The Deep Blue Sea: Love and emotional truth in post-war Britain

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Adapted and directed by Terence Davies from the original play by Terence Rattigan

Terence Davies' latest feature, *The Deep Blue Sea*, is a skilful exploration of love and the buttoned-down social mores of early 1950s Britain. The story centres on the tragic realities confronting Hester Collyer (Rachel Weisz), a sensitive 40-year-old middle-class woman who has walked out of her passionless marriage for an intense but ultimately doomed affair with a dashing young former air force pilot.

Adapted from Terence Rattigan's original 1952 play, the 98-minute film captures the austerity and devastation of the early post-war years. It was commissioned as a contribution to the 2011 centenary commemorations of the playwright's birth.

Rattigan was spectacularly successful from 1939 until his stage work fell out of fashion in the mid-1950s. His better known plays, including *The Winslow Boy* (1946), *The Browning Version* (1948), *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) and *Separate Tables* (1954), are about complex and flawed individuals, often caught in unfulfilling relationships, who painfully discover the necessity to challenge claustrophobic social norms and be true to themselves.

The Deep Blue Sea is a sad, melancholic story. Set in London 1950, its title is a reference not just to the dilemmas confronting Hester Collyer, the central character, but all the film's key protagonists. The pain of war, scarcity and loss has left them going through the motions of life without really living.

All the characters are emotionally damaged, locked in a world still marked by the physical and psychological rubble of the blitz and a time when divorce was all but impossible and a divorcee subject to ostracism.

The movie begins with Hester attempting suicide and then proceeds via a series of flashbacks, recalling the past year and what led to her despair.

Hester's father is a dour protestant vicar and her husband, High Court judge Sir William Collyer (Simon Russell Beale), is just as sullen, though not so harsh. After falling in love with Freddie Page (Tom Hiddleston), recently returned from the front line, Hester can no longer stay with William.

Hester and Freddie's relationship is passionate but apart from their love-making they have little in common. After walking out of her marriage to live in Freddie's grimy working-class flat, she discovers that he cannot provide her with the love or intellectual depth she needs.

Hester is interested in art and poetry but Freddie, a decorated Battle of Britain fighter pilot, is not. Having never recovered from the war, he drinks too much and is mainly preoccupied with his former air force friends and golf.

Freddie lives for the moment, an approach that carried him through the war and allowed him to immediately respond to Hester's awakened passion. But having won her, he is incapable of developing a deep-going relationship. Intimacy sends him running to the pub and then either to ignoring her or angrily putting her down—trying to drive her, and the intimacy, away.

Hester is adrift in the deep blue sea—a world she does not know and one that frowns upon her decision to 'live in sin'. She knows that Freddie is not acting out of malice. He gave her all he could, but when he moves

out and forgets her, all she can think of is to try to stop the pain forever and so tries to kill herself.

The news of the suicide attempt compels William, who still loves Hester, to honourably agree to a divorce. Freddie, terrified, takes a test pilot's job in South America.

Hester realises that she must go on. She finds a spark of kindness and tolerance from her world-weary landlady (Ann Mitchell) and a struck-off doctor (Karl Johnson). Her choice, in fact, was not between one of the two men, but to live true to herself, no matter how immediately painful or pleasurable the results.

Terence Rattigan's plays, one critic has noted, constituted a "sustained assault on English middle-class values; fear of emotional commitment, terror in the face of passion, apprehension about sex." Davies, who reworked Rattigan's original play, cutting out most of the first act and changing its perspective to Hester, has made a compassionate, although not flawless, tribute to this legacy.

The contrasts between Hester's modest working-class existence with Freddie and her luxurious but passionless life as Sir William's wife are effective. Afternoon tea with Lady Collyer—her mother-in-law, who treats Hester with contempt—perfectly captures the claustrophobic English middle-class values. "Beware of passion," Lady Collyer warns Hester. "It always leads to something ugly."

The filmmaker's trademark recreations of early post-war Britain are generally effective. Symmetrical bookend shots of Hester then Freddie silhouetted against the window of the darkened flat as they reach up to the curtains are luminous, as is their first love scene, possibly one of the more sensual and artistic sex scenes in any recent film. The mandala-like image of the two figures intertwined is striking.

While these scenes linger in the mind's eye for days, other elements fail to emotionally and artistically mesh.

The Freddie Page character is not completely convincing—he is too unlike Hester, and the psychological impact of the war years on him is under-developed. An angry shouting match between the couple in an art gallery strikes a false note. A flash-back to the war years and a long tracking shot on Londoners sheltering in the tube during the blitz and singing "Molly Malone" feels mannered.

The Deep Blue Sea is Davies' first dramatic feature since *The House of Mirth* in 2000 and the long delay has no doubt had an impact. Aside from *Of Time and the City* (2008), his autobiographical cinematic poem to Liverpool, the filmmaker has been blocked for more than a decade by funding difficulties and the general lack of finance for serious cinema.

Although the division of labour between the sexes is no longer so rigid, and divorce is not the taboo that it was, *The Deep Blue Sea* and the issues it explores remain potent.

Six decades after the first production of Rattigan's work, Davies' film is an intelligent and sincere interpretation. It resonates because the underlying class tensions and emotional issues that drive the original play remain. The movie's closing shot is one of the more eloquent moments and it provides a sense of hope, and not just about Hester's immediate future. Daylight comes and life—with all its contradictions and possibilities—goes on.

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