

Saltburn: The worm turns

Penny Smith
15 February 2024

Saltburn, directed by British filmmaker Emerald Fennell (*Promising Young Woman*), centres on an Oxford student from northern England who spends his summer break with his aristocratic friend on the latter's family estate. Despite setting off in an intriguing manner, the plot quickly degenerates into various forms of deranged sociopathy.

Saltburn opens on first-year student Oliver Quick (Barry Keoghan) wading through the foot traffic on the University of Oxford campus. Through his dorm room window, he quietly surveys the crowds mingling outside, his mood at odds with the buoyant atmosphere. We learn that the studious Oliver is a “scholarship boy” from the blue-collar town of Prescott in northern England. His first lesson is that within Oxford's philistine elite connections and cunning rank much higher than serious scholarship.

Oliver encounters the handsome Felix (Jacob Elordi), one of Oxford's many privileged progeny coasting semi-lucidly through college life. Felix is stranded with a flat tire so Oliver loans him his bicycle. They bump into each other again that evening in a student pub and Felix, grateful for the earlier favour, invites Oliver to join his table of raucous friends. So begins their budding friendship and Oliver's ambiguous infatuation with Felix and his hedonistic lifestyle.

Shortly before summer break, Oliver confides in Felix about his troubled family history—his parents' struggles with addiction and his dad's alcohol-related death. Felix is moved by the tragic circumstances and invites Oliver to spend the summer holidays with him at his family's country estate—an ostentatious, centuries-old castle known as Saltburn.

Upon arrival there, Oliver encounters his new friend's flakey relations, his beguiling demeanour and problematic background a source of morbid fascination and entertainment (and perhaps welcome distraction from their own relations) to Felix's family. Oliver

appears overwhelmed and out of his depth, or so it would seem.

The initial section of *Saltburn* is engaging enough. Although not particularly illuminating, the rendering of the snobbish Oxford elite feels organic and authentic. In one scene, for example, Oliver's essay reading is rudely cut short by the bored Professor Ware (Reece Sheersmith), who is clearly more interested in the suggestive flirtations and high-society connections of Oliver's peer, the obnoxious Farleigh (Archie Madekwe). In this dishonest, unpleasant context, the apparent timid underdog Oliver wins the viewer's sympathy and support.

Felix, Oliver's quasi-love interest, also has appealing qualities. Although his sheltered existence has made him spoiled and aloof at times, his candour and warmth toward Oliver place him somewhat outside his cynical social milieu (for which he will suffer later).

There are also some effective exchanges that illustrate the insular world of *Saltburn* in all its complacency and ignorance, especially those involving Felix's eccentric mother Elsbeth (Rosamund Pike) and her unwanted house guest Pamela (Carey Mulligan). For example, in this scene where the family is gossiping about Oliver's troubled parents:

Elsbeth: They probably don't have rehab in Liverpool. Everybody just goes to ruin, I suppose.

Pamela: Where is Liverpool?

Or this scene in the courtyard when Elbeth informs Oliver that Pamela was quietly ejected from the house earlier that morning:

Oliver: She did seem a bit lost.

Elsbeth: Ha! How very tactful. She's a complete limpet, the wettest of wet blankets. And, very hard to know by looking at her because she's so stylish. You'd think she was a riot to look at her, but there's absolutely nothing going on underneath.

This is the flavour of the general conversation, which, shallow as it is, marks the film's high point. From there, the story degenerates into contrivance and irrationality, as Oliver rapidly transforms from insecure underdog to Machiavellian master manipulator. His social and physical metamorphosis—something of a phoenix rising—follows an implausible and ridiculous story arc, further sensationalised by sado-voyeuristic elements that carry the plot into even more absurd territory. Murder and mayhem ensue.

At one point, in reflecting on his time spent at Saltburn, Oliver pompously refers to Felix as a “spoilt dog sleeping belly up. No natural predators,” a spiteful attitude that the film's complacent and cheerful tone twists into a shining virtue. *Saltburn* ends with the glorification of outrageous violence and the viewer is left feeling that the real innocent victims of circumstance here are the indolent aristocrats. The not-so-rich turn out to be just as foul or fouler than their “betters.”

This is the old canard of poet W.B. Yeats:

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

Saltburn surely marks a decline in perspective even over Fennel's previous feature, *Promising Young Woman* (2020), another nasty revenge story (feminist in that case), which the *World Socialist Web Site* described as “a deplorable work from every vantage point.”

That *Saltburn* can transform social reality into its

opposite is made possible by the filmmakers' subjectivist and wrongheaded assumption that the thrust of social conflict centres on the trivial desires and relations between individuals and not more fundamental issues bound up with class. *Saltburn* suggests a certain moral acceptance of the status quo, where the issue becomes not the fundamental legitimacy of privileges but their more even-handed distribution among the top few percent.

Such an outlook leads to a serious artistic disorientation, which explains why *Saltburn* can begin with promising ingredients of social satire only to collapse into the very thing it set out to criticise—the celebration of wealth and status at all costs.

A more penetrating look at the present state of social polarisation in the United Kingdom and elsewhere would point toward healthier social processes. A major upsurge of the class struggle is underway in the United Kingdom, and internationally, which stands in principled opposition to the political, social and moral decrepitude of the existing social order that *Saltburn* ends up paying homage to.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact