

## **The Human Mind Through Film - Dr. J. Mior Attachment Theory Applied to "Good Will Hunting"**

**W**ill Hunting has a classic attachment disorder. Abused as a child, he has trouble developing meaningful and appropriate relationships with adults and women. His only friends are among a group of young men his own age who cannot begin to compete with his intelligence. He has no empathy for people outside his close group of friends. He cannot manage his basic emotions, such as anger. If he has a disagreement with someone or if he dislikes them, he will assault them either verbally or physically. Will's anger is one of many defences that mask his inner feelings and guard his inner self. Will's subconscious is determined that no one will be able penetrate these defences and hurt him again.

Will does not integrate his intelligence and his interest in reading with relationships, either socially or in the work place. The reading gives him a sense of mastery and a way to distance himself from people. He uses intellectual tasks to self-soothe. (Had Will been emotionally secure he would have shared his intellectual interests with people who could have appreciated them. When Sean asks Will to name the people with whom he has strong relationships other than Chuckie, Will names Shakespeare, Nietzsche and several other dead intellectual giants. These "friends" could not rise from the grave and hurt him.)

Will does have strengths. His intelligence is a strength, and his choice of Chuckie Sullivan as his best friend is a strength. Chuckie is nurturing, loving, and respectful of Will's promise. Will has the good instinct to be attracted to Skylar, portrayed as a loving and genuine person. But she is smart and requires an empathic and loving relationship. This makes Will very anxious. She represents a risk that he cannot tolerate until after his treatment.

Attachment theory is accepted by most psychologists and psychiatrists as the best explanation for how we develop the capacity to form relationships with others and relate to our environment. It asserts that the methods we use to relate to others, manage our needs, express our demands, and shape our expectations for the world are rooted in our relationships with our early caregivers. Through these interactions we learn to balance our feelings and need states with others and to establish our varying degrees of independence, dependence, power, and control. Attachment also impacts self-esteem through the experience of conflict with caregivers.

Early attachment is established in infancy and is primarily based on the acknowledgment and gratification of basic biological needs: the need to eat, the need to drink, the need to be comfortable (not cold, hot, or wet), the need to sleep, and the need to be free from fear. This is exemplified by the infant emitting a cry reflecting a "need state", a signal for help. The caretaker learns to recognize the infant's different cries to determine the specific need requiring gratification. If needs are consistently satisfied, the infant learns to depend on and trust its caretakers. As the infant becomes assured that its needs will be gratified, it acquires the ability to delay gratification when hearing its caretaker's voice or seeing the caretakers' face. The infant understands that help is on the way. This dependency enables an infant to begin to self-regulate,

to build inner strength and resiliency. The natural consequence of having one's needs met leads to an increased ability to tolerate the discomfort aroused by the "need state". As solutions are repeatedly found, anxiety shifts to a sense of mastery. Without a consistent history of episodes when needs are successfully satisfied, anxiety persists and dependency does not become securely established. This anxiety is reflected in future difficulties in forming trusting relationships with others and managing needs. Attachments thus may be categorized as secure or insecure and anxious or overanxious in response to early childhood experiences as an infant in getting basic biological needs met.

Once attachment is securely established, the role of the primary caregiver changes to helping the infant learn to identify and become comfortable with its various feelings. The primitive emotions felt by infants are often raw and powerful. They can frighten and overwhelm a baby. Caregivers mirror (i.e. reflect back) the feelings the infant projects and label those feelings with words. This enables the child to make connections between its internal and external worlds. When the infant learns that the caregivers can understand the infant's emotions, the infant's fears and anxieties will be alleviated and the caregiver can teach the infant techniques for managing its emotions. (This process continues through adolescence.) Physical closeness, eye contact, voice modulation, facial expression, posture and gesture are all methods by which caregivers and children demonstrate that they are attuned to each other's emotions. Psychologists call this process "affective attunement". The child learns, through affective attunement, that internal feeling states are shared forms of human experience. The need for nonverbal attunement persists throughout life and is manifest through nonverbal communication and empathy.

