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Good Will Hunting or Wild Goose Chase?: Masculinities and the Myth of Class Mobility

Richard Rees

Perhaps one of the reasons that 1997's *Good Will Hunting* received such warm critical and popular receptions is because its narrative is for many viewers another telling of America's most dominant myth. Leo Rull, for example, a South Boston social worker from the depressed, working class neighborhood represented in the film, said, "You don't have to be a genius to make it in life . . . But the movie shows you can make it regardless of all the odds stacked against you" (qtd. in "South Boston"). The film's story falls into the well-worn grooves of the rags to riches story of class mobility whose ideological function is to rationalize the inequitable nature of labor relations in a capitalist society. In America, if you have enough perseverance, so the old homily goes, there is no limit to how high you can climb the ladder of status and wealth. Thus, those who remain where they are must view their own immobility as indicative of some personal, rather than social, failing. For the film's stars and co-authors, Matt Damon and Matt Affleck, *Good Will Hunting* has proved their breakthrough film. So the Horatio Alger narrative even becomes the story that the members of the Academy told when they awarded Damon and Affleck, previously "independent" bit actors, the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1997.

But do you need to be a genius to make it or not? The chief difference between the usual formulation of the American Dream and *Good Will Hunting*'s version is that it is not perseverance so much as remarkable in-born aptitude that is required to cross class boundaries. For Will (Damon), an autodidact, no educational apparatus exists for him or his friends that could develop this innate quality. The only difference between Will and his friends is his intellectual gift. As Will's best friend, Chuckie (Affleck), tells him, "Look. You got somethin' none of us [have]." It is only the occasional freak of nature that receives the opportunity to escape the cruel determinations of a lowly birth. Everyone else without rare talents, however, like his South Boston comrades, must accept the plan laid out for them by the requirements of class society. Taking a beer break at their demolition work site, Will's best friend Chuckie gives his approval for Will to abandon his class comrades, even reprimanding him for not doing it sooner:

All right. No, no, no. Fuck you. You don't owe it to yourself. You owe it to me. 'Cause tomorrow I'm gonna wake up and I'll be fifty. And I'll still be doin' this shit. And that's all right, that's fine. I mean, you're sitting on a winnin' lottery ticket. And you're too much of a pussy to cash it in. And that's bullshit. 'Cause I'd do fuckin' anything to have what you got. So would any of these fuckin' guys. It'd be an insult to us if you're still here in twenty years. Hangin' around here is a fuckin' waste of your time.

The film's central drama involves the main character's resistance to moving up and out of his working class neighborhood by capitalizing on his towering intellectual abilities. This reluctance, despite constant urging from the eminent M.I.T. mathematician Gerald Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård) who discovers him and maneuvers him into therapy, is linked to his incapacity to trust as a result of childhood abuse. Thus the film psychologizes class oppression for the main character but naturalizes it for his friends. That is, while Will's friends accept that their chances of class mobility as equivalent to winning the lottery, Will cannot cash in on his "winning ticket" and advance his socio-economic standing because of his psychological and emotional problems.

The Men of Southie

Yet, class immobility is not all bad in the film. Compensation for the class oppression of Will and his friends is their youthful, virile working class masculinity in contrast to that of the film's somewhat foppish characters from the educated elite. Amy Taubin of the *Village Voice* pointed out the importance of the class basis of the narrative when she wrote that the film is "[s]et in Boston, where the hostility between the resident working-class population and the transient cultural and technocratic elite of Harvard and M.I.T. is knotted into the fabric of daily life." Much of the dramatic structure of the film relies on the assumption of a very strict class division, but primary code by which class differences are articulated is in terms of gender. Even more than that, the film engenders class conflict through the opposition between men from "Southie" and the effeminate, illegitimate, and dysfunctional masculinity of the upper-class, educated elite. There is also an ethnic nuance to this binary in the Southie's Irish toughness versus the vaguely foreign, sometimes WASPy or British characters of Lambeau, George Plimpton's M.I.T. psychologist, and Minnie Driver's reluctantly upper crust Skylar, a young English woman who falls in love with Will.

