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A Good Woman, directed by Mike Barker; screenplay by Howard Himelstein, based on *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde

"And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite."

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

In *A Good Woman*, the filmmakers have updated Oscar Wilde's 1892 play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, to the 1930s and relocated it from London to Italy's Amalfi coastline. Director Mike Barker has borrowed a line from another of Wilde's plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, as the film's epigram: "The only difference between saints and sinners is that every saint has a past while every sinner has a future."

A Good Woman chronicles a series of deceptions and misunderstandings in American and European high society. It treats an upper crust whose respectable and genteel world masks deep wells of hypocrisy, brutality and emotional repression. An elite that, while never questioning or criticizing itself, is preoccupied with admitting or excluding people from its ranks, on the most arbitrary or unworthy grounds.

Surrounded by gossip and leaving behind a trail of unpaid bills, Mrs. Stella Erlynne (Helen Hunt) is chased out of New York City for preying on wealthy, married men. Mrs. Erlynne's reputation follows her to Amalfi, a playground for the wealthy and aristocratic. "The Romans called it the land of the sirens," says Stella cryptically, as if she herself comes from that ancient mythical sisterhood.

Rumors abound as Stella's fortunes improve in the wake of her acquaintance with a newlywed American couple, Meg (Scarlet Johansson) and Robert Windermere (Mark Umbers). She steers Robert away from purchasing expensive jewelry for his wife's 21st birthday, suggesting instead a beautiful heirloom fan. ("A man should never buy a woman jewelry—it makes her wonder what he's bought his mistress.")

Meanwhile, the bachelor/lothario Lord Darlington ("Modern marriage thrives on mutual deception"), believing the gossip about Robert Windermere and Stella Erlynne, feels justified in pursuing Meg. Through some prompting from Darlington, Meg discovers a series of checks written

by Robert to Stella, and suspects the worst. ("Too much rouge, not enough clothing, she appeals to the worst in men.") Stella is blackguarded by all except the rich Lord Augustus, or "Tuppy" (Tom Wilkinson), who is smitten and presses for marriage—an act that would "legitimize" the American temptress.

At one point, Tuppy says to Stella's detractors: "You're so fond of gossip, you don't give truth time to put its pants on." And again, defending himself from those who warn against the risks of being involved with a "tainted" lady, he retorts, "I've begun too many romances out of sentiment. They've all ended in settlement."

The reality is that Robert has been giving Stella money in order to protect his wife from the truth about Stella Erlynne's identity. No longer trusting her husband, Meg perilously places herself in the hands of Darlington and the rest of the tongue-waggers until Stella intervenes, prepared to sacrifice everything, including Tuppy, for Meg's future and happiness. After rescuing Meg from the brink of ruin—"the brink of a hideous precipice"—Stella encourages her to "pay [her] debt by silence." Stella knows the hard-learned fact that the truth is often twisted in order to punish and ostracize. Clearly, a genuinely "good woman" is at odds with a corrupt society. Stella Erlynne puts it another way: "If we were always guided by other people's thoughts, what's the point in having our own?"

Barker's film is intelligent and well made, bringing Wilde's acute social criticism to bear on the present. At one point, in a remark that seems oddly relevant, a secondary character quips: "I like America. Name another country that went from barbarism to decadence without bothering to create civilization."

Explaining why the filmmakers chose to make certain adjustments to Wilde's play, screenwriter Howard Himelstein states in the film's production notes: "Unlike Wilde's other filmed plays, which are of the period and very English, *Lady Windermere's Fan* [made into films by Ernst Lubitsch in 1925 and Otto Preminger in 1949] has a more universal appeal. Although technically a period piece, the story possesses enough modern sensibilities and humour to attract 21st Century audiences. I chose to set the film in the 1930s because in many respects, it was an era that closely

mirrors today—a time deeply divided by the have and have-nots.”

