

English in Context: A Teaching Note

コンテキストで英語を教える

Scott Johnson

スコット・ジョンソン

本論文では、日本語による重要表現の解説を伴う良質の教科書が手に入り、現代アメリカ英語による若者の生活を描いた映画 *Good Will Hunting* (邦題『グッドウィルハンティング/旅立ち』) のシナリオを利用し、場面・文脈の中で英語表現の意味合いを学習させる教育実践について、学習者からのレポートも引用しながら、その効用と限界について論じる。とりわけ、この映画で多用されるスラング (profanity) と字面の解釈にとどまらない間接的表現が伝えるメッセージの重要性に注目し、それぞれの表現を、それが用いられる様々な社会的コンテキストに結びつけて教育を行なうことの意義について論じる。

I will present a single film and the teaching challenges of its contextual English. Specific examples of teaching approaches will be explained, in the hope that they will suggest possibilities to others. Student report excerpts will give some idea of perceptions and varied levels of success in explaining these perceptions.

Specifically, in the first semester of the 2007-2008 school year, my students studied the American film *Good Will Hunting* (1997) in two sections of English III R classes, reading classes for second year students. I have taught this film for several years, and now feel confident in sharing successes and shortcomings.

Background

Several factors prompted my choice of *Good Will Hunting* as an appropriate film for study in a second year English reading course. One factor is the availability of a well-organized textbook, with a glossary explaining key words and phrases in Japanese.¹⁾ A second factor is that the story features young university-age characters. A third factor is that the story uses contemporary American English in a wide variety of settings. A fourth factor is that, although the film was extremely popular when it was released in 1997, most current Japanese

university students have not seen or heard of it. The story, then, is a surprise for them at the outset. A fifth factor is that the story features a gifted but troubled young person who is helped by a psychoanalytic counselor. (My two current reading classes are for students in the Kansai University Sociology Faculty, and many of its students are studying psychology and are considering careers as counselors.)

Three other factors were also influential. Although the film is American, no guns, bombs or special effects were used. And although the film deals in part with the main character's romantic involvement, there are no scenes involving nudity or explicit sex. It is, then, an eminently teachable film for classes mixing young men and women.

The third additional factor is more impressive now than it was when the film first appeared. The scenario was written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who also star in the film. They were originally prompted to write it because they hoped it would assist their careers as "new faces" in Hollywood. I hoped to present them as roll models, since they used their free time between jobs to write what became an Oscar-winning screenplay.

Good Will Hunting does share one aspect typical of current American films: casual profanity. Rather than viewing this as a weakness, it presents an opportunity for a teacher to place such language in various social contexts, which will enable students to think freshly about such language use in other films and song lyrics.

The story

Before getting into teaching methods, it seems advisable to briefly explain the story of the film. The main character, Will Hunting, works as a janitor at M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), one of the most prestigious American universities, especially known for studies in advanced mathematics. We don't see Will's morning routine, but he times his work so that he ends in the evening cleaning the halls near graduate school classrooms in advanced mathematics. A chalkboard in the hallway is used by one of the teachers for especially difficult mathematical problems to challenge students. Will, who is not a student, answers two such difficult problems, which draws the attention of an M.I.T. professor.

As the story progresses we learn that Will is a mathematical genius, but he also has a violent side, and has been arrested numerous times. He had been abandoned by his real parents, and was abused by a series of foster fathers. The film hinges on the possibility of overcoming Will's history of violence, while enhancing his mathematical skills.

A chance encounter in a bar near Harvard initiates a romance between Will and a fourth

year Harvard student, in the final months of her study there. The eagerness of the M.I.T. professor to foster Will's studies leads to the introduction of a counselor who both challenges Will, and is challenged by him.

The counselor and Will share a background: both are "Southies," from South Boston, where the population is largely of Irish and Italian extraction. Near the end of the film, as Will realizes that his counselor also suffered from a violently drunken father, a breakthrough is reached in his acceptance of his past.

Classroom routines

My purpose in the class is to teach English in context through the dialogue, body language and story of a film or drama. The publisher of *Good Will Hunting* supplied a videotape of the film, which has no subtitles. This forces students to pay close attention to the words as they are spoken. This lack of subtitles has sometimes led to student protests, usually coupled with the complaint that the performers in the film "talk too fast." I assure classes that through repeated viewings of individual episodes, they will catch more and more of the dialogue that at first seemed "too fast." Such protests also offer an opportunity to point out that by reading the scenario ahead of time, they should know the dialogue before it is covered in class.

