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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

*EVELYN WAUGH'S DEPICTIONS OF THE DECLINE AND FALL  
OF VILE BODIES INTO A HANDFUL OF DUST*

by

Allison Elaine Nazimek

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillments of the Requirements

For the Degree of

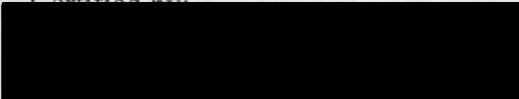
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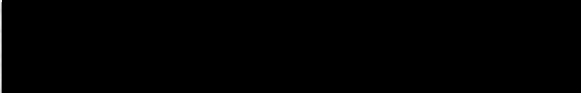
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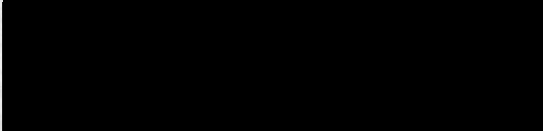
  
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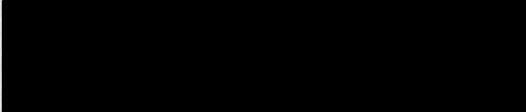
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Thesis Abstract

In the years in between the two World Wars, Britain witnessed many changes in the behavior and ethics of the emerging younger population. There were positive advances, especially in the education of truant students and the development of experimental schools, such as Neill's Summerhill (Graves 209-11). There was also an emergence in public smoking, drinking, and heightened hemlines symbolizing modern times and a freer youth (Graves). These changes exhibited a shift from more rigid, Victorian ideals, yet, the real problems remained in the excess activities in which a wilder crowd indulged. Alcohol abuse became a concern, as the *Practitioner* stated that alcohol was "a repressant, not a stimulant" and the youth "lost their power of manly self-control" (Graves 119). The "Bright Young People" threw a plethora of "amusing" parties and partook in harmless games (Graves). They play-acted at being arty Bohemians, even though many never painted or produced art (Graves 124). Through this menagerie of wild parties and freeing behavior of both men and women, not all were sharing in the joviality. An anonymous surgeon during this time revealed "the great degradation and demoralization of these wild dances" (Graves 119). The Church did everything to discourage these public pleasures and stated "thousands of young people are being brought up without religious instruction and without religious examples" (Graves 113).

This perceived deterioration of a moral code was viewed as problematic, as it fostered a generation who lived by his or her own code and existed independent of anyone else.

Waugh's novels Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, and A Handful of Dust address the problems involved with a British society who indulges in mind-altering, riotous excess and pretends to be people they are not. Waugh's characters are caricature-like representations of the amoralistic younger generation. For example, instead of going to church on a Sunday which would be expected, the younger generation "rambling clubs" would instead ride the new London Underground extensions, or "Metroland" from place to place (Graves 114). It is no coincidence that one character who makes her presence known through all three novels happens to be Lady Metroland, a character known for her parties. His characters play-act at being happy, while their inner conflict is evident in their continual partying and excess drinking; ambivalence towards other characters, especially in death; costumes and masks to hide their true selves; and forms of escapism through suicide and disappearances. Here Waugh presents a Britain that is neither happy nor malcontent. He is critical of their bad behavior, and in order to express this criticism, Waugh employs what Freud calls "tendentious jokes" (Freud 107). A tendentious joke has a purpose in the telling of the joke, and that in the case of Waugh, he writes hostile tendentious jokes through his satire (Freud 115). Waugh's criticism of this amoralistic lifestyle reflects the criticism from the Church. Waugh saw, as the Catholic Church did also, a decline in social and moral awareness and a development of the "new Disillusion" (Graves 128). In his novels, Waugh's critique exposes how a crazed, amoralistic existence eventually leads to the downfall of the partier and those around him or her.

In order to express the point that Waugh's hostile tendentious jokes are intended to present a harsh criticism toward the amoralistic lifestyle of the younger generation, the thesis will be separated into three chapters, one for each novel to be addressed. Each novel deals with how the amoralistic lifestyle of the characters is a catalyst for their downfall. In Decline and Fall, the point will be made how Paul Pennyfeather's subsequent decline was reliant on the irresponsibility of the Oxford Bollinger Club's partying and the immoral business practices of Margot Beste-Chetwynde/Lady Metroland. It will also address forms of escapism in terms of how characters disappear intentionally from their responsibilities. It will also deal with how the public school system is not fostering proper conduct, but blindly allowing disrespect to elders and more frivolity in games. In Vile Bodies, it will be stated how the excess partying, drinking, and a fast-paced life results in an incoherent, confused, and jaded younger generation who flourishes on pretending to be people they are not rather than facing themselves. This play-acting functions a type of mask on the characters that hides their true selves and their amoralistic behavior. In A Handful of Dust, it will be shown how existing entirely for one's own pleasure results in the downfall of the innocent, for example, John Andrew and Tony. The drive for parties and social outings becomes less frivolous and fun, and becomes caustic and cruel, especially Brenda's callous disregard of Tony's presence in her life. All of the novels center on the issue of how living for one's own pleasures and how this ambivalence towards others can be harmful. Each novel deals with different problems of abusing excesses.

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VILE BODIES INTO A HANDFUL OF DUST

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in British Literature

by

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Montclair, NJ

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## Introduction

The "Great War," now known as World War I, broke out on July 28, 1914 and ended on November 11, 1918, after an armistice was signed between the two opposing sides (Graves 1-3). As a result of the war, a new division emerged and split the British population, a separation not relating to economic or class issues. According to Roberts Graves and Alan Hodge, both Oxford University graduates who lived through the First World War, the new separation consisted of the "Fighting Forces," those who actively fought on the war front, and "the Rest," literally meaning everyone else, including the government (Graves 3-4). They comment that propaganda, which played an active factor in transporting news during the war, was not very reliable at verifying the facts about the war front. Anti-German propaganda flew through Britain, and while the Rest began a new wave of Church-going in reaction to the frightening news of barbaric Germans, the Fighting Forces mocked this attitude, as they alone knew the truth behind the embellishments (Graves 4-6). Once the end of the war came and these two new dissimilar sectors merged at home, the period labeled "The Careless Twenties" began (Graves 6-7).

Graves and Hodge concur that once the war ended, the general consensus of the masses was "to cleanse" the old world, not to build a new one (Graves 5). As Britain began to recover from wartime activities, life began to go back to normal; rations and food-coupons slowly became abolished, lights were allowed at night, the spy-craze ceased, and other restrictions put in place because of the war were lifted (Graves 20). Yet during this time of peace, a new generation blossomed, one who partied to the extreme, drank alcohol as if it were water, danced until their feet pained them, and drove motor-

cars so fast that speeders became the new type of criminal. This generation, dubbed the “lost generation” by Gertrude Stein, was meant to include the young survivors of World War I (Graves 198).

Martin Stannard writes, “The word ‘craze’ itself evokes much of the atmosphere of those times. Anything that was ‘modern’ was news; anything that was modern and indulged in by the rich and smart was especially good news” (177). The younger generation consumed themselves with a fast-paced life that included new vogues of fast cars driven by unlicensed drivers, as well as costume and cocktail parties. This was an age of jazz and of a new society, which thrived on the fast-paced style of living. Women were smoking in public, newspapers relished printing and denouncing the ghastly episodes of the wealthy and London’s youth, and slowly the “Bright Young People” of Mayfair began to reflect the disillusioned younger set, particularly in Vile Bodies. There was also the decline of church going. Members of the clergy and others expressed distress at the lack of religious affiliation of the younger generation, and criticized their constant need for parties and distraction, stating that nothing good would come of the frivolity (Graves 102-04). Through all the chaos and rapid changes in society, literature developed as well, adding another dimension to the hurried transformation of British life.

Martin Stannard reiterates the psychological effect the Great War had on the people of England. Continually, according to Pericles Lewis, “English modernism has often been understood as a reaction to the carnage and disillusionment of the First World War and a search for a new mode of art that would rescue civilization from its state of crisis after the war” (Lewis 109). Stability was questioned and mistrusted, caution was neglected by the younger generation as a rebellion against maturity of the elders through

“their reckless drinking and impulsive liaisons...their fast cars and parties represented a refusal to grow up” (Stannard 154). Stannard writes “These two factors – the romantic rejection of caution and the adventure of young marriage in a society consisting almost exclusively of older couples – were undeniably important to Waugh” (Stannard 154). Even though Evelyn Waugh is not a typical modernist writer, he delivers his caustic satire by commenting on these detrimental psychological after-effects of war. He creates a world in Decline and Fall where most aspects of Paul Pennyfeather’s life are turned upside down and he is forced to dwell with farcical characters who lie and behave amorally. In Vile Bodies Waugh overtly expresses the detrimental effect of a fast-paced society on the younger generation of his time. Finally, in A Handful of Dust, he expresses the problems of young marriage and the continual immorality of human beings. Waugh is writing during an age of modernism, yet through his satire, it is the modern world at which he is poking fun.

