

NOT YOUR AVERAGE FAIRY TALE

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Director and producer Alfred Hitchcock is a legend in the film industry, known as the mastermind behind classics like *The Birds* and *Dial M for Murder*. One of his most valuable contributions to film was his concept of the MacGuffin, an item that “must seem of vital importance to the characters” but to “the narrator, [has] no importance whatever” (Walker). In Gus Van Sant’s film *Good Will Hunting*, the MacGuffin is mathematics. Played by Matt Damon, Will Hunting possesses a preternatural skill in mathematics, and much of the film’s plot is contingent upon this skill. However, the fact that his affinity is with mathematics is irrelevant; history, science, or music could easily be substituted for it without the audience caring at all. The important aspect of Will’s story is that his rare aptitude, for math or otherwise, acts as a catalyst; it opens the way for a series of otherwise impossible opportunities and struggles that Will would not be privy to if he had not possessed it.

Because Will hails from the “rough side of the tracks” in South Boston, his brilliance brings with it some complicated decisions. Up until the time frame of the film, Will’s extreme knowledge was pretty much hidden from everyone except his closest friends, who merely saw it as a novelty. In one scene, Will’s friend Morgan, portrayed by Casey Affleck, smugly pronounces that “my boy’s wicked smart” while lightly tossing some peanuts into his mouth and walking away (*Good Will Hunting* 00:20:04). However, when Professor Lambeau, portrayed by Stellan Skarsgård, discovers Will’s genius by chance while Will is employed at MIT as a janitor, Will’s intelligence becomes a potentially divisive presence, threatening to separate Will from his old life. Suddenly, he is faced with job prospects at high-level think tanks and relationships with wealthy, brilliant people. In short, he is offered the opportunity to take a mighty leap from the lower class world of South Boston to the elite world of academia. To most people, this would be a fairy tale come true, and in fact, some critics have referred to *Good Will Hunting* as a “male-Cinderella fantasy of class transcendence” (Golfman 325). To Will, however,

this leap becomes a source of internal tension as he struggles between remaining loyal to his roots in South Boston and remaining loyal to his own intellect.

This tension Will faces evokes the disparities between classes in Boston in the 1990s, when the film takes place. Although class distinctions existed throughout America in the 1990s and continue to exist today, Boston was especially vulnerable as a result of its extremely polarized social levels. The existence of elite academic institutions such as MIT and Harvard was harshly juxtaposed against the poor, struggling world of South Boston in a way that few other areas of the country experienced. And this stark contrast only further contributed to itself. As Sean F. Reardon, a professor of education and sociology at Stanford, writes in his 2013 *New York Times* article “No Rich Child Left Behind,” “[s]tudents growing up in richer families have better grades and higher standardized test scores, on average, than poorer students; they also have higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities and school leadership positions, higher graduation rates and higher rates of college enrollment and completion” (Reardon). This correlation contributed to the socio-economic atmosphere of Boston in the 1990s; the already successful continued to become more successful, leaving a smaller and smaller window for those from the rough world of South Boston to infiltrate their ranks. Therefore, the elite academic institutions in Boston, mainly Harvard and MIT, could be partially to blame for its harshly divided socio-economic climate.

Throughout *Good Will Hunting*, Van Sant visually juxtaposes the polarized landscapes of the two classes in Boston over and over again; we follow the camera as it flies over dilapidated buildings, beat-up cars, and street fights in South Boston mere moments before the camera rises majestically to showcase an impressive, ivy-colored building splashed with sunlight, nestled on an expanse of freshly mown, green grass at MIT. We watch in rapture as Will clashes with a pretentious Harvard graduate student in a bar, and we laugh as Professor Lambeau is mocked by two men on the janitorial staff at MIT. There appears to be no middle ground in *Good Will Hunting*, just the working class, poorly educated citizens of South Boston and the wealthy elite of the universities, reminding the audience of the starkly separated socio-economic American landscape.

