

Film has beauty but slow narrative

Anne Navarro/CNS

NEW YORK — Evocative colors and lighting turn director Peter Webber's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" (Lions Gate) into an atmospheric drama. But its slack narrative and slow pacing prevent this character-driven film from fully resonating with its audience.

Adapted from Tracy Chevalier's best-selling novel, "Girl With a Pearl Earring" provides a fictitious backdrop to the eponymous, famed painting by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, played with glowering intensity by Colin Firth. Cinematically, the film is a gem, imitating with keen strength the painter's chosen palette of blues, yellows and sepia-toned hues. Screenwriter Olivia Hetreed, who worked with Chevalier, understood the entrancing power that unconsummated love holds over an audience — and has kept the deeply felt passions simmering just below the boiling point.

Sixteen-year-old Griet (Scarlett Johansson), a good Protestant girl, is forced to support her family after her father, a textile painter, has a terrible accident that leaves him blind and maimed. She finds employment as a servant in the



Lions Gate Films/CNS

Scarlett Johansson stars in a scene from the film "Girl With a Pearl Earring."

Catholic house of Vermeer (her mother warns her against the "bad influence" Catholicism could have on her), run under the severe eye of the painter's bourgeois mother-in-law, Maria (Judy Parfitt). Maria has what in today's world would be called a head for business, lobbying

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wealthy patrons such as Master van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson) to buy Vermeer's work, and thereby keeping her perpetually pregnant daughter, Catharina (Essie Davis), in the luxurious style to which she has grown accustomed.

When Vermeer forms an attachment to Griet, whose interest in the artist's work allows her entry into his world — carefully mixing colors and cleaning his studio — Catharina grows suspicious, then indignant. But Maria, concerned mainly with the bottom line, sees that Griet-as-muse means money and clandestinely encourages the alliance between painter and servant. Tensions are heightened by van Ruijven's lascivious manner as he senses the growing attraction and arranges to have Griet painted alone by Vermeer, hoping to cause trouble. Meanwhile, Griet entertains a marriage proposal from her lover, the local butcher boy (Cillian Murphy), even as she grapples with her growing feelings for Vermeer.

Despite the friction created, the actual story about a servant girl who inspires a famous portrait by the

17th-century master is less involving. Johansson looks every bit the part with porcelain skin, liquid eyes and full, ripe lips that seem to naturally be pouting. But her character's growing interest in artistic pursuits — despite her entrapment in a class that is destined to serve others — is left by the wayside.

Firth's Vermeer is moody and distant, yet he is made almost laughable by a ridiculous, stringy, long-haired wig placed precariously upon his head. The story's villains are all too conventional with their behind-the-scenes machinations and selfish motives.

"Girl With a Pearl Earring" has moments of true beauty. But it takes more than fine cinematography to create a totally moving film.

Because of a sexual encounter and brief violence, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Navarro is a part-time reviewer in the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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