In defining modernism, Lewis states that “‘Modernism,’ ... is also a period concept. In its broadest sense it refers to art and literature since Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert, but in a more restricted sense it applies to work produced between the two world wars” (Lewis 96). He continues by stating that “Finally, the term modernism is generally used today to describe all experimental literature in English of the first half of the twentieth century” (Lewis 96). Waugh as a writer is certainly not a modernist, as he eschews the “dry and narrow” aesthetics of modernism and concerns himself “with their superficial characteristics, often in an openly parodic fashion” (Allen 319). Waugh did write in between the two world wars, and his confrontation of modernism was through parody, “as a method of emphasizing his own cynical and skeptical position”

(Allen 320). Through his own blend of modern aesthetics and bold writing, Waugh's dynamic satire emerges. In order to portray appropriately his distaste for society's appalling behavior, Waugh employed satire, "the ancient mode of critique that describes all society's flaws without remorse. Satire aims to instruct through a hyperrealistic portrayal of this world" (Lewis 230). Waugh believed that "to point to the absence of 'essential rectitude' and to 'spiritual inadequacy' indicates the critic's certainty that art has a moral basis; artistic character *is* moral character" (Wykes 57). Waugh's characters demonstrate this absence of moral rightness and the problems that occur because of the lack of morality. This is the root of his tendentious jokes.

In order to understand Waugh's humor, the intent of the jokes must be identified. Waugh's humor relies upon what Sigmund Freud defines as tendentious jokes, or, jokes with a purpose (Freud 107). Waugh's humor can further be defined as what Freud calls hostile tendentious jokes, due to the nature of the aggressiveness of the commentary Waugh employs (Freud 115). Waugh is said to have believed that "the artist must not only translate but communicate" (Stannard 142). Waugh used hostile tendentious jokes to translate the debauched, harried lifestyle of the younger generation of London for the reader, and to communicate the deplorable nature of the Bright Young People. By throwing away any attempt at veiled humor, Waugh throws a beam upon the disturbing nature of the younger set, and explicitly urges society to take a closer look at where life is heading and at what cost. Waugh's characters suffer tremendously, yet render no real emotion at their atrocities. His tendentious humor allows the reader to react to the characters' failings and problems, while the characters themselves remain unfeeling. The reader laughs because of the satire, but when one endeavors on a more thorough

interpretation of the texts, what is discovered is Waugh's agenda: to laugh at present day behaviors. Michael Gorra writes that "Waugh's comedy can make any cruelty delightful rather than troubling, so long as it comes off with an imperturbable insouciance, absolutely unruffled by that chorus of champagne bottles" (Gorra 206). However, what makes Waugh's humor troubling is this lack of concern and excess, especially when one understands the nature and agenda of the tendentious jokes.

In order to fully explore Waugh's hostile tendentious jokes and their harsh criticism toward the amoral lifestyle of the younger generation, the thesis is separated into three chapters, one for each novel to be addressed. Each novel deals with how the amoral lifestyle of the characters is a catalyst for their downfall. In Decline and Fall, Paul Pennyfeather's decline results from the Oxford Bollinger Club's irresponsibility and the immoral business practices of Margot Beste-Chetwynde/Lady Metroland. The novel continues to address forms of escapism in terms of how characters disappear intentionally from their responsibilities as well as focusing on how the public school system is not fostering proper conduct, while blindly allowing disrespect to elders and more frivolity in games. It also addresses the issue of how a lack of a solid identity and moral compass aid in the decay of society. In Vile Bodies, the excessive partying, drinking, and a fast-paced life results in an incoherent, confused, and jaded younger generation that flourishes by pretending to be people they are not rather than facing themselves. This play-acting functions as a type of mask on the characters that hides their true selves. The mindlessness of people and the blatant disinterest characters have in others are also catalysts of the decaying moral code. In A Handful of Dust, the characters who exist entirely for their own pleasures cause the downfall of the innocent. The need for parties

and social outings becomes less frivolous and fun, and becomes caustic and cruel, especially Brenda's callous disregard of Tony's presence in her life. Alienation and isolation arise when characters cease relating to others and start to exist for their own purposes. All of the novels center on the issue of living for one's own pleasures and how this indifference and cruelty towards others can be harmful. Each novel deals with different problems of abusing excesses in the Modern era after World War I. Together, these problems are the subject of Waugh's earlier satire.



## Chapter 1 – Decline and Fall

Evelyn Waugh's first novel, Decline and Fall, published in 1928, chronicles the actual decline and fall of the protagonist Paul Pennyfeather from a typical, nondescript student at Scone College to schoolmaster at Llanabba Castle to his eventual incarceration in prison. Paul's losses and the events that lead to his demise are tragic and unfortunate, yet somehow Waugh manages to weave a story full of bombastic characters and witty dialogue that elicit humor. Decline and Fall begins to introduce the problematic behavior of people in England after the First World War. The novel contains numerous satiric moments regarding the strife of the characters and appalling behavior that amuses and alienates the reader.

Freud states that in order for jokes to be pleasurable, "Their function consists from the first in lifting internal inhibitions and in making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered inaccessible by those inhibitions" (Freud 160). The technique of jokes and joke work, as Freud explains, consists of "a choice of verbal material and conceptual situations which will allow the old play with words and thoughts to withstand scrutiny of criticism" (Freud 159). It is through this manipulation of writing material and words that Waugh is able to construct his satire and thereby creates humor in places where humor might not have existed before. Through satire, a joking criticism is possible. Waugh satirizes numerous people and experiences in the novel, including education and religion, but what is mainly highlighted is "the morals and outlook of 'smart society'" (Cook 70). Waugh's comedy centers on his stripping down of once inaccessible sources of humor. In the case of Decline and Fall, he examines religion, morality, and identity.

### I. Immorality and Chaos through Paul Pennyfeather

Paul's appearance as the main character in this story is only due to what Waugh considers the "unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness" (Decline and Fall 164).

The novel focuses on the "mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather" and calls the persona in his place a "shadow" (Decline and Fall 163). In other words, "Waugh is interested in Paul only so far as he can use him to demonstrate what the world is like, what people are like" (Wykes 60). Paul is a tragic and trivial character, and it is only through his unfortunate circumstances that any notice is given to him. According to Martin Stannard, "Paul became the prototype of the central *naïf* in all of Waugh's prewar novels, a mirror upon which experience is reflected, a man of few emotional reactions, exploited and controlled by a corrupt world" (Stannard 164). Stannard's statement fits with the entire tone of the novel. Boredom, lack of morality or values, and a blatant callousness towards other characters run rampant and are necessary for Waugh's tendentious humor to emerge. Paul Pennyfeather would be a person of no importance if his life were serene and happy. This idea elicits the question why it is important to focus only on the tragic. Daniel Robinson aptly addresses the focus of tragedy:

Suffering, indeed, is not funny, but Waugh's "sufferers" do not visibly suffer. Secular life has emptied them of their spirituality so that they are indeed "shadows"...Indeed, Waugh's book is meant to be funny, but what Waugh finds so funny is that we are laughing. (Robinson 83)

Indeed, what is tragic is not typically humorous, yet in order for Waugh to present his attack on modern society, the reader must laugh at the unfortunate situations, then determine why these situations are not normally supposed to be funny.

Paul helps to reveal the problem that exists in the split in identity and the refusal for any reconciliation between the parts. As Graves and Hodge mention, England did

encounter a division in the mentality of its people, and that division is portrayed through the characters as incredibly problematic. The novel as a satire utilizing hostile tendentious jokes brings to light the absurdity of the split and the demand for a reunion in the population. Paul's shadow, for instance, is the Paul chronicled throughout the novel, unless he is in residence at Scone or with his friend Arthur Potts. Paul is not a whole character. The life of Paul Pennyfeather ends on the day that he is unjustly removed from Scone and thrust into the chaos of Llanabba Castle. Waugh writes, "Llanabba Castle, with its sham castellations and preposterous inhabitants, had sunk into the oblivion that waits upon even the most lurid of nightmares" (Decline and Fall 162). Paul is forcibly removed from his stable existence and thrust into a nightmare, thereby creating the first split in identity in the novel that needs to be reconciled. David Wykes writes, "In theory, Decline and Fall should be the portrayal of a nightmare...a happy book about a hellish world" (62-63). It cannot be a happy book; there is too much discord and inner conflict within each character, giving the novel an unstable feel.

## **II. Lack of Identity**

The nightmare that Decline and Fall rests in, characters' lack of complete identity, generates the disquieting tone of the novel. For example, no one knows the real Philbrick, as he tells a different story to each character. He can become anyone he wants, yet he is also unsettled, as he has no stable spot to exist. He is constantly on the run. Captain Grimes also has a sense of detachment as he continually refers to himself in the third person, rarely saying "I." Certain characters behave in any way they choose because of this lack of a whole self. At Llanabba, Paul is immediately introduced to Grimes and Mr. Prendergast, two other masters at the school. Grimes, a character based

on a real-life master Waugh knew at Arnold House, is considered to not be a gentleman and is constantly “in the soup,” or having problems (Stannard 112). He is the first example of the problems of this lack of solid identity.

Waugh presents to the reader the problems if the lack of identity cannot be resolved through Grimes mock suicide in reaction to Dr. Fagan, who reveals to Grimes the immoral and unethical part of himself. Grimes is a self proclaimed immoral man, yet never blatantly acknowledges this part of his personality. It is only when Dr. Fagan begins to bring to light Grimes’ failings that he is able to recognize them. Grimes speaks to Paul and Prendergast about Dr. Fagan, “But now I’ve lived with that man for a week, I feel quite different. I feel half ashamed of myself all the time” (Decline and Fall 143). Waugh deliberately includes the mention of Dr. Fagan’s tendentious jokes as an obvious parallel to what Waugh is expressing in his writing. Grimes remarks that Dr. Fagan is “always laughing at me in a nasty kind of way and making me feel small” (Decline and Fall 142). In a similar manner, satire, as a type of humor meant to convey a message, has the same function in the text as Waugh employs it to present his tendentious jokes. Waugh pokes fun at the poor manners of the characters and overtly makes a mention of this purpose by allotting the job of telling the jokes to Dr. Fagan.