I show a scene, then read the dialogue aloud, usually without comment, and then show the scene again. Following the second showing I explain various points in the spoken words, the body language of the characters and the context. I stick to what is shown in the film, allowing details of the characters' lives to unfold with the story. Students are sometimes intrigued or puzzled by details I don't mention, so I give ample opportunities for student comments. Questions are seldom asked in the first couple of classes, so I usually give a short, unannounced test the third week. The results of the test alert me, and the class, to their level of understanding. If the overall level is poor, I urge students to ask questions about points they don't understand, and make it a class rule that if a question is asked in Japanese I will answer in Japanese. If one or two brave students do ask questions, and get helpful answers, other students begin to raise their hands, too.

Casual profanity

The first casual profanity and bar room talk about sex occur within the first few minutes of the film. Because the story and the characters are unfamiliar to the students, and because

many students are unused to being taught in English, I make no particular reference to the first sexual or profane comments unless specifically asked. Several early scenes in the film focus on Will Hunting and his close friends, Chuckie, Billy and Morgan. They are all about twenty years old, and seem to have been friends for years. As a result, their dialogue is peppered with profanity. By late in the first class, or early in the second class, I attack the problem of such language.

In bold letters I write what journalists often refer to as “the f word” on the board, and then comment that the word is common in contemporary American films, music videos and song lyrics, but that its usage is extremely complex. To prove my point I next write a line of dialogue from the film:

MORGAN: So, give me my fuckin' sandwich. (7)

Since most students only know the “f word” as a verb meaning to have sex, Morgan's comment is indeed puzzling. I assure them that in this sentence, the word has no meaning at all, but it does have a function: it intensifies the basic meaning of the sentence (Give me my sandwich.) to show how frustrated Morgan is that Chuckie has not distributed the sandwiches he had purchased for the group.

I then go on to say that such language was considered “male talk” until fairly recently, to the extent that profanity would be stopped abruptly if a girl or woman came within hearing. Some in the women's liberation movement in the 1960s considered the idea of “male talk” to be chauvinistic, and over the succeeding years the use of casual profanity in mixed company has, alas, become common. Through over use, the power of what were once forbidden words has been lost. Instead, casual profanity is often viewed as evidence of sincerity or un-guarded spontaneity, and has therefore become acceptable in mainstream films. Even so, I point out that many English speakers of all ages strongly disapprove of such language, so Japanese learners should understand, but avoid using, such language. It takes about fifteen minutes of class time to make these points, but based on positive student responses, the lesson is important for many of them.

English in context

Even before my potted lecture on profanity, I point out an example of sexual harassment. The first dialogue in the film is spoken by Gerald Lambeau, a professor of mathematics at M.I.T.

Near the end of his first class of the school year, he comments: "I also put an advanced Fourier system on the main hallway chalkboard. I'm hoping that one of you might prove it by the end of the semester." (3) The class clearly contains well over one hundred graduate students from all over the world, so Prof. Lambeau's hope that perhaps only one such student might prove the problem, given time, is a clear indication of the difficulty of the problem on the chalkboard in the hallway. That evening, when Will finishes mopping the hallway floor, he examines the problem and leaves M.I.T. That night he solves the problem to his satisfaction, and the next evening writes his answer on the chalkboard. The following day is a Saturday. There are no classes, but Prof. Lambeau attends a reunion on the campus, when he is suddenly approached by a young woman:

MIT STUDENT: I'm in your applied theories class. We're all up at the Math and Science building.

LAMBEAU: Come 'ere. . . . It's Saturday! Unless you wanna have a drink with me tonight.

MIT STUDENT: Maybe. . . . We just couldn't wait until Monday to find out.

LAMBEAU: Find out what?

MIT STUDENT: Who proved the theorem. (5-6)

Prof. Lambeau is drinking a glass of wine when the student approaches him. I explain that when he says "It's Saturday!" he means it is his private time, since there are no classes, and he doesn't want to engage in teacher-student conversation. Clearly, in this context, he means his next remark as a private one, too: "Unless you wanna have a drink with me tonight." He leans down to speak softly to her when he says this, so that only she can hear what he says. This is clearly a case of sexual harassment, but the young woman is neither shocked, nor dissuaded from her purpose. Her immediate response to his near proposition is to say "Maybe." This is an excellent response. Saying "no" might have angered Lambeau, who is her teacher in spite of his protestation that Saturday is a day off. A "yes" answer would have compromised her, but "maybe" puts off any decision, and gives her the opportunity to get to her point: someone has proved the theorem in two days, not at the end of the semester. Lambeau is astonished enough to immediately forget his comments about Saturday being private, and hurries to the Math and Science building.

I present this brief exchange as an example of how an alert and tactful woman (or man) can short circuit an unwanted sexual advance without embarrassment to anyone.

