

Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn* as a Cinematic Study in English Class Conservatism

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This article examines Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn* (2023) through the lens of English conservatism, exploring the film's portrayal of rigid socio-economic hierarchies and class stratification, and their interaction with British cultural institutions. Central to this analysis is the main character Oliver Quick, whose nefarious bourgeois aspirations of coveting the aristocratic seat of Saltburn, and whose antagonistic manipulation of the titled Catton family, serve as a potent symbol of the threat posed by the social ascendancy of British middle classes to the English upper classes. *Saltburn* depicts the invasion of upper-class circles by the plotting bourgeoisie, disrupting the natural order of property ownership and thereby triggering aristocratic class anxieties rooted in traditional and cultural conservatism. Drawing on media and cultural studies, *Saltburn* is analysed as a work that reinforces an ultimately classist status quo, resonating with hegemonic conservative ideals by endorsing anti-bourgeois sentiment through its villainization of the protagonist, Oliver. By engaging with the film's thematic, narrative, and aesthetic choices, this study seeks to uncover the broader implications of *Saltburn*'s Anglophilic core, positioning it as a cinematic reflection of conservative values enduring in British visual media.



Introduction

Saltburn, written and directed by the Academy Award-winning Emerald Fennell, follows the story of Oliver Quick (played by Barry Keoghan), an outsider from a modest background who becomes entangled in the lavish, aristocratic world of his wealthy Oxford friend, Felix Catton (Jacob Elordi). By the film's end, Oliver successfully manipulates his way into the Cattons's inheritance as their heir, orchestrates the family's downfall, and murders his friend Felix by poisoning, all to claim for himself their family seat, Saltburn. Oliver's deception of the Cattons involves a series of intricate lies: he claims his father has passed away, portrays himself as destitute, and leads Felix to believe he comes from a broken, drug-ridden home. In reality, Oliver comes from a comfortable middle-class family. Taking into account the film's unreliable narration from Oliver's point of view, *Saltburn* deliberately positions Keoghan's character as the work's villain figure and portrays the elite yet benevolent Catton family as his unsuspecting targets. In expressing its themes through the class dichotomy of 'the haves and the have-nots,' the film portrays, and even venerates, the opulence of aristocratic indulgence as it highlights the intrinsic social tensions linked to class in the United Kingdom. Oliver's betrayal of the established social order ultimately reveals *Saltburn*'s underlying conservative narrative, reinforcing a patrician belief in the sanctity of inherited wealth and portraying England's aristocratic class as sympathetic victims.

Part psychological thriller and part-black comedy, the film situates the aristocratic country house of Saltburn—the seat of the upper-class Catton family—as the central locus around which issues of class hierarchy, upper-class decadence, and traditional manifestations of 'Englishness' unfold. *Saltburn* fully embraces what Cannadine has termed the 'contemporary cult of the country house,' including a romanticised depiction of the old landowning classes as 'elegant, exquisite patrons of the arts, living lives of tasteful ease in beautiful surroundings' (1999: 4). Though the opening act of *Saltburn* was filmed at the University of Oxford, the majority of the film was shot in Northamptonshire with Drayton House serving as the stand-in for the fictional estate of Saltburn.¹ *Saltburn* inevitably finds itself replete with the bucolic aesthetics that have traditionally characterised Anglophilic interpretations of the English countryside's place in British culture. Set against the backdrop of an idyllic English summer, *Saltburn* incidentally encapsulates conservative notions of Englishness within its narrative:

¹ Drayton House is a Grade I listed country house located near the village of Lowick in Northamptonshire. Currently, it is owned by the Stopford Sackville family, more specifically, Charles Lionel Stopford Sackville. The estate has been in continuous ownership since at least the twelfth century CE, having transitioned through several prominent houses including the de Vere, Green, Stafford, Mordaunt, and Germain families, and ultimately, the Sackville family (Lewis 2024).

a pronounced emphasis on the hidden lives of the nation's 'dominant classes,' a fascination with hierarchical class structures, and a deferential reverence for the rural landscape and nostalgic ideals—the 'Deep' England on which national character has been formed and 'the ideal towards which it must inevitably return' (Mandler 1997: 2). This class-oriented idea of Englishness is explicitly tied to land ownership, familial legacies, and an implicit belief in the natural order of aristocratic rule over the pastoral landscape.

At the intersection of the English country house, romanticised renderings of upper-class bucolic life, and an engagement with traditional 'Englishness' lies *Saltburn's* attempted problematization of class divisions. The film navigates the often-fraught relationship between Britain's aristocratic elites and broader segments of the British 'masses' by engaging with the familiar tropes of Felix as the privileged prince, Oliver as the supposed pauper, and Saltburn as the prince's manorial birthright. Researchers such as Cannadine (2000) and Baucom (1999) have well-established both pastoralism and the English country house as emblematic symbols of the British upper classes in popular culture, allowing not just for a mythologising of English landscapes but a representation of the larger nation in the images of its countryside (Higson 1987: 5). As the Catton family seat, Saltburn accordingly represents the pinnacle of upper-class privilege, coveted by the class outsider Oliver.

