

Review #67 : *Amazing Grace* (2006)

Ioan Gruffudd & Romola Garai



People will sooner believe a big lie than a little one, noted a WWII US intelligence report on Hitler, who famously coined the phrase ‘*the big lie*’ to describe this very phenomenon. Case in point : the widespread **notion of slavery as the special shame of Western, Christian Europe**. This popular notion exactly reverses the truth.

Throughout human history slavery was indeed *widely and uncontroversially* practiced on every continent and in practically every culture, from Ancient China, India and Africa to Pre-Colombian America, and in the Muslim Empire (**Bernard Lugan**’s [Quand la Coupe de la Repentance déborde](#)). And it was *only in the Christian world* that slavery ever became controversial, that a concept of personal **freedom and dignity** developed which fostered principled moral resistance to slavery. The Christian West is unique in world history, not for practicing slavery, but for **becoming the first society in the world voluntarily to abolish the practice**. *Amazing Grace* represents a step toward setting the record straight.

Serious-minded and squeaky clean, *Amazing Grace* takes on the life and times of the 18th century in an **engaging look at the imperfect soul of reformer William Wilberforce**, who was an Abolitionist for much of his life and helped bring about the end of slave trade and slavery in the British Empire. The film is confidently directed by **Michael Apted** (*The Voyage of the Dawn Trader*) who invests Wilberforce's fight with strength and conviction. The overall effect is part **BBC-style biography**, part **stunning Hollywood-style hagiography**, generally pleasing and often moving, even when the story wobbles off historical rails or explores different paths such as romance. Many critics have found Wilberforce often comes across as *too good to be true*, yet handsome Welsh actor **Ioan Gruffudd** as a first-rate movie saint is definitely a better *role model* than any of those pop stars, sportsmen, and gay fashion designers whose bio-pics invade western cinema for the past ten years or so.

SYNOPSIS

The film's dense narrative traces Wilberforce's journey from strapping young reformer to nearly broken Member of Parliament, with periodic skips back and forth in time. The only son of a wealthy merchant, he studied at Cambridge, where he met his close friend William Pitt the Younger, the future British Prime Minister, brought to extraordinary life by the young British actor and relative newcomer **Benedict Cumberbatch**. His intimate, prickly relationship with Pitt warms the action and talk, partly through the chemistry between the actors, and brings the personal firmly to bear on the political. Eventually he also meets a woman, his future wife, Barbara (**Romola Garai**), which brings the story into the more serious depth of domestic realm. Outside Parliament, Wilberforce struggles with chronic *debilitating colitis* and vacillates between devoting his life to politics or religion — an inner debate that draws him into dew-kissed fields for wrestling bouts with God.

Amazing Grace's best moments are episodes of **high showmanship and humour** : the chains and shackles placed on the table at a dinner party by dignified ex-slave abolitionist and author Olaudah Equiano (**Youssou N'Dour**) as he explains the horrific reality of conditions on a slave ship ; the wary banter of Wilberforce ; the nautical stunt confronting a crowd of well-heeled gentry with the literal stench of the slave trade ; the low-key passage of a stealth bill while a single alert opponent, sensing a hidden agenda, races about trying to round up idly loitering allies, and of course, the dramatic red-carpet unrolling of an anti-slavery petition on the Commons floor — with a last-minute surprise.

THE MAIN CHARACTER

Wilberforce is a true and devout Christian, a crusader, a man of action and God, a social conservative of **stirring principle and tireless will**, who rallied for animal rights and against trade unions. He's at once pure and seductive, a **dashing, Romantic figure** with a long black coat who talks to God while lying in his garden and keeps rabbits for pets. This matinee idol version might seem wildly simplistic, even borderline caricature, but there is also something **unfailingly attractive about a film character so wholly devoted to good** — and **it does make you think**. This almost messianic portrayal is encapsulated in an early dream sequence where a shining Wilberforce throws over the tables of the Members of Parliament who had prevented the latest attempt to get the Abolition Bill through the Commons.



SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Amazing Grace is filled with many great British actors larking about in knee breeches and powdered wigs : among the more valuable players is **Rufus Sewell** (*The King's Speech*) as Thomas Clarkson, a reformer whose passion seems to tip into zealotry when he speaks about

the French Revolution. And no matter how stuffy the room or the speeches, the reliably brilliant **Michael Gambon** (*Harry Potter's* Dumbledore), who plays Lord Charles Fox with trembling jowls and flashing eyes, brings a sense of the world and its sensual pleasures with him. The actors **Toby Jones**, who plays one of King George III's many sons, and **Ciáran Hinds** (*Persuasion*) are also on hand for much of the parliamentary proceedings, delivering withering commentary and general amusement as two of Wilberforce's most powerful foes. **Albert Finney** also blusters in every so often as Wilberforce's mentor, John Newton.

