

# Amour (French with English subtitles)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V -2-; L 46; S/N -3. Running time: 2 hour 7 min.

Georges and Anne try to adapt to the effects of her stroke.

(c) 2012 Sony Pictures Classics

Even those who live for many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

Ecclesiastes

11:8

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.<sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

1 Cor.

13:4-8a

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith "A whole I planned,

Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Robert Browning, "Rabbi

Ben Ezra"

The urbane Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva), two retired piano teachers in their

eighties probably have read Robert Browning's poem. Living comfortably in their book-lined Parisian apartment, they no doubt would agree with its sentiment—except, probably, for the poet's belief in God. In many small gestures we see that their love for each other has not dimmed through the long years of living together. We first see them near the beginning of the film seated in an audience waiting for a concert to begin. The performer is their most gifted former student, Alexandre (Alexandre Tharaud). Director/writer Michael Haneke keeps the camera on that audience for what seems an extraordinarily long time. We begin to think that they must be staring through the "fourth wall" back at us. It is largely a static long shot, so you have to look for the couple—they are slightly left of center.

A minimalist filmmaker, Mr. Haneke provides no opening music, nor, as the film progresses, any other music except when it is being performed or played on a CD. The film actually begins by revealing the fate of one of the pair. In a sort of prologue we see firemen force their way into an apartment. While the concierge and neighbors stand outside, the officers hold their noses as they open the windows for fresh air and search through the rooms. The door to the bedroom has been sealed by tape, and when they enter, they find an old woman in repose on the bed, flowers strewn over her head and her dress. No one else is in the apartment.

Back to the recent past. It is the next day after the concert. At breakfast, George notices that Anne is not responding to him. She is staring vacantly at a wall. Alarmed, he wets a washcloth at the kitchen faucet and gently daubs her face and neck as he tries to solicit some response to his anxious queries. In his anxiety he has forgotten to turn the water off. He leaves the room for a moment to get dressed, but stops when the sound of the water stops. When he returns, the tap has been turned off. Anne, apparently unaware of the time that has passed, tells him that he left the water on. As he queries her, she cannot recall anything of the last few minutes. She thinks he is joking until he persists in his questioning. She does not want to see a doctor, but as we see next, their doctor has hospitalized her.

Anne's experience at the hospital where it is determined that

she has suffered a stroke is so unpleasant that she makes him promise not to send her there again. She has had a second stroke that paralyzes one side of her body. All of this Georges takes in stride, assuring their grown daughter Eva (Isabelle Huppert) that he can cope. Eva, herself a musician, lives abroad in an uneasy relationship with her husband, also a musician who sometimes has an eye for female colleagues. It is apparent that she has also grown apart from her parents because of her busy career. Her concern is real, but subdued.

Their former pupil Alexandre pays them a visit, but forgets to bring them the copy of his new CD he has promised. Also, because of his visible shock at Anne's weakened condition, she decides not to receive any more visitors. The couple retreat from the world, except for the nurse whom the now overwhelmed Georges has found necessary to bring in three times a week for assistance with grooming and bathing Anne. When Eva returns to Paris and drops in on them unexpectedly, Georges even locks their bedroom. It takes a lot of pleading and demanding before he allows Eva in to see her mother, now barely able to communicate.

This is a powerful film about love and care giving. In so many small ways we see that the couple's love for each other has not diminished, their youth passion having changed into a mature love evidenced by hand holding and other small gestures, including the gentle patience Georges exhibits while trying to tend to the stricken Anne's physical needs. Many reviewers have noted that the shot in which Georges holds Anne close to him while taking tiny steps to move her from her wheel chair to a regular chair is like a slow dance. It is a dance of love, growing from years of living and making music together.

There is one telling scene when Anne sits at the grand piano that takes up one end of their living room. Georges sits in his chair quietly listening to the beautiful classical music filling the room. Then he reaches over to his CD player and turns it off, the music stopping, revealing that Anne had not been playing. We realize how great is there loss—she unable to play and he seeing his life companion slipping away from him. Anne tells him that she does not want to go on this way, but

he puts her off. Even she, as she leafs through their family photo album remarks, "Life is beautiful." She adds very quickly, "and long." We can see she means "too long" when she loses her ability to speak coherently. She is reduced to the state of an infant, George now having to feed her by spoon. She tries to resist eating anything, but he forces food and drink into her mouth, threatening to take her to a hospital or hospice where they will feed her intervenously if necessary.

Anne's care grows so overwhelmingly difficult that Georges hires a second nurse, but she is very different from the main nurse, the latter whom still sees Anne as a person of dignity. His temper grows short with the new nurse whose care he deems unworthy. As he dismisses her, she insults him as she angrily stalks out.

