

film

The (Il)legality of Love: *Gone Baby Gone*

NOT MANY PEOPLE WOULD ASSOCIATE WILLIAM Wordsworth with *Gone Baby Gone*, Ben Affleck's 2007 adaptation of Dennis Lehane's 1998 novel. After all, the film focuses on a gritty working class neighborhood of Boston, with nary a flower in sight, while Wordsworth celebrates the visionary power "Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower." In fact, the Boston of *Gone Baby Gone* is everything Wordsworth repudiates:

What anarchy and din
Barbarian and infernal—a phantasma
Monstrous in color, motion, shape, sight,
sound!

* * * * *

Oh blank confusion! True epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her Sons, . . .
Oppression under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not
free!

(*Prelude*, Book 7)

Though Wordsworth is describing his experience of London in 1791, he encapsulates my experience watching the phantasma of barbarian and infernal characters in Affleck's film: a murderous pedophile, a slovenly drug dealer, a gun-brandishing drug lord, a greasy and obese addict snorting cocaine off her floor, a tawdry mother who exposes her daughter to criminal activities. Even more disturbing is the film's revelation that agents of law-enforcement often contribute to the "blank confusion." *Gone Baby Gone*, then, is precisely about something that worried Wordsworth: "oppression under which even highest minds must labour, whence the strongest are not free."

The highest minds of the film are Patrick Kenzie (played by the director's brother, Casey Affleck), who has hung out his shingle as a "Private

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Investigator," along with his girlfriend Angie (Michelle Monaghan). The oppression under which they labor is signaled by a voiceover at the start of the film. As we watch a montage of sights in Dorchester, Massachusetts, we hear Patrick state "I always believed that it was the things you don't choose that make you who you are: your city, your neighbors, your family." This, in fact, echoes a Wordsworthian insight: that "the Child is Father of the Man," that where one grows up molds one's sensibilities. Wordsworth, of course, grew up among the gorgeous green peaks of the English Lake District, whereas Patrick grew up among the egregious incivilities of an industrial town.

The opening montage of that town ends with television crews interviewing Helene McCready (Oscar-nominated Amy Ryan), questioning her about the disappearance of Amanda, her four-year-old daughter. The girl's aunt and uncle, Bea and Lionel (Helene's brother), later approach Angie and Patrick about finding the child. This creates, if even slightly, the first of many ethical tensions in the film. Angie suggests that the case needs to stay in the hands of the police. Indeed, Bea complains "The cops don't want me coming here; Lionel don't want me coming here,"—but Patrick is willing to bypass proper channels. Angie, quite understandably, doesn't want to get involved due to the brutality of the case, telling Patrick, "We have a good life. I don't want to find a little kid in a dumpster." Significantly, Patrick describes Angie's childhood as "innocent, milking cows up in Vermont," thus aligning her with the Wordsworthian pastoral. Like Wordsworth, Angie is deterred by what might prove "monstrous in color, motion, shape, sight, sound."

The camera, however, returns us to just that: the "blank confusion" outside Helene's flat. We see a dapper newscaster, impeccably dressed in suit and tie, speaking into a television camera. *Our*

camera, however, begins to tilt down the newscaster's body until it captures naked legs clad in tiny shorts and sneakers. This brief take (no pun intended) is highly symbolic. For as the film proceeds, we discover that first impressions cannot be trusted, that beneath impeccably controlled surfaces are morally-naked realities.

The first revelation of this theme immediately follows. Patrick has persuaded Angie to approach Helene before they reject the case altogether. Their visit reveals an underside to the mother who acted so worried in front of television crews. Helene and her friend Dotty slouch on the sofa like teen rebels, hurling insults and vulgarities at their visitors. We learn from Lionel that Helene drinks everyday, snorts coke twice a week, and hangs out in a bar frequented by disgustingly vile addicts. When Patrick and Angie visit the bar, they learn that Helene often brought the four-year-old Amanda with her, but on the night Amanda went missing, Helene was there without her, engaged in illegal activities. Problematically, Helene had told police that she was merely across the street visiting Dotty when Amanda disappeared from her bed.

Angie therefore confronts a bigger moral dilemma than subverting police procedure: the necessity of finding a lost innocent even while knowing her innocence may be lost once she is returned to her immoral mother. However, as the film makes very clear, Helene is upright compared to sexual predators who kidnap children in order to molest them. Along with Angie, we therefore endorse the search, our stomachs turning with each despicable criminal that Patrick encounters along the way.

