

I Am Love (2009)

Rated R. Our Ratings: V-1 ;L-2 ; S/N-8 Running time: 1 hour 59 min.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

Galatians 5:13

But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

James 1:14-15

Italian director Luca Guadagnino's film has been compared favorably to *The Godfather* and to *The Leopard* in regard to his meticulous depiction of family details. It is the turn of the elegantly attired and coiffed Emma (Tilda Swinton) is overseeing preparations for that night's celebration of the birthday of the family patriarch Edoardo Sr (Gabriele Ferzetti). The food and table setting are as lavish as the huge mansion, the latter maintained by a small army of white-gloved servants. That night the patriarch surprises everyone by announcing that he is retiring from

2009 Magnolia Pictures

leadership of the family textile empire. His appointing his son Tancredi (Pippo Delbono) is no surprise, but then, unexpectedly he announces that his grandson Edoardo Jr. (Flavio Parenti) will also share in leading the company. This surprises the younger heir in that his chief avocation has been racing cars, his grandfather chiding him at the table for losing his most recent race.

As the film progresses we learn that Emma is very much under the shadow of her mother-in-law Allegra (Marisa Berenson), still very beautiful and imposing. Emma, born and raised in Russia, had succumbed to the charms of Tancredi and had striven to become Italian. However, she is still regarded as an outsider, even though she had agreed to her husband's order to exchange her Russian first name for "Emma." As she says, she does not even remember her Russian name any more. This helps explain why it is Ida (Maria Paiato), the chief household servant, who seems to be her only friend with whom she can confide and receive solace. Tancredi is so immersed in the company that his original passion for his wife has dwindled, he now treating her like one of his expensive possessions. At one point she tells her husband, "You no longer know who I am." There is a hint also of a dark chapter in the company's past—in one scene some of the family members recall that the company got along with the Fascists and exploited Jewish labor during the war.

When Emma eats a plate of sumptuously cooked prawns, the film starts to resemble those films in which food takes on magical, even erotic, properties (remember *Like Water for Chocolate* or *Chocolat*?). The meal was prepared by her son Edo's best friend

Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini), a talented chef with whom Edo plans to open a restaurant out in the country. Emma has already learned that their daughter Elisabetta (Alba Rohrwacher) is a lesbian, breaking off with the young man whom the family had hoped she would marry. This, plus the young woman's giving up her painting career for photography, turns the daughter into a family outcast, and apparently prepares the way for Emma to give way to her own suppressed feelings and enter into a passionate affair with Antonio, despite the difference in their ages.

Emma's affair has unintended tragic consequences, though the promised death resulting from sin is surprising (see Romans 6:23 as well as the above James passage). This film will be a hard sell for a church group, due to a nude sex scene that lasts for almost four minutes, and yet a good discussion on relationships, freedom and responsibility could result from it. During much of the film my old Victorian morals led me to view Emma judgmentally, and then came the climactic scene in which she reveals her affair to Tancredi, and he responds—. Were this a Hollywood production, there would be a lot of Oscar "Best Actress" buzz swirling around Tilda Swinton's name. As it is, I would expect this to be Italy's nomination for "Best Foreign Language Film."

For Reflection/Discussion

Spoilers below, so beware about reading on.

1. What are your first impressions of the Recchi family? How do they change as the story unfolds? Did you wonder at first why the servant Ida seems so important to Emma?
2. Compare the father and son, Tancredi and Edo. In the sequence in which they are negotiating the company's future, which of them seems to be most concerned about the traditional values of their firm?

3. How has Tancredi apparently come to regard Emma? How is this confirmed in their last scene together? Was there any attempt on his part to win her back, or did he seem to regard her as disposable as one of his machines that had ceased to work?

4. How did you feel at first about Emma's affair? How is her change of hair-do a sign of her inward change, of her search for freedom? How is her adulterous act more complex than a judgmental attitude allows? And yet how do the Scripture passages above relate?

5. What is the cost of Emma's freedom? What do you think the future holds for the characters?