

An Analysis on the Teacher-Student Relationship in *Good Will Hunting* from the Perspective of Humanistic Theory

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Abstract: Based on Maslow's and Rogers' humanistic theory, this study comparatively analyzes teacher-student relationship construction in *Good Will Hunting*, contrasting Professor Lambeau's utilitarian paradigm with Sean's humanistic paradigm. Findings reveal that Lambeau's approach, prioritizing academic achievement while neglecting students' psychological needs, leads to relational breakdown. Conversely, Sean's humanistic approach grounded in empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruent communication builds trust and fosters personality growth. This study offers a new framework for applying humanistic theory in film text analysis, provides reference for transforming teacher-student relationships in China's educational practice, and encourages educators to attend to students' internal needs, deeply empathize with their feelings, and practice unconditional positive regard and congruent communication.

Background: Teacher-student relationships significantly influence the effectiveness of school education, with trust and harmony serving as vital prerequisites for successful teaching. In China, these relationships have evolved from ancient advocacy of teacher dignity and student care, through modern declines in teacher authority and student-teacher opposition, to postmodern ideals of equal communication and cooperative symbiosis. However, practical construction of harmonious relationships faces considerable challenges. Authoritarian dynamics persist, casting teachers as central authorities while students remain passive recipients, creating rigid learning atmospheres. Meanwhile, utilitarian educational practices prioritize short-term pragmatic goals at the expense of humanistic care, undermining students' value cultivation. These distortions lower educational quality and highlight the urgent need to bridge the gap between evolving educational theory and real-world teaching practice.

Materials and Methods: This study employs a qualitative research design combining film text analysis with a humanistic theoretical framework. The primary material is the film *Good Will Hunting* (1997), which portrays two distinct teacher-student relationships: the utilitarian paradigm represented by Professor Lambeau and the humanistic paradigm embodied by Sean Maguire. The research method involves close viewing and detailed scene-by-scene analysis of key therapeutic interactions between Will and each educator, followed by comparative analysis through Rogers' person-centered approach, that is, empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. This integrated analytical approach enables systematic examination of how differing educational philosophies shape the construction of teacher-student relationships and influence student psychological development.

Results: The analysis reveals significant differences between the two teacher-student relationships in *Good Will Hunting*. Professor Lambeau's utilitarian approach prioritizes Will's mathematical talent and academic achievement while neglecting his basic psychological needs for safety and belonging, ultimately resulting in relational breakdown and persistent resistance. In contrast, Sean's humanistic approach, grounded in empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruent communication, successfully establishes trust and facilitates Will's psychological healing and personality growth. Comparative analysis across Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Rogers' three core conditions demonstrates that the humanistic paradigm effectively addresses students' foundational needs and fosters genuine educational transformation, whereas the utilitarian paradigm fails due to its instrumentalization of education and disregard for students' inner emotional worlds.

Conclusion: This study comparatively analyzed two teacher-student relationships in *Good Will Hunting* through Rogers' person-centered approach and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Findings reveal that Professor Lambeau's utilitarian paradigm, prioritizing academic achievement over students' psychological needs, leads to relational breakdown, whereas Sean's humanistic paradigm grounded in empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence successfully builds trust and facilitates Will's psychological healing and personal growth. These findings indicate that humanistic education theory provides valuable insights for constructing democratic and harmonious teacher-student relationships. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a single film; future research should employ empirical methods to validate these conclusions in real educational contexts.

Keywords: Humanistic Theory, Teacher-Student relationship, *Good Will Hunting*

I. Introduction

Teacher-student relationships constitute a fundamental factor influencing the effectiveness of school education. Trust-based and harmonious teacher-student relationships serve as vital prerequisites for ensuring the smooth operation and desired outcomes of teaching activities. In China, teacher-student relationships have evolved from the traditional paradigm of respecting teachers and caring for students, through modern periods of declining teacher authority and student-teacher opposition, to the postmodern ideal of equal communication and cooperative symbiosis. However, the practical construction of such harmonious relationships faces considerable challenges, including the persistence of authoritarian dynamics and the rise of utilitarian educational practices that deviate from democratic ideals.