Fortunately, Angie and Patrick are aided by a paragon of legal fortitude and integrity: police captain Jack Doyle, meritorious head of the Boston Crimes Against Children Task Force. Played by the distinguished Morgan Freeman, who carries with him his roles as a wise and patient God in *Bruce Almighty* (2002) and *Evan Almighty* (2007), Doyle exudes peace and strength. As we are reminded several times, he had a twelve-year-old daughter who was abducted and killed, making him the perfect bridge between the distressed parent and legal redress.

Like Angie and Patrick, we trust Doyle implicitly. He parallels the Spirit of Nature that sustains

Wordsworth in the midst of London's "far-fetched, perverted things," a Spirit of "Composure, and ennobling harmony" (*Prelude*, Book 7). Significantly, the most Wordsworthian scene in the whole movie—a bucolic cottage far from the city, surrounded by verdant trees and lush grass—is identified with Doyle, who has a summer home in the country. Indeed, like nature itself, Doyle seems to carry "the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened" (*Tintern Abbey*).

However, as with the newscaster in knickers, all is not as it seems. Yes, Doyle carries the "burthen" of the film's mystery, but in a way most viewers don't expect. To understand Doyle's role, we must consider the only other shot of Wordsworthian beauty in the film. The director invites us to connect the two scenes by starting each with a bird's-eye-view shot that enhances its loveliness. In the scene associated with Doyle, we look down on Patrick's car driving through a sunny valley framed by pristine hills and stately trees: a shocking contrast to the city's smudgy greys and dirty browns that dominate much of the film.

The same contrast heightens the natural beauty of the other Wordsworthian scene. The action has taken Angie and Patrick to a quarry outside of town. Since the word "quarry" elicits images of nature exploited, we are surprised at its majesty. The bird's-eye-view shot floats us over a gorgeous sunset reflected in the quarry lake, mammoth rocks framing the placid waters. We feel "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns" (*Tintern Abbey*). Soon, however, a long shot shows us the Boston skyline in the distance, as though indicating the source of nature's degradation—brought close when we realize that many of the magnificent rocks have been violated with spray-paint.

Like Wordsworth, who repeatedly describes hopeful ascents in his poetry, Angie and Patrick ascend the quarry rocks hoping for a successful recovery of Amanda. They are expecting to meet with two detectives who Doyle has assigned to help them: Remy (played by the always riveting Ed Harris) and Nick (John Ashton). Remy and Nick have arranged for Amanda to be exchanged for the \$130,000 that Helene and her scummy boyfriend stole from a drug lord. Gunshots shatter their hope

just as they climb over a spray-painted rock with a hard-to-miss sign painted on its side. Standing out in bright white paint against the black rock, a huge broken circle with the head of an arrow at one end seems to signal that things will turn in a different direction than Angie and Patrick anticipate. Sure enough, when they reach Remy and Nick on the other side of the lake, they find the drug lord dead and Amanda's doll, Mirabelle, floating in the waters one hundred feet below. Angie, the child of rural nature, risks her life as she jumps into the lake, but to no avail; neither she nor later divers can find Amanda's body.

The beauty of the quarry thus turns sinister, swallowing up the innocent Amanda. So also, we will discover, the beauty of Doyle's Wordsworthian retreat has swallowed up Amanda. At this point I would offer a "spoiler alert" if I didn't think spoiler alerts were the hobgoblins of small minds. To think a film experience is ruined if the ending has been revealed is comparable to thinking that Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel is not worth seeing because it depicts well-known Bible stories. The pleasure is in the artistry, and, like any work of art, a well-made film bears repeat viewings. Or, as Wordsworth's friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said of Shakespeare's art, "plot . . . is the canvas only." What follows is some canvas and much of the art in *Gone Baby Gone*.

After the quarry fiasco, we see Amanda's empty-casket funeral and assume the film must soon be over. But then Patrick is given a tip about an entirely different missing-child, and the action turns in a new direction, as though following the quarry's circular arrow. Patrick recruits Nick and Remy to help him capture a pedophile holed up with two crack-heads. Another fiasco ensues. Nick gets fatally injured, and Remy gets fatally inebriated in response. In outrage, Patrick kills the pedophile, and in a drunken attempt to comfort him in his guilt Remy admits to manipulating the law in order to incarcerate child abusers. We are thus presented with another ethical conundrum: which is worse—illegally planting evidence on a deviant scumbag or letting him go free until he ravages another child?