When none of Prof. Lambeau's students claims to have been what he calls "the mystery math magician" who solved the theorem, he announces to his applied theories class that, "my colleagues and I have conferred, and there is a problem on the board right now that took us more than two years to prove." (8) One or two nights later, Will writes his proof on the chalkboard. This time, however, Prof. Lambeau and his teaching assistant see him as he finishes writing:

LAMBEAU: What're you doing?

WILL: Sorry.

LAMBEAU: That's people's work. You can't graffiti here. Don't you walk away from me!

WILL: Hey, fuck you!

LAMBEAU: Oh, you're the clever one. What's your name? (*Notices the board*) Oh, my god.

TOM: Looks right. (9)

Will has hurried to a stairwell before he can be stopped. Now Prof. Lambeau realizes that a university cleaning man is "the mystery math magician," and he attempts to learn more about him through his employer.

This brief exchange of dialogue offers another use of the "f word", in this case meaning "Don't bother me." It also presented me with an excellent chance to see how many students are capable of catching irony. In a short test question, I asked, "Why does Prof. Lambeau call Will a 'clever one?'" Predictably, most students answered that he was praising Will's ability to quickly solve a problem which had taken professors two years to solve. After returning test papers I pointed out the necessity of looking closely at the sequence of events. Indeed Prof. Lambeau is astonished at Will's proof, but that comes later. At first he believes that Will is writing graffiti. He calls Will "clever" just after Will says, "Hey, fuck you!" so, the "clever one" comment is clearly ironic. Two students (out of eighty in two classes) caught the irony.

These early scenes establish that Will has exceptional mathematical skills, but other scenes have introduced a streak of violence in his personality. As Chuckie is driving his car through South Boston, Will recognizes a young man who had hit him regularly when they were kindergarten students. Chuckie, Billy and Morgan immediately understand that Will now will seek revenge, and they all leave the car to protect Will from harm. Will calls out to the young man, "Carmin! It's me! It's me, Will, remember? We went to kindergarten together." (8)

Abruptly, Will punches Carmine, whose friends rush to help him but are met with punches from Chuckie, Billy and Morgan. Police quickly arrive, and when Will is grabbed from behind he hits and kicks at another policeman. This is a crime, and Will is arrested on the spot. The impression is that Will and his friends regularly fight with other young people in the neighborhood; this time Will had the bad luck to be caught. Although Will is arrested, he is released pending a court procedure, which will determine whether or not he will go to jail. While waiting for this arraignment, Will answers the second problem on the hallway chalkboard.

Another night, Will and his friends visit a bar near Harvard University. This is far from their usual drinking place, but the reason is that a friend of Chuckie is serving as a “bouncer.” We later learn that Will is only twenty years old, and I explain that the legal drinking age is twenty-one. A bouncer is supposed to check identification to make sure no one under-age is allowed in, but Casey allows Chuckie and his friends to enter. This gives me an opportunity to explain the severe punishment for serving minors alcohol; often such a bar loses its liquor license, which usually means bankruptcy. The bouncer, then, is supposed to protect the owner of the bar by strictly checking identification. Although Will and his friends are pleased to get into the bar, clearly Casey acted irresponsibly in allowing it. Students are often surprised at this information.

Chuckie is attracted to two young women, and begins to make conversation with them by pretending he is a Harvard student. He has no idea how to do this convincingly, and is quickly challenged by a young man who has overheard Chuckie’s comments. One of the young women urges this young man to stop teasing Chuckie:

SKYLAR: Why don’t you just go away?

CLARK: I’m just having fun with my new friend, that’s all.

CHUCKIE: What, are we going to have a problem? I don’t understand.

CLARK: No, no, no, no, no. There’s no problem here. I was just hoping you might give me some insight into the evolution of the market economy in the Southern Colonies. My contention is that uh, prior to the Revolutionary War, the economic modalities, especially in the Southern Colonies, could most aptly be characterized as agrarian precapital—

At this point Chuckie is scratching his head at the sudden shift in rhetoric from casual bar talk to academic jargon. Chuckie is baffled, but Will, offended at Clark’s attempt to humiliate

Chuckie, intercedes, and ends up humiliating Clark because his phraseology reveals to Will exactly which books Clark has been reading:

CLARK: . . . Wood drastically underestimated the impact of social di—

WILL: Wood drastically. . . Wood drastically underestimates the impact of social distinctions predicated on wealth, especially inherited wealth. You got that from Vickers, *Work in Essex County*, page 98, right? Yeah, I read that, too. You gonna plagiarize the whole thing for us? . . . Or do you--is that your thing? You come into a bar, you read some obscure passage, . . . and pawn it off as your own . . . just to impress some girls? Embarrass my friend? (16-17)

Clark is embarrassed in front of his friends by Will's superior knowledge, but Will is determined to press his advantage:

WILL: Pardon me, but if you have a problem 'bout that, you and me could just step outside and we could figure it out.

