

American Pastoral (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 48 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 2; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Honor your father and your mother...

Exodus 20:12a

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

Luke 15:3-4

The title of Ewan McGregor's first foray into directing was obviously meant by the author of its source, Phillip Roth, to be ironic. The life of the story's protagonist Seymour Levov (played by McGregor) is anything but the pleasant picture suggested by such a title. The story of his life since high school is told by his brother Jerry (Rupert Evans) to old classmate Nathan Zuckerman (David Strathairn) at their 45th high school reunion. Having been out of the country as a journalist for the past several decades, it is news to Nathan that Seymore has just died. This scene at the school and their attendance at his grave side service serve as bookends.

During high school days, the Jewish athlete, dubbed Swede because of his blond good looks, had everything—popularity, due to his looks, and athletic team prowess. After graduation, he works at his father's thriving factory in New Jersey where the mixed-race employees make high-end ladies gloves. He succeeds in getting his rather conservative father (Peter Riegert) to accept as his bride the WASP Dawn (Jennifer

Connelly), a beauty queen who had been Miss New Jersey. The newlyweds move to a stately home in the suburbs where they give birth to their lovely daughter Merry (first played by Ocean James). The only dark cloud in their sunny sky is Merry's stuttering, which saps her self-confidence. A counselor's suggestion that Merry's problem is not physical but psychological, arising from her inner comparison to her beauty queen mother is not comforting, but the parents vow to make the best of things. With few schoolmates willing to befriend a stutterer, the girl finds solace in her scrapbook of Audrey Hepburn clippings and pictures. Also she and Swede become very close, he assuring her that he will never forsake her. What else could go wrong in such a pastoral setting?

Well, this is a Roth novel, so you know the answer. The dark cloud that began with Merry's stuttering is just the harbinger of the storm to come. The girl's handicap persists into the 1960s when the American Pastoral for the parents turns into an American Hell. Now played by Dakota Fanning, Merry turns into a rebellious teenager. The family TV set thrusts the violent turmoil of the times into their living room—anti-Vietnam demonstrations, race riots, battle scenes from the warfront, President Johnson defending the War. Merry is especially affected by the sight of a Buddhist monk burning himself alive in protest of the war.

She makes frequent trips into Manhattan where she connects with student radicals. Spouting slogans calling for a violent revolution, she quarrels repeatedly with Swede and Dawn. He says that he too is against the war, but she scornfully brushes this aside, charging him with being part of the exploiting class. The once loving girl has been transformed by her older associates into a hate-filled creature the parents barely recognize. Early one morning their postmaster/storeowner friend goes out to raise the American flag. When he re-enters, the store, a bomb explodes, killing him and setting the building on fire. Merry is nowhere to be

found.

The parents strongly assert to the FBI investigators that their daughter would never do such a thing. But her failure to return home or even contact them, proves them wrong. Dawn accepts Merry 's guilt as her once placid mind slowly disintegrates. Swede still steadfastly clings to the belief that Merry is innocent. Other outside matters also impact him—his factory is facing hard times because women no longer buy and wear gloves to match each of their outfits, and the race riots flare up in Newark. Black rioters torch buildings and exchange gunfire with National Guardsmen. His “Negro” employees remain staunchly loyal, one veteran woman insisting that she stay with him one night to protect the building from rioters. They cautiously go to a window to unfurl a large banner on which is printed the message (actually, a plea), “Negroes Work Here.”

Years pass with no word from Merry, Dawn's mind so confused and withdrawn that she spends time in a mental institution. The factory is barely surviving. A young woman named Rita (Valorie Curry), claiming to be a reporter, visits the glove factory. Swede gives her the red-carpet treatment, even having a worker make her up a special pair. Then she reveals to Swede that she is in contact with Merry, who wants her Audrey Hepburn scrapbook. Swede desperately goes along with her, ignoring her harsh criticism and an attempt to seduce him. Eventually he does get to see her, Merry now a disheveled shadow of her former robust self, living in a ruined house alive with rodents and littered with trash. The film's subsequent scenes are not out of a Hallmark production, though the concluding one at the graveyard does bring about a solemn measure of closure.

The film provides a piercing glimpse of what was once called “The Generation Gap.” Swede and Dawn were members of the post-world War 2 generation that had achieved the American Dream (or Pastoral)—a good marriage and adorable child; a meaningful

vocation that made possible a lovely home far from the dangers of the inner city. Then came the Cold War and the Vietnam War, the latter nothing like WW 2, along with the rising revolution of blacks no longer willing to wait for their rights to be granted by unwilling whites. The parents of the 1960s were upset when their children took the values of love, fairness, and justice seriously for all, blacks included, and began to question why the older generation did not live up to them. The generation gap was a key factor in such Hollywood productions as *The Graduate* (1967); *Easy Rider* (1969); *Joe* (1970); and with the sci-fi film *Logan's Run* (1976) speculating on the result of the rebel slogan "Don't trust anyone over 30!"—but none of these gave much of a picture of the dark side of the antiwar movement. This film reminds us that some protestors did not agree with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's policy of nonviolence, nor that they saw irony in their protesting violence by using violence themselves.

As I watched Swede cling to his hope for reconciliation with Merry and his promise that he would never abandon her, the father in Jesus' Parable of the Father and Two Sons came to mind, as well as the shepherd in one of the parables that precede it. I think Jesus would have loved Swede, who did not just wait for his lost child to return before running out to welcome him back, but ventured forth himself into the dismal slums in search of his prodigal daughter. I wish his anguished encounter with Merry could have ended with the same result as the Parable's, a Welcome Home party replete with prime rib and merry guests eating and dancing. (What an ironic name for the daughter!)

Critics have not been kind to the film. Not having read the novel, I don't know what else should have been included. Of course, the standard two hours allotted to films require much good material to be cut, but what I do see in the film leads me to conclude that John Romano's script packs in plenty of substantive material for movie goers looking for more than

just entertainment. *Doctor Strange* provides escape, and thus is far, far more popular, but Ewan McGregor's film reaches much deeper into the heart and mind of viewers. Also, as with so many novel-based films, the movie might lead viewers to read the source: I have already put in my request at the local library.

This review with a set of questions will be in the Dec. 2016 issue of VP.