REVIEW

With **perseverance, commitment and faith**, strengthened by God's amazing grace, people of **passionate convictions can change the world**. This theme permeates the film, *Amazing Grace*. More than two hundred years ago, in 1807, the first anti-slave trade bill was passed by England's Parliament, ending 400 years of slave trading. A brave force led by **one persistent man upheld by moral integrity**, inspiring friends and a driving faith, paved the way for this world-changing, history-shaping milestone. The film celebrates the 200th anniversary of this accomplishment and a Christian hero who fought to end a horrible evil of his time.

THE GOOD

What I love about this film is how it **celebrates and honours true Christian heroes**. These saintly figures were radical men of strong faith, yet they were not humiliated or portrayed as villainous and fanatical freaks, as is so often the case in major motion pictures of today. When Wilberforce rises to sing '*Amazing Grace*' in a gentleman's club, he boldly proclaims : '*This is who I am, and this is what I stand for.*' As he commands the attention of his peers, he **commands the respect of viewers**. This man is a true Christian, a real human being, doing what is right and what is good.

Viewers are inspired not to quit in the face of failure. As Newton declares to Wilberforce : '*God sometimes does his work with a gentle drizzle.*' Newton is another **hero of faith** beautifully portrayed in this film. Years after his repentance from involvement in slavery, he is tormented with the feeling of '*blood still on my hands*'. As an old man, now physically blind, he states : '*I once was blind, but now I see,*' as he finally accepts God's forgiveness for his sins. I appreciated that the film makers included this admission from Newton, a genuine man of God '*I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour.*'

The story reveals wealth's power to entice and allure with greed. Viewers vividly encounter the hardened hearts of men allowing them to commit great evil. Wilberforce is a reminder that true Christians are men and women with empathy for their fellow man. He could not dilute what he felt for the suffering men and against moral corruption.

Absent from the film are images of the actual slaves in their horrific plight. Part from seeing them in Wilberforce's nightmares and hearing of their cruel suffering, viewers are not overly exposed to crude depiction of the affliction they endured. The strength of this film is in **portraying horror visually and showing its moral and spiritual impact** rather than delight in harsh content or scenes of vicious abuse and cruelty.

THE LESS GOOD

- **Sexual Content :** There is no nudity in the film. Barbara Spooner, Wilberforce's wife, displays ample cleavage during scenes of their courtship, but it was merely the fashion trend of that period.
- **Violence :** One of the most disturbing scenes is when a fallen horse is cruelly beaten. It gives an early glimpse into Wilberforce's love for nature and animals and his reverence for all life. The violence in *Amazing Grace* is more often discussed and described than portrayed visually. In a moving scene, an ex-slave shows brutal scars from his branding, remembering the moment his soul no longer belonged to God, but to a man.
- **Language :** Profanity is limited in this film. Viewers will hear a few instances of the words : 'h*ll' and 'a**'.
- **Drugs and Alcohol :** Characters are shown drinking alcohol and gambling in a gentlemen's club. Thomas Clarkson and others occasionally sip whiskey from a flask. In one scene Clarkson becomes intoxicated. Wilberforce is never shown drinking alcohol, however, to treat his illness, he takes many doses of *laudanum* (opium). Eventually he gives up the medicine because he wants to be 'fully alive' to raise his children.
- **Historical Inaccuracies :** Some blinkered or biased elements of history.
- **Stereotyping :** Combined with the appearance of a simple, docile but loyal working class, the film sometimes relies on stereotypes rather than build complex characters.

WHY THE SUBJECT IS STILL SO RELEVANT TODAY

The makers of *Amazing Grace* are using the film to launch an extensive campaign against modern day slavery. You can learn more about the project at the Amazing Change Web site. According to Walden Media, 27 million children and adults are still being exploited around the world in slavery. Viewers are encouraged, like Wilberforce, to be people of passionate compassion and stand up against this injustice.

I would take this a step further and ask readers to consider additional injustices that exist in our world today. According to *The Center for Bio-Ethical Reform*, abortion kills 46 million lives per year in our world. I have no doubt if Wilberforce were alive today, he would have something to say about that. Just in the United States, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates 2-3 million people go homeless each year. And in 2001 the United Nations estimated that 150 million children live on the streets worldwide. *Amazing Grace* showed that **extreme bravery and commitment is required to speak against evil**. May Wilberforce's spirit inspire us all to tap into the amazing grace of God and continue to change the world.