The film's opening shot establishes Will as a refutation of the working class stereotype. The camera pulls back to an overhead shot of Will, amidst the encroaching decay of his cluttered apartment, relentlessly turning pages of a book as he devours its contents. Will further thwarts the introverted bookworm image as well because his daily routine includes hanging out with his working class neighborhood boys, scenes adeptly conveyed by director Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*). This intimate homosocial relation is bound by to-the-death loyalty, as Sean (Robin Williams) explains on more than one occasion. Of Will's best friend, Sean says, "You know, Chuckie's family, he'd lie down in fuckin' traffic for you."

A highly stylized fight scene early in the film reveals the nature of Will's relationship with his chums as well as an important aspect of Will's character. Formally, the scene is unlike any other in the film. The boys drive past some old kindergarten rivals and decide to settle the score. Van Sant slows the action down and edits in a non-linear sequence by breaking the 180° rule and shot-reverse shot editing. At the same time, Van Sant

uses slow motion in each short clip, lingering over the violence of a punch in the jaw or a body twisting in reaction. Ostensibly, this highly stylized sequence recreates the chaotic perception of time and events as street fighters might experience them. The sequence also aestheticizes the brawl and establishes the main character's machismo while minimizing his brutality so as to maintain our sympathetic identification. The shots of Will straddling his enemy as he pounds the man's unconscious face bloody also reveals that he is an angry young man, and deepens the mystery surrounding the character. The sequence also allows his friends to exhibit one of the primary conditions of male bonding within the relations of the working class characters—the loyalty that would back you up in a fight. But the macho solidarity of working class masculinity demonstrated in the scene is soon to be counterposed by the devalued qualities of men in the educated elite.

The capacity for violence goes right to the question of working class versus upper class masculinity in the bar sequence. On the pretext of going to “fuck up some smart kids,” Will and his buddies head off to the upscale college hang out. But when they get there, Chuckie tries to pass himself off as a member of the educated elite, hoping to impress a pair of coeds sitting at the bar. A snooty college kid sees him as a class interloper and sets about teaching him his place. Will steps in to defend his friend and at the same time establishes his character as a working class hero.

WILL: You dropped a hundred and fifty grand on an education you coulda' picked up for a dollar fifty in late charges at the public library.

STUDENT: But I will have a degree, and you'll be serving my kids fries at a drive through on our way to a skiing trip.

WILL: Yeah, maybe, eh. But at least I won't be unoriginal. Pardon me, if you have a problem with that, you and me could just go outside 'n we could figure it out.

STUDENT: No, man, there's no problem. It's cool.

Will not only out-references his snobby opponent in a dazzling discourse on colonial American political economy, but when the student backs down from his challenge to settle it in the street, Will presents himself as master

of both class's source of potency and means of asserting dominance—with the mind and with the body, respectively.

Amazingly, this withering display of the prodigy's ability to humiliate at will is self-consciously and publicly performed as a sort of courting ritual in honor of Skylar (Minnie Driver). When she gives Will her phone number, flirtatiously reprimanding him for not being aggressive enough in pursuing her, it as if the woman has been awarded as the spoils to the dominant alpha-male. Throughout the film, the character of Skylar serves as a barometer of the effectiveness of Will's psychotherapy and their relationship functions as a parallel to that of Will and Sean. As Sean teaches Will to "open up" to others, the romantic relationship advances to greater degrees of intimacy. Initially, Will is too ashamed of his squalid living conditions and orphanhood to show Skylar, despite her requests, where he lives and with whom. "Opening up" in this context means overcoming his class resentment and shame.

Men of the Educated Elite

By contrast to the preferred relations between Will and his friends, the elite sphere is shown to lack healthy male-bonding conditions. Sean and Lambeau's estranged friendship is laden with grudges and resentment from mutual injuries suffered as a result of some cryptic falling out years before. The unsavory aspects of upper class male relations are also filled out by many of the supporting characters. An example is Lambeau's sycophantic and asexual gopher, Tom. In an early scene as Will and Lambeau bond like father and son over chalkboard equations, we get a split second reaction shot of Tom glancing over his shoulder with a look of dejected jealousy. Another example of the film's representations of the elite class's emasculation is George Plimpton's pompous psychologist, one of the early failed attempts that Lambeau arranges as part of the state enforced therapy. In a brief interview, Will arrogantly "outs" him as a closeted homosexual, thus demonstrating his superior facility for psychological insight. But the homophobic logic of the scene also serves to further distinguish the two forms of masculinity. The equation of homosexuality with elitism and ineffectiveness helps to elaborate the dismal, disempowered conditions for masculinity and male bonding in the educated elite in general. Homophobia returns for a moment at the end as a humorous diffusion to a

tender scene between Will and Sean, who are able to relate as men of the Southie working class. “Does this violate the doctor-patient relationship?” Will asks as they embrace for the last time, to which Sean replies, “Only if you grab my ass.” Homosexuality is a defining feature of the negativized upper class, as the antithesis of real masculinity, and so it must be guarded against among the Southie males, if only jokingly, as well.

