

Wasteland, Texas

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

Thoreau's line about "the mass of men leading lives of quiet desperation" could be applied to Justine Last, the lead character in *The Good Girl*, a low-budget morality play by writer Mike White and director Miguel Arteta, the same team that produced the creepy but moving *Chuck and Buck*.

Both films deal with loneliness and desperate attempts to battle it. *Chuck and Buck* examines the obsessive way a grown man can hang onto the friendships of his past. *The Good Girl* shows how easy it is to stray from a boring, dead-end existence by having an illicit affair, and how difficult it is to regroup once the passion turns to need. ("Oh, what a tangled web we weave.") When Justine (Jennifer Aniston) breaks her wedding vows by getting it on in the storeroom and the local motel with Holden Worther (Jake Gyllenhaal), a younger (and disturbed) fellow employee at the Retail Rodeo, she is risking not only her marriage but her sense of who she is and how she fits into the grand scheme of things. At least in Texas.

Literary sleuths will be able to recognize the heights that White and Artera are aiming for in *The Good Girl*, a title which is both allegorical and oddly sexual. The name Justine refers to the 1957 novel by Lawrence Durrell (the first part of his *Alexandria Quartet*), an examination of modern love, and also to the scandalous 1791 novel by the Marquis de Sade. Holden refers to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (a connection that is reinforced in the film itself), while the small Texas town where the story plays out is called Wasteland, a not-so-veiled reference to T. S. Eliot's poem about souls in despair. This, on top of the *Madame Bovary*--influenced storyline, makes the film feel downright classical in its three-act structure.

But the beauty of the film is the way White--a most intriguing young screenwriter--repackages the familiar story to mix the dramatic elements with black humor. Just as he turned the Damon and Pythias story on its head in *Chuck and Buck*, here he suggests the absurdity of the "steamy affair," even as he's tiptoeing toward tragedy.

To help accomplish this cinematic perfecta, White employs a stylish, at times, quite beautiful voice-over, as Justine attempts to understand her life and explain what she's doing. The tone and timbre of the voice-over is reminiscent of the narration provided by Sissy Spacek's character in Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, a film that continues to influence independent filmmakers like Arteta and White 30 years after its release. The preciseness of the voice-over, complete with sad observations about the passing of the seasons and painful choices, turns Justine into a far more sympathetic character than she would first appear to be, since she shows early on that she is capable of both callousness and cruelty.

Aniston, of *Friends* fame, is quite good, yet one senses, perhaps cynically, that it is her apparent limitations as an actress that drew the filmmakers to her, with her built-in box office appeal. She is a classic TV actress, with a pretty face that is not overly interesting, but is accustomed to being assaulted by close-up after close-up. There is a blankness to her visage, a void behind her big blue eyes, that keeps her a mystery.

From a technical standpoint, she holds her own, though she occasionally gets bumped off the screen by the sterling supporting cast--which includes John C. Reilly (*Magnolia*) as her sweet, pot-smoking husband, Phil; Tim Blake Nelson (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) as Phil's omnipresent best friend, Bubba; and veteran actress Deborah Rush (*Purple Rose of Cairo*) as the matriarch of the Retail Rodeo who provides Justine with a terrifying sense of what her future might look like.

As the affair between Justine and Holden develops, the film makes a serious effort to take on a few knotty issues, like the need to find one's own identity in a small town (Bubba feels unable to move out of Phil's shadow), and the pressure to toe the party line when it comes to religion. This subplot is personified by Corny (played by writer White), a guard at the Retail Rodeo, who is pushing Justine to avoid eternal damnation by attending Tuesday night Bible classes even as he's peeping at her in the storeroom with the store security camera.

The end of the film is morally and emotionally ambiguous, which is a good thing. We don't quite know what Justine is thinking as she chooses the road that will lead to the rest of her life (she is 30 when she starts the affair), but there's nothing about her cryptic look to suggest that she won't still be searching for a way out at 35.