The extraordinary beauty of the natural and cultural setting appears as a forceful argument against a spiritually depleted and parasitical elite. This point about the elite is continually driven home, often humorously, for example, as in Tuppy’s comment about his sister-in-law’s reaction to widowhood: “Her hair turned quite gold with grief!”

Also, lifting the story out of the confines of Wilde’s parlors seems to demonstrate more effectively that the interactions at the top of society are vulgar and crude, despite all the pomp and splendor of villas and yachts. It serves to better highlight the operations of a class that equates communication with vicious and unfounded innuendoes, and whose bonds are essentially self-serving and opportunist. (“Worse than being talked about is not being talked about.”) It underscores the reality that the mode of existence of this stratum is to lie, to conceal, and to suppress true feelings, as purity of heart results in disqualification. And furthermore, one notices that those obliged to cater to this class are aware of its innate malevolence and hypocrisy.

It is in this hothouse atmosphere that the actors bring urgency and feeling to their performances, with the remarkable Wilkinson as Tuppy contributing a great deal of emotional depth. Finally breaking with his closed-status milieu, Tuppy follows Stella into the unknown, taking a gamble on the love of an independent woman. (About his play, Wilde said: “If there is one particular doctrine contained in it, it is that of sheer individualism. It is not for anyone to censure what anyone else does, and everyone should go his own way, to whatever place he chooses, in exactly the way he chooses.”)

Using Wilde to criticize present day social relations is entirely appropriate. In this regard, the film’s limitations “vis à vis” the original work emerge, for example, in its treatment of the two central female characters. While Meg Windermere remains a naïve ingénue throughout Barker’s film, the original Lady is far more a product of her class and environment: more complex and more unforgiving. When Lord Darlington asks her if “women who have committed what the world calls a fault” should ever be forgiven, Wilde’s original Lady Windermere replies in the negative. In fact, until she becomes the beneficiary of Mrs. Erlynne’s unselfish deed, she is quite nasty and intolerable.

In his biography, *Oscar Wilde*, Richard Ellman points out that the young aristocratic woman is prepared to run off with a lover rather than allow someone of “ill-repute” to attend her ball. “Puritanism, as Wilde never tired of showing, produces its viciousness as much as debauchery. Thoughtless goodness is as self-destructive as evil, and

becomes what it despises.”

While the film is murky about Mrs. Erlynne’s past, Wilde makes clear that she left her family 20 years ago for some of the same reasons now propelling Lady Windermere. Wilde’s Mrs. Erlynne, whose condemnation by society and whose life as an outcast are a travesty, is a more nuanced and colorful character than Barker’s Stella. She has gained more knowledge about the role that hypocrisy plays as the glue of relationships, and is more adept at using this knowledge for her own purposes.

In the movie, Stella Erlynne’s role as Robert Windermere’s blackmailer does not jibe with her life-long sorrow and guilt from having abandoned her daughter. Whereas, in the Wilde original, Mrs. Erlynne’s social exclusion has made her colder and more self-possessed. Wilde, in other words, does not prettify the persecuted; he shows more clearly the scars of persecution. The one moment in which his Mrs. Erlynne allows her maternal instincts to override her self-interest is a moment for her of unendurable pain. Her emotional floodgates open when Lady Windermere accuses her with vitriol of being a woman who is “bought and sold.” This generates one of the play’s most impassioned and moving speeches, delivered by the distraught woman, in favor of tolerance and understanding:

“You don’t know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at—to be an outcast! To find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one’s face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. You don’t know what it is. One pays for one’s sin, and then one pays again, and all one’s life one pays.” (Reading these lines, one is struck by how well they describe the author’s own fate only a few years later, and perhaps contain a premonition of that fate.)

Despite the film’s dilutions, the creators of *A Good Woman*, driven to shed light on today’s searing inequities, have generally modified Wilde with integrity and sensitivity. Why should others not attempt, as did Barker and company, to answer the call of a great artist who wrote in 1887: “Who in the midst of all our poverty and distress, that threatens to become intensified, will step into the breach and rouse us to the almost super-human effort that is necessary to alter the existing state of things?”



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