CLARK: No, man, there's no problem. It's cool.

WILL: It's cool?

CLARK: Yeah. (17)

In class, I asked several students if they could guess what Will expected to do if he and Clark "stepped outside." Only one student, who had spent a year in an American high school, made the correct guess: fight. The usually helpful notes at the back of the text didn't explain this usage, but I pointed out that Clark immediately understood what Will meant, and had no desire to get into a fist fight.

Still in the bar near Harvard, Will remains focused on his group of friends, and is totally oblivious to the fact that Skylar was impressed with his defense of Chuckie. Will and Morgan are conversing, and just as Morgan describes telling a girl he had met to "Go fuck yourself!", Skylar approaches them. Among Will's friends, Morgan is the least bound by social codes, but at this point even he is embarrassed enough at his own language that he immediately leaves, saying, "I swallowed a bug," Will, pleased but embarrassed that Skylar and her friend have stopped to chat, is further surprised by what Skylar says:

SKYLAR: You're an idiot.

WILL: What?

SKYLAR: You're an idiot. I've been sitting over there for 45 minutes waiting for you to come and talk with me, but I'm tired now and I have to go home and I . . . I couldn't sit there any more waiting for you. . . . There's my number. I was hoping we can go out for coffee sometime. (18)

Will has demonstrated that his intellectual prowess extends to history in this scene, but his social skills are surprisingly weak when it comes to women. I present this episode to students as an example of how a woman can make clear her potential interest in a man without seeming overly bold.

In the following scene, Prof. Lambeau visits the Head Custodian in an effort to learn Will's identity. At first rules about privacy are explained, but when Prof. Lambeau insists that he urgently needs to know about the cleaning man who is so brilliant in mathematics, an explanation is forthcoming. Will, knowing that he had been seen writing on the hallway blackboard, has avoided going to work:

HEAD CUSTODIAN: Well, he didn't show up for work today. Got this job through his P.O.

LAMBEAU: P.O.?

HEAD CUSTODIAN: Yeah, Parole Officer. (19-20)

The film has shown Will attack a police officer, but the fact that he must report to a parole officer is new information which reveals that Will has previously been in jail, or rather the equivalent for juvenile offenders. Prof. Lambeau takes the card from the head custodian, which gives Will's name and a phone number for the parole officer.

In the next scene, Will is in court. He has no money for a lawyer, but could have asked for a court appointed lawyer to defend him. Instead, Will has chosen to defend himself, based on his study of law history. Prof. Lambeau enters the visitor's section of the courtroom and listens as Will and the prosecutor argue. The judge interrupts:

JUDGE MALONE: Son, my turn. I've been sitting here for ten minutes now looking over this. . . rap sheet of yours. I just can't believe it. June '93, Assault. September '93, Assault. Grand Theft, auto, February '94, where apparently you defended

yourself and had the case thrown out by citing Free Property Rights of Horse and Carriage from 1798. Choke! January '95 impersonating an Officer. Mayhem. Theft. Resisting. All overturned. I'm also aware that you've been through several foster homes. The state removed you from three because of serious physical abuse. You know, another judge might care. But you hit a cop, you're going in. Motion to dismiss is denied. Fifty thousand dollar bail.

WILL: Thank you. (25-26)

Prof. Lambeau has heard all this new information about Will, as have the film's audience members. Clearly the fist fight with Carmine fits into a pattern of Will's violence and lawlessness. The judge's comments make it clear that he has generally succeeded in getting court cases overturned by defending himself based on historical precedent. Judge Malone, however, refuses to be swayed by the revelation that as a child Will had been physically abused by more than one court-appointed foster family, and when he says, "you're going in," Will knows it means jail.

The idea of court-appointed foster families must be explained, but the evidence that three such families abused Will implies inefficient screening of such foster families. Will is shown in the bright orange clothing of a prisoner, but almost immediately he is taken to a small room where he and Prof. Lambeau can talk privately.

WILL: (To Lambeau) Fuck do you want?

LAMBEAU: I'm Gerald Lambeau, the professor you told to fuck himself.

WILL: Well, what the fuck do you want?

LAMBEAU: I've spoken to the judge. And he's agreed to release you, under my supervision.

WILL: Really?

LAMBEAU: Yeah. But under two conditions.

WILL: What're those?

LAMBEAU: The first is that you meet with me every week.

WILL: What for?

LAMBEAU: Go over the proof that you're working on, get into some more advanced, combinatorial mathematics. Finite math.

WILL: Sounds like a real hoot.

LAMBEAU: And the second condition is that, that you see a therapist. And I'm

responsible to submit reports on this. Yes, and if you fail to meet with any of these conditions you will have to serve time.

WILL: All right, I'll do the math, but I'm not gonna meet with any fuckin' therapist.

