

# Michael Clayton: The man who comes in from the cold

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*Written and directed by Tony Gilroy*

In one critical exchange in Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton*, legendary attorney Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), in the midst of a great personal crisis, announces to fellow lawyer and eponymous "fixer" Clayton (George Clooney), "I am Shiva, the god of death." Edens is identifying his role on behalf of an agrichemical conglomerate being sued for poisoning hundreds of farmers with the Hindu god of destruction.

The comment is also an obvious reference to the words of American scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), known as "the father of the atomic bomb," after witnessing the overwhelming power of the weapon when it was first detonated in July 1945. Oppenheimer quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita* regarding Shiva: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

With style and intelligence, *Michael Clayton* dramatizes the type of personal devastation that can result when one profits from dirty, even murderous, business operations.

The movie is the directorial debut of screenwriter Tony Gilroy, notable for writing the *Bourne* trilogy and whose father is Frank D. Gilroy, author of the 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Subject was Roses*.

A former prosecutor from a family of cops, Clooney's Clayton is "the fixer" at the prestigious Manhattan law firm, Kenner, Bach & Ledeen. He cleans up messes. He shields rich clients from troublesome mistresses and shoplifting wives. He kills unfavorable stories in the media. In the film's opening sequence, Michael is called in when an important KBL client is involved in a hit-and-run accident. Expecting the firm to dispatch a "miracle worker," the client, a privileged and selfish type, is enraged that Michael, a self-described "janitor," cannot make his problem disappear.

Clayton is invaluable to the white-shoe establishment. But despite his 15-year tenure, it seems unlikely he'll be chosen for a partnership. Further, Michael has a gambling habit and owes \$75,000 due to a failed restaurant venture. He is divorced and only sporadically sees his 10-year-old son. Nearly broke, burned out and disillusioned, Michael is reaching a critical point in his life.

As KBL celebrates a record in the number of hours billed to the agri-giant, U/North, for a defense against a class-action lawsuit pertaining to a pesticide, the lead attorney on the case, Edens, has his breakdown. He has found a "smoking gun" memo pointing to the company's responsibility for the deaths of 450 people. The career of U/North's in-house counsel Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton) hinges on the favorable settlement of the \$3 billion

lawsuit, and Arthur has been the architect of the company's defense for the last six years.

KBL head Marty Bach (Sydney Pollack), who knows the U/North case "stank from day one," wants Michael to stop Arthur from torpedoing the whole operation. But in the course of carrying out his assignment—in return for the \$80,000 he needs for his creditors—Michael comes face to face with what he has become.

*Michael Clayton* does not focus on corporate malfeasance. The details of U/North's crimes are rather vague. The work takes for granted that corporations do lethal things, and that the spectator understands that and also takes it for granted. Gilroy's film is mainly preoccupied with the moral and psychological consequences for those who enable large corporations to play fast and loose with ethics and with people's lives.

Says director Gilroy in the movie's production notes: "Given the infinity of destructive moral choices that are made every day by people who know what they're doing is wrong, it's always amazed me that there aren't more whistleblowers. When you consider how much is wrong, how deep that wrong is, and how much of it's done by people who go home and pay their taxes and love their children, isn't it astonishing how few actually go off the deep end?"

"Tom's [Wilkinson] character is one of those magnificently intelligent madmen who can convince any judge, jury or plaintiff to drop or settle a case. It's why he's so good at what he does and makes the kind of money he makes. But at the end of the day, what's the real cost?"

Gilroy attempts to show the real cost. *Michael Clayton* does not immediately introduce Edens. Instead, the film opens with an outraged and almost incoherent monologue delivered off-camera and addressed to Michael: "This is not an episode ... it's a release." Arthur is describing, in stream of consciousness fashion, his meltdown, an "overwhelming sensation" of being "covered with some sort of filth," of engaging in the annihilation of the "miracle of humanity."

Later on, Arthur confesses that accumulating millions of dollars in fees from U/North has boiled down to "killing innocents like Anna [a relative of one of the victims]." While Arthur is a manic depressive in need of medication, he suffers more from the fact that he has spent 12 percent of his life, as he notes, defending a cancer. His anguish is deep-going and permanent: "I could tear off my f——— skin and never really know where this thing [eating him alive?] is living."