The film's plot twist lies in Oliver's covert ambitions to claim Saltburn for himself and displace the Catton family as its owners. What initially appears to be Oliver's homoerotic fixation on Felix is revealed as a secret bourgeois obsession with the opulence afforded to Felix's family by their social class, which physically manifests in their country estate. Consequently, *Saltburn* avoids a conventional 'Eat the Rich' narrative despite its imagery of consumption, instead favouring an 'Absorb the Rich' approach, wherein Oliver is cast as a usurper and interloper disrupting the natural order of inheritance, to be later absorbed into the upper classes. Oliver is depicted as an overambitious social climber from the British middle classes, reflecting traditional, existential upper-class preoccupations about the 'nouveaux riches' or 'men of low standing' being inherently envious of their aristocratic counterparts and therefore 'anxious to displace their social superiors' (Stone 1985: 47).

In his monologue to Elspeth Catton (Rosamund Pike) before taking her life in the film's last act, an older Oliver confesses about her son Felix, 'I loved him... But sometimes I... hated him' (*Saltburn*, 2023). This admission summarises Oliver's betrayal of the sole individual who extended friendship and shelter to him during a presumed time of need. Contrasted with the relative patience and charity extended toward him, however

grudgingly, by the Catton family, Oliver is depicted as a vampiric leech, plotting to devour their possessions the same way he consumes Felix's seminal fluid from the latter's bathtub in one scene. By feigning friendship with and goodwill towards Felix, Oliver is presented as not only a birthright usurper but a social vampire, a parasitic pretender who has extensively masqueraded to acquire wealth. Oliver represents the industrialist, capitalist classes, eager to encroach upon the stable hierarchical world, and the continued dominance, of 'the landed gentlemen' in the British status hierarchy (Scott 1991: 94).

Saltburn is a film that appears to glamorise the lifestyle of the United Kingdom's aristocratic classes, presenting their land and property as the ultimate prizes for the less privileged classes. Similarly, Oliver's portrayal as the villain of the narrative, with the features of vampirism imprinted onto him, reinforces the Victorian concept of the bourgeois usurper. Oliver's social ascent, and desire to claim the seat and title that rightfully belong to the aristocracy, are cast as transgressions, framing him as a risk to the established social order. In this manner, *Saltburn* culminates in the aristocracy's gravest fear, where they are the victims of a 'social shock' weakening their position and leaving them 'vulnerable to interlopers' prancing about their supplanted property (Friedman and Reeves 2020: 332). This victimisation of the English upper classes and vilification of the middle classes in *Saltburn* is but one aspect of a stark conservative ideology embedded in the film's subject matter and narrative structure. For example, *Saltburn* maintains a keen intertextual relationship with the English heritage adaptation *Brideshead Revisited* (1981). While it pays homage to this work, *Saltburn* resists engaging in meaningful dialogue with its source material or cultural relevance, choosing instead to repeat, rather than reinterpret, its familiar themes and images of genteel English upper-class privilege. This is equally embodied by *Saltburn*'s fixation on the aesthetic value of the English country house, where the film reaffirms, rather than reevaluates, its beauty and symbolism. In analysing *Saltburn*, this article deliberately foregrounds the question of Fennell's authorial intent in the film's textual construction.

Relating to class, *Saltburn* can be interpreted as a counter-revolutionary film which implicitly condemns middle-class social climbing, the anxieties about which were historically sharpened during the Industrial Era, further amplifying the film's conservative strain. Rather than critiquing the private possession of obscene wealth and the power of class hierarchies, the film's concern lies with their abrupt, unorthodox transfer. These factors combine to make *Saltburn* a work that is conservative, or 'riveted in a continuing effort by established elites to generate confidence in the prevailing structure of power' while warning against its destabilisation (Eccleshall 1977: 62). According to Huntington, conservatism is a system of ideas employed to justify the established social order, 'no matter where or when it exists, against any fundamental

challenge to its nature or being, no matter from what quarter. The essence of conservatism is the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions' (1957: 455). This obsession with and reliance on established British institutions, such as the maintained rule of the 'propertied elite' (Scott 1991: 1), the pleasures tied to social pedigree, and the symbolic influence of the English country estate, flavours *Saltburn* with a cultural conservatism that goes unchallenged in its continued representation of inequitable interclass relations. This study draws extensively on foundational 19th-century ideological frameworks surrounding class, inheritance, and social order—conservative frameworks that continue to echo through British cultural production in the 21st century just as in the Thatcher Era.

Upper-class Englishness

In its opening act, *Saltburn* establishes itself as a film concerned with British class disparities. As a socially inept Oliver Quick treads his Oxford college quad, one of Felix's wealthy friends remarks that no one associates with Oliver because 'he's a scholarship boy who buys his clothes from Oxfam' (*Saltburn*, 2023). Felix responds with a light-hearted laugh but acknowledges the remark as snobbish. This exchange, which Oliver overhears, highlights both his acute awareness of his lower socioeconomic status among his affluent Oxford peers and Felix's recognition of the class-based scorn directed at him. From their crisp Received Pronunciation (RP) accents to their effortless familiarity with the Oxford tutorial system, Oliver differs significantly from his overtly upper-class peers in terms of speech, cultural capital, and social literacy. Despite being the supposedly bright outsider on scholarship, he is treated as suspicious, needy, and laughable. This reinforces the sense that Oxford is both anti-intellectual, anti-meritocratic, and even hostile to upward mobility. Oliver is framed as an unrefined outcast and appears to be penniless compared to his college peers. He is immediately presented as a resident pariah in the context of the film's larger social setting, prompting Felix to take pity on him and extend toward him an unexpected gesture of friendship. *Saltburn*'s opening scenes at Oxford depict the medieval campus as a 'distinctly, stubbornly, obstinately English' institution (Reed 2014: 66), a bastion of upper-class snobbery where charm is more valuable than cleverness, as Oliver learns during tutorials.

