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Psychiatry in movies

Aftersun, directed by Charlotte Wells (2022)

Aana Shah

In a story that's told through reflections, lingering shots and conversations that are held chiefly through a camcorder, the loneliness seeps through.

Aftersun is the story of a father and daughter duo on a family trip to Italy, close enough in age and appearance to be mistaken for siblings – an 11-year-old who's growing up too soon and a 32-year-old father who's surprised he made 30. Calum's (played by Paul Mescal) melancholia makes its way through the screen, whether it's in the way he stiffens when his daughter Sophie (Frankie Corio) talks about being bone-tired, or when he half-smiles, half-jokes, about 'never seeing 40' or as his shoulders heave through loud, guttural, lonely cries. When he tells his daughter 'You have time', the emphasis subtle, Blur plays *Tender* ('Tender is my heart/[...]/Lord, I need to find/Someone who can heal my mind').

The movie is told through flashbacks from Sophie's perspective. As she learns to navigate the waters of adulthood – portrayed quite literally at one point – she also seems to sense her father's sadness. She's not unintelligent – she knows about death, and suicide, and schools her father on Cleopatra's apparent death by suicide. She rubs his back as a way of forgiveness when he hurts her. She lets him pull her into his Tai Chi and his dance, happy that he's happy.

But the shadow of a parent's depression tends to cast itself over the child. Sophie finds herself reassuring her father about his money. She pulls a cast of strangers into singing 'For He's A Jolly Good Fellow' for her father, as he looks on. She tries to unselfconsciously pull him into a public karaoke event and wilts visibly when he refuses. It's not always so bad: she can tell him everything and know he accepts. He listens and tells her he'll be there for her. But there's also parentification that's going on. Sophie wrestles with socialising and love and all the trials that come with adolescence, and although she does not seem to recognise it, the burden of making happy memories seems to lie just as heavy on her shoulders.

We tend to focus a lot on maternal mental health and its effect on children. The focus on a father's mental health sometimes blurs, but we know just as much how important it is to a child's upbringing. This is not to criticise Calum, who you can tell is trying his hardest, even after his mood gets the better of him in the penultimate scene. But as he leaves his daughter unattended and disappears into the waves, a sharp sense of worry hits the audience. In *Blue Black Permanent*, a Margaret Tait work that is referenced heavily, a mother similarly meets her macabre end. When the movie pans to Calum back and asleep, there's a sigh of relief, but it's Sophie who's putting the comforter over him and giving up her bed for him.

For Sophie, these flashbacks are a core memory, and the final scene – where an adult Sophie (Celia Rowson-Hall) imagines him in flashes and embraces him, telling him how much love she has to give him – is her corrective emotional experience.

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