Arthur takes a “deep cleansing breath” and feels reborn. Michael tries to anchor him in reality: “You are the senior litigating partner of one of the largest, most respected law firms in the world. You are a legend.” No, says Arthur, “I’m an accomplice!” Like Peter Finch’s character, Howard Beale, in *Network*, Arthur’s awakening propels him to near insanity as he confronts the legacy of his dirty deeds. (The 1976 movie was written by Paddy Chayefsky, who was a friend of Frank Gilroy and frequent visitor to the Gilroy family home in upstate New York.)

When Michael says, “I’m not the enemy,” Arthur pointedly asks, “Then who *are* you?” As director Gilroy puts it: “He [Michael] has come to the point in his life where his next few decisions will determine everything about him.”

Gilroy poses an important question: Given the state of affairs, why are there so few Arthurs in the world?

That an Arthur-style crisis has not seized more in this milieu has to be explained by a complex of historic and social factors. First of all, the layer that has facilitated the vast transfer of wealth from the majority of the population to a tiny, rapacious minority over the past quarter-century has itself become enormously rich.

Beyond the seductive power of money and privilege, there has been a terrible erosion of solidarity in American society, due in no small part to the betrayals of the working class and the collapse of its traditional organizations, along with the general demise of liberalism. This has been disorienting in the extreme, essentially leaving people to fend for themselves. Selfishness, egoism and callousness have become the watchwords, in large part, of official American society.

In addition, there are concrete political issues. Gilroy is dismayed by the lack of whistle blowers. Is this really the ultimate trump card in dealing with a social system in which, as he puts it, so much is wrong and deeply wrong? As a matter of fact, what do many of those who come forward—and they do—encounter? Is there any encouragement from the big business political parties or a corporate-controlled media? Far from it, they are often either persecuted or left to suffer in silence.

Beyond Arthur’s excruciating self-reflection, the film offers a deeper look at what is potentially sacrificed in a devil’s bargain. A widower, Arthur is alienated from his daughter—and apparently much of the rest of the world—even before he is evangelically transformed. This perhaps explains why he is medicated, why he desperately latches onto—in fact, becomes addicted to—Anna and her purity.

Although Michael does not throw himself into the abyss, he is depressed, a frequenter of gambling haunts in Chinatown. In one sequence, he grippingly tells he son Henry that the latter has the right stuff to handle a world that collapses on people like his alcoholic brother Timmy. (One senses that Michael does not believe himself to be immune from Timmy’s fate.) As for Henry, his obsession with the realm of fantasy—and escapism—entices especially Arthur, but Michael as well.

As a worst case scenario, the film argues that a lifetime of compromise prevents being able to take that “deep cleansing breath.” Marty Bach knows the score about U/North but focuses on the cash rewards. He lives elegantly with a beautiful young wife and small, rosy-cheeked children. He refuses to risk

everything.

“The character I play,” says Pollack about Bach, “depends heavily on Michael Clayton to get Arthur under control. It’s Marty name on the door, and this incident comes at a critical time when his firm is in the midst of a merger with a company in London, which could be a lucrative buyout for him—a way to retire with a big chunk of change.” Like Michael with his restaurant, Marty too wants his “walk-away” plan—his exit from the rat race.

And what of those closest to the devil? Desperate to succeed at the helm of U/North, Swinton’s Karen Crowder takes reckless measures. Determined to prove herself and overcome the combined disadvantage of being young and female, she is driven to protect the company at all costs. Panic attacks notwithstanding, Karen must do what she has to do when billions are at stake. The company’s board of directors would expect nothing less.

U/North has its own “fixers,” but they offer more permanent solutions and “deal in absolutes.” The fact that the hit men Karen contracts are professional and experienced—businessmen in their own right—speaks to the fact that they are in demand. Their expensive services are part of the cost of doing business.

The multifaceted pieces of the film are well orchestrated and the performances strong, although the movie’s beginning is somewhat chaotic. The actors grasp their characters’ dual roles as villain and victim in the irrational scheme of things.

The film suffers somewhat from the general conditions of filmmaking; it lacks the depth and texture and complexity of great works. It settles for certain clichés, for example, the stereotypical denouement in which the incriminating goods are handed over to New York’s “Men in blue,” who will mete out justice to the bad guys. The fact that in reality this rarely happens indicates a certain longing on the part of the filmmakers for easy solutions to problems that may seem to them insurmountable.

Overall, however, *Michael Clayton* is a “deep cleansing breath” in its appreciation of “the infinity of destructive moral choices.” It testifies to the fact that this outlook is gaining ground, both among artists and within the population as a whole.



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