

GOOD WILL HUNTING

[1998]

by

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Working as a janitor at MIT, Will Hunting (Matt Damon) also solves math problems few in the world can even understand. He is discovered by renowned math professor Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgaard) who bails him out of jail to exploit the gifts of which he is more than a little jealous. By court order, Will must see a therapist. Lambeau chooses his ex-roommate of college days, Sean McGuire (Robin Williams). They have since fallen out because of old angers and insecurities. Meanwhile, while barhopping with his working-class friend, Chuckie (Ben Affleck), Will meets Skylar (Minnie Driver), a rich English pre-med student at Harvard who takes an instant liking to his genius. After rejecting almost everyone and everyone's advice, Will finally comes around to recognizing that his genius cannot be wasted. He makes peace with his past through McGuire and takes off west to join Skylar. (Rated R)

Good Will Hunting depends on a clever and captivating device: bring old mythological ideas into the modern age and flesh them out with both complex characters and psycho/sociological significance. By rooting a modern film in the ancient, a whole host of horrors can be quickly and easily forgiven. This device often accounts for both the popularity and acceptance of films like *Star Wars* [1977], perhaps one of the worst written, acted, and directed films to make over \$100 million. (One example from *Star Wars* will suffice: the naming of a greedy character "Greedo" reflects all the brilliance, sophistication, and inventiveness of four-year-olds calling their overweight companion "Fatso".)

What we so readily forgive in *Good Will Hunting* is that it is a collection of clichés so tired that they should have been retired years ago. Here are a few: a damaged psychologist who heals himself by healing others; revelation through therapy sessions; a mistreated child who cannot connect to other humans as an adult; a caring, rich, beautiful woman who instantly recognizes both the hero's pain and genius and picks him up in a bar; the effete snobs of academe; working class buddies who drink and swear deep truisms; and, of course, the poster child of so many touchy-feely films of the nineties - the abuse victim. What is fascinating is how the director and writers of *Good Will Hunting* get away with it (and the film does this quite well) to produce a thoroughly entertaining and seemingly original film. Of course, the film is helped by clever writing, good acting and an almost subversive awareness of its own genre. However, there is something more going on here.

In *Good Will Hunting*, the ancient idea of the Fool is cleverly modernized. There are several types of Fools in our cultural history. There is the Fool who has natural knowledge (like understanding the language of the animals) but little else. When his (typically) elder brothers are sent out into the world to make their fortune and fail, he succeeds. And then there is the Fool who is the Court Jester. The Jester plays the Fool in order to get away with telling the truth to a ruthless monarch that would kill anyone else bearing these messages. Both of these Fools are prescriptions for psychic survival in the view of Analytical Psychology.

Will Hunting is an interesting combination of both. As the Natural Fool he has a seemingly unlimited penchant for advanced mathematics. As the Jester archetype, he expresses his anger by causing others emotional pain. He uses his genius to quickly analyze those around him, and then heartlessly tells them exactly what he sees. His words become knives that open old emotional wounds, and his vitriol is salt in those wounds. For instance, he sees a renowned math professor as an insecure bumbler and a psychologist as a man defeated by his own emotional pain.

However, there is another kind of fool, a much rarer one. Will Hunting is a Fool of compensation. Just as blind men of ancient times were considered “seers” because of the belief that physical blindness would be compensated for by an increase in internal vision, so Will Hunting compensates for his genius by acting the Fool. And, most importantly, his foolishness is compensated for by occasional flashes of genuine insight into others and into himself.

The body of the film concerns Will’s journey toward self-discovery and healing. Will “hunts” within his culture for his salvation. He makes four visits, each with sociological or psychological implications.

First, he works at MIT and meets the professor there. Through him, Will is exposed to the world of academe and the intelligentsia. He quickly finds them all to be shallow, insecure, and childishly competitive. He also quickly rejects working for the private sector or the government as a mathematician. His answers clearly are not here.

