.” Not everyone has a happy ending. Rosemary Leighton-Jones dies. She sees what has happened to her husband Dennis and loses the will to live. Daisy dies as well as Mrs Roberts. But many also live. The gentle, but resilient way the women clap the rocks together at the end shows us that what Daisy says is indeed true: “The will to survive is very strong, stronger than anything.”

Characters:

Characters belong to different groups in Paradise Road. These groups encounter conflict in different but also similar ways. See the accompanying ‘Paradise Road Characters’ for visual references for each character listed below. Each character shows us something important about how we can encounter conflict.

**Captain Tanaka:** He is a cruel officer of the Japanese secret police. He says that, “If war has come it means the time for rules has ended.” His brutal treatment of the women is in part a response to what he sees as the racist, imperial domination of South East Asia by European countries.

**Colonel Hirota:** He is in charge of the women’s POW camp. He is unsettled by acts of brutality towards the women from Captain Tanaka and The Snake, but feels powerless to do anything about it. He is a bystander. He says at the end: “I have done my best for you. I know, not enough. But I could do no more.”

**The Interpreter:** Like Colonel Hirota, the interpreter is empathetic to the plight of the women but feels powerless to do anything about it.

**Sergeant Tomiashi - The Snake:** The Snake is cruel and vicious in his treatment of the women. In a number of scenes he brutally hits them. He pours the petrol on Wing when she is burned alive. However, he is also touched by the music the vocal orchestra performs, and in one scene sings privately for Adrienne. He shows how brutal we can be in times of conflict, but that no matter how much separates us, there are also things that will connect us.

**Mr Pike and Mr Pargiter:** These two men feature at the very start of the film. The are arrogant and over confident in their attitude towards the Japanese and say several racist comments. They show us how arrogance can lead to conflict.

**Adrienne Pargiter:** She creates the vocal orchestra and develops a friendship with Daisy who she would have previously looked down on - “I feel I owe you an apology...We never mixed with missionaries - we were taught to look down on them.” She shows us how our actions in conflict can unite us.

**Daisy Drummond:** She is a missionary. She develops a close friendship with Adrienne in the film and encourages Adrienne to be the conductor of the orchestra. Daisy is always true to her Christian values throughout her ordeals. She dies in the end but shows us how we can have the courage to not compromise our convictions even in the direst circumstances.
Rosemary Leighton-Jones: Rosemary is an English model. She develops a close friendship with Helen, a young Dutch woman who she helps to learn English. Rosemary is initially strong in her will to survive, but loses this when she realises that her husband Dennis has failed to escape from the men’s POW camp. She shows us the tragic impact of losing your loved ones during conflict and losing your sense of hope.

Susan McCarthy: Susan is an Australian nurse who goes from being the “shiest” girl, to an outspoken critic of the way the Japanese treat the women. She shows us how conflict can bring out our strength of character.

Dr Verstak: Dr Verstak is a Jewish refugee. She is not a real medical doctor but pretends to be one in order to get the women medical supplies. She is not sentimental, and is willing to do anything (like pull out the gold cappings on the teeth of dead women) to ensure the women keep getting medical supplies. She gives advice to Susan at a number of points in the film encouraging her to be independent. She shows us that we need to do difficult things in times of conflict.

Topsy Merrit: Topsy is an American who finds the conditions of the camp very hard. She is tempted by the proposition of becoming a courtesan to the Japanese officers because it will offer a more comfortable life, but decides not to in the end. She shows us the difficult choices we need to make in times of conflict.

Wing: Wing is a Malaysian woman who has been interred in the POW camp. We see her husband’s head impaled on a stake in the scene where women are rounded up in a town square. He has been executed for anti-Japanese activities. Wing is a courageous woman. Despite the racism of Mrs Roberts towards her, Wing risks her life to smuggle in quinine to treat Mrs Robert’s illness. She is found out, though, and burnt alive by Captain Tanaka. Wing shows us how selfless we can be in times of conflict.

