

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Directed by Robert De Niro
Produced by Robert De Niro, James G. Robinson, and Jane Rosenthal
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 2006

Making a movie about an epoch still shrouded in mystery allows the imagination to run free. And fashioning a protagonist who is morbidly insular is a challenge, as this forces the audience to identify with a character even though it is clearly impossible to know what he is thinking. On these two points the creators of *The Good Shepherd* set a high bar for themselves. For the most part, they are successful. As we know just enough about the real CIA and the unreal Edward Wilson (supposedly modeled on James Jesus Angleton) we know just enough to care. But there are historical and dramatic compromises along the way that deserve scrutiny.

The public and private lives of Matt Damon's Edward Wilson spill into each other with the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Appropriately enough, that's where *The Good Shepherd* begins, before flashing back to show us how the inscrutable Mr. Wilson finds himself in such precarious circumstances, suspected of disloyalty/espionage/treason.

It's very dramatic. But General Maxwell Taylor's June 1961 special report—now declassified—reveals a leak from within the intelligence community that informed the USSR (and hence, Cuba) what the date of incursion would be. Probably the whole enterprise would have failed even if Castro didn't know the date and location (and even if the vaunted air cover had not been denied by JFK), as Castro was too popular for there to be any hope for an uprising. Moreover, the macho exiles training in Nicaragua refused to maintain a cautious silence, and, before long, Miami was abuzz with rumors of invasion.

Inserting Ed Wilson, Jr. into this maelstrom almost makes sense, because of two great scenes that result. The first is when Edward realizes his son was in earshot of that ill-considered confab on Deer Island. Always calm, realizing he had been stupid, and respecting his son, he responds, to his son's lie that nothing was overheard, that *if* something was heard, it cannot be repeated. Such discretion is easy for the father, impossible for the son.

He seems to have inherited this weakness for indiscretion from his mother, Margaret. Within hours of meeting Edward in 1940 she seduces him in a wooded grove. This has to be the least persuasive scene in the film, and resembles the similarly ill-justified exertions of Ed Exley and Lynn Bracken in *L.A. Confidential*. Indeed, how can a man as disciplined as Edward give in to her? Are we to make a connection between this and the near-consummation of his relationship with Laura, just two sequences previous? Was he just really eager both times, with one girl saying no while the other wouldn't take no for an answer? If he was ready for some action, he sure controlled himself heroically.

Edward is a catch, but didn't it used to be the plan to tease a man, refuse to give in, and then ensnare him in the Tender Trap of marriage? Interestingly, her objective may have been to get pregnant, and thereby force his hand.

It would be more intriguing (and believable) if she was *already* pregnant. Then, knowing the code of honor of the day, knowing that Edward would assume he was the father, she would finally have her “perfect husband.”

This strange interlude humanizes Edward, makes him more relatable. But it also turns a brilliant man into a stooge.

After all, in his one outburst in the whole movie, he tells Margaret that he “married [her] because of him” [Edward, Jr.]. Couldn’t we gather that he never loved Margaret and, maybe (despite Angelina Jolie’s reputation), was not even attracted to her?

Sadly, it is easy to conclude that Jolie is miscast. She is too much the man-eating wonder-woman of movies like *Lara Croft: Tomb Rader*, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, and *Salt*. She displays none of the “good breeding” one would expect from this strata of society in that bygone age. Sexual aggressiveness is a large part of her cinematic grandeur. But is that really what we want in this kind of story? Yes, she has range, and can handle anything thrown at her as an actress. She does a great job conveying Margaret’s sense of disappointment, and betrayal, as the marriage breaks down. But it’s obvious that the producers were more interested in securing a star for this relatively small part than finding the best actress to fill the (definitely supporting) role. And, ironically, because she is such a big star (her career was at its absolute peak in 2006 when this film was released) it seems like her part is underwritten and there are too many dangling loose ends—but that’s only because, given her fame, we initially expect more to happen with her. (Probably, if the producers dared to put the story first and let the box office take care of itself, Amy Adams would do, or, in a pinch, Isla Fisher.) Again, Angelina Jolie makes sense as a seductress, but it doesn’t add up somehow—even if she was well bred *and* loose, wouldn’t she have enough self-respect to at least allow Edward a few minutes to gather his thoughts, to see if he worked up some enthusiasm for her after a little conversation? She could tease him and make herself obviously available. Instead, she mounts him, after Edward has shown—and this is weird, too—no interest whatsoever, despite her obvious beauty.

(But, to be fair, Edward has just been recruited by General Sullivan for [what would become] the OSS. His brooding makes sense. He is struggling with the idea of being a spy. The tension between duty to family and duty to country is nicely—if bizarrely—encapsulated in this scene.)

She seems sad when he leaves for London, right after their wedding. But she isn’t dedicated enough to remain faithful while he is away. Upon his return, she admits she had an affair. He admits a similar “mistake,” and they settle into an anti-life of bland domesticity.

