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Sweet Sixteen

Abstract

This is a review of *Sweet Sixteen* (2002).

When film-makers combine the genre of political tract with that of social documentary, they tend to produce the sort of romanticism that in hefty doses has dulled other Ken Loach movies like *Bread and Roses* and *Carla's Song*: Marxism and love are woven into a modern folk mythology of the idealist versus the oppressor. It is all too easy to re-hash the old tale of Christians and Romans, or Jews and Egyptians in a modern political setting. It is only when Loach returns to the home turf of British society, as in *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, *My Name is Joe* or here in *Sweet Sixteen*, that with all the complexity of a Greek tragedy, he imbues his moral vision with deep social and psychological insight. He shows us what spirituality is really made of.

Sweet Sixteen, for which Loach's collaborator Paul Laverty won Best Screenplay at Cannes, is about the meteoric rise and fall of Liam, a teenager approaching his sixteenth birthday in the poverty stricken "Red Clyde" Estuary in Scotland (once a Left-wing promised land). All of Liam's methods are immoral, yet all of his motives seem to be good. The resulting ethical conundrums laced throughout the film are held together with flawless integrity by first-time actor Martin Compston's performance as Liam.

Sweet Sixteen has been criticised for its downbeat tone, yet Liam is an optimistic, brave, joyful and defiant protagonist who seems to embody the best of the human spirit in its struggle against overwhelming odds. His hair-raising lifestyle is balanced by a subtle sensitivity to nature, which counterpoints the scams he perpetrates and the beatings he suffers. From the star filled sky at the opening of the movie, to the arresting view from the caravan on which his hopes lie, and finally to the darkly symbolic Glaswegian seashore on which the film ends, Loach punctuates the comedy and the tragedy of Liam's situation with

sources of hope. While it is the economy of the local drugs trade that Liam has to succeed in, it is the spiritual struggle to save his family, and be saved by their reconciliation that drives him. Ultimately, this is the key to whether he will rise or fall. Loach tells a classic story of drugs and gangsters, but the focus of the film is on the inner landscape of hope and compromise through which its characters move.

In Loach's moral universe, sin is less a quality of the person who commits it than a by-product of the complex moral situations in which they are placed. The redemptive goal of his films is to show the genesis of sin in disappointed hopes and pointless suffering. In the Oedipal climax of the film Loach paints a picture of humanity left to its own resources without an icon on which to pin its dreams of something better. Yet Liam's resilience, and in the closing moments, the call of his responsibility to the family that relies on him, leave us with a tearful but enduring hope. Sixteen is when we inherit both the freedom of adulthood and the burden of moral judgement - resourceful as he is, we do not realise that Liam has been clinging to childhood until the end of the film when in a heart wrenching scene of confrontation, he finally "graduates."

If Loach sometimes slips into sentimentality while ignoring the larger scale moral issues of drugs traffic, then perhaps he can be excused given the ambitious scope of his filmmaking programme. For Loach, film is a fundamentally redemptive medium that both aesthetically transfigures suffering, and initiates real change in the circumstances that cause it. The press notes for the release of the film include statistics on Scottish poverty, and one can't help but feel that Loach is trying to save us from our own moral laziness with a call to arms against the social ills of the world.

Liam can be read as a saviour who is betrayed by those he tries to save (in an exhilarating scene he literally rises again and again when he has been left face down in the dirt - Jesus or terminator, you choose). Or as a modern Job who finally loses his faith. In the language of liberation theology, not so far from Loach's political province, Liam's suffering is vicarious, offering us the possibility of redemptive social action. Whichever way you take the open-ended conclusion of the film, there is no theodicy in *Sweet Sixteen*, but there is the sweetness of hope. Loach seems to have located the spiritual struggles of modern humanity in the practical and personal challenges of reality - a helpful clue for audiences and theologians alike.