He visits the Feminine in the form of his aggressive girlfriend, Skylar. Because of his previous psychological damage, he cannot accept her ministrations of love and acceptance. His answers are not here. He purposefully rejects Skylar, clearly feeling he doesn’t deserve her. Psychologically, he has not yet grown enough to accept the feminine as a part of his healing process.

He then visits the archetypal Father – Sean McGuire, the psychologist. McGuire himself is a damaged soul, not yet recovered from the painful death of his wife. He is also a fellow genius, turned underachiever after life treated him unfairly. By sharing his pain with Will, he not only comes to resolve his own problems, but opens Will to a sensitivity toward others and forces him to reassess his own isolation. McGuire is willing to accept Will on his own terms and to help him rid himself of the psychological demons of

childhood abuse. However, before Will can completely accept his new Father image, he must make one more trip.

With the fourth influence on Will Hunting, the writers have broken the mythological mold and come up with something new. Will is influenced by his working-class buddies. Thus, the idea of class and all its sociological implications is surprisingly introduced into what appears to be a mostly psychological film. (Perhaps not too surprisingly, given Van Sant's previous films.) Most of the characters in the film – representing academe, the intelligentsia, the helping professions – have considered the working class beneath notice. At MIT, the workers are something the professors have to put up with, like weeds in their intellectually well-trimmed lawns. However, according to *Good Will Hunting*, it is the working class that holds the real answers to Will's problem.

It is noteworthy that his buddies help him solve his problem in several different ways. They give him advice at the verbal level. However, they also give him an automobile for his twenty-first birthday. It is through this automobile that he escapes the confines of Boston and the sterile, book-knowledge to which he has safely limited himself. Symbolically, the car is a means of movement – he drives to Sean's house to accept him as his newly acquired, positive father image. He then drives West (toward the American frontier) to San Francisco join Skylar and to accept the symbolic feminine, presumably as part of his healing process.

The writers have cleverly taken ancient ideas from archetypal psychology, folk lore and mythology and breathed new life into them by fleshing them out in several ways. Mythological characters rarely have personalities or histories. The film provides both in the Fool archetype as manifest in Will Hunting. And very rarely do mythological characters have a social environment, especially an influential one. Unfortunately, Will's darker side, his Shadow, is whitewashed by turning the one violent sequence from an ugly, brutal confrontation into a mock ballet by the use of slow motion.

In many ways, the writer's and director's reading of mythological figures is an attack on the sterility of myth. Like many analytical psychologists, they look for the psychological and social implications in the ancient stories. However, unlike analysts of myth, they don't layer our problems over the ancient stories. Rather, they take the ancient stories into our time and see how they would be realized if they were lived today.

This is by no means a perfect film. As the writing project of some very young actors, it shows its youth in various ways. For instance, the title. What Will Hunting must learn is a positive feeling for his fellow human beings. Thus, as the title states, he is hunting for good will. A little corny. But then so is the opening shot of Will reading with a brightly lit light bulb situated over his head much like the cartoon cliché of someone getting an idea. And why is Skylar leaving Harvard, the site of perhaps the finest medical school in the country, to go to Stanford Medical School?

And what is cinematic rebel Gus Van Sant doing directing this anonymous Hollywood feel-good film? After *My Private Idaho* [1991] (with much of the script in

iambic pentameter and large chunks of Shakespeare folded in for good measure), *Drugstore Cowboy* [1989] and, most recently, *To Die For* [1995], it looked as though Van Sant was edging toward the Hollywood mainstream while still retaining his counter culture sensibilities. Like *Will Hunting*, it seems that Van Sant is intellectually slumming, producing a commercial, totally audience-pleasing entertainment that can be accepted by all. Yet, much to his credit, Van Sant has taken a Hollywood product and made a drama that recognizes the clichés it uses and gives them new life, a statement that satisfies without pandering.

Good Will Hunting. Directed by Gus Van Sant. Screenplay by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Distributed by New Line Films, 1998.