

Manchester by the Sea: The suffering of an ordinary man

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10 December 2016

Written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan

Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* has obviously struck a chord with critics and audiences alike. The film has been almost universally praised for generally healthy reasons. It is a humane examination of the suffering of an ordinary man, whose terrible personal tragedy has emotionally crippled him. While the movie concerns itself with an individual circumstance, the intensity of the emotions and relationships it presents has wider implications.

The movie opens with Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), his young nephew Patrick (Ben O'Brien) and the boy's father—Lee's brother Joe (Kyle Chandler)—in a fishing boat offshore from the small coastal town of Manchester by the Sea, some 30 miles northeast of Boston. There is a genuine bond between Lee and his nephew, whose comic sparring conveys a natural ease.

We then jump forward in time. Lee is now a handyman/janitor at an apartment complex in Quincy, Massachusetts (south of Boston). He is isolated, angry and going through the motions as he performs his menial tasks, blowing up at tenants and getting into bar fights. His reclusiveness and spartan existence are disrupted by the news that his brother has fallen seriously ill. On his way to the hospital, Lee's mind returns to the moment when Joe was diagnosed with a congenital heart condition.

Sadly, Joe dies before Lee's arrival. In his will, Joe has named Lee as the guardian of now 16-year-old Patrick (Lucas Hedges), whose mother Elise (Gretchen Mol) has been out of the picture due to alcoholism and mental illness. Somewhat overburdened with flashbacks, Lonergan's movie proceeds to reveal a back-story calamity that explains why the bottled-up Lee is his hometown's pariah, why his marriage to Randi (Michelle Williams) dissolved in so much wretchedness and why he has exiled himself to the Boston area, attempting to excise a pain that has consumed his being and gives to all his interactions, particularly those involving the orphaned Patrick, a coldness and awkwardness.

Manchester by the Sea features characters who each, in his

or her own desperate way, try to cope with the aftermath of a horrific disaster—like soldiers afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder. There is an intimacy in their anguish. Affleck carries the weight of the work, but Williams, in her brief onscreen presence, is wrenching, and anchors the film. Lonergan and his actors are engaged in a deliberate effort to counter the blockbuster movie experience with a bittersweet realism.

There are moments that stand out. Lee's suicide attempt at the police station hits one like a body blow. Another occurs when Elise, after Joe's death, tries to reconnect with her son. She invites Patrick to the home she shares with her "fella," Rodney (Matthew Broderick), a stiff, religious conservative. Elise is so fragile that the level of discomfort during the meal is excruciating. Rodney later informs Patrick—by email no less!—that he will be vetting the boy's access to his mother from now on.

However, all these sequences pale by comparison to the disturbing and poignant scene between Williams and Affleck, in which the emotionally walled-off Lee proves incapable of responding to his ex-wife's empathy, and worse, her heartbreak. This encounter, lasting only a few minutes, is the more than two-hour movie's emotional pivot.

The misfortunes in *Manchester by the Sea* are real and terrible, and entirely deserving of treatment. However, it is impossible to discuss the film in more detail without generally indicating that Lee bears responsibility for the tragic event that has befallen him and his family. The reader should accordingly beware.

It must be said that the nature of the episode and Lee's culpability have certain consequences that the filmmakers, frankly, have not thought through.

In the first place, the tragedy is of an extremely unusual and atypical character, at least within this social layer. And it would be so damaging that the average human being would never recover.

Second, the incident is so intensely personal that it tends to "drown out" or skew the larger picture. Is the tragedy the necessary, logical product of Lee's social and psychological

situation, or is it largely unconnected to that situation? Although *Manchester by the Sea* tends to argue the latter, there are hints at circumstances that contributed to the accident. But here a serious weakness emerges, because, if anything, the film stresses Lee's personal irresponsibility and carelessness.

In general, Lonergan and his drama seem pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, there is something Job-like about Lee. The guilt he carries speaks to some "eternal" human condition, the need to carry on despite everything, the urge, finally, to redeem oneself. This is the less substantive, less intriguing side of *Manchester by the Sea*, but the one that is most prominent.

However, this is not the only thing going on here. The filmmakers are clearly not oblivious to social reality in America. They have chosen to make a work about people who are not rich and privileged, people with various difficulties. Even the movie's advertising gives the impression that it deals with contemporary working class suffering.

The final results on screen and audience reactions would suggest that what gives Lonergan's film the power it does have is its reference to—only obliquely and somewhat distantly—the general state of American society. The evidence suggests that, even if the filmmakers are not aware of it, other, more general processes are pressing on the characters' lives and collective situation.

New York Times reviewer A. O. Scott stumbles upon this issue in his review of *Manchester by the Sea*, but from the point of view of a dedicated practitioner of identity politics. The film, he writes, "is not only about Lee and his family, and not only about their houses and boats and drinking habits and marriages. It is also about what all those things mean, and what kinds of sentimental and ideological value are attached to them. ... It's a movie, that is, about the sorrows of white men."

In fact, Scott spends some 40 percent of his review on the subject of "whiteness." He asserts that he is not being "dismissive" about the film, simply "specific," but his comment certainly raises questions as to whether *Manchester by the Sea* should have been made in the first place, since it is allegedly about people with "ironclad entitlement." Scott, incidentally, has reviewed hundreds of films about upper middle class existence, black and white, without once referring to their "racial dimension."

Carrying on, Scott writes, "Cast out of this working man's paradise, Lee is also exiled from the prerogatives of whiteness. He lives in a basement room, earning minimum wage, answering to an African-American boss and accepting a tip from a black tenant whose toilet he has cleaned and repaired. He doesn't complain, but it is also clear that he has

chosen these conditions as a form of self-abasement, as punishment for his sins."

"Working man's paradise"? "Prerogatives of whiteness"? Scott and his fellow well-paid journalists at the *Times* and other media outlets repeatedly begrudge workers (in actuality, *Manchester by the Sea* probably takes place for the most part in a lower middle class milieu) who are not living in conditions of the most abject poverty. It's absurd and dishonest.

It is not a question of anyone being "cast out of ... paradise," in any sense, but, as we have noted, the film *does* indirectly touch upon the reality of a social descent for wide layers of the population. This is not a racial phenomenon, but the working out of a broader social crisis.

The contrast between *You Can Count on Me* (2000), Lonergan's first film, and the present one is instructive in this regard. The first was intelligent and pleasant enough, but it manifestly lacked urgency. Something has happened in the world and, to one extent or another, Lonergan has registered it. Only not explicitly and wholeheartedly, and therefore less convincingly and enduringly. The impact of the film, while powerful at the moment of viewing, tends to recede with time.

The arbitrary, diminishing element of *Manchester by the Sea*, its inability to seriously link the tragedy to the antecedent conditions stands in contrast to the efforts of F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). There too a fatal accident performs a critical dramatic function, but the incident is the almost inevitable outcome of the characters' social and psychic being.

Famously, Fitzgerald wrote, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

Lonergan and company are simply not working at this level.



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