This study uses the film *Good Will Hunting* as a narrative case to comparatively analyze two contrasting teacher-student relationship paradigms, the utilitarian approach of Professor Lambeau and the humanistic approach of Sean, through Rogers' person-centered approach and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The research constructs an integrated analytical framework for examining teacher-student relationships through humanistic theory, offers cross-cultural references for transforming teacher-student dynamics in contemporary Chinese education, and provides practical insights for educators.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Three Core Concepts of Rogers' Person-Centered Approach

Carl Rogers posits that individuals possess innate resources for self-healing, activated when they inhabit an environment characterized by acceptance and genuineness. He identifies three conditions for fostering growth: unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathetic understanding.

Unconditional positive regard refers to the therapist maintaining a positive, acceptant attitude toward the client's experiences and emotions, creating a safe therapeutic environment. Even when facing extreme emotions, the therapist upholds acceptance, enabling the client to feel secure and more likely to make positive changes. Congruence means the therapist is genuinely himself or herself in the relationship, without professional pretense or personal facade. The more openly the therapist expresses inner feelings, the more accurately he or she perceives and communicates understanding of the client's experience, facilitating constructive growth. Empathetic understanding entails the therapist accurately sensing the client's feelings and personal meanings and communicating this understanding back, so the client feels heard and accepted.

Within an atmosphere embodying these three conditions, individuals feel accepted and valued, attending more closely to their own development. Their inner thoughts and true feelings become more consistent with their self-concept, shedding defensive disguises. They return to their authentic selves, take greater initiative in self-improvement, and evolve into genuine, complete individuals.

2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow first proposed his five-level hierarchy of needs in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*. He later expanded the model in 1954 by adding cognitive and aesthetic needs, forming seven levels, and in 1969 added self-transcendence needs, forming eight levels. This study adopts the five-level model due to its clearer hierarchy and widespread influence to analyze the two teacher-student relationships in *Good Will Hunting*.

According to priority, Maslow divides human needs into five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. Only when a lower level is relatively satisfied will higher-level needs emerge and influence behavior. Though generally sequential, the order can flexibly shift based on experience or cognition.

Physiological needs which includes food, water and sleep are most basic; when deprived, other needs are overlooked. Once satisfied, safety needs arise, physical security, stability, protection from fear, establishing the environment for personal growth. Love needs drive individuals to build affectionate relationships and gain belongingness. Esteem needs involve the desire for self-respect and recognition; their satisfaction brings confidence, while frustration generates helplessness and depression. Even after four lower levels are satisfied, people may still feel uneasy. Thus, self-actualization emerges, which includes the pursuit of being faithful to one's nature and actualizing one's potential, representing the highest motivation, achievable only when lower-level needs are met.

This thesis applies Rogers' person-centered approach and Maslow's hierarchy to analyze the contrasting teacher-student relationships in *Good Will Hunting*. Rogers' three concepts focus on interaction dynamics promoting growth, while Maslow's theory illuminates Will's motivational structure behind his rebellious

behavior as a traumatized genius. Two relationships shape Will's trajectory: Lambeau's ultimately fails, whereas Sean's remains intact and facilitates Will's psychological growth. Through these complementary lenses, this thesis examines the causes of these two relationships' different outcomes.

III. Analysis of Two Teacher-Student Relationships In *Good Will Hunting*

3.1 The Teacher-Student Relationship Between Professor Lambeau and Will

Professor Lambeau hopes that Will can make good use of his extraordinary talents to contribute to the advancement of mathematics and the development of the country. Fundamentally, what he cares about most is Will's mathematical talent. His expectations for Will center on the need for social recognition and respect, as well as the need for self-actualization through his innate potential. However, Will's own predicament lies precisely in the long-term lack of safety needs and the needs for love and belonging. From the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Professor Lambeau's education ignores Will's satisfaction of basic levels of need, which will inevitably lead to the breakdown of their teacher-student relationship.

3.1.1 Professor Lambeau's Utilitarian Approach to Education

Utilitarian education refers to the excessive and extreme expansion of education's instrumental functions, prioritizing the value of talent cultivation over the value of nurturing individuals. It leads people's conceptions and behaviors to deviate from the objective laws of education and neglect the essence of fostering human development. Initially, the reason Professor Lambeau noticed Will was that Will solved a math problem which none of his students could solve. It is Will's talent that truly draws his attention.