Many view *Good Will Hunting* as a fable of sorts, reinforcing the positive trope that one can tear down this wall of class distinctions and advance in life purely through hard work and determination. However, the film may actually directly challenge this sentiment. In her article "Getting Ahead of the Class: Reflections on *Good Will Hunting*," Noreen Golfman states that the film "openly declares that a restless young man from the wrong side of the American tracks could not possibly, *wilfully*, find an off-ramp to easy street without some extraordinary advantage" (Golfman 325). Will happens upon his numerous opportunities as a result of a series of fortunate events; if he is Cinderella, then his intellectual abilities (and Professor Lambeau's many favors) are his fairy godmother, and most ordinary people are not gifted with these advantages. Will's story somewhat delegitimizes the value of regular hard work and determination and can be discouraging to the viewer; as a Cinderella story, his is hardly inspiring.

For a true Cinderella story, one might examine *Forrest Gump*, another American film of the 1990s. This film tells a more typical rags-to-riches story, one that inspires audiences amidst a discouraging socio-economic climate. In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest, played by Tom Hanks, can be viewed as a foil for Will; his IQ is so low that his mother had to seduce the principal of the local public school in order to ensure him an education; additionally, he can hardly walk due to a spinal condition. However, by sheer force of will, Forrest gains the ability to walk and even becomes a star football player at the University of Alabama; he joins the military and performs well enough to receive the Medal of Honor; he earns global fame as a professional ping pong player; he even happens upon a fortune as co-owner of the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company (*Forrest Gump*). In complete juxtaposition with Will Hunting, Forrest advances in life despite extreme disadvantages without any extraordinary advantages. He truly conveys to the audience the value of hard work and determination in overcoming class distinctions rather than discarding them, as Will Hunting subtly does.

To see *Good Will Hunting's* true statement about overcoming class barriers, a more realistic character is Will's best friend, Chuckie—portrayed by Ben Affleck. In one scene, Chuckie tellingly states that "tomorrow [he's] gonna wake up and [he]'ll be fifty, and [he]'ll still be doin' this shit. And that's alright. That's fine . . . you're sittin' on a winnin' lottery ticket" (*Good Will*

Hunting 01:42:30). Chuckie does not even see a slim possibility of one day advancing in the same way as Will. His stance is never once challenged during the film. Chuckie can be said to represent the majority of South Bostonians and people in general; he possesses neither extreme disadvantages, nor great advantages. Through this character, Van Sant seems to tell the audience that if they have not been gifted with some rare talent or ability, they have little hope of moving up society's ladder. Though this seems harsh, it conveys the reality of Boston in the 1990s; the lower class was regularly squashed by the privileged people drawn to the area by its universities.

Even though its story may not be a fairy tale of pure inspiration, *Good Will Hunting* still conveys an important picture of the class system. The film renders the psychological and social atmosphere that class creates by way of the clear disconnect between characters like Chuckie and Morgan and those like Professor Lambeau. Thus Van Sant creates a distinct mentality of insiders versus outsiders, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.'

Will Hunting has long considered himself an outsider and yet is presented with a unique hall pass, of sorts, to become an insider. This instills an odd persona in Will. In her article "Reflections on the Outsider Within," Patricia H. Collins uses the term "outsider within" to describe the plight of black women in American society. Members of the community can officially but inherently feel distanced from American society, left out. The same idea is relevant to Van Sant's film. Though Collins's article is primarily about black women and *Good Will Hunting* is about a white male, it is applicable because "[f]amily income [can be] a better predictor of children's success . . . than race" (Reardon). In other words, coming from the low-income, rough part of town was a divisive characteristic, just as Collins shows being black to be. Will's socio-economic status, combined with his genius, put him in a unique position similar to that of the women described in the article; he is an "individual . . . who [finds himself] caught between groups of unequal power" (Collins 85). He is trapped between his life of comfort in South Boston and the decidedly more 'powerful' world of academia. Though parts of each world seem attractive to Will, he is unable to find an overlap between the two, creating a distinct tension within him.