This issue of Grimes’ lack of a full identity is extended to his continual “death” and “resurrection” moments. According to Stannard, “Grimes assaults the modest conformity of domestic life” (Stannard 169). What affects Grimes the most is the feeling of repression (Decline and Fall 264). He does not feel as if he can fully be happy if he conforms to dictates not by his choosing. He cannot be completely happy and content, as he is constantly at war with his whims and societal rules, and therefore always tries to

reinvent himself. He does not fit with societal rules of behavior. Stannard continually writes, "Waugh developed Grimes into an unmistakably Bergsonian protagonist" (Stannard 168). Grimes connection with Alexandra Bergson from Willa Cather's 1913 novel, *O Pioneers!*, makes clear the problematic, unresolved identity in Grimes. Jinghua Cao explains the Bergsonian identity crisis:

"[Alexandra Bergson] endowed with both "masculine" and "feminine" traits and having a personality that is independent, self-assertive, and directed towards self-fulfillment, she defies prevailing cultural standards of feminine behavior, soars above the domestic roles traditionally assigned for women, and succeeds in satisfying both her expansive needs and dependency needs." (Cao 1)

In connection with Alexandra Bergson, Grimes does embody characteristics that do not fit seamlessly the cultural standards of the time, which make him that much more dynamic and amusing. Grimes is "self-assertive, and directed towards self-fulfillment" and is ignorant to the wants of anyone else around him. Waugh takes this selfish behavior a step further in his satire by introducing Flossie and Grimes' first wife as women who are left in the dust of Grimes' "deaths." The tendentious humor allows for amusement in Grimes "deaths" and "resurrections," yet the object of the humor is Grimes' lack of successful assimilation in society.

Mr. Prendergast is another character whose difficulty in defining a solid identity eventually leads to tragic consequences. Prendergast, another master at Llanabba Castle, was once a clergyman of the Church of England when he began to experience his doubts, as he calls them (Decline and Fall 38). These "doubts," as Prendergast states, have caused him so much mental anguish that he hasn't been happy since. He says, "*I couldn't understand why God had made all the world at all...but what I couldn't see, and what I can't see now, is, why did it all begin?*" (Decline and Fall 38-39). Robinson writes,

“Prendergast is a parody of the modern spiritual man because he symbolizes the secularization of religious life” (81). Grimes and Prendergast begin to lose their focus once they begin to question larger issues that they cannot explain nor have control over. Grimes questions the purpose of human beings and Prendergast questions the purpose of the world. Both questions are directly tied to the state of some people in the aftermath of the First World War. After mass death and destruction and with religious belief in doctrine, many began to question the purpose of existence, similarly to Grimes and Prendergast. The hostile tendentious joke is that “Waugh builds a completely secularized society for the novel that is clearly defective in order to point out the defects of his own chaotic, increasingly secular society” (Robinson 81). Neither Grimes nor Prendergast are able to resolve their inner questions, and both characters consequently never become stable. Recognizing the parallels between British secular society at the time and Grimes and Prendergast’s dilemma results in the knowledge of how failing to answer satisfactorily self-meaningful questions can hurt individuals in a population.

### **III. Problems in Education**

The ridiculous actions by the Bollinger Club and real clubs during the time present a socially relevant, tendentious joke. Readers would laugh at the ridiculousness of the Bollinger Club, and then recognize that they are actually laughing at Oxford and Cambridge students and intellectuals. At Scone College, the reader is introduced to the Junior Dean, Mr. Sniggs, and the Domestic Bursar, Mr. Postlethwaite, members of the Bollinger Club, whose violent, raucous meeting cause the membership to be suspended at regular intervals (Decline and Fall 1). In reality, “eccentric” clubs such as the Bollinger Club existed at Oxford and Cambridge (Graves 112). For example, at Oxford, there

existed the “Oxford Railway Club, formed to popularize the pleasure of drinking on trains at night” (Graves 112). Waugh’s connection to real clubs at elite universities would have been known to British society when the novel was first published. Waugh is satirizing the gentlemen’s clubs at Oxford and Cambridge through his creation of the Bollinger Club. This “gentleman’s club,” as it might be referred to, is ironic in name, as the members are hardly gentlemen and thrive on the disorder and disarray they bring to others as they destroy personal possessions. The club is also suspended at regular intervals because of the members’ destructive actions. For example the club is suspended after the members stoned a fox to death with champagne bottles (Decline and Fall 1). Waugh’s tendentious joke reflects the absurdity of the gentlemen’s club, the pointlessness of their actions, and the members of the clubs. As a member of the Bollinger Club, destruction is rewarded, and the more costly the damage, the better (Decline and Fall 2-3). This first section of the novel is prophetic of Otto Silenus’ remarks relating humans to monkeys; the behavior of the Bollinger Club, the elite members of Scone, is very reminiscent of wild monkeys and chimpanzees.

Paul Pennyfeather, a third year student at the college, is mistaken for a Bollinger Club member and consequently punished for crimes he did not commit (Decline and Fall 4). His judges and executioners happen to be the actual members of the club and feel justified in allowing him to take the blame. Mr. Postlethwaite, caring only about appearances states, “We have the prestige of the senior common room to consider... We must at all costs avoid an *outrage*” (Decline and Fall 6). Mr. Sniggs, in a statement that reveals the insensitivity towards the innocent involved, states, “It’s Pennyfeather – some one of no importance” (Decline and Fall 6). Paul is accused of being involved in the

destructive activities of the Bollinger Club, because his tie closely resembles the pale blue and white of the club's tie. He is then expelled because of this mistake (Decline and Fall 5-7). Paul's situation elicits humor through Sniggs' and Postlethwaite's statements. Both are more concerned with preventing a scandal, and therefore can allow innocent Paul to function as their club's scapegoat.

The leaders of the school care nothing for others, as indicated in Sniggs' remark about others' possessions, "It was a lovely evening. They broke up Mr. Austen's grand piano, and stamped Lord Rending's cigars into his carpet..." (Decline and Fall 3). This obvious disrespect towards others' personal possessions extends to religion as well, as Sniggs states, "It'll be more if they attack the Chapel...Oh, please God, make them attack the Chapel" (Decline and Fall 3). In order to continue with their path of immorality and destruction, order and peace cannot exist; therefore, Sniggs begs for the Chapel to be attacked by the members of the club. These institutions are targets of tendentious humor. As Freud notes, the focus of a joke can be religious or educational institutions and the people who stand for them, typically institutions that are highly respected (Freud 129). Waugh creates caricatures of Oxford professors who wish to destroy chapels and objects of great value as envelopes to present the humor. These professors function as messengers of the joking because they are unexpected envelopes. Professors should thirst for knowledge and learning, not crave destruction and chaos. This unexpected use of professors as joking envelopes effectively presents Waugh's satire. There is double joking; the professors as the modes of destruction and the sacred objects that are the targets. The professors, the pursuers and protectors of knowledge, encourage the



destruction of sacred objects. The satire employed reveals the problems in the institution of education and the lack of sanctity for revered objects.

One would generally not question the intelligence of professors and other scholars, yet the above mention of the Oxford intellectuals' quest for destruction allows for this interrogation. Dr. Fagan makes the point about the professors in the novel: "but then you know what scholars are – inhuman" (Decline and Fall 23). This idea of inhumanity is startling, as Waugh uses the intelligence of the professors to question the idea of moral or ethical judgment. This point is reinforced in the novel through the disrespect the young boys of Llanabba have towards the masters, as well as the callous actions towards the scholars at Scone. A purpose of tendentious jokes, criticism of people in high positions of power, functions as a "rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (Freud 125).

#### **IV. Religion as Tendentious Humor**

Religion and morality are tenuous ideas in the novel. Prendy has a desire to be religious, but he cannot lead, so his function as a religious, and perhaps possible moral, leader never comes to fruition. Grimes, in contrast, is a very dynamic character, but is too self-serving to care about what others do. On the occasion of his impending marriage to Flossie, Grimes seems spiritual in expressing a fate that is predetermined. Yet this mood is very contradictory for Grimes, since he usually relies more on his status as a public-school man to determine his next path in life, not religion. His self-serving attitude does not fit with this new religious persona, thereby eliciting tendentious humor through the presentation of two Grimeses. The joke pokes fun at Grimes' situation and his present acknowledgment of a higher being. He is calling to God to help him, yet

religion never mattered to him previously because someone else would step in to set him on his feet. Now that Grimes' fate is in his own hands, he begins to recognize a possible God to intervene. Freud asserts, "Other jokes, which are in the same sense cynical...attack religious dogmas and even the belief in God" (Freud 136). The attack on Grimes and religion is interconnected, as the joke is that religion is only relevant once man cannot do for himself any longer. Grimes cries out in agony "“Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! That it should come to this!”" (Decline and Fall 132), yet previously Waugh depicts a Grimes who is blatantly ignorant of religion or moralist ways. Waugh demonstrates this ignorance in his drawing portraying Grimes relating to Paul Pennyfeather all his misdeeds and problems. In this picture, Grimes speaks to Paul while facing a picture of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. It is only once Grimes is faced with the shackles of marriage that he recognizes his past limitations as an amoral character. He addresses Paul and Prendergast with much emotion, "you see a man standing face to face with retribution. Respect him even if you cannot understand. Those that live by the flesh shall perish by the flesh. I am a very sinful man" (Decline and Fall 133). Grimes acknowledges his immoral past, but asks for respect in his current situation. He requests respect from the other two men, but has done nothing to warrant this respect. He overly embellishes his speech, and since he is a character who lives only for his pleasures, the reader cannot take him seriously. This apologetic moment is humorous as Grimes is not sorry for his past misdeeds; he is sorry that he has to marry Flossie in order to get out of his troubles.