When he realizes this mathematical genius is about to be imprisoned, he obtains the judge's permission to have Will released under his supervision. But there are two conditions. "First condition is that you meet with me every week.... Go over the proof you're working on, get into some more advanced combinatorial mathematics, finite math. And the second condition is that you see a therapist". This act reflects Lambeau's fundamental understanding of Will, who is a rebellious mathematical genius who needs psychological therapy. Lambeau views mathematical training as the central focus, while using psychological therapy as a tool for taming the genius into submission. He uses these two conditions to trade Will's freedom. Though Will rejects the therapy, he still accepts Lambeau's conditions to stay out of prison.

After the fifth session, Lambeau seeks Sean out and presses for an acceleration of the treatment process, as there are a substantial number of high-level technical job offers for Will. Lambeau insists that "...this boy has that gift. He just doesn't get the direction, but we can give that to him.... He can contribute to the world, and we can help him do that". And in his opinion, the right direction Will should take is using his talent to make contributions to the progress of mathematics. This explicitly reveals Lambeau's utilitarian mindset. In his mind, the worth of education only lies in cultivating scientific talents. Using talent to contribute to academic development is prioritized over individual growth and well-being.

Besides, Lambeau projects his own successful path onto Will, putting the academic achievements Will can get above his personal growth. Before the last session, Lambeau and Sean get into a fierce argument, Lambeau reckons that "He won't be a failure... I am what I am because I was pushed and because I learned to push myself". He intends to use the same way he attains academic achievement and reputation to make Will become successful.

In conclusion, Lambeau regards Will's mathematical talent as a tool to actualize his practical and visible worth. His education on Will mainly focuses on his talent cultivation, which leads to the lack of attention on Will's emotional needs and need for personal growth as a holistic individual. From the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, an individual whose particular need has been consistently satisfied over an extended period tends to underestimate the value of that need. Lambeau works as a professor at the world-class higher education institution, and he doesn't have similar traumas to Will. He won the Fields Medal previously, which provides him with respect and fame. All his prerequisite needs have been satisfied.

Though Will has the potential for self-actualization, he has been lacking satisfaction of the safety needs and love needs for a long time. However, Lambeau underestimates the importance of these prerequisite needs, which ultimately causes Will to reject him.

3.1.2 Will's Rejection Toward Professor Lambeau

Will's rejection of Lambeau manifests through three incidents. First, when Lambeau arranges a job interview with prestigious employers, Will sends his friend Chuckie as a "chief negotiator" to impersonate him, demonstrating his refusal to engage with the professional opportunities Lambeau provides. Second, after solving complex mathematical problems, Will deliberately burns his handwritten answer in front of Lambeau, symbolically destroying the pathway to academic recognition. Third, when Lambeau offers him an interview with the National Security Agency, Will delivers a cynical monologue mocking government work, ultimately rejecting the offer.

These refusals reflect not only Will's facade of a rebellious teenager, but also his desire for self-protection. In Lambeau's world, Will's value is equated with his talent. Will is noticed, expected of, and competed for by society solely because of his mathematical gift. The reason he confines himself to the underprivileged community and rejects all opportunities to ascend to the upper class of society is precisely that moving out of the lower class means leaving behind the relatively stable safety he currently gets. Once he leaves, his safety needs will no longer be met. His refusal to move upward is a refusal to become a genius recognized by the mainstream of society because it would require him to overcome his emotional traumas and psychological plights. However, he lacks the ability to confront his traumas directly at this point. Therefore, he prefers to wear the mask of a delinquent and immerse himself in the vulgar but at least stable safety provided by life in the underprivileged.

His attempts to solve the problems posted outside the classroom reflect his inner desire to prove his self-value. However, he is unwilling to let his talent become an academic tool for others, thereby losing the significance of his own existence. He yearns to be noticed by people, yet fears being exposed for his trauma of lacking unconditional positive attention from his parents during childhood. He craves recognition but is reluctant to become an object of societal scrutiny. Will has never been truly accepted by others, so he cannot calmly accept recognition from others; he has long been deprived of the sense of safety and consequently he is unable to face opportunities that could change his fate.

