

# Period film examines love, money

By Robert McGuire  
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**J**ennifer Jason Leigh as Catherine in the new film version of "Washington Square" continues her specialty of playing overeager social misfits.

The setting this time isn't the punk music scene of Washington state as in Leigh's earlier film, "Georgia," but 19th century Manhattan in the moneyed houses around Washington Square park.

Catherine is arguably that era's version of the troubled teenager. Literally orphaned by her mother and emotionally orphaned by a father too concerned with propriety, she is unable to mold her enthusiasm and eccentricities to fit into society.

She seeks identity in a very suspect and

forbidden relationship with a man with no money.

Morris Townsend (Ben Chaplin) has nothing to recommend him except adventurous tales of his travels abroad and apparently the very singular quality of loving Catherine.

But people whisper that she is being taken advantage of for her inheritance and that no man that charming and handsome could love such a wallflower. Her father fiercely forbids the marriage eventually proposed.

Resolving this dilemma, and trying to learn if Morris really does love Catherine, the characters debate the larger questions of romance vs. pragmatism and of true love vs. finances.

The negotiations are carried out in the ridiculously formal and archaic way that contemporary audiences marvel at when watching heavily costumed period pieces.

Last year, the flavor was Jane Austen's novels of manners. This year, several Henry James novels are being made into films, such as "Washington Square."

The comparisons are obvious, but they won't go very far. "Washington Square" isn't a pretty tale about how suitable matches are inevitably made despite pride and prejudice. Instead, it is a darker exploration of how these emotions can cloud a romance.

"Washington Square," directed by Agnieszka Holland, is well made and, like

many period dramas, provides pleasant viewing. Leigh's portrayal of almost freakish shyness is often amusing, although occasionally distracting.

Maggie Smith is, at moments, hilarious as the lonely widow and incurable romantic living vicariously through Catherine. Albert Finney, as Catherine's father, subtly reveals the cruelty and derision inherent in his patronizing relationship with his daughter.

The only serious drawbacks to the film are possibly a couple of missing scenes. It's difficult to understand how Morris' behavior changes so suddenly late in the movie. And it's not entirely clear what his feelings for Catherine are.

Also, the story's most powerful point — how it is that Catherine can mature into a very confident and satisfied woman despite, or because of, her social ineptitude and the scorn others hold for her — isn't clearly detailed in the film.

Overall, though, "Washington Square" is done capably and will satisfy fans of period dramas. But it will fail to be the masterpiece that persuades movie goers bored by them.

*"Washington Square" is rated PG and is playing at the Downer Landmark Theater, 2589 N. Downer Ave., through Dec. 24.*

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