

DANCE WITH A STRANGER

THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR

If the end of the war in 1945 gave plenty of reason for celebration, it was also a moment for reflection. A period of 31 years (from 1914-45) had left Europe ravaged by 2 wars, and an economic depression during the 30's had left its mark, either directly or indirectly upon everyone. There had literally been no escape. But victory for the Allies in 1945 did not suddenly end the problems. With one leap mankind was not free. For now there was the task of rebuilding, of trying to ensure stability and of coming to terms with some unpalatable truths about the nature and possibilities of man. The atomic bomb became a symbol of the age - it ended a war but there was a price to pay. So, too, the post war years became a time of hope and concern. Victory was elating but caused its own unique problems.

In July 1945, two months after the German capitulation, Great Britain held its first general election for 10 years. The Labour Party was swept to power, winning 392 seats in a House of 620. Whether this was due to disillusionment with the Conservative Party or hopes of a radical change in British politics is open to debate - and anyway was most probably a mixture of both. But certainly the old ways hadn't worked and a new beginning was felt necessary.

The crux of the problem was twofold - to get the country back on its feet again economically and to rectify the many wrongs of pre-war society, removing poverty and rigid class barriers, both prevalent at the time. Great Britain had pulled together during the war, and now wanted to remain together after it.

Many hopes were pinned on the Labour Party being able to manage this - the worst was over, fresh minds and fresh faces were expected to tackle the two problems in a way that the Conservative Party was considered politically incapable of doing. Yet, of course, the problems were neither mutually exclusive nor inseparable. Equally they would not go away overnight. To rebuild involves as much sacrifice and hard work as going to war.

And the difficulties very quickly came to the fore. Our allies, particularly USA, had their own problems and their own designs. Thus the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan resulted in considerable dependence on the USA and not long after the split between East and West took place. Mutual suspicion and empire building caused NATO to go one way, the Warsaw Pact to go another.

State intervention became a necessity - for instance war damage to buildings in Great Britain was estimated at around £2 billion - the free market was simply not equipped to deal with such a large scale



operation. Thus a large housing programme and the nationalisation of vital industries was accepted by all parties (the only debate being one of how much state control was deemed necessary).

The emphasis was on growth - and growth there was. But alas, never as much as desired. Superficially there was an economic boom. Many people had money in their pockets - but below the surface things were not as good as had been hoped. "You've never had it so good" later became the catchphrase of the 50's but the foundations of economic strength were shaky. Large numbers of people still lived below the official poverty line tinkering with taxation and social security systems did not alter that fact. The rich still got richer, the middle classes began to prosper but the rest just had to get by. Not always successfully There was, too, the gradual realisation that no longer was Great Britain a country in isolation, dealing with its own problems - we were in competition, part of a global system, which politicians could play at but never really control.

Thus an age of hope, of looking forward to brighter and better things came face to face with economic and political reality. Much was achieved - the introduction of a social security system, a national health service, free secondary education to name but by the mid 50's the structure of society remained very much the same. The war had to be paid for. Hope was tempered by crippling debts and war damage. Things had not changed overnight. Rationing continued for many years after the war, a continuing reminder of the deprivations that still had to be dealt with. The early 50's were an austere age. The high hopes and expectations were quickly tempered by reality.

However, if war changed the map of Europe, it also affected a change in the European mind. It was almost as if the discovery of the death camps in Poland and the awesome destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki called into question a moral code that had outlived its usefulness. Severe cultural shock led to a questioning of values - a perception and outlook on life previously framed by religion and class began to fall apart. Life was not necessarily as we had been told. A sense of vulnerability and questioning set in. Old fashioned values had failed us, previous restrictions were seen as outdated and, in many cases, irrelevant under this new shadow of mortality and the past. So the 50's became an age when people began to grow impatient and dissatisfied with the way things had been. "You've never had it so good", ironically meant to refer to economic purchasing power, suggested a new outlook on life in general.

"As wealth became more widespread, and materialism grew with it, indulgences which had formerly been prohibitively expensive to all but a few came within the reach of many".

(John Colville, *The New Elizabethans*, Collins 1977)

Thus began the stirrings of a new liberalism, or decay, depending on your point of view. The process was inevitably a long one - it was not until the late 1960's that most liberalising laws came into being - but the mood can be seen to start after the war.