3.2 The Teacher-Student Relationship Between Sean and Will

The teacher-student relationship between Sean and Will is equal, sincere, and mutually healing. Despite the large age difference between them, Sean does not show arrogance because he is an elder, nor does he just treat Will as a patient like other psychiatrists, giving up easily when their treatment failed. Instead, he has an equal and sincere dialogue with Will and still wants Will to continue his therapy. Sean aims to help Will rebuild a sense of safety and self-acceptance from the bottom of the hierarchy of needs before discussing his talent and the direction of his life. A total of 7 sessions of psychotherapy is conducted between Sean and Will, showing Will's whole process from resistance and temptation to finally being willing to confide his feelings to Sean. Through Sean's treatment, Will gradually regained his ego.

3.2.1 Analysis of Will's Psychological Plights

Will's psychological plights mainly come from his self-abasement and psychological defense mechanism caused by his childhood trauma. Influenced by his self-abasement and defense mechanism, Will gradually generates fear toward intimate relationships and rejects trusting social authority or any opportunities to ascend into the upper class.

Will's childhood trauma was caused by loss of the need for safety and unconditional positive regard. In Will's childhood, he was abandoned by his biological family and became an orphan. Consequently, Will went through multiple foster care experiences, where he suffered abuse from an alcoholic foster father. "The unconditional regard that an individual is exposed to at birth generally comes from his parents", and this regard serves as the foundation for developing a healthy and complete self-concept for individuals. Being abandoned in childhood meant that Will lost this unconditional positive regard from an early age, and multiple foster care experiences deprived him of sufficient tolerance and stable love from the family. The prolonged unstable environment prevented Will's need for safety from being met, and his need for love and belonging also go unfulfilled under such circumstances. This lack of fundamental needs becomes the origin of Will's inferiority and self-abasement, as he internalizes the belief that "I am not worthy of love," leading to a profound denial of his own worth as a person.

As an adult, although Will demonstrates extraordinary talent in mathematics, he remains trapped in the shadow of childhood trauma when it comes to intimate relationships. Due to his defense mechanism and self-abasement, Will doesn't dare to reveal his scarred mental world to others or establish deep emotional connections with others. Faced with the sincere feelings of his girlfriend Skylar, he displays avoidance and resistance. When Skylar asks him if he has siblings, he fluently makes up 12 names of his fictitious brothers to evade painful memories of his past family experiences. When Skylar invites him to move to California to pursue medical studies, his defense mechanism makes him reject her invitation. Going to California means losing the relatively stable safety he has already got now. He is afraid that as the relationship gets deeper, Skylar will discover his flaws and then leave him just like his parents did in his childhood. So, he pushes Skylar away before she truly left him. This pattern of abandoning the other first to avoid being abandoned oneself is precisely the defense mechanism formed by long-term emotional trauma.

Will's attitude toward authority similarly reflects his lack of trust. Faced with the various psychologists brought in by Professor Lambeau, he uses sarcasm, provocation, and intellectual superiority to drive them away. When the National Security Agency offered a job to him, he rejected it with sharp logic and biting remarks. Sean describes him as a "cocky, scared kid", and all his reason, knowledge, and mockery are facades that Will

uses to cover his feelings and avoid emotional experiences. In Will's view, there is no difference between the social authority represented by university professors and government agencies and the foster father from his childhood; they all try to control him, regarding him as a tool or belongings. And the only thing he can do is to maintain his dignity through intellectual superiority, refusing to become a tool for fulfilling others' expectations.

The root of Will's rebelliousness, emotional withdrawal, and evading lies in a long-standing deprivation of his needs for security and belonging, stemming from his childhood trauma. He distrusts authority because, in his eyes, authority has never truly protected him or cared about what he truly wants; he fears intimacy because every instance of it has ultimately ended in getting hurt; and he withdraws into himself because he has long internalized the belief that he is not worthy of love. This complex psychological dilemma constitutes the core issue that Sean must confront in Will's subsequent therapy and only by using sincerity, acceptance, and understanding can he "break down the solid barriers within Will's mind, guide him to let go of all his disguise, and rebuild his sense of security and self-worth".

3.2.2 Sean's Strategies for Constructing Teacher-Student Relationship

A total of 7 sessions of psychotherapy is conducted between Sean and Will, and as the treatment progresses, Sean gradually gets closer to Will's inner world. After the last session, Will finds the thing he truly desires and then quits his job, driving to California to pursue Skylar. The following content conducts an analysis from the perspective of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathetic understanding.