The aristocratic country house emerges as another beatific symbol of English heritage and historical continuity in *Saltburn*. According to Kim,

In postwar Britain, the country-house heritage effectively provided a symbolic language through which a desired ideal of national identity is reaffirmed and the solidarity of a national community is newly cemented. With its visual splendor and prominence and its richness of refined furnishings and art collections, the

country house becomes the most expressive sign of forever England in which Englishness, preserved immune from actual historical changes, is imagined as accessible. (2002: 4)

Following Britain's imperial decline after the Second World War, the country house emerged as a retrospective symbol representing the grandeur and sophistication of Old England. Kim continues to explain that this late twentieth-century 'cult' of the country house, to use Cannadine's term, stemmed from the requiring of a compensatory nostalgia for the past as a means of articulating the countryside's supposed 'cultural resistance against the rapid and rabid urbanization resulting from industrial capitalism' (2002: 11). The social class that held the 'wealth and glory of the English country house produced by English imperial history'—the aristocrats, nobility, and landed gentry, all members of the Old English elite—was naturally integrated into the cultural myth of the country house, becoming symbolic of nostalgia for a pre-industrial, pastoral England at its imperial peak (2002: 33).

Thus, the English country house has served as a tangible romantic and nationalist symbol facilitating the reconstruction of 'a true and whole England, in which the present and future are legitimized through the memory of a shared past' embodied by the estate—a vision of Englishness that is 'desirable,' 'exclusive,' and evocative of an era when aristocrats peacefully reigned over their lands (Kim 2002: 28, 30). As Zeng and Dai note, the country-house preservation movement that reached its height in Thatcherite Britain—arising from a 'post-imperial melancholia' triggered by imperial decline, regional devolution, migration crises, and economic recession—commemorated, in a 'politically conservative' effort, the country house tradition under the landed aristocracy as a symbol of a lost golden age (2023: 2–3). From the desire for this romantic myth of the English country house was born in heritage media the paradisiacal visual representations of Brideshead Castle, Howards End, Darlington Hall, Pemberley, Gosford Park, Downton Abbey, and now *Saltburn*.

A reverence for the English country house in *Saltburn* is evident through its prolonged, warm-toned shots of the Catton family estate and the surrounding greenery. *Saltburn*, in its capacity as a quintessentially English country house, functions as a romantic, neo-feudal symbol of aristocratic wealth and social pedigree, of everlasting summers and decadent living. The film consistently bathes the Catton estate in gilded light that flatters its architecture and lends the interiors and grounds a painterly quality reminiscent of portraiture by Gainsborough or Reynolds. The camera repeatedly lingers on manicured lawns, grand corridors, and polished stonework with a near-reverential stillness. Slow, gliding point-of-view shots aligned with Oliver's gaze reinforce a "museum aesthetic" presenting the mansion as an object to be admired.

Notably, despite the narrative turmoil Oliver unleashes, the estate remains entirely unscathed: there is no visual suggestion of architectural decline, disrepair, or gothic ruin by the end. The house endures in pristine form through the film's conclusion. This visual continuity underscores the film's ideological investment in the estate as a stable monument of aristocratic heritage, signalling an implicit conservatism in its attachment to the material endurance of elite social structures. The film's consistent use of warm lighting and a saturated, amber-gold colour palette reinforces an atmosphere of comfort around the estate. The sound design amplifies this aestheticization as orchestral swells, hushed ambient noises, and the soft acoustics of its cavernous interiors contribute to the estate's portrayal as serene.

Saltburn continually depicts a stereotypical illustration of Englishness synonymous with the English upper classes through the Cattons's wealth, social pedigree, and ownership of a vast country estate. In consequence, the film not only associates Englishness in its depictions with a ruling class also but with conservative sensibilities, given its non-critical emphasis on upper-class prestige and prosperity. *Saltburn*'s presentation of synonymy between Englishness and class, where English identity is 'intertwined' with social inequality and the upper classes, aligns with the conclusions of studies like Mann's which explore widespread perceptions of mainstream English culture (2012: 496). This portrayal of class hierarchies, commonplace in English heritage films and routinely criticised by film critics for being 'complicit' with the Thatcherite project for national unity (Monk 1995: 121), is central to *Saltburn*'s narrative. Monk, generally defensive of English heritage media's conservative undertones concedes that within transnational interactions with English heritage media, an Anglophilic engagement—especially from American audiences—has commonly constituted an aspect of audience reception (2016: 223).

Despite drawing heavily from the English heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s with their wistful portrayals of aristocracy and cultural Englishness, *Saltburn* minimally engages with their themes beyond recreating their imagery and visual aesthetics or alluding to them in dialogue. This stereotypical portrayal of upper-class Englishness in *Saltburn*, as an authentic or original form of English character, aligns with what Saleh posits is an identity and reality rooted in both whiteness and maleness (2021: 5). This is exemplified by the character of Felix and reinforced through the family's exclusion of his mixed-race cousin, Farleigh (Archie Madekwe). As can be observed, most of *Saltburn*'s servants are Black British or mixed race, and Felix treats the women with whom he engages sexually as interchangeable, available at his whim and easily forgotten once they leave his bedchamber. Fennell's film thus engages with a series of entrenched tropes characteristic of heritage media, contributing to the nationalist and conservative undertones permeating its imagery. According to Thompson,

furthermore, the ruling English elite have been ‘astute in inventing for themselves a cultural function as the guardians and chief embodiments’ of a popular version of English national heritage (2007: 20). The Cattons, likewise, are not simply wealthy, titled landowners but also custodians of an expansive collection of rare historical trinkets, statues, and paintings housed at Saltburn which transform the estate into a museum-like environment.