Another parallel Waugh makes with Grimes and religion is his uncanny, and very uncomfortable, association as a Christ figure. Robinson refers to Jerome Meckier who

concludes that “Waugh exposes the senselessness of modern society through religious parody: the immortal Captain Grimes is a parodic Christ” (Robinson 81). As a joke technique, this connection can be considered a form of “double meaning arising from the literal and metaphorical meaning of a word” (Freud 39). The chapter “The Agony of Captain Grimes” is very similar to “The Agony in the Garden” in Luke 22, Matthew 26, and Mark 14. In the Christian religion, after the Last Supper in which Jesus ate with his twelve disciples, he removed himself to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to God that his burden of impending crucifixion would pass from him. In Decline and Fall, Grimes cries to God and wishes that his life didn’t have to come marriage, ““Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! Why didn’t I die in that first awful home? Why did I ever hope I could escape?”” (134). This uncomfortable connection to Jesus Christ is part of the satiric humor Waugh employs in order to force his readers to think. This connection Grimes makes to Jesus’ impending crucifixion and marriage is a tendentious joke. The reader can recognize the bizarreness of Grimes’ analogy comparing marriage and crucifixion. This is an absurd parallel, yet Grimes is a character known for his embellishments and rejections of anything going against his personal pleasures. He dislikes the idea of marrying Flossie, so reinvents himself as a martyr in a dramatic sense.

Prendy is a representation of someone who is attempting to regain a better hold on religion. He becomes the Chaplain at Blackstone Gaol where Paul is being held. There Prendy tries to bring religion to the prisoners, yet here is where Waugh presents his darkest tendentious joke of the novel. An insane prisoner beheads Prendy, a disturbing parallel to John the Baptist who was also beheaded for his beliefs. This insane prisoner who sees violent visions of God speaking to him exhibits a stronger, more forceful

version of religion than Prendy's, which is why insanity triumphs. Earlier in the novel, the Vicar at the sports at Llanabba comments, "I have noticed again and again since I have been in the Church that lay interest in ecclesiastical matters is often a prelude to insanity" (Decline and Fall 91). This explains why the prisoner eventually loses his sense of reality while waiting for the Second Coming and kills Prendy. What is being poked fun at are individual perceptions of spirituality without proper religious guidance. During the 1920s and 30s, people were hostile to organized religion, but were in desperate need to spiritual guidance. The emergence of Yoga, Buddhism, and the "Oxford Group" Christian revivalist movement did little to present one solid form of religious doctrine for people to follow (Graves 191-93). Waugh is attacking the lack of organized religion in the British population as well as the new forms of spirituality presented during this time. This section's tendentious humor reflects an attack on "dogmas of morality and religion" through the dual extremist versions of religions and "people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions" (Freud 129). In fact, it is the Chief Warder, Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery, who placed the tools of murder in the prisoner's cell. A warder witnesses the unstable actions of the prisoner, holding a Bible in one hand and a piece of wood in the other, while muttering and pacing in his cell (Decline and Fall 243). Sir Wilfred misreads the situation. He claims that the prisoner was once a carpenter and required the tools of his trade. He provides the tools for Prendy's murder, falsely assuming that carpenter's tools would rehabilitate the prisoner (Decline and Fall 244).

#### **V. The Absence of Morals**

Even though self-centeredness wins out in the end for most characters, proper moral conduct does try to push through when Paul has the dilemma whether to accept the

20 pounds from Mr. Digby-Vaine-Trumpington, the person who committed the crime at Scone that Paul was accused of. The money was suggested as a peace offering, yet Paul's moral dilemma is whether to accept the money or not. Paul's problem is that he wants the money and needs the money, but morally feels unable to accept the money with a clear conscience. He states, "there is honour...It is the quality that distinguishes the gentleman from both the artist and the aristocrat. Now I am a gentleman...I just can't take the money" (Decline and Fall 54). Paul can be commended here for his determined stance to uphold his honor as a gentleman, yet he is never able to enact this decision, as Grimes, the one who does what he wishes at all times, takes the liberty to write Potts back accepting the money. Waugh pokes fun at the uncertainty in life, or *carpe diem* mentality, due to the self-righteousness of the action. It does not matter if Grimes' decision is right or wrong. This is a selfish assertion of Grimes, one Freud calls "immoral," but the recognition or decision process is considered humorous, even if a decision is not made (Freud 130).

Grimes is a "public-school man" who behaves as he wants, no matter who is effected, and who believes that he will always land on his feet (Decline and Fall 31-32). For example, he mentions to Paul that he is going to marry Flossie, one of Dr. Fagan's daughters, but only when he lands in the soup again, then he "shall play that as my last card" (Decline and Fall 28). The absurdity in stating that marrying Flossie would be a last resort is amusing, but only to the extent that the reader sees it as a last resort for Grimes. It does not matter to Grimes if he is using Flossie as a means to an end. He is someone who is constantly used to being shuffled off to the next destination, no matter

what he does, and therefore it is of no consequence for him to consider using another person in his quest to again land of his feet.

These degenerate deeds done by masters of schools extend to Paul's encounters at Llanabba Castle, where he witnesses firsthand the disrespect the young students have towards the teachers. Prendergast makes a point to tell Paul the reasons why the boys laugh at his wig, and both men use skewed logic to justify the disrespectful action. Paul states that the students would find something else to poke fun at if not Prendy's wig, while Prendergast becomes bizarrely martyr-like when stating, "I daresay it's a good thing to localize their ridicule as far as possible" (Decline and Fall 46). Neither master will address the problem of the boys ridiculing one of the masters. The problem can either be that neither man cares enough to correct disrespect and ridicule, or that they have no solution to the issue and consequently cannot address it. Paul's friend Arthur Potts writes in a letter to Paul, "It seems to me that the great problem of education is to train the moral perceptions, not merely to discipline the appetites" (Decline and Fall 52). Waugh's tendentious humor in this section states that it is not enough to provide rules and regulations for the young boys to follow; they need to understand why certain behaviors are morally better than others are. Paul and Prendy identify the root boys' joke, and the reader laughs along as well in this revelation. However, the tendentious nature of the joke is in the knowledge that through the boys' joke, Prendy is being ridiculed. No one corrects the boys' disrespect, thereby allowing the ridicule to continue. Here lies the solution to Silenus' commentary on the mechanical nature of people. If one understands the whys of the becoming process, then the mechanical nature falls away and understanding emerges.

## VI. Self-Centeredness, Escapism, and the Mechanical Nature of Man

Connecting the issues of a lack of morals and identity, the problem of self-centeredness and existing for one's own purposes becomes too much for certain characters. Instead of facing their problems, they leave. Eventually this develops into Grimes' own decline and fall. His inability to take responsibility for his actions requires him to announce his engagement to Flossie in order to secure funds from her father (Decline and Fall 125). As a result, the separation of self that Grimes embodies becomes evident in his excessive lamentations to Paul and Prendy. He begins to express his notions on the futility of human existence and the division of lives. He states, "As individuals we simply do not exist. We are just potential home builders, beavers and ants" (Decline and Fall 134). Grimes expresses his thoughts on how human beings can't be individuals and can't follow their own path. Grimes begins to state how life is divided between two houses, the one you grow up in and the one you make with your future spouse. Because Grimes is very self-centered, he rejects the idea of having a future as a husband and a father, yet begrudgingly accepts the inevitable, "We can't escape, try how we may" (Decline and Fall 133).

At Egdon Heath Prison, Grimes attempts an escape, and is pronounced dead when a body is not recovered. The Chaplain states, "I tried to console him and reconcile him with his life, but things are so difficult; there are so many men to see" (Decline and Fall 170). The Chaplain's statement reveals Grimes' problems with his self. It can be assumed due to Grimes' continual disappearance/rebirth acts that he will continually try to gain some footing and sense of his life, but he can never be successful and content unless he can merge his wild, immoral side with a more stable side. He winds up in

prison once he lands in the soup again, but instead of facing the fact that he constantly gets into trouble and now has two wives, he leaves his problems as they are and goes off to start again.

Just as escaping problems is a satisfactory answer for Grimes, so there seems to be no hope for the younger generation to emerge with better morals. The scenes in Scone and Llanabba Castle involving the masters and the pupils lead to very little learning and moral development. The masters and the boys are simply people who function and exist without concern to anyone else. Waugh continues this tendentious joke in Vile Bodies and A Handful of Dust. It is the surface that matters, and the content or substance of anything is not seen as pragmatic. Paul assigns his students an essay during his time at Llanabba and tells the boys that “there will be a prize of half a crown for the longest essay, irrespective of any possible merit” (Decline and Fall 45). The irony of this essay assignment is that the topic is on self-indulgence, and therefore the longest essay would be the most self-indulgent. The assignment fosters self-centeredness in the guise of a project meant to keep the boys quiet, yet is reflective of the characters’ self-centeredness. The purpose of the assignment fosters nonsense and worthlessness, which is exactly the problem with the characters in the novel: their lack of substance.