First, for the perspective of congruence, Rogers believes that "realness, or genuineness, or congruence is a fundamental basis for the best of communication". In the therapeutic relationship, when the therapist remains authentic to themselves, without putting on a professional or personal mask, there is a higher possibility that the client will undergo constructive change and personal growth.

During the first session, Will still attempts to use the same tactic to take the initiative and crush Sean's psychological edge. He makes provocative comments about the painting in Sean's office, precisely attacking the grief over the loss of his wife that the painting implies. According to professional principles of traditional psychotherapy, Sean should remain neutral and composed, yet instead he reacts with anger and grabs Will by the throat. This response obviously violates principles Sean should have obeyed as a professional psychological teacher, but it is authentic and full of Sean's emotion which shatters Will's stereotype of what a professional therapist should be. The person sitting in front of Will is not an analytical machine which just follows its manual, but a living human being who can be hurt and infuriated. In the process of psychotherapy, when the therapist "treats the client with sincerity and behaves in a congruent manner," the client can begin to perceive the therapist as "transparent" and thus become willing to let down their defenses. Although Sean's anger may seem out of control, it conveys a direct message to Will that this relationship is real, not a scripted and rigid treatment. Notably, after Will reveals Sean's trauma, Sean does not terminate the therapy but insists on Professor Lambeau letting Will continue with subsequent sessions. This attitude "without hiding behind personal authority or professional status" creates a foundation of trust for the development of their relationship.

In the fourth session, when Will hesitates to fully commit to his love relationship with Skylar. Sean sincerely shares his personal understanding of marriage, perfection and imperfection, even using a small idiosyncrasy of his late wife to offer insight. "My wife used to fart when she was nervous. She had all sorts of wonderful idiosyncrasies.... Those little idiosyncrasies that only I knew about. That's what made her my wife... People call these things 'imperfections', but they're not. That's the good stuff. And then we get to choose who we let into our weird little worlds... But the question is whether or not you're perfect for each other.... That's what intimacy is all about."

This act of self-disclosure is an expression of genuineness and congruence, aiming at building an authentic connection with Will and helping him understand that two individuals in a true intimate relationship do not need to be perfect for each other, and that revealing one's flaws does not mean being abandoned by another as well. When Will asks if Sean has any plans to remarry, Sean replies briefly and honestly, "My wife is dead." Without evasion, this response presents his sincere nostalgia for his wife.

In the fifth session, as Sean further shares the story of how he met his wife and missed game six of the World Series, he once again approaches his memories with sincerity. In the office, he enthusiastically discusses baseball with Will, using animated tones and gestures to describe the scene of the baseball game, completely without any professional pretense. It is this kind of unprofessional performance and sincere communication that lets Will gradually remove all kinds of his defensive disguises and find his true self.

Sean demonstrates congruence through his genuine emotional expression. Whether expressing anger about Will's provocation, nostalgia for his wife, or enthusiasm for the baseball game, he remains consistently aligned with his inner state. When the misery of losing his wife is brought to light, he never hides behind authority or professional status, allowing Will to realize that Sean is a "transparent" therapist.

And this condition of being “transparent” lays a foundation of psychological safety which influences Will to let go of his defense mechanism. Based on this, Sean further uses unconditional positive regard to create a space of acceptance for Will in which he will not be judged or rejected regardless of his behavior.

Second, unconditional positive regard means that “the teacher should be adept at observing the student’s inner world and offering the student unconditional positive regard”, accepting the student entirely without attaching any conditions, and evaluating the student holistically rather than conditionally.

The third session is the quietest one. After a brief conversation, both Sean and Will fall into silence until the session ends. Sean’s silence is a form of unconditional positive regard. He creates a quiet, awkward, and uncomfortable environment, giving Will the initiative to speak. The purpose of doing so is to make Will take the initiative to break this embarrassing atmosphere and learn to express his feelings. And only in this way can Will voluntarily share his hiding misery with him. Thus, instead of intervening, Sean accepts Will’s silence.

During the seventh session, Sean keeps repeating to Will, “It’s not your fault” breaking down Will’s psychological defenses and shattering his self-abasement. Sean’s words “It’s not your fault” comes with no conditions attached. It means Will does not need to take responsibility for his own trauma. No matter what Will has been through, what he has done, or how he defends himself and resists the outside world, he himself is still worthy of being loved. This acceptance penetrates all of Will’s defenses, making him finally feel permitted to release his pain. From casual response to final sobbing breakdown, Sean uses the simplest words to deconstruct Will’s inferiority and the belief “I am not worthy of being loved” that Will had internalized for years.