This is a difficult area - was the impatience with the old ways inevitable part of the cyclical pattern of history was it caused by the philosophical shock of World War II - was it a mixture of both? But the story of Ruth Ellis must be seen within this framework. She was hanged in 1955, and her death and public reaction to it can be seen as symptomatic of the slow change that was taking place in society.

ENGLAND IN THE 1950's

Britain may well have been one of the victors in the Second World War, yet at the beginning of the 1950's when the events of "Dance with a Stranger" took place the wartime conditions still existed. Part of cities were still in ruins after the Blitz of 1940. The great rebuilding programmes were still in the future. People were still subject to rationing of essential foodstuffs - meat, bacon, butter, sugar, sweets. At times the shortages were worse than during the war. Yet, as has already been said in the previous chapter, there was a sense of hope. The big consumer boom was yet to come but people had survived the war and wanted enjoyment.

One problem, however, was that society seemed to expect a return to the old status quo. During the war, women had been expected to work for the War Effort in factories and on the land. With the restoration of peace, the return of men from the war, the women were expected to return to the role of housewife.

The old wartime feeling of everybody fighting together was also lost and the English class structure soon re-established itself. Those with money could enjoy a "little extra" through having connections in the right places. They could also take the benefits and comforts of the consumer boom in gadgets such as T.V., fridges etc.

Due to the bombing during the war and the slow re-building programme many people lived in pre-fabricated houses made of wood and aluminium. These were supposed to be only a temporary housing measure and yet people continued to live in them well into the 1960's.

In public, the country was entering a "boom" period, yet for the majority of people in the early 1950's life was as hard and uncomfortable as it had been during the war.

RESEARCH

1. Find out what the rations were for a single person in 1950. If possible, try to work out exactly what this would be and bring in those quantities or measure them out at home. Don't forget, these would have to last a week. When you have done this, try to work out how much of each rationed commodity your family use a week now.
2. Fashion - During the war, clothing was rationed but in 1949, it was removed from the ration category. Find out what fashions were like before 1949 and then how they changed after 1949.
3. When you have seen "A Dance with a Stranger" write down what aspects of life in the 1950's are actually shown in the film.
4. If any of your relatives or neighbours were alive in the early 1950's ask them what they remember about that time. As a class try to build up a picture of the period from what people you know remember. When you have done this (and it will probably take some time) try to compare the picture of the period that you have built up with the picture given in "Dance with a Stranger".

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND PUBLIC OUTCRY IN THE 1950's



In 1957, two years after Ruth Ellis was hanged, the Homicide Act was passed by Parliament which restricted the death penalty and introduced the defence plea of diminished responsibility (e.g. in cases of crimes of passion).

The case of Ruth Ellis was partly instrumental in this move, but two other murder cases and subsequent hangings during the 1950's also enraged public consciousness and made people question the validity of capital punishment.

THE MURDERS AT 10 RILLINGTON PLACE

In 1949, Timothy John Evans was convicted of murdering his child, Geraldine, whose body was found with that of her mother Beryl Evans, in the wash house of 10 Rillington Place, London. Evans repeatedly claimed that he was not the murderer, that the crime had been committed by John Christie, who lived below the Evans family. But as Evans had confessed to the police that he had killed his wife and child and as Christie was an ex-policeman, no one believed this story and Evans was hanged.

Four years later, however, four more bodies were found at 10 Rillington Place - all of them were women and all had been strangled. Two skeletons were also found buried in the garden. Christie was arrested and admitted that as well as murdering these six women he had also murdered Mrs. Evans.

It was immediately recognized that an appalling miscarriage of justice had occurred. Evans had been hanged for a murder that he did not commit; and it was now realised that he had been telling the truth.

CRAIG AND BENTLEY

In 1952, Derek Bentley was hanged, not for committing a murder but for being present when his companion, Christopher Craig shot and killed a policeman in Croydon.

Because Craig, the firer of the shot, was under 18, he could not be hanged. The judge, however, decided that an example had to be made and Bentley was sentenced to death even though, when the shot was fired, he had already been apprehended by a police sergeant and had offered no resistance. Despite petitions and protests clemency was denied. Justice was said to have been done.

