

Human Mind Through Film

Good Will Hunting

OVERVIEW

Good Will Hunting is a 1997 film directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who both star in the film. Set in Boston, Massachusetts, it tells the story of Will Hunting (Damon), a troubled prodigy who works as a janitor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, despite the fact that his knowledge of and facility with higher mathematics far outstrips that of anyone in the university. Will must learn to overcome his deep fear of abandonment in order to learn how to trust and love the people who care about him. Good Will Hunting is the story of a young man and his struggle with both himself and personal relationships, trying to work through his problems so that he can open up to others, and begin putting his immeasurable intellectual potential to work.

PRODUCTION

Affleck and Damon originally wrote the screenplay as a thriller: Young man in the rough-and-tumble streets of South Boston, who possesses a superior intelligence, is targeted by the FBI to become a G-Man. Castle Rock Entertainment president Rob Reiner later urged them to drop the thriller aspect of the story and to focus the relationship between Will Hunting (Damon) and his psychologist (Williams). At Reiner's request, noted screenwriter William Goldman read the script and further suggested that the film's climax ought to be Will's decision to follow his girlfriend Skylar (Driver) to California.

Castle Rock bought the script for \$675,000 against \$775,000, meaning that Affleck and Damon would stand to earn an additional \$100,000 if the film was produced and they retained sole writing credit. However, studios balked at the idea of Affleck and Damon in the lead roles. The script was put into turnaround, and Miramax bought the rights from Castle Rock.

After buying the rights from Castle Rock, Miramax gave the green light to put the film into production. While several well-known filmmakers were originally considered to direct, including Kevin Smith, Mel Gibson, Michael Mann and Steven Soderbergh, Affleck and Damon's choice for the job was Gus Van Sant, whose work in previous films like *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) had left an impression on the screenwriters. Miramax was persuaded and hired Van Sant to direct the film.

Good Will Hunting was filmed on location in the Greater Boston area and Toronto over five months in 1996. Although the story is set in Boston, much of the film was shot at locations in Toronto, with the University of Toronto standing in for MIT and Harvard, and the classroom scenes filmed at McLennan Physical Laboratories and Central Technical School. However, the bar scenes set in South Boston ("Southie") were shot on-site. The cast engaged in considerable

improvisation in rehearsals; Robin Williams, Casey Affleck and Minnie Driver each made significant contributions to their characters. Robin Williams' last line in the film, as well as the therapy scene in which he talks about his character's wife, were both ad-libbed. The therapy scene took everyone by surprise, as, when Williams gets to the joke, the camera can be seen shaking due to the cameraman's laughing.[citation needed]

The film is dedicated to the memory of poet Allen Ginsberg and writer William S. Burroughs, who both died in 1997.

Plot

Though Will Hunting (Damon) has genius-level intelligence (such as a talent for memorizing facts and an intuitive ability to prove sophisticated mathematical theorems), he works as a janitor at MIT and lives in an impoverished South Boston neighborhood with his childhood friend Chuckie Sullivan (Affleck). An abused foster child, he still feels great anger and frustration and works a series of menial jobs.

One day, Will solves a difficult graduate-level math problem that Professor Gerald Lambeau (Skaarsgard), a Fields Medalist and combinatorialist, left on a chalkboard as a challenge to his students, hoping someone might solve the problem by the semester's end. Everyone at MIT wonders who solved it, and Lambeau puts another problem on the board -- one that took him and his colleagues two years to prove. Will is discovered in the act of solving the problem, and Lambeau initially thinks that Will is vandalizing the board and chases him away. When Will turns out to have solved it correctly, Lambeau tries to track Will down. Meanwhile, Will attacks a man who had bullied him in kindergarten, and faces imprisonment after striking a police officer who is breaking up the fight. Realizing Will might have the potential to be as great a mathematician as the legendary Srinivasa Ramanujan, Lambeau goes to Will's trial and intervenes on his behalf, offering him a choice: either Will can go to jail, or he can be released into Lambeau's personal supervision, where he must study mathematics and see a therapist. Will chooses the latter, even though he does not want to go into therapy.

Five psychologists fail to connect with Will. Lambeau calls on psychologist Sean Maguire (Williams), an old friend of his who grew up in the same neighborhood as Will. Sean is able to connect with Will and get past his hostile, sarcastic defense mechanisms. Will is particularly struck when Sean tells him how he gave up his ticket to see the Red Sox in the 1975 World Series (thus missing Carlton Fisk's famous home run in Game 6) to meet and spend time with a stranger in a bar who would later become his wife. This encourages Will to try to establish a relationship with Skylar (Driver), a young woman he met at a Harvard bar. Meanwhile, Lambeau pushes Will so hard to excel that Will eventually refuses to go to the job interviews that Lambeau arranged for him in lucrative fields. Lambeau and Sean also fight about Will's future.

Skylar asks Will to move to California with her, where she will begin medical school at

Stanford University. Will panics at the thought of so much change and commitment. He angrily breaks up with her and, after she leaves, he returns to his usual habits. He shrugs off the work he's doing for Lambeau as "a joke," even though Lambeau is incapable of solving many of these mathematical problems and even envies Will. Lambeau begs Will not to throw it all away, but Will walks out on him.

Sean realizes that Will spends so much time and energy seeing all the things that can go wrong that he takes no action, in order to avoid the risk of future emotional pain. He asks Will what he wants to do, and proves that Will has no answer to that question. Will, annoyed and angry, leaves. When Will tells Chuckie that he wants to stay in Boston for the rest of his life, Chuckie takes it as an "insult" and tells Will that he's wasting his potential, saying that one day Chuckie would want to knock on Will's door and hope he wouldn't be there.

Will goes to another therapy session, where both he and Sean share that they were victims of child abuse. At first Will is defensive and angry, but he eventually starts to cry. Finally, after much self-reflection, Will decides to take a risk. When his buddies buy him a car for his 21st birthday he decides to go to California to live with Skylar, casting aside his lucrative job offers. He leaves a note for Sean explaining what he's doing, using one of Sean's own quips, "I had to go see about a girl." Sean also leaves to travel the world, though not before reconciling with Lambeau. The movie ends as Chuckie discovers Will has left and Will drives to California.