After Remy's confession, Patrick soon learns that Remy and Helene's brother, Lionel, were Amanda's kidnappers, and that they planned to

demand as ransom the \$130,000 that Helene had stolen. But, as we have already seen, complications at the quarry foiled their easy exchange of child for money, and during the mayhem Amanda fell into the lake. We realize that Remy is like the naked-kneed newscaster: merely putting on an act of professionalism for anyone watching. Significantly, Remy is the only person in the film consistently to dress like the newscaster, with coat and tie (though Remy includes the slacks as well!). In his distinguished dress, Remy pretends to be an honest cop when, underneath, he's "just like everyone else," to use the words Patrick employs with Lionel, Remy's accomplice: "You saw a big load of money and you wanted it." A parallel has been established between the good guys and the bad guys, reinforced when the writers give the same phrase to Lionel, describing Amanda's death in the lake, as they give to the pedophile describing a boy's death in his bathtub: "It was an accident." Underneath slick surfaces, enforcers of the law don't seem that different from the criminals they chase.

As Lionel confesses the botched plan to Patrick—in a bar appropriately named "Murphy's Law"—a man in an oversized jester's mask bursts in, claiming it's a hold-up, turning his gun on Lionel and telling him to shut up. The voice behind the excessively outrageous mask is so obviously Remy's that the scene seems incongruous with—if not a flaw in—the film's gritty realism. Things get even more far-fetched when the absurdly masked Remy seems pacified, lowering his gun, once Lionel yells, "I told [Patrick] that we took Amanda for ransom. Please, please." Shouldn't this admission anger Remy all the more? We barely have time to contemplate the strange psychology when the bartender shoots the masked intruder in the back. The injured Remy flees, and Patrick chases him out of the bar. Remy dies on a factory roof, telling Patrick, "I love children," a strange dying statement for someone implicated in a kidnap-for-money scheme.

But, once again, not everything is as it seems. We soon discover that Remy's "act" is far more outrageous than we ever dreamed—as outrageous as the jester's mask he wears while enclosed in Murphy's Law. By the end of the film we realize that the scene in the bar is not a flaw in the film; it operates, instead, like a mask covering over a mask.

When police interrogate Patrick about Remy's death, our protagonist gleans clues that lead him out of the squalid city to Doyle's Wordsworthian retreat. The lush beauty surrounding his journey prepares us for a happy ending. Indeed, as Patrick addresses the dignified Doyle in front of his quaint cottage, we once again feel strength and peace. In reply to Patrick's despair over Remy's mask—"He *seemed* like a good man"—Doyle calmly comments, "He *was* a good man. We don't know why people do what they do. Everybody looks out his own window." We are reminded of an earlier scene when Patrick looks through a hospital window at the dying Nick. In two different shots (to make sure we catch it), we see the dark—almost black—shadow of Patrick's shape on the window—a human shape that impedes a clear picture of Nick's shape *through* the window. This reflection (in both senses of the word) puts Doyle's statement in a different light. If everybody looks out his own window, might not the shadow of the self impede a clear view of right and wrong?

This, indeed, becomes the quintessential question of the film. And we are forced to grapple with it as the circular arrow is once again fulfilled: we, like Patrick, are utterly flabbergasted when a jubilant Amanda runs out of the country cottage and into Doyle's grandfatherly arms. Suddenly we understand the Wordsworthian nature setting. Doyle's retreat is a place that embraces and nurtures children: "Delight and liberty, the simple creed / Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest, / With new-fledged hope still fluttering in [her] breast" (*Intimations Ode*). We also begin to reassess the actions of Remy, revelatory flashbacks helping us along. Remy was willing to act like a corrupt cop pretending to be a moral cop in order to save Amanda from her immoral mother: a mask covering over a mask. Remy's dying words *do* in fact explain his actions: "I love children." That love is the shadow on the window through which he sees the world.

Patrick, however, looks through a different window. As Doyle tenderly cradles Amanda with his nurturing wife looking on, Patrick tells him that the child should be returned to her birth mother. When Doyle calmly explains "We're just trying to give a little girl a life," Patrick retorts, "It wasn't your life to give; Helene's her mother. If you

thought she was a bad mother, you should've gone to social services." Here, then, is the climactic ethical tension of the film: Patrick stands for law; Doyle for new life.

Angie, bred in rural nature, takes Doyle's side. As sunshine glints off Amanda's baby-blond hair and in Doyle's loving eyes, we impatiently wait for Patrick to surmount the shadow of the self and see the light. The film thus brilliantly plunges us into the emotional tension of an ethical conundrum, manipulating us with Wordsworthian beauty to root on the side of illegal practices.

