

## **How 'Miller's Girl' Blurs Boundaries: A Critical Review of Power Dynamics and Inappropriate Behaviour in Teacher-Student Relationships**

As I finished watching the movie *Miller's Girl* (MG), I couldn't help but feel a bit unsettled. Although the movie is categorized as a thriller, I found myself more horrified than thrilled. As an academic, and someone who envisions themselves primarily in a university setting, I am intrigued by the relationships between different stakeholders in this ever-changing environment. While MG focuses exclusively on romantic relationships and the resulting fallout from a teacher-student relationship, I must say that this is just the tip of the iceberg. In any workplace setting, the interconnectivity between different agents can be diverse, but it is magnified in a university setting. This is primarily due to the members belonging to a vast range of social classes within the institution<sup>1</sup>.

The dialogues offer intriguing glimpses into the characters' psyche and the thematic undercurrents of the film. They touch upon existential angst, societal norms, and the complexities of human relationships. However, amidst these profound musings, the movie confronts us with uncomfortable truths about power dynamics and ethical boundaries within academic spaces. Jonathan Miller, portrayed as a charismatic but flawed figure, embodies the archetype of the tortured artist grappling with his own demons. His interactions with Cairo, the student who becomes infatuated with him, blur the lines between mentorship and manipulation. While the film may romanticize their connection as a rebellious act against societal norms, it fails to adequately address the inherent imbalance of power between a teacher and a student.

What particularly caught my attention is the idea of mediocrity and the resulting despair it causes. I often find myself falling into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. In the words of the influential mathematician André Weil, "the exceptional gifts of my counterparts, bring my own inferiority home to me. I do not mind having no visible successes, but what grieves me is the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides." One must wonder, what is the relationship between academic or scientific mediocrity and this movie plot? I believe a great academic setting is truly the place of divinity. It can shoot for the heavens, but also reach the deepest trenches of hell. And what do they both have in common? A lack of mediocrity, or at least a deep-seated hatred of it.

In academia, where intellect and ambition often collide, the pursuit of greatness can sometimes lead to moral compromise. The character of Mr. Miller, with his disdain for mediocrity and his desire to transcend societal constraints, exemplifies this paradox. Yet, it is precisely this contempt for the ordinary that ultimately drives him towards reckless behaviour, jeopardizing not only his career but also the well-being of those around him. The portrayal of mediocrity as a source of existential despair resonates deeply within academic circles. In a hyper-competitive environment where success is measured in publications and grants, the fear of being deemed average can be paralyzing. This pressure to excel at all costs can push individuals to ethical boundaries, blurring the line between ambition and exploitation.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes university leaders (presidents, provosts, deans, and so on), faculty members (chair professors, full, associate, and assistant professors), administrative staff, research staff (postdoctoral researchers and research students), and lastly, teaching students (undergraduate and postgraduate students).

As we reflect on Miller's *Girl*<sup>2</sup> and its portrayal of academia, we are forced to confront uncomfortable truths about power, privilege, and the pursuit of greatness. While the film may offer tantalizing glimpses into the darker recesses of the human psyche, it ultimately serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the consequences of crossing ethical boundaries.

However, the movie does come with a few beautiful surprises, such as naming Jonathan Miller's book as *Apostrophes and Ampersands*, and dialogues such as:

*"Come on, why you always gotta hold my coffee hostage?  
'Cause you're a puritan. I feel like it's my duty to punish the goodness out of you.  
God, you're a sadist.  
I'm a public-school teacher."*

*"What has been your greatest achievement to date?" All right, what the fuck am I supposed to say? Surviving the crippling ennui of growing up in bumfuck nowhere?  
I'm sorry. I just... I couldn't hear you over the high whine of your shining trust fund."*

*"The teacher who attempts to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron."*

*"It's about two like people abnegating social convention. You know, it's commentary on the sexual anesthetization of a culture that's super saturated with pornography. It's about the inefficacy of romantic dogmas on young people's expectations. It's about inexorable attraction. It's layered."*

*"You built the world. You built the fantasy, not on the page, but in real life. You can't blur the lines and then expect me to see a boundary when I suddenly cross it."*

*"Heartbreak is a slow-motion car crash set to Mozart. You know the one. The Requiem."*

*"What would I possibly worry about other than dying of boredom having to listen to your inventions of conflict?"*

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<sup>2</sup> **Production:** A Lionsgate Films release and presentation of a Good Universe production, in association with Point Grey Pictures. Producers: Josh Fagen, Evan Goldberg, Mary-Margaret Kunze, Seth Rogen, James Weaver. Executive producers: Jade Halley Bartlett, Martin Freeman, Bernie Stern.

**Crew:** Director: Jade Halley Bartlett. Screenplay: Jade Halley Bartlett. Camera: Daniel Brothers. Editor: Vanara Taing. Music: Elyssa Samsel.

**Actors:** Martin Freeman, Jenna Ortega, Bashir Salahuddin, Gideon Adlon, Dagmara Domińczyk, Christine Adams.