Attachment becomes disorganized and dysfunctional in the presence of neglect or abuse. As needs are not consistently met or acknowledged, a damaged concept of self develops. Nonverbal communication is also negatively impacted. The ensuing fragmented self has difficulty regulating affect and behaviour, and managing interpersonal relations. These individuals often experience overwhelming feelings of worthlessness and shame. The infant learns to expect negative responses from caretakers and therefore begins to turn inward as a means to self-protect and avoid further disappointment. Shame reflects the infant's self-blame for the negativity and leads to further psychic injury.

In the movie, Sean seeks to provide Will with a positive attachment relationship. This connection enables Will to create a more cohesive self-image and engage more positively with others. The beginning phase of treatment is characterized by creating a rapport based on commonality. This process was exemplified by the shared experiences of being raised in "Southie" (South Boston), a common interest in books and in lifting weights, their love for the Boston Red Sox, and their common experience of having been physically abused as children. (Even the painting served to tie Will to Sean. It was an accurate portrayal of how both of them felt.) This commonality creates hope for a future connection between therapist and client. The shared experiences force Will to see Sean as a human being, not just another adult trying to reach into his core being and hurt him. With very guarded and defensive patients like Will, this process is crucial. By showing the client

that someone with whom he has so much in common is offering a way out of his problems, it gives the client a hope for change.

Once Will sees commonality with Sean, he can accept the nurturing relationship that Sean offers. The therapist substitutes for the caregiver that Will never had, filling in the gaps of Will's development. Sean's stories substitute for the memories, experiences and learning that Will would have had if he had grown up in an intact family. As Sean points out, Will has never seen or experienced true intimacy between a man and a woman. To give Will some sense of this, Sean describes the intimacy of his own marriage and how he loved his wife even when she farted in her sleep. This detail reflects the closeness of the marriage and the beauty found in trusting and loving others with all their imperfections.

In treating attachment disorder, the therapist uses the phenomenon of "transference" to fill the gaps in the patient's attachment. Transference occurs when patients subconsciously transfer to their therapist the feelings and attitudes that they originally linked with significant figures in their early life. Sean, in effect, re-parents Will and becomes the loving caregiver that Will never had. It's not just coincidence that Sean chooses to begin the treatment in the Boston Public Garden, a place where parents take young children for rides on a small lake in boats with swan decorations.

Empathy is crucial as treatment progresses, requiring the therapist to be responsive to the patient's emotions. Sean's ability to understand Will's shame and terror contains Will's anxiety and reduces dissociation (a psychological state or condition in which certain thoughts, emotions, sensations, or memories are separated from the rest of the psyche). To resolve painful experiences, therapy must bring that pain to the surface and deal with it. Empathy allows the therapist to make the revelations of therapy less threatening and overwhelming. (In the treatment of attachment disorder, this is the substitute for the process by which the primary caregiver helps the infant learn to manage its feelings.)

One of the most evocative scenes in the movie shows this process. As Sean and Will cut through the layers of injury caused by the neglect and abuse Will suffered as a child, Will comes to the guilt which abused children so often feel. Abused children wonder why they are not loved like other children. They usually think that it must be something that they have done or due to some deficiency from which they suffer. To help Will overcome this misplaced but deeply felt sense of guilt, Sean confronts the illogic. He holds Will and reassures him, repeating, "It's not your fault. ... It's not your fault", helping Will to understand on an emotional level that he was not to blame for the abuse. With this realization, Will can move forward, leaving behind the vestiges of shame, worthlessness, and rage from the past.

The success of the treatment occurs when Will has enough self-confidence to accept the love offered by Skylar and to take a chance on the relationship by venturing out of the Boston area to live with her in California.

The treatment process outlined in the movie stretches the limits of traditional therapy in which the therapist strictly recognizes a boundary between the therapist's life and that of the patient. The untraditional nature of the work is justified by Will's stony resistance and clever defensiveness. Sean bent the rules to reach Will and without these modifications the treatment would not have been successful. Examples of these unusual interactions include Sean's confrontational approach and his physical touching/bullying of Will, the meeting at the lake, ending sessions early and Sean's sharing of his own past experience. In working with adolescents and resistant clients, these variations from standard practices are often necessary.