Whether Will is silent, resisting therapy, or wailing in front of him, Sean never abandons Will; he is always ready to accept Will unconditionally. No matter what Will has done in the past, Sean always accepts him as a whole person, rather than conditionally treating him as a talented but rebellious teenager. He can actively and unconditionally accept Will’s pain, guiding him gradually to face his true ego.

Third, in addition to congruence and unconditional positive regard, Sean also highly empathizes with Will’s experience and perceives his true feelings with empathetic understanding in the therapy.

Achieving empathetic understanding needs teachers to respect students’ personal experiences, value their feelings and opinions, and capture students’ emotional experiences and subjective perceptions with a high degree of empathy, being able to put themselves in students’ places to experience how they feel.

The second session takes place on a bench by the lakeside. Will still resists Sean’s therapy by provoking him, but this time, Sean shares his own experiences, revealing all his psychological traumas to Will. “...I ask you about war, you’d probably throw Shakespeare at me... But you’ve never been near one. You’ve never held your best friend’s head in your lap and watch him gasp his last breath looking to you for help.” “If I ask you about love, you’d probably quote me a sonnet.... And you wouldn’t know what it’s like to be her angel, to have that love for her be there forever. Through anything. Through cancer.”

By revealing his own painful experiences, Sean is sending a signal to Will that “I’ve also gone through painful times, and I can understand what you’re experiencing.” It helps establish a channel for emotional connection between them and gradually breaks through Will’s defenses. When Will realizes that Sean is willing to listen and accept his past, his defense mechanism begins to loosen. In the follow-up sessions, he gradually reveals his confusion about the relationship with Sean and ultimately releases the pain he has been enduring for many years.

During the sixth session, when Sean inquires about whether Will has a soulmate, Will responds by listing his friend Chuckie as well as famous figures like Shakespeare and Nietzsche, thereby evading Sean’s question. This question touches upon the deep-seated loneliness that Will has long conceals but is also afraid to confront. The series of questions aims at prompting Will to actively reflect on what he truly wants and to face up to his desire for the superior education represented by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). “...What are you passionate about? What do you want... You could be a janitor anywhere. Why did you work at the most prestigious technical college in the whole world...So what do you really want to do?” Sean takes Will’s true needs as the starting point, guiding him to realize the motivations underlying his behaviors, precisely perceiving the loneliness lurking within Will, along with the discrepancy between Will’s innermost desires and his outward behaviors in this situation. With his empathetic understanding of Will, he can discern Will’s desire for knowledge and his dread of taking the first step to connect with the world, so he rejects the job from National Security Agency.

Sean’s psychological treatment of Will deeply reflects the integration and collaborative application of the three core conditions in Rogers’ humanistic approach. From the perspective of congruence, whether it is an angry response to Will’s provocation, expressing his longing for his dead wife, or passionately sharing the baseball game, Sean responds to the client Will from his true self. The authenticity of this non-specialization breaks through Will’s defense mechanism in interpersonal relationships and lays the foundation of trust for healing relationships. From the perspective of unconditional positive regard, Sean maintains a consistent respect for Will’s whole personality, never conditioning his acceptance on Will’s behavioral performance or level of cooperation. This sense of psychological security makes Will gradually dispel self-denial and confirm his own

value in the peace of mind atmosphere of unconditional permission. The treatment process includes not only listening, but also an in-depth understanding of Will's inner needs, thus achieving an empathetic understanding of the client's inner experience. The synergy of these three core conditions ultimately contributed to Will's psychological transformation and psychological growth from defensive alienation to self-accession.

3.3 A Comparative Analysis of These Two Teacher-Student Relationships

The teacher-student relationship between Lambeau and Will and the relationship between Sean and Will represent the traditional education paradigm and the humanistic education paradigm respectively. This section makes a comparative analysis through the dimensions of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard and congruence to clarify the differences between the two paradigms.