LAMBEAU: It's better than spending time in jail, isn't it? (27-28)

When Prof. Lambeau explains the second condition, both he and Will laugh. Lambeau can guess that Will has had numerous encounters with psychotherapists as a juvenile criminal. Will's laugh comes from having anticipated what the second condition would be. Will is freed from jail, but his agreement to abide by only one of the two conditions imposed by Judge Malone suggests that trouble is ahead.

Will must go through the motions of visiting counselors, but his tactic is to alienate or infuriate them, so that the therapist rejects Will, putting off the selection of a regular counselor. Will succeeds in totally alienating two therapists, and Prof. Lambeau approaches desperation. Finally, he decides to seek help from an old personal friend who teaches psychology at a community college.

Will visits the office of Sean McGuire and repeats his efforts to anger the therapist. He demeans the books on office shelves as "the wrong fuckin' books." This does not anger Sean McGuire. He looks at a watercolor the therapist has painted, and says, "It's a real piece of shit." This, too, fails to anger. With the allotted time running short, and the therapist's good humor prevailing in spite of Will's provocations, his next tactic is to get extremely personal:

WILL: Maybe you married the wrong woman.

SEAN: Maybe you should watch your mouth. Watch it right there, chief, all right?

WILL: Ah. . . . Well, that's it, isn't it? You married the wrong woman. What happened? What, d'she leave you? Was she, you know, whew whew, banging some other guy?

SEAN: If you ever disrespect my wife again, I will end you, I will fuckin' end you. Got that, chief?

WILL: Time's up.

SEAN: Yeah. (40)

The published scenario does not describe Sean's actions in this scene, but a photograph from the film makes it clear that after Will's pointed suggestion that Sean's wife had been unfaithful, the therapist, in violation of all notions of doctor-patient objectivity, grabs Will by

the throat, and threatens to “end” him. Clearly, Will has succeeded in again alienating a therapist, and he leaves in a good mood. When Prof. Lambeau enters Sean’s office he can see that he has been deeply upset by something Will has said or done:

LAMBEAU: You okay? I—I’ll understand if you don’t wanna meet with him again.

SEAN: Thursday, four o’clock. Make sure the kid’s here.

LAMBEAU: Yeah. . . . Thanks. (41)

In an earlier scene, there was a brief reference to the death of Sean’s wife. Will, of course, did not know that, but sensed that his first reference to his wife had angered Sean, and he pursued the topic until the therapist himself became violent. His ultimate purpose, however, is not achieved. Will angered Sean, but in spite of that, Sean agrees to see him once a week as his court-approved counselor.

I cite Will’s references to Sean’s wife as examples of spectacularly inappropriate English in a normal context, but extremely effective if your purpose is to infuriate someone.

In the bar near Harvard, Skylar had given Will her telephone number. Will has little money, so they visit a toy store for their first date, and then eat hamburgers at a café. They enjoy one another’s light-hearted conversation, and then Skylar accuses Will of anticipating a good-night kiss at the end of their date. Will admits this is true:

SKYLAR: Well, why don’t we get it out of the way now?

WILL: Right now?

SKYLAR: Yup. Come on. (*They kiss.*) I think I got some of your pickle.

(46)

Kissing in a public place, while eating hamburgers, is more comic than romantic, and the scene suggests that Skylar is full of surprises.

The following Thursday Will visits Sean’s office, as scheduled. They walk to a nearby park, and Sean begins to describe his initial impressions of Will as a man filled with book learning but lacking in emotionally rich experiences, summing up his views by saying, “I look at you: I don’t see an intelligent, confident man. I see a cocky, scared shitless kid. But you’re a genius, Will. No one denies that.” Will remains impassive through most of Sean’s long monologue, but averts his eyes when Sean says,

You're an orphan, right? Do you think I'd know the first thing about how hard your life has been, how you feel, who you are because I read *Oliver Twist*? Does that encapsulate you? . . . Unless you wanna talk about you, who you are. Then I'm fascinated. I'm in. But you don't wanna do that, do you, sport? You're terrified of what you might say. Your move, chief. (47-48)

Abruptly, Sean walks away, before Will can respond.

The film continues, alternating scenes in Prof. Lambeau's office regarding mathematical proofs, and visits to Sean's office. Sean realizes that Will is reluctant to talk about his past, so he talks about his own past, especially his happiness with his wife, her fight against cancer and her death. Slowly but surely, Will begins to respond to Sean's role model. At Sean's urging, Will decides to visit Skylar in her dormitory room to ask for a second date after an interval of a few weeks:

SKYLAR: Hello.

WILL: Hey.

SKYLAR: Where've you been?

WILL: I'm sorry, I've been, like, I've been really busy and, but uh. . .