What’s more important as a story element? Is it alienation from Margaret, or his bond with his son? Let’s say that was the way it was written—that she was pregnant by some other guy when she seduces Edward: If the kid dies in ’43, and they had relations upon his return from Europe, they could still have a son, but the impact of her betrayal—when he discovered the truth some time later—would diminish. The filmmakers made a choice. It may have been the right one, since everything else in his life, particularly as relates to the tension between family and country, stems from that tryst in the woods.

The second scene befitting by Junior is Edward telling his son that his fiancée is dead (left unsaid: he acquiesced to her death so that Edward [who couldn’t keep hit trap shut] wouldn’t be killed). So now his son has lost his great love, as Edward lost his. Despite

Margaret's anger ("What have you done?"), he didn't let his son down; his son let *him* down. Junior chose not to believe his father's warning about his fiancée, even though his father (it is fair to extrapolate) had never lied to *him*. Because he is the master of lies, in his role as the counter-intelligence doyen, his son can concoct a justification for his romantic-haze rebellion.

There are overtones of *The Godfather Part III* in this plot device. Just as Michael Corleone, despite his best intentions, engages in gross criminality for the supposed greater good (trying desperately to keep his hands clean by pawning the Vatican-Immobiliare mess off on his trigger-happy nephew), only to find that his beloved daughter is killed in the never-ending crossfire, so, too, does Edward lose a would-be daughter-in-law. But, one could argue, he pulls the trigger himself. And unlike Al Pacino's grandiose wail of forever-lament, Matt Damon can barely muster a frown.

Given his upbringing, given his undeniable capacity for self-sacrifice, it makes sense why Edward dumped Laura and married Margaret. But why, after he finally beds her in the late '50s, does he send his lieutenant to tell her—in effect—that their briefly rekindled romance is over? (And, by the way, who took the incriminating surveillance photos?) He's breaking up with Margaret, so why this penchant for suffering? The most poignant moment of the entire movie is when Edward asks Laura, after all these years, whether she has anybody. "A cat," she replies with manufactured courage. She is all alone—a common lament in our day, despite, and perhaps due to, our on-line ubiquity —and, at the film's end, lost in the cold corridors of CIA, so is Edward. Does he secretly like it that way? He is the suffering servant. But he is no religious zealot. His only belief system is America. "What about you people? What do *you* have?" the mobster challenges, referring to the WASPy elites represented by his ill-at-ease visitor. Wilson replies with dismissive stoicism: "The United States of America. The rest of you are just visiting."

It's one of the few times we are granted some insight into Edward's psyche. He hides the secret of his father's suicide. He hides the nation's secrets from enemies foreign and domestic. "You have to look behind the words to understand their meaning," Dr. Fredericks once instructed his poetry students. Edward takes this as a literal truth. The less he says, the less can be discerned, the less can be exposed—the more can be protected.

And thus, he, too is protected. But his wife and son feel helpless. He can't tell them everything is going to be okay; he can't explain why he knows this, even if it *is* true—that would give away another secret. So he never gives help. He never has help. He is always alone.

"Don't ever lie. If you lie to your friends, they won't trust you. And you will have nothing and you'll never be safe." These were the parting words of his father. Buried in Edward's closet, beneath a hidden panel in the floor, is a combination safe. Within, nestled alongside the suicide note, is a program from the Yale theatrical of "H.M.S. Pinafore." That night, back in 1939, may have been the last time that Edward was truly happy.

The Good Shepherd comes full circle with the climactic revelation—and it is the climax, even though it concerns an event from the distant past—concerning the fate of Edward's disgraced father. With this final secret—a secret shared with no one in the world—Edward is confirmed as a highly dedicated, resourceful man with feet of clay, carrying forward the failures

of his father. Unlike his father, he did not betray his friends. But, unlike his father, he doesn't have any friends. So, sure, he didn't let himself down, but he has hardly distinguished himself. He doesn't mean anything to anybody at this point, and, if we're supposed to believe that his sacrifices were necessary for the sake of the country, it's not only depressing—it's not convincing.

The filmmakers would probably point to the death scene of Edward's English mentor (and one-time poetry instructor), Dr. Fredericks. He is killed not so much because of his homosexual activities (and the constant concern of being blackmailed because of them), but because he chooses men outside the elite for his sexual partners. Edward reluctantly participates in his death, mainly trying, in a last-ditch effort, to convince the old man to retire. Always reluctant to speak, he nevertheless runs after Dr. Fredericks, just in time to see his lifeless body dumped in the river. Fredericks had not betrayed any secrets. It just wasn't convenient to let him hang around. "He knew too much. You understand," Arch Cummings (who turns out to be a slimer-spy) admonishes Edward at the water's edge.

The lesson we're supposed to learn is that while no one can be trusted, the mission is still (mostly) worthwhile. That may be true. And if it is, the sacrifice of men like Edward Wilson must be commended. But *The Good Shepherd* really stacks the deck, making it absolutely clear that his life is one of elevated misery, as dark clouds of misfortune shower him with icy ill tidings even as he ascends the heights of power. There is no redemption, no triumph...no hope.