In response to this tension, Will enters into a state of what can be referred to as self-sabotage in many of his encounters with members of the

upper class. For instance, he makes a mockery of the psychiatrists whom he is required to visit in lieu of serving prison time for a violent street fight and blows off job interviews set up for him by Professor Lambeau. During these bouts of self-sabotage, Will reveals an inherent distrust that he has been conditioned to possess for the upper class, a clear psychological result of his lower-class upbringing. This distrust is most clearly manifested in Will's relationship with his girlfriend Skylar, portrayed by Minnie Driver, a pre-med student at Harvard. Skylar, a life-long member of the privileged, lightly broaches the topic of Will accompanying her to California for medical school. However, Will is paralyzed by an innate fear of entering into a deeper relationship with someone from her class level, and in an ensuing argument, shouts that she will leave him for a wealthy Stanford student while in California and brag about how she "went slumming too once" (*Good Will Hunting* 01:24:49). This statement highlights a deep fear of rejection, another psychological struggle brought about by Will's lower-class upbringing.

Despite Will's skill at solving advanced mathematical equations on his own, he is unable to reconcile his own internal struggles. Therefore, he relies heavily on a man named Sean Maguire—played by Robin Williams—who has attempted to create an overlap between the two distinct classes in Boston that Will cannot make for himself. Like Will, Sean was reared in South Boston, dealt with childhood abuse, and possessed the intelligence to gain admission into a prestigious college, where he became roommates with none other than Professor Lambeau. Sean was on the path to becoming as prestigious a scholar as Professor Lambeau, yet was seemingly held back by his lower-class upbringing. He appears to possess a certain fear of ambition, as evidenced by his citing of the Unabomber during an argument with Professor Lambeau in which he implored the professor not to push Will too hard, lest he crack under the pressure. Professor Lambeau regularly references Sean's 'failures'; instead of working at an elite university, he holds a humble position teaching at a community college and has never been notably recognized for his work (00:48:55). However, knowing the barriers of Boston's class distinctions, these do not seem like failures, but rather like an inevitable reality.

Ultimately, Will follows in Sean's footsteps, going to "see about a girl" instead of taking a prestigious position at McNeill, a local firm (02:01:44). By pursuing Skylar in California, Will attempts to do as Sean has done and cre-

ate an overlap between two worlds. Overcoming his distrust of the elite will let him enter into Skylar's privileged life in California, yet he still blows off a high-level job, just as he would have done at the film's beginning. Through examination of both Will's and Sean's life paths, we are forced to consider whether the overlap they so desperately seek can ultimately exist while still allowing them to reach their fullest potential, or if it only exists at the expense of their ambition. There is a distinctive trade-off between professional success and happiness for these 'Southie' boys, leading the viewer to consider whether the class distinctions present in the movie make it impossible for people of a lower-class upbringing to achieve both.

Good Will Hunting ends with an image of Will driving, isolated, down an open road to California while the credits roll. The blue skies, green foliage, and open road paint a picture of optimism for the audience, a feeling of 'happily ever after.' We root for Will as he finally pursues Skylar, and we recognize that this scene conveys a certain amount of freedom from the psychological chains of his rough socio-economic landscape. However, Van Sant leaves Will as a piece in a cycle of lower-class entrapment first introduced by Sean; he sacrifices professional success for personal happiness, unable, at the moment, to have both—just as Sean has done before him and another smart young man from South Boston will likely do in the future. The psychological consequences of growing up an "outsider" forge a barricade difficult to crash through, a chain difficult to break, and Van Sant uses *Good Will Hunting* to draw attention to this difficulty and perhaps call for the development of a larger middle class. Ultimately, the class system in Boston and, zooming out, in America, requires radical action to stop the vicious cycle of lower-class repression and poverty; Van Sant is ready to "let the healing begin" (00:37:40).

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