In November 1965 the death penalty was suspended and was finally abolished in December. 1969.

DAVID BLAKELY AND RUTH ELLIS QUESTIONS OF ATTRACTION



The relationship between Ruth Ellis and David Blakely begs many questions. Exactly what was going on between them?

It is perhaps easy to be cynical. For David - here was a peroxide blonde, a working class girl who was obviously attracted to him, and a nightclub "hostess" into the bargain and so the relationship might have appeared "easy" - no responsibilities, no pressure. Things were unlikely to get "serious" as she was not from his class. And when he got bored, he could just disappear.

And for Ruth? Well, the attractions are obvious. Life was dull and difficult. She was in a rut that was far from comfortable and she had responsibilities, such as her child, that she didn't want to take seriously. Enter a knight in shining armour to sweep her off her feet, and to offer her (she hoped) a lifestyle that previously she could only dream about. And who knows what might happen?

Perhaps they were both using one another the mercenary side of relationships - David having fun before the time came to marry "properly", Ruth because here was an escape from the humdrum nature of her life.

Without doubt the attraction between Ruth and David was genuine at the start. And passionate -another dangerous element in the state of play. And casting aside all cynicism for the moment they obviously enjoyed one another's company. In France Ruth's case would have been considered a crime of passion - frighteningly common. In post war Britain that was not the case. She admitted killing David and that was that. She had to pay. But what in fact was she paying for? For murdering a man, or loving him too much? Or crossing the class barriers?

Also, how true is it to say that the attitudes of David and his friends, even of the society in which they lived, still exist today? The man may "have a good time" with one type of woman, but would marry someone else, someone more "acceptable". What is permissible for the man is taboo for the woman.

"DANCE WITH A STRANGER" - DISCUSSION

Below are 11 statements about the film and the characters in it. Read through them and then tick those that you agree with. Compare your list with someone else's. If you and your partner disagree on any of the statements, try to talk through your disagreement. You may wish to do this with one other person or with a group of people.

1. Ruth Ellis had to kill David Blakely. It was the only way to escape from him.
2. David was everything that Ruth dreamed about. That was why she could not bear to lose him.
3. Ruth was stupid falling in love with someone who was better than she was. She should have known that she would get nowhere.
4. David was a typical male, using a woman for only one thing, and not thinking of her as a person.
5. The barriers of class that were shown in the film do not exist today.
6. Ruth deserved to be hanged. She had cold bloodedly planned to shoot David.
7. David loved Ruth. It was his friends who turned him against her.
8. Ruth should have stayed with Desmond. He was willing to give her everything.
9. Ruth wanted what society was offering. What she did not realise was that it was not worth having.
10. Ruth killed David because he did not behave in the way in which she thought a lover should. Society killed Ruth because she did not behave in the way in which it thought a woman should behave.
11. The story of Ruth Ellis need not concern us. It is an unimportant event which happened a long time ago.

When you have finished your discussion of one or all of the points, you might want to write down your ideas in an essay. It could be on any aspect of the film that you choose - possibly the rights or wrongs of the passing of the death sentence on Ruth Ellis (or the rights and wrongs of capital punishment itself).

WRITING TOPICS

1. At the end of the film, Ruth is writing a letter to David Blakely's mother. Try to write this letter, as if you were Ruth, explaining why you killed David and what you felt about him.
2. Consider how David felt about the relationship. Write a short play in which David is explaining to a close friend what he feels about Ruth. You might write two scenes, the first from very early on in the relationship, the second from just before he is killed.
3. Desmond Cussen offered Ruth everything that he had but was always rejected. Imagine Desmond either at the trial of Ruth or giving a statement to the police. Try to write down what he might say about Ruth and her relationship with David.
4. "Dance with a Stranger" shows three people all searching for different types of love and relationship. Write an essay which describes what each of the three are looking for and why each one seemed to fail in their quest

FILMOGRAPHY

Saturday Night & Sunday Morning (1960)

A Taste of Honey (1961)

10, Rillington Place (1970)

The Servant (1963)

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962)

The above films, would tie-in with a viewing of "Dance with a Stranger", "10 Rillington Place" tells the story of Christie whilst the others give portraits of life in the mid to late 50's. An interesting comparison could be made between "The Servant" and "Dance with a Stranger".

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