Sean's educational goals correspond to the underlying construction of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He meets Will's safety needs and love needs through therapeutic dialogue, laying the foundation for his ascent to the esteem needs and self-actualization. However, Lambeau directly skips the repair of the fundamental needs, letting Will satisfy the esteem needs and put forward advanced expectations of achieving self-actualization as a mathematical genius, resulting in a fractured jump in the level of needs, which is the radical cause of Will's resistance.

In the perspective of practicing empathetic understanding, Sean not only listens to what Will says but also keenly perceives the underlying emotion. For example, in the sixth session, the question about whether Will has a soulmate reflects Sean's awareness of Will's inner loneliness and distrust of the outside world. The humanistic learning process requires mutual communication and understanding between teachers and students, rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. But the communications between Lambeau and Will always revolve around mathematics. Lambeau encapsulates Will's behavior to rebellion and wasting talent, failing to deeply understand Will's behavioral motives and failing to empathize with him.

In terms of unconditional positive regard, Sean's attitude toward Will comes with no conditions attached. No matter what Will has done or what he has been through, Sean maintains an accepting stance. Lambeau's regard, in contrast, is highly conditional. When Will burns the math answers, he indicates to Will that "Most days I wish I never met you, because then I could sleep at night.... I didn't have to walk around with the knowledge that there was someone like you out there. I didn't have to watch you throw it all away". What Lambeau truly cares about most is Will's mathematical talent. He judges Will based on Will's mathematical talent, without paying attention to his overall personality development.

In terms of congruence, in the fourth session, Sean unhesitatingly talks about his deceased wife's little flaw, actively revealing embarrassing aspects of his private life. This unprofessional attitude precisely creates a safe space where Will doesn't need to disguise, allowing him to show his authentic ego. While Lambeau always immerses himself in the role of preeminent professor and guide of a math genius. Behind his helping behavior lies an investment in academic reputation and social contribution. When Will refuses the job interview arranged for him, Lambeau's first reaction is to feel "it reflects poorly on me". He is defending his dignity as a professor at a prestigious university. He never shows Will his own emotional needs, and this unshakable professionalism leads to Will's complete rejection of him.

In summary, through a comparison across four dimensions the two teacher-student relationships clearly reveal the fundamental differences between the traditional educational paradigm and the humanistic educational paradigm. In the relationship between Lambeau and Will, the core issue of education is to cultivate the student's talent. But in the relationship between Sean and Will, the core issue is to guide the student to plan his own life and attain the ability of self-acceptance.

It reveals the collision between the educational philosophy of forcibly planning students' lives for them and that of guiding students to learn to plan their own lives. The former views the student as a carrier of talent, focusing only on cultivating the student's abilities while neglecting the student's inner needs and existing difficulties. The latter, by satisfying the underlying needs for safety and belonging, empathy, unconditional acceptance, and authentic self-disclosure, constructs a person-centered educational relationship, enabling the student to achieve self-integration in a safe atmosphere where they are seen as a whole person rather than being judged instrumentally.

IV. Inspirations for Constructing a Democratic and Harmonious Teacher-Student Relationship

4.1 Paying Attention to the Differences in Students' Intrinsic Needs

Students' different behaviors implicitly contain different levels of needs, but in reality, teachers often only pay attention to students' academic performance and ignore their diverse needs. As a result, educational measures are disconnected from the actual needs of students and can't promote their comprehensive development. Therefore, teachers need to identify the dominant needs of students through a variety of ways. For

students who lack a sense of security or whose basic physiological needs are difficult to meet, teachers should ensure the satisfaction of these basic needs by creating a stable and safe space and providing financial support policies. For students who encounter difficulties in life and study, teachers should listen to their struggles and help them find a sense of belonging. For students who yearn for respect, teachers should give emotional encouragement and psychological support in time. For students who pursue self-actualization, teachers can let them organize class activities or manage class affairs, so as to enhance their confidence in growth and improve their sense of self-identity. Therefore, educators should pay attention to the intrinsic needs and individual differences of students, and take corresponding measures to meet the real needs of students.