Early on, *Saltburn* designates its connection to English heritage texts and their adaptations, most notably *Brideshead Revisited*, when Felix reveals to Oliver that Evelyn Waugh drew inspiration for his country house novels from the Catton family and their estate. Felix remarks, ‘You know, a lot of Waugh’s characters are based on my family actually. Yeah, he was completely obsessed with our house...’ (*Saltburn*, 2023). As a result, the audience assumes that *Saltburn* represents the ‘original’ *Brideshead*. This notion is reinforced by the plot’s resemblance to *Brideshead Revisited* where a charming, aristocratic Oxford student invites his less privileged friend to his palatial country estate. *Saltburn*, like *Brideshead*, lies in a beautiful parkland and even ‘improves upon’ the enchanted botanical beauty of Oxford (Schönberg 1990: 86). However, *Saltburn* perverts the relationship between Felix and Oliver and transforms it into one of predator and prey, deviating from the amiable bond between Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte and instead evoking a more parasitic dynamic. While *Brideshead Revisited*, like *Saltburn*, ‘figures a modernist plot of inheritance as a case in which sexual ambivalence enables upward mobility,’ (Hepburn 2007: 239) the latter film heightens Waugh’s narrative of property dispossession by reimagining a scenario where Charles never cared about the Flytes, only *Brideshead*. In doing so, Fennell’s retelling of Waugh’s plot amplifies and exaggerates the disruptions to traditional patterns of inheritance that, as Hepburn notes, may jeopardise high class and status (2007: 240). Whereas Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* can be interpreted as ‘a comedy about social climbing narrated from the point of view of the social climber,’ (2007: 245) *Saltburn* is, conversely, a tragedy about social climbing narrated from the perspective of the social climber.

The setting of *Saltburn* between 2006 and 2007—which drew Tony Blair’s New Labour era to a Tory close—also introduces the abstract idea of the past, however recent, which guides the film’s thematic direction to evoke nostalgia. Notably, this period aligns with former socialite Fennell’s time reading English at Oxford, raising the question of whether autobiographical elements permeate the narrative.² According

² Emerald Fennell is the daughter of Theo Fennell and Louise MacGregor. Theo Fennell, an Old Etonian, is a renowned British designer of jewellery, having created pieces for high-profile clients such as Elton John and Lady Gaga. According to a report by British high-society magazine *Tatler* (Bystander 2021), Fennell’s extravagant 18th birthday party in 2003 featured a guest list that included dukes and duchesses, other members of the nobility, and prominent socialites.

to Higson, in the contemporary period, nostalgia is a ‘heavily mediated experience, manifested in the intense public re-cycling of narratives, images, sounds, characters and styles associated with the often recent past’ (2014: 121). This concept of nostalgia and recycled film elements is especially pertinent to *Saltburn*’s reflection on the recent past, another hallmark of English heritage media. Higson (1993) characterizes this practice as a ‘conservative’ reaction to Thatcherite modernity and postmodernity, describing it as a form of ‘patriotic escapism’ and an idealised reconstruction of a homeland that is both parochial and imperialist. This romanticised history conceivably evokes a sentimental, escapist distance from the harsh realities facing urban populations in post-Brexit Great Britain. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Britain’s post-2010 austerity policies deepened wealth divides while masquerading as fiscal necessity, disproportionately impacting the working and middle classes. Simultaneously, the resurgence of Etonian “Old Boy” political culture—encapsulated by figures like David Cameron, Boris Johnson, and Jacob Rees-Mogg—has effectively cloaked elite retrenchment in the populist language of Brexit-era nationalism.

Saltburn thereby projects enduring nostalgic or ‘classical’ fantasies of Englishness, reminiscent of Julian Fellowes’s *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015), a drama arguably eliciting conservative longing for a societal order where everyone ‘knows their place’ and portraying elitist views as redeemable through the depiction of well-meaning aristocrats (Baena and Byker 2015: 267). As numerous film scholars have done, English heritage media is often criticised for ‘sanitising, polishing, and commodifying the past’ in a way that aligns with the aspirations and values of the Conservative Thatcherite government (Byrne 2014: 4). At its core, as an arguably neo-heritage work, the film preserves the motifs of heritage media and with a refusal to subvert its associated convictions about class privilege and high status. Just as Byrne has observed that Fellowes’s ‘hierarchical and patriarchal’ *Downton Abbey* gained popularity as a heritage piece in the United Kingdom during a period of social unrest, fiscal crisis, and Conservative-dominated government (Byrne 2014: 5), *Saltburn* emerged in late 2023 primed for virality amid the instability of a Tory government riddled with resignations and popular dissatisfaction. Although *Saltburn* certainly deploys a satiric grotesquerie—unlike the earnest nostalgia that characterises earlier iterations of heritage cinema—these tonal fluctuations operate less as a strategy for genuine class critique than as a stylistic veneer that muddles the film’s politics. The portrayal of the Cattons’ world is often exaggerated to the point of absurdity, but the work’s irony, whether expressed through camp excess, smirking dialogue,

Privately educated at Marlborough College in Wiltshire, she subsequently read English at Greyfriars, Oxford, where, as noted by classmate Yossman (2023), she was part of a ‘rarefied social set’ of individuals with surnames such as Balfour, Frost, von Bismarck, Guinness, and Shaffer.

or hyperbolic performance, does not meaningfully disrupt its ideological framework nor does it facilitate thematic reflection or commentary on “Deep English” cultural identity.

