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Much more than a pretty woman: An Education follows the right cinematic lesson plan.

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Abstract: Female hubris isn't something we tend to see on screen all that often, if only because women rarely get to play leading roles, but in the hands of breakout star Carey Mulligan, budding intellectual pride and sexual ego become the pistons driving the dramatic engine.

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It may well be one of the most significant scenes in the annals of feminism: A young schoolgirl confronts her teachers and asks them why she should bother with an education at all, when all that's really expected of her as a woman is a good roast, a happy demeanour and a bobcat's ability in the boudoir.

Well, those aren't Jenny's (Carey Mulligan) exact words in this Nick Hornby script adapted from Lynn Barber's memoir, but the message underlying Lone Scherfig's *An Education* remains the same: In 1961, a woman's schooling was somewhat irrelevant in the larger social order, because she had nowhere to go after Oxford - except another school, where she could become a school marm to other neglected female intellectuals.

It's an uncomfortable moment, because as much as we don't want it to be true, we can tell by the crestfallen expression on the teacher's face that Jenny is right. She's seen the status quo for what it is and decided she's no fighter. She'd rather be a lover - and that's where things really get complicated.

Jenny falls for a man named David (Peter Sarsgaard), an older suitor with questionable intentions who helps her home one day in the rain. Jenny is wary of David, but she's also drawn to him because he seems to live in a whole different world where the colours are richer, the food is tastier and the clothes are far more chic than the standard, row-house uniform cut from patterned cotton.

David deals in art, cars and the odd real-estate transactions. He travels around the countryside on weekends, and when he introduces Jenny to his lifestyle packed with good-looking and glamorous friends, Jenny is positively smitten.

David has his own agenda where Jenny is concerned, and, by her 17th birthday, he gets what he came for, leaving Jenny with little more than the nagging sense she should have known better.

Female hubris isn't something we tend to see on screen all that often, if only because women rarely get to play leading roles, but in the hands of breakout star Carey Mulligan, budding intellectual pride and sexual ego become the pistons driving the dramatic engine.

We watch Jenny transform from innocent schoolgirl into a somewhat worldly scholastic failure. On the surface, this could have been phrased as tragedy, but thanks to the careful and detailed direction of Lone Scherfig (*Italian for Beginners*, *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself*), watching Jenny's missteps on the road to experience become a very human, and frequently, very humorous, voyage.

The key is balance, because despite the rather heavy implications of sexual deflowering and becoming a high-school dropout, Scherfig never indulges in the melodramatic side of the denouement and keeps things skirting along the edges of 'so what?'

That's where *An Education* finds its most subversive edge, because Jenny doesn't really recognize the social taboos for what they are. She resists the idea that she's somehow tainted by her sexual foray, and insists on being strong when so many other girls her age would have crumbled in the face of social ostracism.

Jenny is, in essence, a symbol of the rising feminist consciousness of the early 1960s, and played by the plucky

Mulligan, she emerges as an entirely round and unique character.

Surrounding Mulligan like so many moons is an equally talented group of players led by Peter Sarsgaard and Alfred Molina. Sarsgaard's performance as the predatory David is so subtle and charming, it makes him seem even creepier than he really is, while Molina stands in as the ultimate male foil: The man who would be king of his own house, but ends up a fool - thanking the man who took everything from his flesh and blood, just because he attended Oxford.

The hard edge here is an education, and how our understanding of that word creates endless class differences and striations of social worth when the real issue, and the real meaning of the word, centres on the pursuit of knowledge.

Everyone, in the end, receives an education - of some form or other - and watching Jenny try to pass her oral, written and metaphysical exams in the midst of a changing era makes for a movie with several gleaming facets. This isn't just a story of one girl trying to find her way in the early 1960s. The movie actually captures an ephemeral changing of the moral guard, as housewives left the home and schoolgirls started to take control of their own sexuality.

It's a lot for any movie to take on, but Scherfig handles the human drama with an intricate plan and delicate touch while the art department does all the heavy lifting with a truly inspired production design that warps us straight into the rainy streets of London, circa 1961.

Smart, entertaining and dramatically memorable, An Education may not teach you anything new, but it's a compelling distraction.

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