### **Why Trust in Dependence is Necessary for a Mature Interdependence**

**K**nowledge of attachment theory and the mechanism of attachment disorder enhance our understanding of dependence, independence, and interdependence in people who are psychologically healthy. No person living in society is completely independent. We are all dependent on many people: family, friends, employers, co-workers, employees, police officers, doctors, nurses, garbage men, fire fighters, etc. In higher order animal groups, long before mankind ever walked the earth, most adults provided support or care for others and at the same time benefited from the support or care they received from others in the group.

### **Security in dependence → maturity in interdependence**

Human society is the most interdependent of all animal cultures. To thrive, individuals need to be comfortable with dependence and to trust that others will meet their needs. In addition, it is only when infants and children learn to trust their caregivers and are confident that their own needs will be satisfied by others that they can extend themselves and nurture others. Individuals obsessed with meeting their own needs without depending on others have no interest in satisfying the needs of others. People who are like Will Hunting before treatment, who fear that others will hurt them, push those others away and erect barriers to intimacy. Individuals who are strongly self-absorbed cannot develop empathy and thus have trouble developing a conscience.

# Why Victims of Child Abuse Blame Themselves

In a key scene Sean, reassures Will that the abuse and the rejection were not his fault. Abuse of a child by an adult is never the child's fault. No matter what the abuser may claim, no child has ever done anything to deserve being hit or molested.

## **Victims of Physical Abuse:**

A major psychological injury suffered by victims of child abuse arises from the message that the child is not worthy of having his or her boundaries respected. This message is a devastating blow to self-esteem. Physical abuse often follows some real or imagined transgression by the child. The abuser's position, often yelled repeatedly, is that the child has "caused" the adult to act aggressively through the child's misbehaviour. While older kids may know the logical absurdity of this claim, younger children do not. A child of three, four or five, or even older, is totally dependent upon his or her caretaker's for food, clothing, shelter and a host of other necessities. The adults are much larger than the child. They are more powerful, physically, mentally and socially. They are much more experienced than the child. To the child, especially if the child is very young, they are like gods. It is hard for a child to discount the statements of these powerful figures.

Even if the abuser is silent or the child is older and understands the illogic of the abuser's excuses, the child will wonder what about him or her is so unworthy or so disgusting that it causes such abusive actions by an adult. As the movie shows, even when the child is older and knows intellectually that the abuse was not his or her fault, the underlying feelings of inadequacy remain. As Sean McGuire repeats to Will that it wasn't his fault, Sean pierces deeper and deeper into Will's psyche until he gets to the heart of the boy's hurt. This process, which usually takes months, was expertly condensed by the movie makers into one dramatic scene. (The mechanism by which children blame themselves for physical abuse is similar to that which occurs in adult victims of spousal abuse who believe that they bear some of the blame when their husbands or boyfriends beat them.)

## **Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse:**

Most children who have been subjected to sexual abuse by an adult also believe that they are fully or partially responsible for the abuse. First, 90% of children sexually abused by an adult do not disclose the abuse while it is ongoing out of either shame or fear or for some other reason. By hiding what is occurring, the children become complicit in what they know or sense to be an invasion of their boundaries. Second, sexual abuse entails an intimate and special relationship with the adult abuser. This gives the child-victim a sense of importance and specialness, which any child would enjoy. But children also know that the relationship is degrading to them and feel guilty for enjoying the feeling of being special. Third, in many cases the act of abuse is physically pleasurable for the child. The adult will convince the child that he or she desires to continue these feelings. The child will feel guilty about this and want to keep the act secret. Fourth, the adult abuser will use every psychological trick he (or she) knows to keep the abuse going and to keep it secret. This often includes convincing the child that it was the child who seduced the perpetrator

or who continues the relationship because the child enjoys it. Most children will not be able to withstand the persuasiveness of a motivated, larger, stronger and more experienced adult. (Not all of these factors operate in all cases.) Through these mechanisms, the children come to "own" the acts of their own abuse and take on the blame for them.