The vampire Oliver

While this study does not aim to classify *Saltburn* as a strictly Gothic film, it would suggest that features of the Gothic are transposed onto Oliver’s character to allow for his villainization within a Gothic framework. The primary method of transforming Oliver into a Gothic villain is through Fennell’s vampirization of his character. This portrayal is epitomised during a clandestine late-night garden encounter where Oliver tells Felix’s sister, Venetia (Alison Oliver), ‘Lucky for you I’m a vampire,’ before engaging in sexual acts with her while she is menstruating (*Saltburn*, 2023). The script details that Oliver licks his fingers stained with Venetia’s menstrual blood before they kiss, lips smeared with it, and he then disappears under her skirt to perform oral sex while she bleeds (Fennell 2022). Oliver’s act of sexual exsanguination, aimed at seducing and manipulating Venetia, whom he later coerces into committing suicide, is not the only instance in which he literally consumes the bodily fluids of a Catton family member in his pursuit to possess their status and property. In a viral scene, following Felix’s act of masturbation in their shared bathtub, Oliver surreptitiously enters the bathroom to crudely consume the traces of Felix’s seminal fluid from the bathwater left in the tub. This appropriation or theft of their physical essence, specifically through the consumption of bodily fluids, is later echoed in Oliver’s proprietary takeover of the estate. Oliver’s consumption of blood and seminal fluid deliberately positions him as a figurative leech, parasite, and vampire, aligning with the Gothic tradition’s portrayal of the monstrous, soul-sucking Other. Although the film does not depict it, Oliver’s successful capture of Saltburn by the end leaves room for the audience to imagine the inevitable conversion of the estate into a grim Radcliffian manor haunted by the crime and sin of his usurpation. Moreover, the film’s viral reception, fuelled by its aesthetic allure and transgressive material, mirrors Fennell’s authorial strategy of using spectacle to obscure hollow class politics.

According to Butler, by the end of the 1700s, [“Vampire”] had come into wide circulation as a pejorative term for those who abused power: the true identity of the monster was now to be found by unmasking financiers and politicians’ who embodied imposture outright to prey upon victims (2010: 107). Butler goes on to explain that the word ‘Dracula’ in Stoker’s eponymous novel designates the ‘creeping process’ of invasion and corruption where, as a literary figure, Count Dracula shatters his form to reconstitute himself in new guises for unexpected attacks (2010: 108). Oliver’s vampiric

imposture is conspicuous in his ability to adopt false personas to manipulate the Catton family: he presents himself as the fawn-like orphan to Felix, the impoverished working-class outsider to the Cattons, the smooth-talking charmer to Elspeth and Venetia, and lastly, the ruthless invader to Farleigh. It is only in the last moments of *Saltburn* that Oliver's true nature is fully revealed to the audience: a brazen opportunist, unapologetically revelling in his triumph over the Cattons, dancing stark naked to a Sophie Ellis-Bextor disco track following their deaths. Oliver's vampiric monstrosity is further emphasised by an inherent 'constitutive inauthenticity' as the piece's sole true Other, enabling him to easily 'penetrate' the Cattons's private sphere (Butler 2010: 113, 118). Despite Farleigh's mixed-race American background, Fennell's narrative makes clear that Oliver's outsider status is more profound at Saltburn as he lacks the Catton blood that forever ties Farleigh to the family. In this way, Oliver's vampiric consumption of Venetia's blood and Felix's semen can be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to acquire the missing essence that excludes him from the Catton lineage, or an attempt to attain the physical element that could transform him into a legitimate member of the family's world.

For centuries, the vampire has served as an apt metaphor for the capitalist classes. As Boone observes, Engels condemned bourgeois Victorians as 'capitalist vampires' just as Marx drew a parallel between the working-class body, whose muscles are 'devoured by capitalists,' and the feminised victim, whose blood is drained by the 'undead factory owner' (1994: 88). Morrissette also contends that the vampire metaphor effectively illustrates numerous principles of Marxist critique and asserts that, in this interpretation, the bourgeoisie transforms into vampires that drain the value of the worker's labour to enrich themselves 'in much the same way that Stoker's vampire sucks blood from victims' to gain strength (2013: 637). In addition, Morrissette argues that factory owners often emerge as economic vampires, depleting the working class of their humanity as they, as capitalists, seduce their victims by casting a spell that generates a false consciousness, enabling them to 'feast on the blood,' or life force, of the impoverished (2013: 639–640). The bourgeoisie and the economically mobile upper middle classes have long been associated with vampiric qualities, a parallel readily evident in *Saltburn* as the audience discovers that Oliver comes from a well-to-do suburban area. Much like Lord Ruthven and his cohort of 'ambitious monsters' from John William Polidori's *The Vampyre*, who exploit gaps within a destabilized social order, Oliver as a vampire exemplifies a 'new class' of men poised to overturn the foundations of the British *ancien régime* (Butler 2010: 86, 89).