The social world of the upper class is also where the National Security Agency governs the affairs of men. In one of Will’s intellectual *tour de force* scenes, he plays working class intellectual to his NSA interviewer and analyzes the treacherous class and colonial relations of the United States intelligence community. Will conjectures about what would happen if he were to decrypt a code that revealed the location of a “rebel army” that resulted in military action against them:

Fifteen hundred people that I never met, never had no problem with get killed. Now the politicians are sayin’, “Oh, send in the marines to secure the area” ’cause they don’t give a shit. It won’t be their kid over there, shot. . . . It’ll be some kid from Southie over there takin’ shrapnel in the ass. He comes back to find that the plant he used to work at got exported to the country he just got back from. And the guy who put the shrapnel in his ass got his old job, ’cause he’ll work for fifteen cents a day and no bathroom breaks. Meanwhile he realizes the only reason he was over there in the first place was so that we could install a government that would sell us oil at a good price.

And then for a finale, Will summarizes his reasons for rejecting the offer from the chagrined NSA representative, defiantly speaking the truth to power, as it were:

I’m holdin’ out for somethin’ better. I figure fuck it, while I’m at it why not just shoot my buddy, take his job, give it to his sworn enemy, hike up gas prices, bomb a village, club a baby seal, hit the hash pipe and join the National Guard? I could be elected President.

Working for them would implicate Will in oppressive power relations and so the scene helps to fill out the film's dichotomy between the two masculine orders. Either predatory or effeminate, the nature of upper class social relations further explains Will's reluctance to leave his class. Lambeau desperately demands Will begin harvesting his intellectual potential and cannot understand why he resists abandoning his class cohorts. As Sean explains to Lambeau, "And why does he hang out with those retarded gorillas, as you call them? Because any one of them, if he asked them to, would take a fuckin' bat to your head, okay? That's called loyalty." Again the film reiterates the dichotomy between the two modes of masculine relations, preferring working class fraternity over the fratricidal elite. The unfortunate irony is that, as the fight scene, the bar scene, and Sean's line suggest, the film's working class masculinity is predicated on some of the same tendencies, such as violence and domination, that the NSA scene means to demonstrate are part of the elite class.

Resolving the Contradictions

The film's top billing and the producers' most bankable asset is Robin Williams. His Sean McGuire is a haggard and haunted psychology professor who teaches Will the cliché that life's deepest lessons come not from books but human experience. As another Irish-American "Southie," he is also heir to the same rugged masculinity. It is in part their common backgrounds that explains Sean's success with Will where the other elite but ineffectual psychologists and hypnotists had failed. But it is also Sean's use of violence against Will in their first encounter, his act of grabbing Will's throat and threatening harm for disrespecting Sean's deceased wife, that gets Will's attention and his respect. In opposition to Lambeau's philandering and oily come-ons to his women students, Sean reveals a romantic nostalgia for his dead wife. The same choice between romantic attachment and male bonding that Will faces in the last reel is foreshadowed in Sean's story about how he met his wife: by missing the historic Game 6 of the 1975 Boston Red Sox World Series with his pals. With his Southie credentials and undying love, Robin Williams thus supplies the image of a masculinity that can exist at the margins of higher society without submitting to its unsavory male code.

True to form, Robin Williams serves his usual role in the structure of dominant American ideology which is to supply the image of the reconstructed father figure. In films such as *Hook* (1991), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), and *Jumanji* (1995), he plays a dad who transforms from distant and irresponsible to loving and responsive, thus returning the unbalanced family to its proper, if compromised, patriarchal order. In *Good Will Hunting*, Sean represents a reformed, “good” father figure, especially in contrast to Lambeau’s more ambitious and demanding counterpart. But since he is both a Southie and a professional, Sean presents a role model for Will who also is situated between the working class-educated elite binary opposition. In this regard, Sean’s character functions as a kind of ideological resolution to the class and gender contradictions in the film. As a community college professor who apparently lives in the same kind of neighborhood as Will and his friends, he is also situated economically in an ambiguous middle position between Will’s working class and the prestigious M.I.T. professor.

