

The Deep Blue Sea

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue



Readers of a certain age may remember “women’s pictures,” those four-hankie weepies from the 1940s and ’50s that starred such luminaries as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in melodramatic tales of lone women and small-minded men. Celebrated British director Terence Davies has lovingly embraced the once-popular genre via an adaptation of the 1952 play *The Deep Blue Sea*, by the famed English playwright Terence Rattigan:

The film takes place in London in 1950. It tells the story of a melancholy woman, Hester Collyer (Rachel Weisz), who abandons her secure but passionless marriage to the distinguished jurist Sir William Collyer (Simon Russell Beale) in order to start an illicit affair with Freddie Page (Tom Hiddleston), a former RAF fighter pilot whose life has seemed aimless since the war ended.

While the original play offers a straightforward narrative and lots of first-act exposition, Davies—who is masterful with issues of memory and regret—reconfigures the story and infuses it with many flashbacks. Through these flashbacks, Davies attempts to explain what led the smart and attractive Hester to

abandon her good, loving, wealthy and respected husband for a man of little means who drinks too much and doesn't take his relationship with Hester as seriously as she does.

But instead of painting the characters in broad strokes—the husband as a stuffy Brit and Freddie as a philandering cad—the film employs sighs and glances to suggest that all the principal players, in their own small ways, are doing what they think is right for them at the time. There are no bad people in the film, just a trio of sad people whose needs collide—leaving emotional wreckage that rivals the bombed-out areas of the city that haven't been repaired since the Blitz.

Hanging over the film, of course, are the twin towers of sex and passion, suggesting that once Hester (the name may be a nod to *The Scarlet Letter*) samples the forbidden fruit of sexual satisfaction, she is hooked. Whether that satisfaction is bona fide love or a flame that would eventually be extinguished is left up to the viewer. But Rattigan, who was gay at a time when it wasn't acceptable to announce this publicly, undoubtedly knew a thing or two about the taboos of passion and sex.

The Deep Blue Sea employs images and music, along with a few of Davies's signature long tracking shots, to convey the emotions that Rattigan conjured up through language. Most poignant of these are a flashback to the London Underground in 1940, where a soldier sings "Molly Malone" as the bombs rain down above, and a pub scene featuring Jo Stafford's famous rendition of "You Belong to Me." The song plays as a sort of anthem, not only for the soldiers in battle but also for Hester, William and Freddie as they try to find their way.