The script explicitly categorises Oliver as upper middle class, hailing from the picturesque small town of Prescott, which is characterised by 'beautifully kept gardens,

gleaming cars, [and] well-maintained houses,' where he was raised by sensible parents in a 'cosy' environment (Fennell 2022). It becomes clear that Oliver's obsession with the Cattons and Saltburn stems from insatiable greed, and perhaps homoerotic desire, rather than necessity, suffering, or poverty. After the revelation of Oliver's happy family life, he is shown to be a disagreeably bourgeois villain-protagonist whose motivations are rendered largely unrelatable to viewers, due to the absence of a sympathetic backstory. Moreover, as an outsider conquering—arguably colonising—a distinctly English edifice like the country house, Oliver's vampiric machinations resonate with the anxieties inherent in the Imperial Gothic tradition, as exemplified in works such as Stoker's *Dracula*.

The elements of homoerotic obsession in the relationship between Oliver and Felix—obvious in Oliver's professed 'love' for Felix, his envy toward the women Felix becomes involved with, and his secret consumption of Felix's semen—likewise invite an interpretation of Oliver as a Gothic Other in the film. Westengard states that transgressive sexuality has long been central to Gothic themes, with queerness refusing 'to remain strictly moored to the status quo' thereby mirroring the plot disruptions in early Gothic narratives where inciting incidents mark a 'departure from "normal" life' and immerse audiences in realms of the irrational, perverse, and supernatural (2022: 267–268). *Saltburn* parallels vampire narratives like *Dracula* in which homosocial bonding is a central theme, positioning Oliver as a repulsive figure embodying the sexual anxieties of Felix and Farleigh, as did Count Dracula. Just as vampires in the Victorian era symbolised societal fears—ranging from the New Woman and homosexuality to immigration, venereal disease, Darwinian science, and the perceived decay of traditional British values (Rosenberg 2000: 2)—Oliver also represents a similar threat to the established British social class order.

Oliver's role as a villain-protagonist in *Saltburn* is further reinforced by Fennell's use of unreliable narration from his point-of-view, which initially conditions both the audience and the Cattons to sympathize with him. Presenting himself as a working-class loner from a broken home, struggling to adapt to the posh world of Oxford, Oliver's façade deceives the audience just as it deceives the well-meaning Felix. Viewers are initially encouraged to interpret Oliver's narrative as a homoerotic love story gone awry, with the film opening on his monologue centred around his purported 'love' for Felix: 'I loved him. Of course! It was impossible not to love Felix. And that was part of the problem' (*Saltburn*, 2023). Only after Oliver's deception and conquest of Saltburn are complete does he fully disclose his true feelings toward Felix: 'I hated him. Yeah, I hated him... I hated all of you' (*Saltburn*, 2023).

Esslemont's recent study on the elements of Bosch's artworks in the film, particularly *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, explores how the colour palette, artistic inspiration, and visual aesthetics of *Saltburn* subtly transpose Bosch's figure of a beast, whose imagery is synonymous with the Antichrist, onto Oliver's character following Felix's murder in the hedge maze (2024: 175–176). Esslemont suggests that the depiction of Oliver in a bright red robe after Felix's murder parallels interpretations of the hooded, red-robed figure in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as a false Christ or Antichrist, symbolising the devil and his imposture. This interpretation positions Oliver as the human embodiment of the lust and deceit present in Bosch's triptych, positioning him as a Satanic manipulator 'playing the part of the lamb, taken in by the lions' (2024: 177). A moral parallel is established in doing so, positioning Oliver not as a flawed anti-hero but as a diabolical murderer. In the scene where Oliver poisons Felix in the garden hedge maze, Felix is notably dressed as an angel-winged fairy from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, embodying innocence and light, whereas Oliver appears as a changeling boy with horn-like antlers, suggesting trickery.

The film often frames the Cattons' generosity as part of a ritualised aristocratic performance, an expression of *noblesse oblige* rather than authentic empathy, yet it offers little to disrupt this surface. Their hospitality toward Oliver, however stylised, remains coded as graciousness, an openness that he strategically exploits. This framing is sustained through the ensemble's performances. Jacob Elordi plays Felix with a disarming warmth and emotional ease, traits amplified by the film's recurrent use of soft, golden lighting in scenes viewed through Oliver's admiring gaze. Felix is never cruel to Oliver; his manner instead renders privileged entitlement benign, even endearing, as he shepherds the socially awkward newcomer into the pleasures of *Saltburn*. Venetia's vulnerability is likewise foregrounded through Alison Oliver's performance. Her earlier self-destructive tendencies and her coerced suicide are shot with horror and pathos, positioning her less as a cruel socialite than as a tragic damsel in distress. Rosamund Pike's portrayal of Elspeth blends brittle glamour and cultivated charm with maternal attentiveness that the film treats sympathetically, underscored by her prolonged patronage of "Poor Dear" Pamela. Her death bed scene, where she is immobilised and bewildered, consolidates the Cattons' narrative positioning as victims rather than antagonists. Even Sir James's casual acceptance of Oliver underscores a baseline aristocratic hospitality. By the time Oliver calmly admits, "I hated all of you," the film has meticulously arranged the Cattons as unsuspecting, if deeply flawed, objects of pity rather than agents of harm toward Oliver or society at large.