Professor Silenus, who is probably the only character interested in teaching and who in fact is not an actual professor, relates the behavior of humans to monkeys, indicating an anti-evolutionary process in manners and thoughts. He states, “Do monkeys require houses?” as he comments on the atrocity he built for Margot Beste-Chetwynde (Decline and Fall 160). Mindless animals that exist and do not have the higher order thinking patterns as humans do, the monkey-like image of people reinforces



the notion that people are behaving any way they see fit and without thought to the consequences, like the Bollinger Club and Grimes. The Welsh band for instance, who speaks with jumbled words, “slaved at their mouths, which hung loosely over their receding chins, while each clutched under his ape-like arm a burden of curious and unaccountable shape” (Decline and Fall 80). They are portrayed as the most animalistic, monkey-resembling characters; however, they have more of a moral code than the rest of the characters, as they refuse to play religious music in light of Margot Beste-Chetwynde’s blasphemous smoking (Decline and Fall 106).

Silenus’ point about the mindless and self-centered nature of people can be seen when Paul encounters the dwellers of Llanabba for the first time. He witnesses the following conversation:

Another boy came in.  
 “What do you mean,” said Grimes, “by whistling when I told you to stop?”  
 “Every one else was whistling,” said the boy.  
 “What’s that got to do with it?” said Grimes.  
 “I should think it had a lot to do with it,” said the boy.  
 (Decline and Fall 21)

It does not matter to the boy if he is told to stop the action of offense. The only relevant point is that he continues whistling because others are whistling. Even though a figure of authority requests that he cease the whistling, he cannot stop because no one else has. This is a nonsensical answer, yet “the rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality is deep-going and long-lasting” as seen in the tendency of schoolboys (Freud 154). Because there is no other valid reason other than everyone else is whistling, humor is elicited because of the lack of a logical answer. Humor is also generated in the boys’ rebellion; their whistling is an example of the undisciplined immorality, also seen in the

ridicule of Prendy's wig. At a later point, Grimes continues on this self-serving point by stating, "I can't quite explain it, but I don't believe one can ever be unhappy for long provided that one does just exactly what one wants to and when one wants to" (Decline and Fall 40). Grimes' point is to state that no one else matters, only oneself, an ideal Grimes does embody throughout the course of the novel. It is, however, very contradictory when Grimes decides to marry Flossie. He does not want to, but makes the decision based on his difficulties at the time. It is this decision that makes him incredibly unhappy and causes his subsequent "suicide" to escape.

It is within the walls of King's Thursday, Margot Beste-Chetwynde's home, that Waugh makes the strongest commentary about the mechanical nature of people and the problems that arise because of it. While Stannard indicates that the book is not meant primarily as a social satire, and that the house party scenes were meant as "padding" in the novel (Stannard 164-65), one can hardly ignore the strong social commentary of these scenes. Professor Silenus, the architect of the modern construction of King's Thursday, makes a strong, dynamic presentation to Paul, a parody of Hamlet's famous soliloquy:

What immature, self-destructive, antiquated mischief is man! How obscure and gross his prancing and chattering on his little stage of evolution! How loathsome and beyond words boring all the thoughts and self-approval of this biological by-product! this half-formed, ill-conditioned body! this erratic, maladjusted mechanism of his soul: on one side the animal, on the other the inflexible purpose of the engine, and between the man, equally alien from the *being* of Nature and the *doing* of the machine, the vile *becoming*! (Decline and Fall 160)

Silenus presents the most accurate account of the struggle man faces every day battling the double sides of his nature. He rails against the disturbing mechanical nature of human beings as he reflects on the modern reconstruction of King's Thursday, a once physical monument to the Tudor age in England. The years in between the two world

wars were considered the “machine age.” “The chief aim was agreed to be a general spread of social contentment by organizing industry to increase the standard of living of the common people” (Graves 208). Here Waugh uses tendentious humor to point to the problematic separation of self and how that lack of identity throws others into chaos. Silenus comments quite strongly on this separation, calling one side animalistic and base in instinct, and on the other, the process of becoming of what we will be regardless of a higher being or the machinery. Tim Armstrong writes that “the culture of technology implies the loss of freedom, or the offering of freedoms which are regulated and illusory (167). This forced infusion of industry in the Modern era did not create a happy, cohesive population; it generated a loss of identity.

In the novel, “contemporary society is under attack” (Cook 75). The settings, characters, and events of Decline and Fall reflect the passing of a timeless era, and the emergence of a confusing, modern era of which people cannot make sense. Characters lack of identity after World War I and comically struggle to deal with everyday life. There is no resolution presented, as the novel comes full circle. The novel starts and ends with Paul’s “third year of uneventful residence at Scone” (Decline and Fall 4, 289). Nothing is solved; Margot will continue her prostitution ring and hold parties, and Grimes will continue to land in the soup and not care. “Decline and Fall is predominately a comic novel, but...just when the reader is laughing loudest, he is struck with an awareness of a reality which portends a tragedy of human proportions” (Cook 82). Waugh layers his novel with subtle references to other dissatisfied, tragic characters, as he references Hamlet through Silenus’ similar speech to Paul (Decline and Fall 160), and

Thomas Hardy's 1878 novel, The Return of the Native, as he names a prison Egdon Heath after the place where the ever-unsatisfied Eustacia Vye lives. As the reader moves through the novel, the shocking reality of Waugh's use of tendentious jokes emerges: "if these incidents were presented differently they would be tragic or even horrific" (Robinson 82). Elite members of Scone College urge chapels to be destroyed, students mock and ignore their teachers, antique homes are flattened without a second thought, and the lives of many characters are played with. Wykes concurs that "Waugh is determined to force from his reader, by the acquiescence of laughter, the admission that, yes, the world is like this: arbitrary, unjust, mendacious, and hilarious" (62).

Chapter 2 – Vile Bodies

In Vile Bodies, the second of Evelyn Waugh's novels, the reader discovers a surreal England full of nonsense, movement, and a dizzy population. The erratic, whimsical nature of the characters, especially the "Bright Young People," reveals the underlying parallel to the actual British population given that name (Graves 114). Waugh was once a member of this younger set, but eventually began to find their antics pointless, and "crowds and hedonism distressed him" (Stannard 179). It was this generation who knew little about the First World War, since they were too young to be drafted, and whose utter disregard to rules, manners, and their nation's past baffled the elder generation. Cook quotes James F. Carens who stated that " 'Waugh has aimed his satire far more precisely than he did in Decline and Fall; and the activities of the Bright Young People introduce us to the futility and rootlessness of life in the twenties'" (Cook 92). One could apply Freud's insight, derived from philosopher Kuno Fischer, that "A joke is a judgment which produces a comic effect...if what is ugly is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of the comic way of looking at things" (Freud 6). What is ugly in Waugh's novel are the "vile bodies" of the Bright Young People and the comic effect is to reveal their disgusting behavior. Waugh here begins to view the human experiences as an "incomprehensible series of shifting façades" (Stannard 144). This joking functions as a type of façade that conceals greater content. Freud writes, "A suspicion may arise, moreover, that this façade is intended to dazzle the examining eye and that these stories have therefore something to conceal" (Freud 126). The Bright Young People's exploits can be initially read as humorous, entertaining stories, until one searches beneath the surface for the real meaning. They are hedonistic, eccentric people who flit from one

party to another, as if the interruption of motion will be their downfall. Not only are they obsessed with parties, and in connection with that, costumes and an overindulgence of alcohol, they are without moral substance. Who they are as individuals does not matter, as long as they mindlessly partake in the comings and goings of the party circuit, hence the idea that "*Vile Bodies*, despite everything, is depressing" (Wykes 70). There is a commodification of religion and morality through Mrs. Ape and her angels, bringing to the surface the blatant lack of moral guidance in these young lost souls. If Decline and Fall brings to light the issues of the disturbing lack of identity and morals within people, Vile Bodies demonstrates how failing to rectify this separation of identity and to develop a moral code can hasten people's demise and death.

Michael Gorra writes that Vile Bodies has "both an ability to be disturbed by the implications of its own style and a critical relationship to history, to a society in which, as Orwell wrote, 'the official beliefs were dissolving like sand-castles'" (206). One piece of evidence that shows the disturbing nature of the younger set and their disappearing moral code is their constant involvement in a fast-paced way of life. The fast-paced way of life, the representation of British youth rebelling against their elder's generation, rejects conformity while the façade of the joke, or envelope as Freud would label it, would be the illusion of having fun. This is similar to Grimes in how he rejects conformity by dying and resurfacing at random moments. In Vile Bodies, instead of characters revamping their life-styles, their rejection of conformity is through parties. Their moments of escapism are through nonsense conversations. Miss Brown sees the Bright Young People as "brilliant people," but it is not a comment on their intelligence or positive luminescence. It is a reflection on their fast-paced, dizzying way of life and her

own flawed morals. They flit from scene to scene, party to party with no thought or reason as to why or where they are going. As a result of this crazed behavior, they can't take care of themselves. Waugh's underlying purpose is to illuminate the destructive, harried pattern of the Bright Young People and how their behavior will bring about their own demise. Adam comments at one point, "Oh, Nina, *what a lot of parties*" (Vile Bodies 170). They are consumed with parties, but don't know what to do about that. Many of them party at Edward Throbbing's house without his knowledge, and Agatha begins to comment on the dilapidated state of the interior because of their neglect, "Everything's getting rather broken up, too, and dirty, if you know what I mean. Because you see, there aren't any servants only the butler and his wife and they are always tight now" (Vile Bodies 30). The dilapidated state of the house is a direct parallel to the younger generation. They are becoming unconsciously self-destructive and starting to implode. They are breaking as well, like the pieces in Throbbing's house, and they cannot recognize how to fix the house or themselves. Waugh does not suggest that his characters can act any different (Gorra 208), but the tendentious nature of the satire reveals the problems in their behavior. Their brilliance is fading.

