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The Wolf of Wall Street

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), directed by Martin Scorsese.

Keywords

The Wolf of Wall Street, Ecclesiastes, Ethics of the Fathers, Colossians, Leonardo DiCaprio, Martin Scorsese, Paradise Lost

Author Notes

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“One who loves money is not satisfied with money,” states the Bible in Ecclesiastes 5:10. When the rabbis of antiquity expanded upon this apothegm and wrote, “envy, desire and greed remove a man from the world” (Mishnah, *Ethics of the Fathers* 4:21), this may as well have been a Delphic utterance about Jordan Belfort. Martin Scorsese’s latest masterpiece, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, is at once a brilliant display of virtuoso filmmaking at its finest, as well as a cautionary tale that illustrates the biblical and religio-ethical warning concerning the perils of unchecked greed, envy and desire.

Jordan Belfort was clearly one for whom the admonition “don’t be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshipping the things of this world” (Colossians 3:5) was not a living value. In real life, Belfort was one of the most notorious white-collar criminals of the past thirty years, and was the King (or “Wolf”) of Wall Street until a long-simmering FBI investigation finally dethroned him and put him behind bars. The fraud prince of penny stocks penned *The Wolf of Wall Street*, an eponymously titled memoir about his avaricious exploits, while stewing for several months in federal prison. After a similarly long-simmering production process, Leonardo DiCaprio, writer Terence Winter, and director Martin Scorsese finally brought a film about this devilishly duplicitous yet irresistibly charismatic figure into the light of day and onto the light of cinema screens.

DiCaprio dramatizes Belfort’s deviousness so effectively, so mercilessly, and so dynamically, that DiCaprio’s Belfort takes on mythic hues. DiCaprio’s Belfort is greedier than Michael Douglas’s Gordon Gecko (*Wall Street*, 1987), more animalistically lustful than Marlon Brando’s Paul (*Last Tango in Paris*, 1972—or Brando’s Stanley Kowalski

[*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951]), and more incorrigibly covetous than Cain (Genesis 4) and Kane (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, from Orson Welles).

Like Charles Foster Kane, Jordan Belfort could have led a simple life with a modest income and a happy wife, and like Kane, Belfort was a man of outsized ambitions but without the ethical scruples of a moral tradition or a religious discipline that could have helped him harness his hubris. Belfort, as portrayed by DiCaprio, does not possess the patience to toil away in the back alleys of Wall Street finance firms, and when the company for which he was working suffers through the Black Monday stock market crash of 1987 and lays off much of its workforce—including him—Belfort is fortuitously yet unfortunately provided with an opening to indulge his amoral ambitions.

While job-hunting for stock-trading jobs, he chances upon a shabby stock-trading shop in Long Island. What it lacks in glamor and glory, it makes up for in entrepreneurial opportunity. Belfort is at first surprised to become appraised of what the firm does—selling artificially inflated penny-stocks to easily manipulable men and women—and that it may not be so, well, *legal*. But he becomes intrigued when he is informed that a trader can net a seemingly infinitely greater commission on selling penny-stocks compared to the infinitesimal commission he had been earning as an honest salesman of solid stocks on Wall Street.

‘Let me give it a shot,’ he asks the penny-stock traders. He picks up the office phone, makes a few calls, and within minutes he has miraculously sold a small-fortune of penny-stocks. The other traders are so awestruck by his overwhelming penny-stock-selling performance that they are rendered dumbstruck. It’s as if they’re the baseball scouts watching a young Roy Hobbs (Robert Redford) throw fastballs across a tawny

Midwestern cornfield, or a comedy-club audience watching a young pre-*Seinfeld* Jerry Seinfeld perform a stand-up set. Belfort is not just a natural; he could be the greatest salesman of all time. If a salesman is only out there “on a smile and a shoeshine,” as Willy Loman would have it, DiCaprio’s young Belfort is out there on a smile as scintillating as the light of a thousand suns, and with a shoeshine that could make the grimmest coal-miner’s loafers glow like green-and-white gold.

Belfort soon realizes that he has the talent to go out on his own. He opens up his own penny stock-trading company, brands it with the faux-respectable name “Stratton Oakmont,” and recruits a home-grown crew of his own to join him. When he’s finally joined by the audacious Donnie Azoff (Jonah Hill) and begins collecting obscene (yet not quite enough—never quite enough—for him) gobs of money, he finally becomes “the Wolf of Wall Street.”

But Belfort does not only live for money—he’s just as addicted, if not more so, to drugs and sex, and he and Azoff use their illicit earnings to fuel their drug-induced Quaalude-crazes and their profligate patronization of high-priced prostitution. Lest we think that Belfort was originally destined for this degree of depravity, the film informs us that he had the chance to take a different, more upright route, if not for having been taken under the wing of a fabulously foul-mouthed trader played by a scene-winning Matthew McConaughey. The masterful two-minute monologue he delivers to DiCaprio in the five-star Wall Street restaurant may be the film’s crucial scene, for it is here where we learn how the callow Belfort became so corrupted, and it is here where we learn that Belfort then deigned to become this devilish apprentice.

It is an origin story akin to the one Milton appended to Satan, and indeed, one must turn to the Satan of *Paradise Lost* to find a villain as compelling, alluring, and irresistibly seductive as DiCaprio's Belfort. But one must also turn to religion to find a puissant discipline sufficiently capable of controlling con men as slippery as Satan and Belfort.

But Belfort not only lacks any discernable ethical code and moral scruple; he even lacks the self-awareness and the reflective capacities to heed the early warnings of the FBI agent (Kyle Chandler) to cease his sinful ways. The agent's investigations should have served as sufficient admonishment, but Belfort's Ahab-like obtuseness in ignoring the agent's Elijah-esque implorings imperils Stratton Oakmont, and he persists in his avarice until it is too late to save himself and his friends from their self-inflicted doom.

Scorsese's latest film—yet another monumental cinematic achievement in a career marked by many magnificent movies—certainly has its detractors, and they have pointed to the film's seemingly excessive and allegedly gratuitous depictions of Belfort and his company's flamboyant, lascivious lifestyle. The movie does feature inordinate amounts of sex, crudeness, and lewdness, but the blatant bacchanalia serves a purpose; like Hieronymus Bosch's vivid depiction of the agonies of hell in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (oil-on-wood; 1504), we need to see the full degree to which Belfort and his company flaunted their wealth in order to understand the depths of their depravity. By focusing on Belfort's bottomless depravity in such a deep and sustained way, we are able to truly see the deleterious consequences of greed, envy, and unchecked desire.

Belfort is a hopelessly ambitious and incorrigibly restless character, and his greed, desire, and lack of self-control eventually compromise his friends, his marriage, and his

very life. His satanic enthusiasm is seductively contagious, and his lavish lifestyle may be attractive, but in the end, because he cannot contain his greedy desire, it devours him alive. As Scorsese himself says about Belfort, “the devil comes with a smile”.