Oliver's positioning as the narrative's monster-figure stands in stark contrast to the Cattons's patience toward those less privileged. This dynamic would not have carried conservative undertones were Oliver truly working-class or had the Cattons not been portrayed as redeemable benefactors to multiple individuals in need. *Saltburn* is therefore not a transgressive Cinderella story featuring an underprivileged anti-hero confronting despicable aristocrats. Rather, the film tells the story of the ascendant middle classes displacing, overtaking, and becoming the upper classes, the latter portrayed as vulnerable targets in contrast to Oliver's calculated ambitions. *Saltburn*'s audience is drawn into sympathising with the Cattons, who, despite being portrayed as charitable victims, represent in reality one of the least sympathetic social 'castes' in modern Britain, given the immense wealth and disproportionate political influence of England's titled aristocracy and the landed gentry, many of whom constitute the dominant Tory political elites.

Inter-class relations

When critiquing British status hierarchies, anti-bourgeois sentiment often targets the middle classes for aspiring toward the wealth and status that have traditionally been associated with the upper classes. This sentiment, primarily borne out of the upheavals triggered by the Industrial Revolution, stems from conservative ruling-class perspectives that have since persisted, viewing middle-class ambitions as a radical threat to the established order of minority social control. According to Walter Bagehot, an essayist from the late Victorian period, the aristocracy have lived 'in fear of the middle classes' whom they see as possessing a greater 'impetus' for self-improvement, commerce, and knowledge (2001: 88). The newly affluent middle classes—comprised of 'alien' financiers, 'swindlers,' and 'speculators' who rose within the City of London's business sector during and after the Industrial Revolution—therefore found 'no welcome' among the traditional aristocracy (Rubinstein 1977: 114). Glickman contends that these conservative views are a negative reaction to the idea of change as a disruption and that this form of English conservatism, driven by a trust in history's natural rhythms, has displayed its 'doctrinal element through the Tory tradition' (1961: 111–115). In the context of British history—particularly since the onset of the first Industrial Revolution, when power could be acquired through capital rather than resting solely on familial ties—the British bourgeoisie has functioned as one such 'disruption' to the natural feudal order of class hierarchies. This existential predicament lies at the heart of *Saltburn*, when read as a cautionary message to the upper classes about the disruptive presence of the bourgeois upper middle class to their aristocratic ways

of life. Considering the film's veneration of English heritage and Oliver's portrayal as a vampiric deceiver, *Saltburn* proves defensive of the English aristocratic elites, contributing to audiences' unsettling reactions to the final scene where Oliver dances naked around the former Catton estate.

Glickman argues that aristocratic hostility toward the bourgeoisie and the rising middle classes stems from the problem of property. Property, as a means of self-expression and status reinforcement, allowed the capitalist classes through their purchasing power to access privileges traditionally reserved for upper-class manorial life (1961: 136). Indeed, this problem of property possession lies at the heart of *Saltburn*, centring on the transfer of ownership—and of lordship—of the English country house and its associated symbolism. The middle-class villain of the narrative, transformed into the new owner of aristocratic property through his deceptive machinations, embodies upper-class concerns about displacement and loss of status in the face of the purchasing power and social mobility represented by Oliver's class in modern British history. This gradual infiltration of English institutions by the middle classes, whether based on capital or 'merit,' was in part facilitated by the British bourgeoisie's capture of national educational institutions like the public schools, Oxford, and Cambridge (Anderson 2007: 12). This shift allowed them to assimilate into upper-class systems of power through an exclusive education, a process that Oliver meticulously accomplishes in the film's first quarter at Oxford.

As formerly feudal privileges transformed into matters of private property rights and systems of taxation (Smet 2016: 15), the symbols of the English elite, such as titles and vast property holdings, no longer rested solely on blood. This is what Farleigh, a Catton by blood who was temporarily kicked out of Saltburn for alleged theft, fails to grasp at the party just before Oliver murders Felix. He pompously tells Oliver, 'This place.. you know, it's not for you. [Saltburn] is a fucking dream... This isn't a dream to me. It's my house. So whatever happens—I always come back' (*Saltburn*, 2023). Nevertheless, despite his direct connection to the Catton lineage and estate, Farleigh does not inherit ownership of Saltburn. He overlooks that Oliver's manipulation and duplicity, paralleling the aristocratic distaste for capitalist-driven socio-economic mobility, could realistically allow Oliver to claim Saltburn.

Oliver's deception of the Cattons and his usurpation of Saltburn are portrayed as premeditated, labyrinthine plots. This motif of the maze is introduced in the film's opening extended shot at the University of Oxford, where Oliver confusedly circles the Radcliffe Camera to reach 'Webbe College' (a stand-in for Brasenose College). The imagery of Oliver navigating a maze to arrive at his destination reflects a calculated,

circuitous approach to infiltrating the Catton family and seizing Saltburn. Felix's tour of Saltburn for Oliver reveals another maze-like environment as the estate's maximalist interior—filled with treasures like Henry VII's cabinet, a painting by Peter Paul Rubens, family portraits, and Shakespeare's folio—is unveiled in all its chaotic grandeur. In a subsequent scene, the camera lingers on a three-dimensional model of the Saltburn hedge maze which Oliver studies intently, showing his strategic contemplation of the estate's structure and budding plans to kill Felix. Felix's murder by poisoning then takes place at the very centre of the cloistering hedge maze, signifying that Oliver has reached his intended goal: the elimination of the current heir to Saltburn. The recurring imagery of labyrinths and mazes throughout the film suggests that Oliver's takeover of Saltburn was both methodical and inevitable from the beginning. With mounting anger and dread, Venetia confronts Oliver before her death, fully realizing his secret intent to orchestrate the takedown of her family:

I think you're a moth. I'm right, aren't I! Quiet. Harmless. Drawn to shiny things. Batting up against the window... Just desperate to get in. Well you've done it now. You've made your holes in everything. You'll eat us from the inside out... (*Saltburn* 2023).