### **I. A Decaying Moral Code**

The mindless, uncaring behavior of the characters reflects their internal war and is used by Waugh to present tendentious humor and reaction through bewilderment and haziness (Freud 10). Freud writes that according to Heyman, "the effect of a joke comes through bewilderment being succeeded by illumination" (Freud 9). Waugh's characters have no answer as to why they need parties or alcohol; they only recognize that for some reason, they have to find a party. There is no recognizable motive for the characters'

need to party, hence the emergence of the bewilderment in the Bright Young People's actions. The need to drink away reality and be constantly in motion will eventually lead to their downfall. This internal, irrational compulsion is seen in sections Waugh writes that are themselves quite harried in pace. At Archie's party, there is a very agitated paragraph that reveals the mindset of the Younger set:

There were two men with a lot of explosive powder taking photographs in another room. Their flashes and bangs had a rather disquieting effect on the party, causing a feeling of tension, because everyone looked negligent...but most of them, as a matter of fact, wanted dreadfully to be photographed and the others were frozen with unaffected terror that they might be taken unawares and then their mammas would know where they had been when they said they were at the Bicester's dance, and then there would be a row again, which was so *exhausting*, if nothing else. (Vile Bodies 66-67)

Reading this section is exhausting; the prose is harried and rushed, similar to the crazed mentality of the Bright Young People. It displays with accuracy the conflict the inner war has generated in the younger generation. They lie to their families about where they are, because they want to go to Archie's party. They know they have lied, but they do not want to be caught in their lie by being photographed, yet their vanity compels them to be in the limelight. This lying reflects the lack of morals in the younger set; they do not care what they need to do to go where they want, as long as they are not caught.

Waugh's hostile tendentious joke reveals the decaying moral code in the younger set as influenced by the constant drive to party and drink and how those mindless desires adversely affect their lives.

According to Michael Gorra, there is also constant noise and motion in the novel, as if stopping for a moment would be dangerous.

The novel's energy grows from the tension between Waugh's febrile delight in the parties...the parties with which he fills the novel that his characters' lives appear to contain nothing else, and his growing despair over their mad, depressing



gaiety... *Vile Bodies* escalates from party to party, a shout welling into a scream, with a war “Happy Ending” (Gorra 208).

Characters ultimately need to have a solid moral compass to guide them, as there is a lack of focus. This irrationality will eventually lead to their emotional and mental decay, as seen with Agatha Runcible when she is hospitalized after being found in the race car. She was going too fast and repeats “*Faster. Faster*” repeatedly (*Vile Bodies* 285). It is almost said like a mantra, reiterating the mindlessness of society. “Faster” almost got her killed, but no one really recognizes this. This tendentious joke actually refers to a present social issue during the 1920s - the rising rate of motor vehicle accidents. Car crashes became a major social problem in England during the period between the world wars (Clarke 147). “The slogan ‘Safety First’ was used in campaigns to cut the rising toll of road accidents...Increasing numbers of drivers were convicted of motoring offences – nearly half a million by 1938” (Clarke 146). The view of people living in the country saw “that motoring was still not so much a means of transport, as a dangerous form of sport” (Graves 172). Because of this new wave of sport, “Scores of thousands of new drivers, who were given no preliminary tests, brought road accidents into the news” (Graves 171). Waugh is infusing a real social issue during his time, but the actual target of the joke is the recklessness of the Bright Young People and their apparent lack of consideration for anything around them.

Agatha is eventually hospitalized because of the effects of her excessive habits and her lack of putting “safety first.” She drinks heavily during the race, and decides to act as the space driver as the brassard on her arm indicates. After her accident, she is occasionally incoherent, and the last words the reader is allowed to hear from Agatha are “*Faster. Faster*” (*Vile Bodies* 285). Waugh uses the term “faster” with a double

meaning, with what Freud calls “literal and metaphorical meanings of a word” (Freud 39). In the literal sense, Agatha’s increased speed in the car that crashes lands her in the hospital, while the metaphoric meaning extends to the fast paced life of the Bright Young People. Agatha “personifies the general (though futile) speeding up of modern life,” which makes her inclusion as a spare driver in the race fitting (Allen 324). Being fast drove her actions in the novel, and it is that constant speed that eventually kills her.

A lot of attention is paid to the motor cars, as they mirror the characters in this fast paced, mechanical society. The narrator comments: “The truth is that motor cars offer a very happy illustration of the metaphysical distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming.’ Some cars...these have definite ‘being’ just as much as their occupants...” (Vile Bodies 227). Waugh makes the connection between motor car and people in their quest of movement and what they will become to show how problematic life has become. In reality, “the machines in *Vile Bodies* produce for the most part not exhilaration but nausea” (Allen 322). Life is not a race, yet it is led like one, or more accurately, it is led as if remaining in one moment too long would be detrimental. Waugh continues this comparison:

Not so the *real* cars, that become masters of men; those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space, for whom their drivers, clinging precariously at the steering wheel, are as important as his stenographer to a stock-broker. These are in a perpetual flux; a vortex of combining and disintegrating units; like the confluence of traffic at some spot where many roads meet, streams of mechanism come together, mingle and separate again. (Vile Bodies 228)

In this explanation, it is not a stretch to conclude that Waugh can also be creating a tendentious joke targeting the Bright Young People and their mindless, fast-paced existence. This is problematic in that if the younger generation is existing “solely for

their own propulsion through space,” than what is to become of the future of British society? Armstrong writes “that technological modernity imposes impossible strains on the subject, producing overload, fatigue, or violent rupture” (169). Moral decay is not only rampant in the mindless, erratic youth, but it is in danger of rotting and rupturing the future of England.

## II. Modes of Escaping Reality

When real life becomes too much for the Bright Young People, modes of escapism are employed in order to distance themselves from serious situations. For one, drinking is a necessity. Altering their state of mind is the only way for them to function. Freud states, “A cheerful mood, whether it is produced endogenously or toxically, reduces the inhibiting forces, criticism among them, and makes accessible once again sources of pleasure which were under the weight of suppression” (Freud 155). After Archies’s party, the younger set travel from place to place to find a party, before settling at Miss Brown’s at her suggestions (Vile Bodes 69-70). Before they move the party to Miss Brown’s, the idea of ending the party altogether is considered “fatal” (Vile Bodies 70). Not only does Waugh present this very melodramatic idea, as ending a party would do more good than harm for these young people, but he also reinforces the obsession they have with needing to party and be in constant motion. They do not know how to stop and be intelligent. Drinking also provides the Bright Young People with illusions of happiness. Historically, “The *Practitioner* declared drink a repressant, not a stimulant, and particularly deplored the effects of drink on the young – they ‘lost their power of manly self-control’” (Graves 108). Without the effects of alcohol, they are forced to face the grim reality of a world where they are unproductive and where another war is just

around the corner. This illusion is broken after the motor-car race. Physically they are hung-over, but mentally is where the melancholies intrude. Waugh explains this by highlighting Adam's discomfort from excessive drinking:

The effect of their drinks had now entered on that secondary stage, vividly described in temperance hand-books, when the momentary illusion of well-being and exhilaration gives place to melancholy, indigestion and moral decay. Adam tried to concentrate his thoughts upon his sudden wealth, but they seemed unable to adhere to this high pinnacle, and as often as he impelled them up, slithered back helplessly to his present physical discomfort. (Vile Bodies 251)

When Ginger begins to become friendly with Adam and Nina, he comments on how boring London is, until at Lottie Crump's he begins to drink, and all of a sudden, London becomes exciting. "So Ginger had a drink, and then he and an American sang the Eton Boating Song several times. At the end of the evening he admitted that there was some life left in the jolly old capital of the Empire" (Vile Bodies 165). Life only becomes exciting for this younger generation when they are drinking.

Part of the Bright Young People's obsession with escaping themselves and reality is to pretend constantly to be people they are not. This adds to the falseness of the Bright Young set. Costume parties became fashionable once the war ended in which people came dressed in all types of garb (Graves 111). They are comfortable in bizarre situations and in masks; they do not have to be themselves. At one party, they are meant to arrive dressed as savages, which is amusing because they behave in an unrestrained and savage way (Vile Bodies 65). Waugh satirizes this escape from reality to imply the detrimental effect of the lack of an inner peace in the Bright Young People. They cannot seem to fit comfortably in their own skins, as they are not from the past Victorian age, nor are they fully used to modernity with its automobiles and talkie films. The "real aristocracy," as Waugh calls them, who are at the party, did not dress up: "They had

come on from a dance and stood in a little group by themselves, aloof, amused by not amusing” (Vile Bodies 66). Another example of costume is at the race when Adam, Agatha, Miles, and Archie receive brassards for their arms indicating what part they were to play during the race. As a prelude to Agatha’s eventual demise, her brassard reads “Spare Driver,” and consequently she drives in the race as a spare (Vile Bodies 228). Being considered a “spare” is significant because Agatha is being defined as expendable. She is not important as an individual. Her death is predetermined by the brassard, because she drives in the race and consequently crashes. The tendentious humor reveals the disregard towards the value of life by depicting Agatha as a spare.