The affinity between Sean and Will also supplies the film its mechanism for dramatic resolution. Homosocial bonding is ultimately the only means for Will to transcend class boundaries. Will rejects Skylar in two separate scenes, in her dorm room the last time they meet and then later on the phone as she boards her plane for California. As their dorm room confrontation reaches its climax, the dialogue mirrors the emotional climax of Will’s therapy in Sean’s office later in the film. But where Will’s climactic psychological breakthrough occurs when he is able to bond with Sean over their comparable memories as victims of child abuse, Will refuses to trust to Skylar the ugly details. Will denies Skylar can accept his dark childhood secrets:

WILL: No, you don’t wanna hear that.

SKYLAR : I didn’t know it.

WILL: You don’t wanna hear that I had fuckin’ cigarettes
put out on me when I was a little kid.

SKYLAR: Oh, I didn’t know that.

WILL: That this isn’t fuckin’ surgery, that the motherfucker
stabbed me. You don’t wanna hear that shit, Skylar.

SKYLAR: I do wanna hear it.

Finally, with repetition that will be echoed to the opposite effect in the corresponding scene with Sean, Will rejects Skylar's appeals:

WILL: Don't bullshit me. Don't bullshit me. Don't you fuckin' bullshit me!

SKYLAR: I love you. I wanna hear you say that you don't love me. Because if you say that, then I won't call you, and I won't be in your life . . .

WILL: I don't love you.

In Will's breakthrough scene brought on by his exchanging reminiscences with Sean of both their fathers' violence, the repetition leads to Will's leap of trust:

WILL: Don't fuck with me.

SEAN: It's not your fault.

WILL: Don't fuck with me all right? Don't fuck with me, Sean, not you.

SEAN: It's not your fault. It's not your fault.

With this psychotherapeutic incantation, Will embraces Sean and catharsis ensues. After their hug and a good cry, we are to conclude that the good father's forgiveness has brought on the emotional breakthrough by which Will is rehabilitated. Will has learned to trust outside the circle of his friends and thus conquered the emotional demons that had previously blocked his passage to class mobility. In the next scene, Will is able to submit to a corporate job interview and then later leave his Southie chums. The film's typical Hollywood resolution has Will riding off into the sunset in the final frame to, in one stroke we are led to believe, transcend his class constraints, get the girl, and make something of his intellectual potential. Getting the girl, which had already been pursued across the terrain of class differences, represents and parallels the resolution of class contradictions in Will's literal and symbolic move out of his class.

The relationship between Sean and Lambeau also plays out in another way the film's concern with resolving class hostility. Eventually it comes out during a heated argument in one of the final scenes that while Sean may have been the smarter of the two back when Lambeau was "pimple-faced and homesick, and didn't know what side of the bed to piss on." But

it was Lambeau who nevertheless went on to the scholarly acclaim of the Field's Medal and the prestige of an M.I.T. professorship. As a result, Sean feels accused of "fucking up," as the American myth of success teaches everyone to interpret their failure to ascend the ladder of socio-economic status. But in a move parallel to Will's willingness to give up his resentment of the upper classes, Sean and Lambeau tacitly forgive each other and reconcile their longtime grudge. But for Sean, this also means absolving everyone among his former classmates that Lambeau represents because Sean's gesture of good will is his promise to join his peers at the next, previously disdained, class reunion. Heretofore, Sean had boycotted the reunions because of the condescension he feels from Lambeau and his peers:

Oh, you arrogant shit. That's why I don't come to the god-damned reunions. 'Cause I can't stand that look in your eye. You know? That condescending, embarrassed look . . . You think I'm a failure . . . And you and your cronies think I'm some sort of pity case.

Class conflict is resolved in the image of the men's chummy reconciliation in the final scenes. As they promenade out, arm-in-arm to buy each other a drink, Chuckie's lottery metaphor returns, reminding us of Will's success despite impossible odds:

SEAN: This one's on me. I got the winner right here, pal. . . . This is my ticket to paradise.

LAMBEAU: Sean, you know what the odds are against winning the lottery?

SEAN: What? Four to one?