SKYLAR: Me too, yeah. I've, I thought you'd call.

WILL: Yeah, um. . .

SKYLAR: I mean we really had a good time.

WILL: I had a really good time, too, I mean, I just, I, I'm sorry, you know, I, I, blew it.

SKYLAR: No, no. I mean that, you know, it's all right.

WILL: Yeah, so I was wonderin' if, you know, you'd give me another crack at it. You know, let me take you out again.

SKYLAR: Oh, I can't.

WILL: All right.

SKYLAR: Oh no, I didn't, I didn't mean I can't like, EVER. I just can't right now. I've got to assign the proton spectrum for ibogamine. . . .

WILL: All right. Um. . .

SKYLAR: Maybe some other time.

WILL: Like tomorrow?

SKYLAR: Um, yeah, all right.

WILL: Okay. (57)

I spend a fair amount of time in class discussing this scene. Will's embarrassment is clearly revealed in the numerous fits and starts of his sentences. Skylar quickly realizes that when she says she can't go out with Will, he thinks she no longer wants to see him again. She assures him that it is the urgent necessity of finishing organic chemistry homework that prevents her from going out with him immediately. Will is almost pathetically certain that because he had neglected her for weeks, she will reject him. Skylar catches this, and repeatedly encourages him until they agree on a date "tomorrow."

Will's lack of money for dating prompts him to think of unusual places for a date. For their first date they visited a toy shop. For their second date, they go to the dog races, where Skylar bets on the winning dog. After the race they talk, and Skylar asks Will about his childhood and family. For some reason, Will claims that he comes from a large family:

WILL: I have twelve big brothers.

SKYLAR: You do not.

WILL: No, I swear to God. I swear to God. I'm lucky 13 right here.

...

SKYLAR: Wow. Do you still see all of them?

WILL: Yeah. Well, they all live in Southie. I, I'm livin' with three of them right now.

SKYLAR: Oh yeah?

WILL: Yeah.

SKYLAR: Well, I'd like to meet them.

WILL: Yeah, we'll do that. (58-59)

We now know that Will is an orphan and knows nothing about his birth parents. He and Skylar get along well, but Will's lie about his twelve brothers, and his promise to introduce Skylar to them is an irrational and totally unnecessary complication.

By this point in the film, almost the half-way point in the scenario dialogue, students have been introduced to all the main characters, and their key relationships. Will drinks beer and goes to game centers with his friends. He continues to impress Prof. Lambeau with his mathematical abilities, and slowly but steadily develops rapport with his counselor, Sean McGuire. The number of students capable of spontaneously enjoying the film has grown, even among some students who professed that they could understand nothing at the beginning of

the year. And, partly because it is a Hollywood film, we can anticipate growing importance in Will's romantic involvement with Skylar.

Although there are no explicitly sexual scenes in the film, it becomes apparent that Will and Skylar have become physically intimate because he now spends some nights in Skylar's dormitory room, and in one such scene, he promises to introduce Skylar to his close friends. I remind students that in an earlier scene, Will entered the women's dormitory by waiting until students left the building. He caught the door before it closed, and entered the dorm. He could also enter with Skylar because she has a key. I assure students that all dormitories have rules, but that sometimes these rules are only loosely enforced, especially for upperclassmen such as Skylar.

When Skylar goes drinking with Will and his friends, Chuckie tells a long, and seemingly true, story about one of his uncles who had been stopped by a policeman for drunken driving. The humor of the story is dampened by repeated questions and interruptions from Morgan. Chuckie becomes embarrassed. Skylar then tells a comic story involving oral sex. Everyone laughs at the punch line, but at the same time seem scandalized that a woman has told such a joke. I don't explain the story to the class, but do stress that Skylar tells the story in order to distract everyone from Chuckie's embarrassment. Chuckie is impressed with Skylar, which is important to Will.

Skylar will soon graduate from Harvard, and will immediately enter the medical school at Stanford University. In the middle of the night, she awakens Will and asks him to go with her to California. She knows that Will is now working with Chuckie as a day-laborer, and could find similar work on the West Coast. The question, and the commitment it implies, panics Will, and their quiet conversation soon turns into a devastating emotional crisis:

WILL: I'm afraid? Wha—wha—what am I afraid of, huh? What the fuck am I afraid of?

SKYLAR: You're afraid of me. You're afraid I won't love you back. And you know what? I'm afraid too. Fuck it. I want to give it a shot and at least I'm honest with you.

WILL: I'm not honest with you?

SKYLAR: No, what about your twelve brothers?

At this point, Will attempts to leave Skylar's room, but she stops him, demanding that he be honest with her. He becomes brutally blunt, reducing Skylar to tears with

revelation after revelation.

WILL: What do you want to know? What? That I don't have twelve brothers?