Another means in which the younger set tries to distance itself from others and reality is by employing accents at certain intervals. The cockney accent that is taken up by Nina, Adam, and Agatha Runcible at a few moments in the novel shows that they are pretending to be of another social class. The situation makes them uncomfortable; they hide behind the accent. At Archie’s party, Nina begins to lament about Adam’s fair hair that she thought was dark, which is another indicator as to how people do not really pay attention to one another. She is engaged to him, but does not know his hair color. Adam, sensing Nina is distraught about this, switches to a lower class, Cockney accent. Another example is when Agatha emerges in Miss Brown’s house in front of Prime Minister Brown’s family still wearing her Hawaiian costume from the night before. Not only is she in costume, but she employs a Cockney accent to greet everyone to distance herself from the situation (Vile Bodies 73). When the characters are uncomfortable or when the gaiety ceases and seriousness enters, they have to change to another personality to get through. It indicates their inability to face anything; they avoid or leave altogether.

### III. False Constructions of Salvation

Waugh critiques religion when it becomes his troubled characters' "answer" for their salvation. "*Vile Bodies* has at its core a lament that belief is impossible, that there is nothing to keep its characters from being mere soulless things" (Gorra 210). Waugh presents its satiric attack on religion in the form of Mrs. Melrose Ape, the evangelist who sells hope and salvation. Waugh recognizes this falseness and exploits it in his tendentious joke to reveal the lack of morality present in their lives. Morality has become a commodity, perhaps a reflection of a modern, faster time. Why go to Church and pray for salvation, or perhaps even change your bad habit? By selling salvation, the interpretation is that the characters do not have to develop moral lives. It is like a modern day Catholic indulgence practice. Buying forgiveness is the answer Mrs. Ape provides, especially in the beginning of the novel while everyone is on the boat on the way to Dover. She intrudes upon the men and begins to sell hope. She states, "Hope's what you want and Hope's what I got" (*Vile Bodies* 17). As she incites the men in song, no one else hearing the commotion understands her preaching. Waugh's tendentious intention is to make the point that morality cannot be bought, it needs to be realized. Mrs. Ape has a strong parallel to the real-life evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, who arrived in Great Britain "in 1928 with a large company of 'Angels'...she and her angels were beautifully garbed...She retold Bible stories in the American vernacular...and persuaded them to sing" (Graves 195). Religion is seen as a commodity as she collects money from the men in return for her "hope." Mrs. Ape states, "'Salvation doesn't do them the same good if they think it is for free'" (*Vile Bodies* 20). The tendentious joke is that Mrs. Ape insinuates that salvation gained through any means other than commerce is insufficient

and that the monetary amount placed on salvation is what makes it valuable. Waugh critiques the necessity of easy religious salvation, and through his satire, the commentary is that religious guidance through commerce is not legitimate and won't provide satisfaction. Salvation is not something that can be bought and sold. Father Rothschild appears to be the only one who sees her for the charlatan she is, as he turns his head away from the song (Vile Bodies 18). He is a more legitimate vessel for religion and moral doctrine, yet he remains in the presence of the older members of society, such as the Prime Minister and Lord Metroland, and does not successfully impart his moral sense to the Bright Young People.

Mrs. Ape enters the scene again as the guest of honor at Lady Metroland's party. Here she begins to preach, yet says the most disturbing phrase for all present. She states, "*Just you look at yourselves*" (Vile Bodies 137). She asks the Bright Young People to do exactly what they fear; to stop and have a moment of self-reflection to see their moral decay and failing lives. In the end, Mrs. Ape is not received well by this set; she is shunned by Lady Circumference, who calls her "impudent" (Vile Bodies 138). In Decline and Fall, morality was nonexistent; moving into Vile Bodies, the attempted attainment of a moral code of behavior becomes simplistic, and false. Again, this is an example of Freud's assertion that the object of a joke's tendentious aggressiveness can be institutions or religion (Freud 129). Mrs. Ape's angels' firstly, do not always wear their wings; they carry them in black cases, reflecting their removal of their virtues at their whims (Vile Bodies 3). Again, this refers to the flimsy nature of Mrs. Ape's commodified salvation. The angels' virtues mean nothing unless they are selling the virtue and presenting the illusion that they are representatives of those virtues. The

angels are very concerned with men and flirting, and Chastity, ironic to her name, becomes one of Margot Metroland's prostitutes (Vile Bodies 319). The angels represent the lack of solid morality; they are meant to portray virtues they do not embody.

Waugh problematically and repetitively uses the word "divine" to further confuse the audience, as "the vehicle of the joke appears at first simply to be a wrongly constructed word, something unintelligible, incomprehensible, puzzling" (Freud 10). To continue the analysis of the word "divine" as a joke, "the technique of the joke lies in the fact that the one and the same word...appears in it *used in two ways*" (Freud 33). The term "divine" is typically associated with theology and religion, yet nothing is actually divine in that sense. It is a mocking of religion, or the younger set's own false religions. The use of the word bewilders the reader, because the word is not used in a religious definition many would relate it to (Freud 10). It is used mindlessly, reinforcing the false luminosity of the Bright Young set. Their mass is parties, and their sacred wine is champagne. Everything is divine to them. Agatha asks if she can spend the night at Miss Brown's, and Miss Brown thinks that idea is "divine." Agatha replies that the answer was "too divine" (Vile Bodies 71). It is a word thrown into any conversation meant to convey a false sense of happiness. One could substitute the word "wonderful" or something similar, but Waugh's need to insert a satiric way of looking at these people in an existential way requires the use of the term "divine." Divine is a term that refers to a person's goodness and relation to God, and the irony in using the term is that the Bright Young People aren't close to religious involvement or goodness. They are hedonistic and self-centered, and religion means little or nothing to them. It is also a term only used by the Bright Young People, as seen when Miss Brown comments to her mother (in a lie



about where she actually was the night before; she was at Archie's party but was thought of to be at the Bicester's dance) that the dance was divine. The generational gap between the younger set and their elders is seen when her mother does not know what she means by using the term divine (Vile Bodies 72).

#### **IV. Mindlessness of Society and a False Reality**

Mrs. Ape's name is a throwback to Professor Silenus' comments about monkeys in houses and the mindless nature of human beings. She is presenting and selling religion to people, while she does not accurately reflect the moral dogma she wants to sell. She is simply a product of society, someone false who wears a mask of piousness. This mindlessness is also seen in Adam's tenure as Mr. Chatterbox. He begins to make up imaginary, influential people whom the readers of the column embrace and bizarrely enough speak about as if the caricatures are real. According to Graves, "'Society' came to mean 'people worthy of a columnist's respectful mention'" (Graves 56). Adam becomes Mr. Chatterbox and immediately develops into a success through making up prominent people. People who read the column buy into these lies and propagate them by adding their own lies about these fictional people. Waugh's tendentious joke is to reveal to the reader how living in a modern, fast society has contributed to the simulation of a reality that is not there. This refers back to Decline and Fall's Professor Silenus' deduction of people becoming mechanical in the modern age. They have lost their sense of independence and individuality, and have become mindless puppets at the mercy of their puppeteer. Adam creates people to write about in his gossip column, and his readers believed that his creations were real. Adam, through the power of his words and the mindless nature of the population, is able to construct the thoughts of the upper class and

modify their behavior. For example, he creates Imogen Quest, the pinnacle of an aristocratic woman, who happens to be quoted by others outside of the gossip column (Vile Bodies 157-159). He also manipulates how people dressed. For example, in his column as Mr. Chatterbox, he remarks upon the “black suède shoes” fictional gentlemen were wearing. A few days later, real members of society emerges wearing black suède shoes (Vile Bodies 160).

Continuing with the mindlessness of society, the newspapers always tell people what to think. At Lottie Crump’s, the King of Ruritania states that if given a thousand pounds he “would start one little newspaper in my country to say that I must come back and be the King” (Vile Bodies 53). He would use the media to tell people what to do. The gossip columnists run rampant with frivolous stories that are meaningless. “With the advent of the gossip column, Society has become ‘news’...the antics of young Lords were written up alongside cookery tips and gardening calendars” (Stannard 177). They revel and are interested only in gossip and surface chatter, nothing of substance. When Agatha is strip searched at Dover, Nina is excited that the incident is in the evening paper. People thrive on other people’s news and downfalls. Nina and Adam are out together and Adam entertains her with the story of Simon Balcairn, the original Mr. Chatterbox, being attacked at his office (Vile Bodies 122). They found this to be entertaining enough to chat about until they went to see a film. People do not know how to think for themselves anymore, and they do not have to with the gossip columnists and fashionable elite setting the stage and spreading the latest news and fashions. No one needs independent thoughts anymore. Adam states, “it was imitation, and that it was natural to man to be imitative” (Vile Bodies 123). The Bright Young People are not

aware of what is around them, and they need to be told what to do or where to go. When Agatha emerges in the morning in the Brown household, she needs to ask whether she should be embarrassed to be still in Hawaiian costume. She asks, "Are you sure you're not *furios* with me? All this is really much more embarrassing for *me*, isn't it, don't you think...or don't you?" (Vile Bodies 74). Agatha is embarrassed because part of her recognizes that she is not behaving well and is not sure how to act in the Prime Ministers home. She is struggling with her identity as a partying Bright Young Person who is constantly in motion and with the moment when she is stagnant in the Prime Minister's home, unable to drink or whisk herself away. It is very difficult for her and other characters to make decisions. The tendentious humor comes through her obvious discomfort and inability to decide whether she should be embarrassed.