LAMBEAU: About 7,000,000 to one.

SEAN: I still have a shot.

Behind the Scenes

A report on the film's South Boston setting at the time the film was released revealed something of the brutal reality of working class life for young people there: "From December 1996 through last July [1997], six young men from the neighborhood hanged themselves, at least 17 others

attempted suicide and seven more young people died from drug overdoses” (“South Boston”). The same report makes more explicit the stark, real-life basis of the film’s fictional dilemma: “Though Hunting is a genius, he illustrates on a basic level what many consider an epidemic in South Boston: young people with untapped potential who end up living dead-end lives.”

Indeed, the tragic capacity of capitalist society to waste human potential fuels *Good Will Hunting* and supplies much of its sense of realism and urgency. Its point of view derives from its sympathy for its working class characters and their desperate circumstances. On a few occasions the film even gestures towards a class critique that recognizes the inequitable nature of power relations at the root of the problem. In the bar scene, Will demonstrates his loyalty and class solidarity by sticking up for his friend against the arrogant condescension of an affluent M.I.T. student. And Will’s rousing NSA speech, articulating a global structure that links the oppression of Southies with that of the rebels in “North Africa or the Middle East,” reveals an informed, progressive perspective. The screenwriters Damon and Affleck also display their lefty sympathies by putting into their lead character’s mouth the line that Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States* will “fuckin’ knock you on your ass.”

Yet, it might be somewhat ironic that Zinn’s book is showing a ten percent sales increase and may receive the culture industry’s highest honor—a television series (with Damon and Affleck possibly writing and starring)—as a result of the film’s plug (Robins). Zinn’s unconventional work repeatedly reveals that the most promising moments of American history are not those of the exceptional individuals and great men, but rather “those hidden episodes of the past when, even in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win” (Zinn 11). What *Good Will Hunting* offers, however, in its happy ending, is an imaginary resolution to class contradictions through an extraordinary individual’s flight from oppressive class circumstances, rather than the abolition of those conditions by collective action. Moreover, the individual’s escape from class constraints takes place with the explicit approval and acceptance of the oppressed class itself, whose only compensation is a retrograde version of masculinity. The film asks us to believe that Chuckie’s self-effacing fantasy is to be left behind by his best friend without a word:

Every day I come by your house and I pick you up. And we go out, we have a few drinks, and a few laughs, and it's great. But you know what the best part of my day is? It's for about ten seconds from when I pull up to the curb to when I get to your door. Because I think maybe I'll get up there and I'll knock on the door and you won't be there. No good-bye, no see you later, no nothin'. Just left. I don't know much, but I know that.

In the same high powered intellectual repartee in which Will promotes Zinn, Sean offers Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* as a comparable work. Again, the irony of this reference is that the preferred ideological cast of the film stands in contrast to the book. In fact, *Good Will Hunting* is strong evidence of Herman and Chomsky's thesis that "the 'societal purpose' of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state" (298). The film is especially clever in this regard because despite its iconoclastic accouterments and working class sympathies, its compromised bootstraps fable leaves the naturalness of the class structure safely unquestioned. Chuckie's resignation to his caste (quoted above), despite the fact that he would do anything to escape it, is the film's way of conceding and confirming the intractability of the class structure. Herman and Chomsky suggest that such ideological outcomes are largely a function of the institutional structure of the text's production. *Good Will Hunting* was financed by Miramax Films for around \$10 million (but grossed over \$100 million). Sometimes called a "pseudo indie" (Roman) because the style and budgets of its films are reminiscent of independently owned film companies, Miramax is nevertheless owned by Disney-Cap Cities, one of the world's largest media conglomerates. The success of films like *Good Will Hunting* and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) has helped Disney-Cap Cities reposition itself in the specialized and arthouse film market in order to increasingly squeeze out any alternative and independent forms of production and distribution (Roman). Little wonder then, perhaps, that Miramax would be attracted to a product that sells the status quo beneath its rebellious, "independent" trappings. In a triumphant ascending crane shot, the film bathes Will's departure in sunset and pop music as the final credits roll. But the final frames' crescendo of emotional rhetoric for the

hero might make us forget that Chuckie and all his friends have just driven off to their far less promising futures, compensated only by the nobility of their authentic manhood. Despite its gestures to the contrary, the film confirms that the good will you will find within the American class structure depends on what you have to sell.

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