SKYLAR: Yes.

WILL: That I'm a fuckin' orphan!

SKYLAR: Yes.

WILL: No, you don't want to hear that!

SKYLAR: I didn't know that.

WILL: No, you don't want to hear that.

SKYLAR: I didn't know it.

WILL: You don't want to hear that I had fuckin' cigarettes put out on me when I was a kid.

SKYLAR: Oh, I didn't know that.

WILL: That this [He points to a scar] isn't fuckin' surgery, that the motherfucker stabbed me. You don't want to hear that shit, Skylar.

. . . .

SKYLAR: God, I just want to be with you because I love you.

WILL: Don't bullshit me. Don't bullshit me. Don't you fuckin' bullshit me! (86-87)

Will does not hit Skylar, but he punches the doorframe of her room each time he says the word "bullshit." Most of this dialogue is easy for students to understand, but Will's repeated "Don't bullshit me" clearly puzzled many students. This scene is so emotionally powerful, that an appropriate change of mood seemed necessary. I asked how many students had seen fresh bovine excrement. One student had, at a dairy farm on Mt. Rokko. I explained that most American students have never seen fresh bovine excrement either, but that the meaning of Will's shout would be clear to them because of common usage. Fresh bovine excrement is hot, shapeless and smells bad, which is why the colloquial "bullshit" means "a lie." I assure students that many such barnyard expressions are common in English because farm life was so common through most of the twentieth century. With this explanation in mind, we return to the scenario. "Bullshit" means a lie, so Will is saying to Skylar, "Don't lie to me" when she tells him she loves him. He simply can't believe that she means what she says, and the scene ends as he coolly tells Skylar, "I don't love you." This seems to end Will's romance with Skylar.

In the following scene Will sets fire to his proof of a theorem to show how little he values his mathematical abilities. Lambeau races across the room to put out the fire because he has

been unable to solve the problem. Sitting on the floor, humiliated, Prof. Lambreau says, “Most days I wish I’d never met you.” (89) And when Sean McGuire asks Will what he wants to do in the future, Will is unable to answer. Sean abruptly tells Will to leave his office since he refuses to be honest.

In successive scenes, Will seems to have cut himself off from three of the people who are the most supportive, and concerned about his future.

In the following scenes, the language is simple enough that repeated showings of the video are seldom necessary. Students have become engrossed in the story, and are eager to see the lines in the printed scenario enacted in the video of the film. Key conflicts in the story are ultimately resolved, and the film ends happily.

The test and report

I had promised students that the end-of-term test questions would be in English, and that their answers must be in English. Dictionaries (printed or electric) are acceptable, as are the printed text and any notes they have written. Giving the test during class, they have ninety minutes, but for some students even ninety minutes might not be enough. I therefore also distributed report questions, which students had three weeks to prepare.

Here are sample questions, followed by selected student answers:

Q. EXPLAIN why Will resists counseling.

Answer 1: He’d been through several foster homes. The state remove [sic] him from three because of serious physical abuse. He was abandoned by the people who were supposed to love him most. He pushes people away before they have a chance to leave him. It’s [a] defense mechanism. And for 20 years he’s been alone because of that. Therefore he can’t open his mind and is terrified of what he might say.

This answer cuts and pastes sentences from many different scenes in the film, to create an excellent, compressed answer. The English is safe (from a student’s point of view), and is skillfully put together, but obviously lacks originality.

Answer 2: In general, people have some opposition to consulting a counselor (psychotherapist). Because it is proof that your mind have [sic] some problems and the problems are so serious that the specialist should see [you]. Will thinks he is

sane and it's not necessary for him to meet a counselor. I think Will also thinks that if he opens himself to a counselor, he can't get the result he hopes [for]. It is no use meeting a counselor. He can't trust the profession of a counselor. I think Will resists counseling because of these reasons.

This is a more general explanation, but written in smooth, personal English.

Answer 3: Because he hates [to be] counseled by strange people. He have [sic] a horrible experience when he was young. He was orphan [sic] and he was abused. No one helped him at that time, so he can't open out easily. And, he has a pride [sic], so he doesn't want them to compassion him [sic], so he resists counseling.

Although the English in Answer 3 is weaker than in Answers 1 and 2, it is carefully focused on details from the story, as told in the student's own English. Predictably, most student answers to this question were brief, and more fragmentary than these three examples.

The film scenario, and accompanying video, gave students access to a great variety of English in many emotional contexts. I had explained many points of usage, but was eager to see what had most intrigued, attracted or astonished students about the English in the film. Accordingly, I was most interested in responses to the following problem:

Q: QUOTE at least three places where the English in *GOOD WILL HUNTING* interested you, and EXPLAIN WHY.