The motif of a meticulous, labyrinthine, and pestilent infiltration is solidified in the final scene of the film in which the camera traverses, using extended shots, the intricate interior of Saltburn—a labyrinth in its own right—which culminates in Oliver's victory dance. This scene reflects his mastery over the estate as he navigates his newly claimed domain with ease.

Oliver's conquest of Saltburn undermines the potential for subversive or revolutionary perspectives on class privilege within an obviously 'class-bound, class-obsessed' nation, with deeply 'archaic' conventions, like the United Kingdom (Cannadine 2000). His relationship with the Cattons's wealth is defined by envy, desire, and obsession, rather than outrage or a sense of injustice. Although Farleigh is openly snobbish to Oliver, and Oliver does face a degree of class discrimination based on his status at Oxford (Panjaitan et al. 2024: 282), his subsequent murder of the Cattons is not framed as a justified revenge arc nor a form of resistance to their privilege. In spite of the class disparity, Oliver is warmly accepted by the Catton family up until the point when the lies he has spread about his background come to light. Moreover, the film does not portray the Catton family's wealth, or the opulence of the estate, as morally questionable. Consequently, the film does not investigate the mythology of the English country house, nor does it reflect

any supposed 'Eat the Rich' narrative which directly challenge wealth and class structures. Instead, the physical manifestation of upper-class English privilege neither burns nor is relinquished. Rather, *Saltburn* is merely ruled by a new lord, and the cycle of immense wealth resting in the hands of the few is perpetuated with a sense of distracted anti-intellectualism at best. This is bolstered by the film's ongoing reverence for aristocratic decadence, celebrating the Wildean pleasures of beautiful art and the accompanying excesses yet available to only the most affluent in society. *Saltburn*'s visual imagery draws inspiration from the artworks of Bosch, Gainsborough, and Caravaggio, utilizing their characteristic rich lighting and the aesthetics of maximalism to evoke the theme of excess. This luxury is further conveyed in scenes of Felix, Venetia, and Farleigh idling in the estate gardens and indulging in their choice of drugs and alcohol, and through Felix's continual attendance at extravagant parties.

As a result, *Saltburn* tells the story of old ruling-class English institutions falling under the reign of the British bourgeoisie. Upon the film's conclusion, a middle-class Oxford scholarship boy ultimately claims a noble title and expansive aristocratic property in a narrative curiously reminiscent of Baroness Margaret Thatcher's own rise. It is, as a result, challenging to view *Saltburn*'s treatment of class—along with its implications for pervasive class inequality—as anything but conservative. Fennell's consistent, counterrevolutionary refusal to interrogate the question of disproportionate status-driven power suggests that Oliver's murder of the Cattons was not an act of revolt nor rebellion but rather a surrender to the rigid, hegemonic structures of class stratification still existing in Great Britain.

Conclusion

As Plato asserts, the British cultural imagination and its values not only possess popular appeal, but they evoke a reverence for and fascination with representations of English culture which, like the British class system, are 'decidedly elitist' (2010: 1, 4). By drawing on the demands of traditional memory, the film reinforces the conservatism and elitism embedded in the stereotypical English cultural imagination and its values, allowing for a romantic notion of the past to survive as a 'fetish' of itself (Baucom 1999: 19). This conservative ethos is achieved through a whitewashed and archetypal conceptualisation of English identity, the portrayal of the middle classes as antagonistic from the ruling-class point of view, and the framing of upward social mobility as a radical or destabilizing threat by the masses to long-standing elite minority rule.

As a result, *Saltburn* distinguishes itself from comparable recent class satires—such as Mark Mylod’s *The Menu* (2022), Lone Scherfig’s *The Riot Club* (2014), or Yorgos Lanthimos’ *The Favourite* (2019)—that challenge or subvert hegemonic class ideologies in mainstream society. These dominant ideologies may encompass hetero-patriarchal gender norms, wealth inequality, and, more internally, the Conservative Party’s unbalanced influence over the political landscape of the United Kingdom, as Earle (2023) concludes. *Saltburn* does not simply reprise the heritage aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s; it engages highly with elements associated with neo-heritage cinema in contemporary British screen culture.

Recent discussions of post-heritage cinema have noted a turn toward films that distance themselves from the conservative or nostalgic associations of classic heritage texts through “overt” engagements with gender, class, and sexuality (Monk 2011: 23). While *Saltburn* adopts many of these stylistic tendencies in its cheeky irony—dressing itself in the visual language of critique through transgressiveness—the narrative ultimately reiterates the very hierarchies that the post-heritage mode often seeks to complicate. The film therefore encapsulates a broader tendency in contemporary British media such as *Downton Abbey*, *The Crown* (2016–2023), or *The Gentlemen* (2024) to stage class “disruption” as aesthetic entertainment while reaffirming the desirability and durability of elite worlds. Even in its overt presentations of queerness and homoeroticism, *Saltburn* treats these experiences as means to Oliver’s end rather than genuine aspects of a complex identity. As such, given its lack of interpretative discourse on class privilege, *Saltburn* remains in the public imagination as, first and foremost, a thrilling and highly sexualized cinematic romp.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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