Ironically, Wordsworth himself might give us pause. In books nine through eleven of his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, he describes his sojourn in France during the French Revolution. Like most young radicals, he supported the goals of the revolutionaries: liberty, equality, and fraternity (qualities of life that Remy, Doyle, and Angie want to give Amanda). With the passage of time, however, Wordsworth begins to witness what happens when revolutionaries, glorying in their freedom from the law, began breaking the law in new ways. Radically committed to "the good," revolutionaries like Robespierre instigated the Reign of Terror, killing everyone who disagreed with their definition of "the good." Wordsworth suffers an emotional breakdown from this ethical conundrum, later vowing to follow

... right reason, that matures
Her processes by steadfast laws, gives birth
To no impatient or fallacious hopes,
No heat of passion or excessive zeal,
No vain conceits—

(*Prelude*, Book 13)

Excesses like those of the French Revolution help explain why Patrick insists on the steadfast laws of right reason over the excessive zeal of "good" people. However, as the film quite wisely shows, it is not easy choosing the law over good intentions. The dignified Doyle is taken away in handcuffs, the contented Amanda is tearfully pried away from Doyle's wife, and the disappointed Angie tells Patrick she can no longer live with him.

The camera returns us to the city, as depressed as Patrick for what he has done. We witness another

superficial newscaster, this one making callow pronouncements about “little Amanda” returned “to the arms of a mother who never lost hope that she’d see her daughter once again” (what about the funeral?). As at the start of the film, we see Helene interviewed by television crews in front of her house. Her idiotic statement, “Thank you to all the policemen and firemen. I feel like 9-11 right now,” makes the newscaster’s summarizing comment, “Good news for everybody,” all the more disgusting. After seeing a lonely and disconsolate Patrick at his kitchen table and behind the wheel of his car, we once again get a montage of his neighborhood, one shot focusing on an adolescent girl standing on the exact same porch, dressed in the exact same trashy clothes, as she was during the opening montage. All these repetitions force us to question whether conditions will change for Amanda now that she has been returned to her legal mother.

This seems to be Patrick’s question as well. He stops by Helene’s flat, where the mother is swigging beer while dressing for a blind date with someone who saw her on television. Despite her protestations in front of the cameras—“Never let your kids out of your sight; trust them to no one else; just keep them in your arms”—Helene has made no arrangements for someone to watch Amanda while she’s out partying. So Patrick volunteers. The film ends with Patrick sitting on the couch where a deflated Amanda passively watches television.

Two gestures in this last scene present us with the film’s final conundrum. First Amanda lifts her arms onto the top of her head, in exactly the same pose Helene took earlier in the film. Does this signal that Amanda will turn out like her (il) legal mother? This, of course, was Doyle’s fear. If Amanda returns to Helene “she’ll be dragging around a couple of tattered damaged children of her own” someday.

The second gesture encompasses the last words of the film. Patrick, from one corner of the couch, looks over at Amanda, who is cradling her doll that was rescued from the quarry. He asks, “Is that Mirabelle?” and the child emphatically answers

“Anabelle!” The implication of this, the film’s last word, is as murky as several of the film’s ethical issues. Does it imply that Helene is so out of touch with Amanda that she misreported the name of the doll to the media? Or is it yet another indictment of the media’s superficiality, a television newscaster inaccurately calling the doll Mirabelle? Indeed, the closing shot of film is taken behind the television that Patrick and Amanda face, such that it fills a third of the screen, perhaps symbolizing how the media—and its misrepresentations—dominate their lives.

I would like to offer another, more hopeful, interpretation of the film’s final word. Just as Mirabelle escaped the waters of the quarry and changed to Anabelle, perhaps Amanda can escape the modeling of her mother and be baptized for the better. This, of course, was Doyle’s plan, but his tactic for change was illegal. How might one instigate rebirth and still honor the law?

The answer, perhaps, appears in the film’s final shot: Patrick sitting on the couch with Amanda. Rather than merely enforcing the law, Patrick takes responsibility for his decision, offering himself as a positive influence in the girl’s life. Significantly, several times in the film Patrick quotes his priest as a source of wisdom, most tellingly during the opening voiceover: “When I was young I asked my priest how you can get to heaven and still protect yourself from all the evil in the world. He told me what God said to all his children: ‘You are sheep among wolves. Be wise as serpents yet innocent as doves.’” Sitting on Helene’s couch, Patrick acts on those words. Though situated “in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din / Of towns and cities,” he begins to fulfill Wordsworth’s description, in *Tintern Abbey*, of “a good man’s life,” exercising “His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love.”✠

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