March marks the 100th anniversary of Germany’s final offensive of World War I, which sent 74 divisions of German troops against the Allied lines over a 60-mile front, preceded by a five-hour artillery barrage of a million shells. More than half a million men died on both sides.

The days up to, and including, the start of the battle are portrayed in the recent film adaptation of R.C. Sherriff’s classic World War I play, Journey’s End – which premiered in 1928. Adapted by Simon Reade and directed by Saul Dibb, the movie has all the familiar features you’d expect of a piece about the “Great War”: a frontline dugout, mud everywhere and a foolhardy raid on a German trench during which seven men die.

As with many films of this oeuvre, there are brave young officers and there are good-humoured working-class soldiers – but it is left to a heavy-drinking army captain, Dennis Stanhope (played by Sam Claflin), a former captain of “rugger” at his private school, to reflect on the horror before leading his men out to die.

Despite its age, Journey’s End retains its appeal as evidence of what the war was “about”. It’s a fixture of GCSE syllabuses and is taught alongside the so-called trench poets – Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon – as an anti-war statement, and sometimes as a subversive and unusually “modern” reminder of the waste of life that war inevitably brings.
The idea that Journey’s End is anti-war – a “classic play about the futility and slaughter” of 1914-1918 as The Guardian’s Peter Bradshaw put it – appears a good deal in reviews of the latest film. It’s perhaps what we now expect of plays and films about the Great War. If such entertainments make us cry, so much the better.

But it’s doubtful whether Sherriff aimed to create a fully fledged pacifist drama. He originally planned to write a novel focusing on the relationship between Stanhope and a new young recruit, James Raleigh (played by Asa Butterfield) – a school friend who loves him. It’s an intense relationship which made it onto the stage and is symptomatic of how, throughout the play, it’s the interactions between the soldiers that primarily interest Sherriff.

The resulting play ran for 594 performances in the West End, 485 on Broadway and was a worldwide hit, including in Berlin. Sherriff had apparently found the “perfect pitch” at which to represent the “tragedy” of 1914–18 for 1920s audiences who were more used to drawing-room comedies than plays set in a grimy dugout.

Yet Sherriff’s fondness for small realistic details – his characters spend a lot of time eating meals – did not please everybody. There was criticism of his reluctance to tackle wider issues, as well as of his depiction of an army officer as an alcoholic.

Where the play scored, and has done so ever since, was in its ability to bring together, in an acceptable way, key elements of an emerging mythology: the idea of the “lost generation” of young men. It’s a piece which celebrates the heroism of young, well spoken, officers, often giving them a kind of film-star glamour.

But even here the dominant tone of Journey’s End the play is grief rather than anger at their loss. They’re young men for whom ideals of gentlemanly conduct, teamwork and good sportsmanship learned on the public school playing fields are the key. “Sticking it” as the dashing Stanhope comments, “it’s the only thing a decent man can do”.

A gentleman’s game?
This relentless focus on the young officers killed prematurely has long been recognised as the play’s strength but also as its Achilles heel. It’s an emphasis of which the makers of the new film seem to have been acutely aware and which they try to resolve by making the play’s two working-class characters, Mason (Toby Jones) and Trotter (Stephen Graham) more sensitive than Sherriff envisaged them.

Even in the socially stratified 1920s, the social composition of the play prompted raised eyebrows. In 1929 the left-leaning New Statesman hated Journey’s End calling it “an orgy of the public school spirit” and asked: “Was the war really only a slaughterhouse for athletes and a school for gentlemen?”

The Irish dramatist, Sean O’Casey complained that Sherriff had turned the conflict’s “bloodied vulgarity ... into a pretty, pleasing picture” of polite young officers talking by candlelight. Journey’s End, as O’Casey saw it, was sickly, sentimental and “false”. The “yells of agony” had been “modulated down to a sweet pianissimo of middle-class pain”.

Possibly O’Casey was jealous – his own play about working-class combatants, The Silver Tassie, was nothing like as successful when it opened in London in October 1929. But he was right that Sherriff was not really concerned with the wider picture or the rights and wrongs of the war. Journey’s End extols the bravery of the young officers who died damaged but uncomplainingly, even gloriously, representatives of an older England of cricket and chivalry. There’s no room for anyone below the rank of lieutenant.
The new film, despite its power – and, as film critic Mark Kermode noted, its determination to be “cinematic” by opening things out – can’t but help retain this emphasis.

It’s fitting that a film about the 1918 spring offensive has been released now – but it’s perhaps a comment on our times that it’s this one. Perhaps our collective view of what some persist in calling the “Great War” might better have been served by a film adaptation of The Silver Tassie or Peter Whelan’s The Accrington Pals (1981) or Frank McGuinness’s Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme (1985). These were all plays created from a desire to democratise representations of the war experience.

Watching Journey’s End is still an intense experience, but it isn’t an anti-war play – it’s a piece by a fairly snobbish writer whose views were old-fashioned in 1929. The fact that for many people it still encapsulates what the war was like is in stranger still.