4.2 Deeply Empathizing with Students' Feelings and Thoughts

Empathetic understanding is the teacher's ability to put themselves in students' experiential world and perceive their emotional tone and cognitive logic. In *Good Will Hunting* Sean says to Will, "I doubt you've ever dared to love anybody that much" instead of judging Will just as a rebellious genius, for he can accurately perceive Will's fear of abandonment. His judgment comes precisely from the empathy for Will's traumatized life experience. In the process of education and teaching, and in students' learning processes, emotion and cognition are inseparable parts of the learner's spiritual world; they are integrated with each other. But in actual teaching, teachers are more likely to neglect the emotions behind students' behaviors because correcting students' mistakes takes priority over caring their emotions in their minds. Therefore, during the construction of a harmonious and democratic teacher-student relationship, educators need to sensitively perceive students' emotional changes and understand students' behaviors with empathy. While listening to students', teachers can use guiding statements in communication, such as "Can you tell me what makes you feel angry?", to gradually understand students' emotions and behavioral motivations then make the final judgment.

4.3 Implementing Unconditional Positive Regard

Unconditional positive regard means that teachers need to accept students without attaching any conditions, and do not change their accepting attitude based on academic performance, good or bad behaviors, or level of talent. In *Good Will Hunting* Sean thinks neither highly of Will because of his genius, nor gives up on therapy because of his resistance and sarcasm. This stable acceptance, which is not affected by student performance, gradually allows Will to drop his disguise and reveal his true self. Both students and teachers possess independent personalities. Each student's inner world and ways of emotional expression require teachers' understanding and respect. Thus, teachers need to actively accept students' diverse opinions and suggestions. When evaluating students, they should start with the student's whole personality. In daily interactions, they should keep equal chances for answering questions in students. When honoring students, arranging seats, or organizing activity participation, teachers should not judge students solely by academic performance. Gradually by conveying the message that "you are worthy of attention just as you are", the unconditional acceptance will be established, and students will become more willing to reveal their true ego to teachers and promote the construction of harmonious and democratic teacher-student relationships.

4.4 Making Congruent Communications with Students

Congruence requires teachers to be genuine and consistent in actions and words, not wearing a professional mask or hiding true emotions. In *Good Will Hunting*, Sean expresses his anger at Will and grief for his deceased wife without reservation. Through this honest self-disclosure, he breaks the common authority barrier between teachers and students. In actual teaching practice, teachers may hide their true emotions to maintain teacher's authority and dignity, while students also dare not express their true feelings to them due to the norm of respecting the educator. This mutual concealment of emotions creates heavy obstacles in communication between teachers and students.

When building harmonious and democratic teacher-student relationships, educators can first establish informal personal relationships with students. In such relationships, teachers and students can express true thoughts freely and engage in relatively deep two-way communication without restraint. Because in informal relationships, students can feel more relaxed and are more willing to share true thoughts and emotions with teachers. Teachers can also understand students more transparently and adopt more specific and effective methods to solve students' problems. Furthermore, educators should treat different students in different ways while communicating with each other, because it allows students to feel that the teacher is not merely going through the motions to complete tasks, but is sincerely communicating with them. During practicing congruence, teachers can appropriately share their own learning setbacks and admit what they do not know. Only when teachers put aside their perfectionist masks to model for students can they dare to accept their real, imperfect selves.

V. Conclusion

This study conducts a comparative analysis of two teacher-student relationships in the film *Good Will Hunting* based on Rogers' person-centered approach and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, exploring the enlightenment for the construction of a harmonious and democratic teacher-student relationship. It is found that Rogers' person-centered approach theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory can effectively explain the successful construction of the teacher-student relationship between Sean and Will, and at the same time reveal the theoretical cause of breakdown of the relationship between Professor Lambeau and Will in *Good Will Hunting*. Professor Lambeau represents the traditional utilitarian paradigm, ignoring the basic needs of students and pursuing self-realization, which leads to the breakdown of the teacher-student relationship; while Sean represents the humanistic education paradigm, giving priority to meeting the student's basic needs, building trust through sympathy, acceptance and sincerity, and finally promoting self-integration of the student. It is also found that humanistic theory has the function of easing emotional detachment between teachers and students and reduce the trend of utilitarian education, offering an inspiration for constructing a democratic and harmonious teacher-student relationship.

This study reveals that when building a democratic and harmonious teacher-student relationship, educators should pay attention to the differences in students' inherent needs, deeply empathize with students' feelings, unconditionally actively pay attention to students, and communicate sincerely with students. It provides a new analytical framework for the application of humanistic education theory in the interpretation of film texts and provides a cross-cultural theoretical reference for the transformation of Chinese teacher-student relations..

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