Answer 1: "fuck you!" This words [sic] constantly [made] appearance in this film. . . . Not only boy[s], but also professor. I feel it is strange.

Answer 2: The English I was interested in is Will's line, "Fuck do you want?", first because this "fuck" means "what", and [is a] provocation to Lambeau.

Predictably, many students were interested in the frequency of profanity. Some students were also able to express their understanding of the complexity of such usage, as in this comment about Sean's use of profanity:

Answer 3: He became Will's soul mate, and talk[ed] to him in rough English, so that

Will can talk to Sean like a friend, not like a therapist.

Some students selected scenes showing understanding of more subtle usages:

Answer 4: page 20, Lambeau visited [the] Buildings and Grounds office at MIT. When Tom said to [the] Head Custodian, “This is Professor Lambeau,” [the] Head Custodian said [to his friend], “This is Professor Hayes.” . . . I saw that [the] Head Custodian make [sic] a sarcastic remark about them.

Many students referred to a scene late in the film in which Chuckie shows that he is more than a drinking buddy to Will. As they chat after work, Will indicates that he plans to live in South Boston forever as a day-laborer. Chuckie, in outspoken terms, tells Will to escape from his daily routine and forge a new life, making full use of his intellect. The scene is highly emotional, which attracted many students, some of whom could express their insights fully:

Answer 5: Page 104, CHUCKIE’s lines

“Look, you’re my best friend, so don’t take this the wrong way. In 20 years, if you’re still livin’ here, comin’ over to my house to watch Patriots games, still workin’ construction, I’ll fuckin’ kill you. That’s not a threat. Now, that’s a fact. I’ll fuckin’ kill you”

It’s normal [sic] to say “I’ll kill you” to someone when you express your anger but *it’s not usual to say that when you challenge someone. Therefore I can see how seriously Chuckie challenged Will.* And this line insists that Chuckie will be the first soulmate for Will’s life, *not just “family” as Sean called him, or “a retarded gorilla” as Pro. [sic] Lambeau called him.* [Italics show where the student underlined.]

Another student, referring to the same quote, wrote more simply:

Answer 6: Chuckie and Will are friends, *but he ventured to advise parting from him.* I felt Chuckie’s gentle[ness]. [Italics show where the student underlined.]

In class, I had pointed out that when Chuckie says, “don’t take this the wrong way,” he is affirming that he is about to make critical remarks as a friend. No student selected this

prelude as an example of interesting English usage, which I guess is an indication that what teachers teach isn't necessarily what students learn.

It is also true that students learn what they want to learn, and sometimes that is a blessing for easily embarrassed teachers. If a student asks me to explain a passage that contains a sexual reference, I do my best to be frank if the question seems sincere. There are so many sexual references in the scenario of *Good Will Hunting* that I feared class discussion might get sidetracked, and that the seriousness of the story and its characters might be diminished for some students. Happily (for me) no embarrassing questions were asked in class, but two students wrote report comments that confirm their curiosity and alertness to sexual references. One student commented on a phrase used in one of the first scenes in the film:

Answer 7: (page 4) "Tootsie Roll dick"

Tootsie Roll means a little chocolate. But [in] this scene, "Tootsie Roll dick" means a poor penis. It's funny.

Another student selected a phrase spoken by Skylar to Will in her dormitory room. It is 4:30 AM and Will refuses to be definite about when he will introduce Skylar to his friends and his alleged brothers. Skylar presses him by threatening not to allow him to sleep with her until he arranges a meeting. In spite of the hour, Will immediately telephones Chuckie, prompting the phrase selected by the student that such behavior is:

Answer 8: (p. 67, line 20) "thinking with your wiener"

I thought that this English is very interesting. I didn't know that English has had like this comparison.

There was a great deal of variety in the English selected to answer this report problem, some selecting words or phrases, others sentences or longer passages. My guidelines were not specific in this respect, allowing for a wide variety of answers.

Conclusion

I was pleased with the level of understanding of most students, both on the semester-end test and the reports quoted here. Nearly all students demonstrated a good understanding of

the film, the many human interactions it portrayed, and the English used in those varied contexts. Their abilities to express their understanding varied, and I have selected more articulate answers for inclusion here.

It is always a challenge to select films worthy of the time it takes to teach them, and rich enough in contextual variety to offer useful lessons for students. Repeated showings of individual scenes reveals weaknesses in many films. Those that stand up to this severe test can hold the attention of students (and, needless to say, teachers). *Good Will Hunting* continues to fascinate me, after several years of teaching it, and student responses suggest that they, too, are challenged and fascinated by the characters, the story and the English in the film.

Note

- 1) Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, *Good Will Hunting*, annotated by Alan Rosen and Kusumoto Jitsuko, (Shohakusha, 2002), hereafter with page number citations (in parentheses) immediately following quotes.