Different ways conflict is encountered:

There are many different ways we can think about encountering conflict. One way, is to divide encounters with conflict into two groups:

• **Instinctive, reflex or first responses to conflict**: This is what we do when we first come across a conflict situation.

• **Second and considered responses to conflict**: This is what we do when we’ve had some time to think about the conflict we’re in and what we can do about it.

Throughout the film there are a range of scenes that show us conflicts that require reflex responses (like the women’s ship being shot at - Adrienne instinctively shelters a young child), to conflicts that go on (such as surviving the conditions of the camp and dealing with the problems between the groups of women) and which characters continually think about. Often characters’ first response to conflict is different from their second response. A number of characters don’t initially want to join the orchestra, for example, but do in the end. Other times, characters like Mrs Tippler or Captain Tanaka, don’t change their second response from their first response. This tells us a lot about the person and their capacity to encounter conflict.
Quotes:

Dennis Leighton-Jones: Beautiful? You can’t say that about a man!

English Gentleman at The Raffles Hotel: They’re [the japanese] all cross eyed you know

English Gentleman at The Raffles Hotel: They all have white sticks and glasses....

English Gentleman at The Raffles Hotel: Their weapons are useless...

English Gentleman at The Raffles Hotel: We’re all ready and waiting for them...

English Gentleman at The Raffles Hotel: The paper reported that the Japanese were being driven back...

Nurse: I saw the reports on what the Japs did to the women in Shanghai and Hong Kong

Captain Tanaka: Attacking the enemy is characteristic of war
Captain Tanaka: Japan has signed no convention
Captain Tanaka: If war has come it means the time for rules has ended. The aim is to win.

Colonel Hirota: You Europeans had great pride and arrogance...Now 100 percent reversed

Mrs Tippler: How do we know they’re dividing it up fairly - those Dutch?

Dr Verstak: The English don’t invite Jewish refugees to the cricket club!

Daisy: The people they despised most were Europeans, then prisoners, then women.
Adrienne: Well that’s us - all three.

Rosemary: They’re not going to win - we’ll win!

Adrienne: You know, you could do some work, Mrs Tippler..You’re just lazy!

Susan: I think it’s just too much for her really - for a lot of them!

Oggi: Do you think she’s really a doctor? She’s certainly got herself out of working in the field, and cleaning up the lavatory!

Mrs Tippler: The blackmarket will get us all into trouble. They warned us - they’ll cut our rations again.

Daisy:

*It is our paradise road.*
*How silent is this place.*
*How sacred is this place.*
Bett: One would think they would have learnt a few words of English by now..

Adrienne: I feel I owe you an apology...We never mixed with missionaries - we were taught to look down on them.

Topsy: After what happened, no one’s in the mood for a sing-a-long
Adrienne: But that’s the point...

Edna: You were always the shiest little thing at nursing school.

Mrs Dickson: How many women conductor’s are there?
Daisy: Well then this is probably a first.

Bett: We’ve got buckley’s chance of getting through the war in that camp.

Topsy: Are you asking me to give up food and soap...so I can starve and sing?

Mrs O’Riordan: A good Catholic sister like you...I can’t believe you’re not...
Catholic nun: I’m not their judge. If they want to survive, maybe they will this way.

Daisy: The will to survive is very strong, stronger than anything.

Captain Tanaka: Japanese soldiers never assault women.

Susan: You’re starving and beating women and children! And you have the cheek to sit there and lecture us on good manners!

Interpreter: Colonel Hirota says he regrets, but incident dealt with by Captain Tanaka.
Daisy: So Captain Tanaka is in charge of this camp. I understood it was you?

Daisy: I’ve tried, but I just can’t bring myself to hate people. The worse they behave, the sorrier I feel for them.

Rosemary: You’ll never get out of this. None of us will ever leave Sumatra.

Daisy: We must get the orchestra started again...Show the Japanese we still have some spirit.

Mrs Roberts: I learnt a great deal in the camp. I did nothing in Singapore.

Dr Verstak: She doesn’t want to live anymore.

Colonel Hirota: I have done my best for you. I know, not enough. But I could do no more.