# *Mothering Sunday*: A World War I film not at all about World War I

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The WSWS commented briefly on *Mothering Sunday* when it was presented at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2021. Now that the film is opening in movie theaters in the US, it is worth expanding on what was said.

*Mothering Sunday*, directed by Eva Husson from a 2016 novella by Graham Swift, takes place in the aftermath of World War I, but the war does not play the dominant role it should. On the contrary…

"Mothering Sunday" referred centuries ago in Britain to a day when, as one commentator explains, "it was considered important for people to return to their home or 'mother' church once a year. So each year in the middle of Lent, everyone would visit … the main church or cathedral of the area." It has no connection to the US-invented Mother's Day, although the establishment of the *latter* apparently spurred a revival of the *former* just prior to the First World War.

It was also often the custom on Mothering Sunday that children, primarily daughters, who had gone to work as domestic servants, were given the day off to visit their mothers and families.

In Husson's film, a housemaid and foundling, Jane Fairchild (Odessa Young), spends the morning of Mothering Day 1924 with her secret lover, Paul Sheringham (Josh O'Connor), the son of a wealthy family. He is engaged to be married to another woman (Emma D'Arcy), a childhood friend and daughter of his parents' friends. Paul is the only surviving son of three prominent families in the district. The other five have all died in the war. Paul's elder brother, one of those fatalities, was once engaged to the woman Paul is about to wed.

Mr. and Mrs. Niven (Colin Firth and Olivia Colman), Jane's employers, have lost both their boys. Mrs. Niven is shattered almost to the point of madness. Her husband attempts to carry on, going through the social motions. Firth's is the most convincing and touching performance in the film. Colman, bitter and glum without letup, is mostly wasted here.

The script by Alice Birch focuses on Jane and her musings about love, her future, writing (she already has ambitions) and so on. In the absence of her employers, Jane wanders around the large manor house in the nude for what seems like hours. The film's production notes assert that the nudity is "a rare moment of freedom for a girl who has—at that point—spent most of her life in service to others. The scenes had to convey a certain liberation." That prolonged nakedness represents a step in the direction of "liberation" for a poorly paid housemaid in a rigidly class-divided society reveals something about the outlook of the novelist and filmmakers.

We also see fragments of Jane's life as a celebrated, award-winning author in the 1980s, where the character is played by Glenda Jackson, and in the late 1940s as well, when Jane has a relationship with Donald (Sope Dirisu), a black man.

The approach and concerns of *Mothering Sunday* are telling. Once upon a time the pointless carnage of the war would have taken center stage in such a work. After all, the film's writer and director, following the novelist, have gone out of their way to imagine *five* young men from one small social circle having been killed in the war, and another who essentially becomes a *sixth* victim.

The three families have been devastated almost beyond repair. One would think that the dead and the character of the conflict in which they fell ought to take up a considerable portion of the filmmakers' attention. Whether the affluent, rural families would have challenged the official version of the war in 1924 is one

thing, perhaps not, but, surely, the contemporary artist is called on to do that. After all, a little water has flowed under the bridge by now. No hint of criticism, of protest, of anti-war sentiment? Nothing but a generally elegiac mood, which easily makes room for patriotism, for delusions about the young men having fought and died to defend Britain against foreign tyrants? That is not said explicitly, but, just as importantly, the *opposite* is not said.

This is a work ostensibly about the catastrophic consequences of World War I that takes no position on the war whatsoever, that, in fact, expresses little or no interest in the conflict. Not everyone has been as forthright as Lenin, who described the war's fundamental purpose as "the division of the spoils among the three principal imperialist rivals, the three robbers, Russia, Germany and England," but innumerable poets, novelists and filmmakers have expressed varying degrees of horror and outrage at the mass slaughter.

Husson seems largely oblivious to this. Rather, the director congratulates herself on the "opportunity to bring to the big screen the story of a 'Doris Lessing-esque' writer. To explore the fragility and power of sex, love and the impact it has on a creative female artist." What are the deaths of five young men, and millions of others, in a Great Power struggle for global domination against this?

Remarkably, Husson went on to assert that to "explore" the issues she refers to "in some sort of holy triumvirate composed of Alice Birch's impeccable writing, [producer] Elizabeth Karlsen's effortless charisma, and myself, is nothing short of an extraordinary privilege." Having included herself in an artistic "holy triumvirate," it does not appear that modesty is one of Husson's vices.

As for the "class divide" that supposedly "runs through" the story, this is simply another plot device, like the five deaths, which has little or no bearing on the events of the drama. As we see from her immense artistic and personal success later on, the easily "liberated" Jane has been able to overcome any social obstacles she may have faced.

The middle class self-absorption of the filmmakers is simply vast, and debilitating. The murderous war, class divisions, the turbulent state of British society on the eve of the great General Strike—all this counts for nothing. An apparently timeless portrait of "a creative female artist"—everything!