There is plenty to ponder in the film, such as two intriguing incidents in which Georges has to deal with a pigeon that gets into their apartment when a window is left open. Also the camera lingers for a long time in close ups of the six paintings displayed on the walls of the apartments. All are landscapes, one with the sunlight illuminating cumulous clouds in a spectacular way. This is the only outdoor scenes in the whole picture, every other sequence being shot indoors.

Georges brings home a bouquet of flowers which, in a surprisingly long sequence, he washes in the sink and cuts the heads off the flowers. What he does with them softens somewhat the shocking act of love at the climax of the film. The film demonstrates that Browning's poem is true only up to a point, beyond which the more gloomy poetry of Qoholeth might be more pertinent:

"Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is

your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9.9)

The film has been exuberantly praised by critics for the way

in which Anne and George's love is depicted, as well as for the terrible but loving last service he performs for his suffering wife. I found their brave attempt to adjust to and live with her debilitating condition inspiring at first, but then depressing in that neither seemed to have any sense of transcendence, not even a mustard seed of faith. I have been privileged to minister with many elderly people victimized by strokes and diseases whose faith enabled them to see that their present suffering in the light of a caring God would end in death, but not defeat. People came to comfort them, and though they probably did, went away with far more comfort received than imparted. This is not the case with Anne and Georges. A priest might read from St. Paul about the "sting" of death being removed, but it will ring hollow. And yet having said that, There is a fascinating scene that maybe belies what I have just written: it is near the end, and it involves Anne and Georges going out together, suggesting that the filmmaker at least does entertain some future transcendent state.

Thus, as much as I admire them for their love and initial pluck in dealing with the cruel effects of a stroke, this admiration fades into pity and a sense of sadness by the time the end credits roll. We are also left by the filmmaker with the mystery of what has befallen Georges, though I think most viewers will be able to agree on an answer to that. The very last shot of Eva sitting alone in their apartment raises a similar question concerning her future. Nonetheless time spent with this film is well worthwhile and could add to some good group interchange dealing with the elderly and their care—and, of course, suffering and death.

### **For Reflection/Discussion**

*Might be spoilers near the end.*

1. How many films can you think of that deal with old people in love? Some films to compare this one with: *The Last Station*; *Iris*; *Away From Her*; *On Golden Pond*.

2. Other films dealing with elderly that are worth comparing: *Trip to Bountiful*; *The Straight Story*. How do many films deny the elderly their wisdom or dignity (especially comedies)?

3. In what ways does the film show the love between Anne & Georges? Why does Georges refuse to give in to Eva's suggestion to send Anne back to the hospital—or to a hospice?
4. Why doesn't Anne want any visitors after their protégé Alexandre visits them? Have you known someone not wanting visitors due to the effects of their illness/disease?
5. Why is Georges so upset with one of the nurses? Have you known of situations in nursing homes where some of the staff treat their charges as objects to be kept from bothering or inconveniencing others? How is the way we talk with and about an incapacitated person very important? How does Georges show that he understands this?
6. In caring for someone, how can the caregiver also become a victim? How do we see this happening to Georges?
7. Despite her disabilities, what does Anne say when she looks through the family photo album? But what does she quickly add? How has life become too long for her? How does her feeling that she is a burden compare to what many others have felt and said about their condition in relation to their families, especially the immediate caregivers?
8. What significance do you see in the pigeon scenes: in the long sequence of the 6 paintings; in those involving George & the flowers?
9. What did you think of what Georges does near the end? How is this terrible deed further evidence of love? Do you see any sign of hope in the film? What about the scene in which they leave the apartment together?
10. Another film in which the theme of care-giving is important is the 1996 *Marvin's Room* in which Meryl Streep and Diane Keaton played Lee and Bessie, two sisters, one whom (Lee) flees home to find her own life, and the other (Bessie), who gives up her own life to care for their ailing father. It has a beautiful statement by Bessie about giving and receiving care.
11. Why do you think the sentiment in Robert Browning's poem must be balanced by the insights of the author of Ecclesiastes? (Or do you?) How might faith have made a difference in their lives? Many people of faith who are dying look to their death as a "home coming." How might this have been a comfort to Anne and Georges?
12. What do you think the author Ecclesiastes means by "vain?"

Scan the book and note how many times he uses this word and the noun form "vanity." Writing a few centuries before Christ, what does his belief system lack that Christ provided for those believing in him ? (Note that this was a major difference between the conservative Sadducees and the liberal Pharisees, as can be seen in the incident recorded in Matt. 21:23-22:34.)

13. In what ways does the film, and your experience with the elderly, show that aging is a series of giving up cherished things? Mary Chapin Carpenter's beautiful song "Grow Old With Me" could be playing as the group gathers. It can be found on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KLPAMo5QTc>.