

my summer of love

a different kind of teen movie

Alienation, emerging sexuality, betrayal and coming of age – familiar ‘teenage’ themes are turned upside down in a British film directed by Pavel Pawlikowski with music by Goldfrapp, as **Rebecca Scambler** explains. But don’t expect an American-style Teen movie ...

Winner of the Best British Film award at the Edinburgh film festival, Polish born director Pawel Pawlikowski’s *My Summer of Love* is in many ways a **classic ‘coming of age’ story**. Based on the novel by Helen Cross, the film tells the story of two teenage girls who meet one summer and form an intense but unlikely friendship. From two very different worlds of desperate boredom and frustration, a relationship develops that leads **to love, despair and the kind of self-knowledge only understood through those very first experiences of love and loss**.

Mona (Natalie Press) has spent her life in a small Yorkshire village, living with her thug-turned-evangelical-Christian brother Phil (Paddy Considine) above The Swan, once the local pub and now a place of worship for the village.

Tamsin (Emily Blunt) is rich, spoilt and in trouble at her private boarding school. She is everything Mona isn’t and a rapport develops quickly between them. Before long they are spending every day of their summer together, drinking, talking, listening to romantic French torch-singer Edith Piaf, and exploring their growing physical attraction. Mona is overawed by Tamsin’s casual but superficial talk of Freud and Nietzsche, but it isn’t long before we begin to realise that it is Mona who possesses the greater self-knowledge.

Siblings and spirituality

Interlaced throughout the story of the girls’ increasing absorption in each other is the story of Phil’s struggle to bring evangelical Christianity to the valley. The film brilliantly realises the fervour and intensity of the happy-clappies, and Mona’s alienation from it all. She struggles to cope with the feelings she has for the brother she adores. Phil is her only close family, and as she sees him change from the man he once was, she begins to realise that he is seeking to change her too. The bond that they have never dies, and when Mona





Realism and self-awareness versus ...

Although exasperated by her life, Mona knows the kind of person she is, and where her life is likely to lead. When Tamsin asks her how she sees her future, she brilliantly remarks that she aims to get an 'awful job in an abattoir, marry a right bastard, churn out loads of kids with mental problems and then wait for the menopause ... or cancer'. Considering she never knew her dad, lives in relative poverty and lost her mother to cancer, her quip is as potentially accurate as it is funny.

... idealism and fantasy

On the other side of the coin, Tamsin has a whole world of opportunity, born into a wealthy family and a privileged education. She romanticises the idea of another life, listens to Piaf, pursues Mona and successfully attempts to stir the raw and tender emotions of others, with more than a little cruelty. A key tension in the plot is her attempt to seduce Phil. She finds herself attracted to him, and sets herself the challenge of exposing him as the man he was before turning to God, yet when he finally looks like giving in to her seduction she laughs at him and brands him a fake. For Phil this is the first moment of weakness, and these are the hardest and the cruellest words to hear, destroying the image he'd been attempting to build of a good and faithful man, penetrating his desperate, deep desire to change from everything he had once been. Ironically, as the film unfolds, it is Tamsin who is eventually exposed as the fake. Every tragic event in Mona's short life, Tamsin matches – even exceeds – with a life story riddled with lies and exaggeration. She isn't without her own, genuine misfortune, but this lies below her own understanding.

Perhaps the one exception to Tamsin's lying and stirring is the real sense of anger and hurt she experiences when faced with her father's infidelity. She and Mona track down her father



needs him most he is there for her, but not how she wants him to be. She craves the unconditional love of a brother, but when Phil displays his love for her, it is because he wants to 'save her from herself' and from a godless life. These scenes between Mona and Phil demonstrate the influence of **Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit***.



at the home of his young lover and it is Mona who picks up the brick and chucks it through the window of his smart new car. An act of revenge, silly maybe, but not cruel. However, Tamsin's reaction to Mona's cheating married boyfriend, Ricky, (who dumps her when he is bored with driving her out to a deserted part of the village for a quick shag) is to hurt him, not directly, but by targeting his wife. It is an act dreamt up by Tamsin which is designed to cause maximum distress to all involved. Again, we see just how callous she can be.

Experimentation and escapism

As the narrative suggests, there are many elements of this film which set it apart from your average Teen movie. Pawlikowski manages skilfully to convey the passion and intensity of the relationship between the two girls in a way that also exposes the fragility of their youth. From the outset the girls' relationship is one of emotional and sexual exploration and intrigue, an escape from their dull and unsatisfactory lives. You do not get the sense that the relationship is the result of ingrained lesbian desires in either of the two girls; they are just teenagers, doing what teenagers do, experimenting with their sexuality.



The film highlights the vast differences between the two girls, particularly of class and education. While Tamsin has the benefits of a first class education, Mona, who is clearly as intellectually capable as Tamsin, suffers from the cruelties of poverty; lacking the same opportunities, she has very different expectations for the future.

The radiantly contemplative quality of the camera work is a joy to watch as it lingers on the stunning Yorkshire landscape and the flawlessly youthful faces and bodies of the girls. The camera work is really at its finest in the final scene, where a startling turn of events leaves both girls reeling. The last rolling camera shot shows the heroine of the film walking away into the sun, head held high, hurt, but emotionally stronger for the summer's journey. The film leaves the relationship at its natural end, and although you don't know where the girls' lives will lead, you get the sense that the experience will have changed them both a little for the better.

This film offers a uniquely British take on the themes described in Sarah Flanagan's article on pages 12-15 – try comparing it with Catherine Hardwicke's *thirteen* or Larry Clarke's *Kids* to see just how different the issues look from our side of the Atlantic.

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