

Wicked Little Letters: A biting comic work, but gilding the lily only weakens it

David Walsh
11 August 2024

Wicked Little Letters is a comic film, directed by Thea Sharrock and written by Jonny Sweet, and inspired by an incident that took place in Littlehampton, a seaside resort in the south of England, in the early 1920s.

That event, known as the Littlehampton Letters Scandal, involved a conflict between two families, and in particular two women.

As interpreted by the filmmakers, Edith Swan (Olivia Colman) claims to be receiving libelous and obscene letters from her neighbor Rose Gooding (Jessie Buckley). Edith, a spinster, lives with her tyrannical father, Edward (Timothy Spall), and cowed, timid mother, Victoria (Gemma Jones).

As the film opens, the devoutly Christian Edith has already received 19 rude missives, enraging her all-too-easily enraged father. As portrayed by Colman, with inimitable timing, Edith claims to be above being offended by the letters. “But there are benefits to suffering, don’t forget. We worship a messiah who suffered, so, by my suffering, do I not move closer to heaven?”

Her father, however, seeks out the town constabulary. As he explains to the insufferably smarmy and self-righteous policeman, Papperwick (Hugh Skinner),

It’s wicked abuse, this! Edith’s not sleeping. She’s grizzling all the night, bless her. In and out of bed. Now, I know my law. This is a prison offence. So, you better do something about it sharp-like, before there’s a hurleyberloo.

The letter in question reads, “Dear Edith. You foxy-ass old whore. ... You really are a tricky old fucker. You belong in hell probably, and you’re a sad, stinky bitch as well.”

Suspicion falls on the Swans’ rowdy Irish-born neighbor, Rose (Buckley), with whom Edith has already had a misunderstanding and who has, we learn, had a child “out of wedlock.” The proof? “That woman [Rose] curses like a fish. She’s got straggly hair all the time. And she marches

around on the Sabbath with feet as bare as goose eggs!”

The opening scenes are quite sharp and funny, with the wonderfully hypocritical Edith pretending not to have any desire to pursue a case against Rose. “I should not cast the first stone. ... If I were without sin.” Her mother, however, “convinces” her by explaining that “if you behave right, as I know you will, you could be an example to people. You could be known in Littlehampton for your virtue and your sacrifice.” The reluctant (but secretly eager) Edith muses: “Perhaps. Yes, if I could be of use to people ... But is it not prideful?”

Meanwhile, Rose goes cavorting around town, earning the disapproval of the morally upright. Constable Papperwick, arresting Rose on practically no evidence whatsoever, informs her that he had to tell Nancy, her daughter.

—What did you say to her?

—Nothing bad. Just that I was arresting her mother, and it was great shame on the family and the street as a whole.

Rose is incredulous about the arrest: “Why would I send anonymous letters to someone I’ve torn strips off in the street? Do I look like the anonymous type to you?”

The audience becomes aware that Edith herself is sending the frenetic, angry, scabrous letters. One of them causes her mother to keel over dead from a heart attack.

A female police officer, Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan), eventually becomes suspicious, observing discrepancies in the handwriting, a fact, however, dismissed in court when Rose first comes up for trial.

Gladys and three of Rose’s other friends, Ann (Joanna Scanlan), Mabel (Eileen Atkins) and Kate (Lolly Adefope), team up a little bumblingly and amusingly to prove Rose’s innocence, and Edith’s guilt.

Edith meanwhile continues to act a convincing part:

The whole thing's been a trial. ... Of my strength, of my conscience. And the press! It's been a whirlwind. I don't want to be seen as a martyr ... They're calling me "The Upstanding Miss Swan." It's a direct quote. But what do I know? ...

The only saving grace is that, owing to Rose's character and way, in prison Rose may find some kindred spirits.

—In Portsmouth Prison?

—No, no, not the murderers or the rapists. I'm thinking more the drunks and the queers, maybe. Just trying to find a bright side. ...

Nothing really. Just this outpouring of sympathy for me, it seems ... and love. Waves and waves of love. It's quite a humbling experience. I think it's just an acknowledgement that, yes, I've been through hell, but I've survived with my head held high.

In the end, Edith's claims and her mental state itself unravel.

As noted, Colman and Spall in particular know these sorts of lower middle class characters inside out. Their performances would be difficult to improve upon. Skinner as the wretched policeman and Atkins as the aging, but mentally alert Mabel are also excellent.

The English know how to satirize this social type, the holier-than-thou, conformist, repressed and repressive hypocrite, and have been doing it for a good long time, more than 200 years, if one takes Henry Fielding and Fanny Burney into account.

No less an observer of human behavior and student of literature than Karl Marx in 1854 memorably praised the "splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England," including Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, for its treatment of the "English Middle Class." And how had these writers painted that social class? "As full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilised world have confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that 'they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath them.'"

It's impossible to improve on such a "verdict."

Wicked Little Letters takes certain liberties with the facts.

According to the National Archives website, "Edith and Rose had been on friendly terms since becoming neighbours, but the relationship soured when Edith reported Rose to the NSPCC [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] for the way she treated her sister's child. Investigations found Rose was not at fault, but soon

afterwards Edith and other neighbours began receiving letters containing obscene language and libellous allegations."

Rose Gooding was not Irish, nor is there any particular evidence showing that police officer Gladys Moss's efforts to prove her innocence were blocked by higher-ups. There is no reference to Edith's father being a despot, although the National Archives does point out that at the time

the events took place, Edith, born in 1891, was a young woman sharing a small home with her parents and two brothers. As the daughter, she was responsible for the care of the family, and it's easy to imagine she may have felt trapped and stifled by her situation.

Wicked Little Letters loses a certain amount of strength as it goes along, through no fault of Colman, Spall, Buckley, Atkins or any of the others. It loses force in proportion to the filmmakers' attempt to turn the work into a critique of patriarchy and misogyny. The *Variety* critic reasonably points out that the film "feels very of-the-moment (almost frustratingly so) in its critique of religious hypocrisy and backward gender dynamics, and yet, one longs for a little more nuance in the clownish way these bigots and blowhards are depicted."

Indeed, a lighter hand was necessary in certain areas and a heavier (or sharper) one in others. Making Rose a foulmouthed Irishwoman, having the black or South Asian performers, in the film's perfectly legitimate color-blind casting, *only* play characters on "the side of the angels," etc., shows the weight of contemporary gender and identity politics. It is unnecessary and distracting, this gilding the lily, as it were.

Without losing an ounce of the biting humor, in fact, adding to it, the filmmakers might have thought about the deep tremors going through British society in the wake of the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the explosive events of 1919, the year of mass strikes. Those intense social tensions found contradictory expression in many facets and features of life, even to conflicts between neighbors and the writing of obscene letters.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)