The effects of childhood abuse, both physical and sexual, are often devastating. The good news is that modern psychotherapy can treat and cure the effects of abuse restoring children who have suffered from abuse to full and complete lives, emotionally and sexually. The goal of the therapist is to crawl inside the patient's mind and see how the patient perceives the world. Before a therapist can help a patient, the therapist needs to see the world the way the patient does.

Most parents, at times of utter desperation, have wanted to throw a child against the wall. But actually doing it is an entirely different matter. At times, parenting calls for the utmost in self-restraint.

# Class Critique in "Good Will Hunting"

In many communities that host universities, there is a class division between the locals, the "town", and the university people, "the gown" (for the gowns worn at graduation). This is another way of saying working class vs. educated elite. "Southie" (South Boston) is an Irish working class neighbourhood. Millions of Irish fled to the United States in the late 1800s seeking relief from the infamous potato famines. Many of them settled in Boston and formed a large minority in the town. For decades they suffered discrimination by New England's dominant Yankee culture.

One of the centres of academic life in the Boston area is the adjoining city of Cambridge, in which Harvard, MIT and several other universities are located. The town and gown difference is shown in many aspects of the movie, setting up conflict in Will's relationship with Lambeau, with Skylar, with the young graduate student in the bar, and with the NSA, as well as with his own abilities and interests.

The movie criticizes aspects of both the young male culture in "Southie" and the academic/intellectual life. The young male culture in Southie is portrayed as cruel, emotionally impoverished (especially in relations with women) and sometimes violent. (It does have strengths, particularly the friendship between the boys and the love of the Boston Red Sox.) However, as impoverished as the male culture of Southie is, it is home for Will ... and for Sean.

The academic/intellectual culture is criticized for its overemphasis on results, i.e., academic achievement and breaking codes (for the NSA). However, it is academic learning that developed the psychological understanding that Sean uses to help Will.

The character of Sean is a key to the movie's class critique. Sean is clearly a product of the academic/intellectual society: he is a graduate of Harvard; he loves books; he paints in his spare time; and he is a teacher. However, Sean has not abandoned his Southie roots. (He has a long running tab at a neighbourhood bar.) His acquaintance with the academic world has allowed him to grow beyond the violence, cruelty and emotional impoverishment of his Southie roots. So, too, he has not bought into the achievement-beyond-all-else rule of the academic/intellectual world. With his understanding that there are aspects of human existence that transcend both academic achievement and the Red Sox, e.g., going to see about a girl, and his knowledge of how to help Will heal from the abuse he received as a child, Sean combines the best of both cultures.

Thus, the class critique of the movie tells us that we are at our best when we can take the good from our home environment and combine it with academic/intellectual achievement within a framework of emotional maturity.

## Symbolism, Plot and Literary Devices in "Good Will Hunting"

The name of the movie refers to the fact that the main character is hunting for the good Will, for the behaviours that will allow him to be good.

The fact that Will has not been out of Boston, nor on a plane, nor to any of the places that he has read about shows that his outlook is very limited. It is a metaphor for the limiting nature of psychological conditions.

The group of boys is like a gang and also a substitute family. Will is lucky that his friend Chuckie is such a good and nurturing person. Chuckie can see Will's potential. He doesn't try to hold Will back but instead encourages him to be himself and to grow beyond the group of friends.

The therapy really gets started in the visit to the Boston Public Garden, a place where parents take their young children for rides on a small lake in boats decorated to look like swans. This is a symbol for the beginning of Sean's re-parenting of Will.

As characters, Will and Sean both move out of small and confined worlds to the larger outside world. Sean, who obviously could do more than teach psychology to disinterested kids at a junior college, has confined himself there following the death of his wife. The parallel movement by the characters gives the movie added depth.

The painting on Sean's wall is a reflection of both of their characters. However, the storm waves tossing Will around are different than the storm waves tossing Sean. Will can read the meaning of the picture so well not only because of his great intellect, but because like Sean, Will feels alone in a small boat in stormy seas.

