

Carol (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 58 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould...

Romans 12:2a (J.B. Phillips)

The one line summary of the film at IMDB “An aspiring photographer develops an intimate relationship with an older woman” doesn’t even begin to convey the power of this love story. Director Todd Haynes returns to the time of his memorable *Far From Heaven*, 1952. In that film, as well as in this adaptation (by screenwriter Phyllis Nagy) of Patricia Highsmith’s novel *The Price of Salt*, he ably conveys the straightjacketed moralistic atmosphere of society back then in regard to “deviant” behavior. It is worth noting that Ms. Highsmith wrote her novel under a pseudonym because at that time depicting a love affair between two women was so shocking that using her real name would hurt her career, critics and public alike probably branding her work as salacious or pornographic..

Therese (Rooney Mara) is a lowly sales girl in an upscale Manhattan department store when she sees the fur-clad Carol (Cate Blanchett) gazing at her across the counters of the toy department where she works. Christmas is nearing, so Carol uses the season as a pretext for approaching the clerk about buying a popular doll for her young daughter. When Therese responds that it is sold out, but there are other good ones, Carol asks what she would have liked when she was a little girl. The clerk replies that it would be the toy train set on

display—not at that time considered gift appropriate for a girl. Carol agrees to buy it. Apparently this has confirmed her attraction to Therese, because she “forgets” her pair of expensive gloves. As their owner probably had surmised, Therese scoops them up and later, obtaining the address from the bill of sale, mails them to her. Thus begins a relationship that turns into a love affair, one that had it started today might have been regarded as a mundane affair, thanks to the Supreme Court ruling, at least in such large urban settings as Manhattan.

Representing the repressive society that the 1950s America was for some (this is also the the blacklisting period of *Trumbo*) are two men. Therese’s boyfriend Richard (Jake Lacy) has asked her to marry him, but she has said No. Harge (Kyle Chandler) is Carol’s husband and father of the little daughter she adores, but she is not drawn to him. She has intended to divorce him for a long time. Richard continues to hang out with Therese, and Harge is jealous of Carol’s one time lover Abbey (Sarah Paulson) who is now Carol’s best friend.

The tenor of the era is well depicted in the scene with would-be-husband Jack and Therese talk about romantic feelings—or rather her lack of feeling for him. She explains that persons have no control over whom they love, that it could be two men falling in love. To her query if he has ever had feelings for a boy, he quickly scoffs at the idea of such a notion. When he asks if she has felt that way about a girl, she also denies it. Much later we also see the order of things when Carol encourages Therese to pursue her hobby of photography, even buying her for Christmas an expensive camera. When the former gets a job at the New York TIMES through a friend, we see that she works as a secretary, not as a photojournalist—all of the latter are men.

Matters become so bad at home that Carol talks Therese into quitting her job at the department store and going with her on an escapist trip through the Mid-West. During this interlude

the two consummate their love in a motel, but the trip screeches to an unexpected halt, thanks to Harge and his hired detective. We soon see that Carol has broken off from Therese and agreed to stay married because of a "moral clause" in the marriage laws that would allow Harge to gain full custody of their daughter and prevent all contact should they divorce. But love will have its way. What the two women eventually decide to do suggests that their future in such a society will be extremely difficult and require a great deal of fortitude. The course of true love is seldom an easy one, especially when society, fueled by a particular interpretation of the Bible, raises obstacles.

Director Haynes has explored this era and its attitude toward deviants before in his 2002 *Far From Heaven*, as mentioned at the beginning. It is almost a remake of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*. The deviation in the 1955 film was one of class and age difference, a widow falling in love with a gardener who is younger than she, and thus having to go up against the disapproval of grown children and friends. In the 2002 film the heroine is married to a man who has tried to disavow that he is gay, but at last gives in and moves out to live with a man. The wife slowly falls in love with her gardener who is African American.

Haynes demonstrates in this new film, as well as his earlier one, that he is a keen observer of human nature and of people pushing against boundaries that enslave them. In this new film he is beautifully served by Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara whose total commitment to the project makes us believe in their love.

The movie took me back to the early 50s when I was still in high school and working with other youth at a grocery store unloading trucks and stocking shelves. All the guys, anxious to prove their manhood, tried to outdo one another in oggling and making smart comments about female customers dressed in shorts and brag how many girls they had "laid". The worst

insult one could hurl during an argument was to call someone a "fag" or "queer." I shared that viewpoint, even though a friendly clerk at a music store whom I came to know was "different. He served as my mentor during the process of expanding my love for film music into the larger world of classical music and opera. The clerk became my friend, inviting me into his home where I met what I naively thought was his roommate. We spent many enjoyable hours listening to and discussing music and related issues. Never did either make any sexual overture to me, as those enveloped in homophobia claim always happens. By the time I was entering college I knew that they were homosexuals, but was able to keep this knowledge separated from the section of my mind that condemned homosexuality as indecent and sinful. It would take many years, even after seminary graduation and ordination, before I could shed the embedded homophobia and discern how badly mistaken we are to use the Bible as the basis for anti-gay views. Part of my eventual emancipation was due to movies that showed the humanity of those who were "different," movies such as *Midnight Cowboy*, *Cabaret*, *Priest*, *Philadelphia*, *Far From Heaven*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and now this one. Today it is hard for me to believe that some will hear about this movie and condemn it as immoral. The love between Carol and Therese is a universal one. Some day perhaps we will be able to label such films as just love stories without having to resort to any kind of an explanation or label.

This review with a set of discussion questions is in the Jan. 2016 Visual Parables.