#### **V. Lack of Emotional Involvement**

Conversations in Vile Bodies have a tendency to be detached or meaningless, as if the two people conversing were engaged in monologues and not in dialogue with the other person. This is another example of bewilderment as the joke technique; the reader cannot follow the conversations (Freud 9-10). This creates another illusion in the novel. The power of words is expressed through Mr. Outrage as he thinks, "Oh, for words, words! That masked treasury of speech that was his to squander at will" (Vile Bodies 58). To squander anything is to waste it, and here Waugh outlines for his reader the wasting of words within his character dialogues. The tendentious nature of the joke is that people talk to one another, but do not listen, hence they waste their words. They do not listen, as they are too busy worrying about themselves. Nonsense conversations also indicate a lack of emotion or involvement with others. In Decline and Fall, Grimes

feared the human connection, and we can see his escape. There was a passionate explanation to go along with his reasons. Adam and Nina always call off their engagement, and it seems as if either one really does not care either way or they are so used to living without emotion, that at the first intrusion of feeling, they hide it. The entire pace of the Bright Young People is too fast and harried, and they do not slow down for a moment to absorb the content. As Michael Gorra writes, “bodies are vile because that is all they are, bodies, things that should be people but whose participation in that ‘succession and repetition of massed humanity’ ensures that they are not” (Gorra 209).

Gorra’s image of a grotesque “massed humanity” strengthens the idea of numerous people in one place, yet no one really connecting. No one listens; it is as if each one exists entirely independent of the other. Nina tries to discuss with Adam their dire status as poor, young people who want to get married, yet Adam keeps falling asleep. While this is a humorous moment when Nina keeps prodding Adam to keep awake, the idea of distance and an element of uncaring between the two emerges (Vile Bodies 68). Before anything is resolved, Adam suggests they go to another party to drink. Here partying and drinking function as forms of escape from their grim reality. They might think about their problems for a few moments, but don’t spend too much time dwelling on the serious issues. The envelope for the jokes is the nonsense conversations, but Waugh’s intent is in the realization that no one cares or finds it too painful to listen (Freud 109). When Adam visits Colonel Blount, Nina’s father, both are speaking to one another, but it is as if two separate conversations are occurring at the same time, yet both assume the other is listening and understanding. While Adam tries in vain to convince Colonel Blount of who he is, the Colonel never listens and carries on a conversation

independent of Adam's (Vile Bodies 210-11). This nonsense dialogue reflects the independent nature of the characters, but it also reveals a disturbing disconnect in the population. Yet another example, at the races in the pit, the pit manager continuously asks Agatha not to smoke, and for every time she is asked, she lights up another cigarette. She comments, "What a rude man...Let's go up to the divine tent and get a drink" (Vile Bodies 236). It is as if she is being inconvenienced for being asked to not smoke around flammable petrol or for following directions. She exists in her own sphere and cannot comprehend why she cannot function independently of others. This negligence is problematic in the characters, as it leads to their self-implosions.

#### **VI. Absence of Emotions and Morals**

People do not care about others, nor do they understand the value other people have. When Adam first lands in Dover his memoir is confiscated: "But as for this autobiography, that's just downright dirt, and we burns it straight away, see" (Vile Bodies 25). This destruction of Adam's memoir reflects how people do not care about others. Everyone exists for him or herself, regardless of who is being maltreated in the process. When Agatha Runcible is strip-searched in Dover, her "friends" become excited because of the gossip (Vile Bodies 29), and even Agatha is excited due to the nature of her poor treatment.

There is a blatant disregard for others, especially seen in Simon Balcain's suicide, "Death comes as casually into the novel as it comes to the end of the lives of Lord Balcain ('Mr. Chatterbox') and Miss Runcible" (Wykes 71). This suicide functions in dual roles; on one hand, Simon's death in itself is of no interest to those he knew, and on the other hand functions as a form of escapism, because Simon kills

himself because he was not invited to Lady Metroland's party, then exposed by sneaking in. He is devastated by not getting an invitation to Lady Metroland's party, so he kills himself after he crashes the party and is discovered. "Gate-crashing" hosted at private residences was unacceptable and nearly impossible (Graves 215). Simon does succeed in crashing the party by masking his features, but is discovered by Father Rothschild, Lord Metroland, and Mr. Outrage (Vile Bodies 139-140). The fact that Waugh writes Simon's successful party crashing is humorous. The editress stated, "Well, a pretty mess he's let us in for. Sixty-two writes for libel up to date and more coming in. And that's not the worst. Left me to do his job and mine" (Vile Bodies 148). In regards to his suicide, no one really cares, except the newspaper he worked for, and they were only affected because Balcairn left a mess for them. Similarly to how Agatha is defined as a spare, Simon is inconsequential as a person and after his death another Mr. Chatterbox emerges. He, just as Agatha, is expendable, providing another instance of the devaluing of life.

Another situation that causes mock-distress and inconvenience is the death of Flossie, who dies due to swinging on a chandelier. Instead of a form of escaping from the turmoil of everyday life, like Simon, the woman dies from excess. Lottie discusses the unfortunate event that occurred at her establishment; she views it as an inconvenience and not as a devastating event. She states, "But what I mind, I said, is having a death in the house and all the fuss. It doesn't do anyone good having people killing themselves in a house like Flossie did" (Vile Bodies 78). Flossie is not seen as a person, but as an inconvenience. It is a very callous, self-centered moment. Yet, most characters come across as being equally narcissistic as everyone exists and functions separate from the others and nihilistic since the sarcasm and narcissism translates into a very disillusioned

population. The hostile tendentious nature of the humor in the deaths show that “laughter may serve as a liberation from orthodoxy, but for Waugh it is finally a reminder of his world’s inability to sustain and express a genuine and deeply felt emotion” (Gorra 210).

Waugh’s writing expresses a melancholy feel for the past, a subtle yearning for times that were more genteel and moral. When Lottie Crump’s party begins to dissolve, the King of Ruritania, acting with past decorum, “gave her his arm with a grace he had acquired many years ago; far away in his sunny palace” (Vile Bodies 57). The rest of the statement likens this past time to stones from a broken necklace, the beauty strewn about in a new pattern. These characters are living in a time where life is scattered. After the war, everything changed for these people, including their way of life. Modernity intervened, and the gentleness of the Victorian age was lost. Nina and Adam converse about the gravity of everything in a very vague, yet all-encompassing conversation:

“Adam, darling, what’s the matter?”

“I don’t know...Nina, do you ever feel that things can’t go on much longer?”

What d’you mean by things – us or everything?”

“Everything.”

“I dare say you’re right...what are you looking for?”

“Clothes.”

“Why?”

“Oh, Adam, what do you want...you’re too impossible this evening.”

“Don’t let’s talk anymore, Nina, d’you mind?” (Vile Bodies 273)

Adam tries to get to the root of his disillusionment, but just as the thread comes within his grasp, it just as easily slips through his fingers. He realizes that there is something wrong in his society, but as the question “What are you looking for?” is posed, he cannot seem to find an answer and drops the conversation. People are disappearing, as Agatha states

from her bed in the nursing home, and not only in the sense that they are leaving the party scene (Vile Bodies 266).

Vile Bodies chronicles the moral, mental, and emotional decay of the Bright Young People, whose compulsions for movement, parties, masks, and alcohol aide them on their way to decay. They cannot learn from their mistakes, and they will be doomed to repeat their tragic past, as is seen when in Agatha's nursing home room a party erupts around her with alcohol being tossed around, ironically because it is the alcohol that has landed her in the hospital in the first place. The parties, the wildness, the crazed movement all lead to the downfall of many of the characters. Their self-centered existences and disenchantment with other people and their harried lives are portrayed through their erratic partying, lack of moral compass, and constant masking of themselves, "...all that succession and repetition of massed humanity...Those vile bodies" (Vile Bodies 171).



Chapter 3 – A Handful of Dust

A Handful of Dust brings to a head the consequences of living an amoral life, and extends this problem to include the aftermath of existing solely for one's own purposes without regard for anyone else. The opening question in the novel, "Was anyone hurt?", expresses the main problem throughout. This novel is a vicious attack on society when its inhabitants stop acting in a moral manner and begin to deteriorate emotionally and socially. This creates successful satire, as "the presence of numerous inhibited instincts, whose suppression has retained a certain degree of instability, will provide the most favorable disposition for the production of tendentious jokes" (Freud 175). For example, issues surrounding divorce proceedings, marriage, and death are all fodder for jokes due to their sensitive nature, yet Waugh releases the suppression surrounding them and creates satire. Each character, even if determined to exist with some redeemable qualities, is undeniably self-centered in his pursuits and unable to accept responsibility for his actions. This severely problematic character trait reveals a world where the snowball effect of living without morals becomes unstoppable, "Waugh writes of the decay of tradition, order, even civilization itself in the wake of the 'new regime'" (Cook 124). The end of the novel shows the continuation of this vicious cycle: "Teddy surveyed his charges with pride and affection. It was by means of them that he hoped one day to restore Hetton to the glory that it had enjoyed in the days of his Cousin Tony" (Handful 308). This prediction is dually disturbing and ironic. Teddy wishes to exist at Hetton in all its glory as when Tony lived in it, yet it is Tony's obsession with Hetton that leads to his downfall. The novel presents a bleak picture of a world where the amorality prevalent in its characters will constitute the downfall of society.

There are numerous problematic issues Waugh satirically presents through hostile tendentious jokes in A Handful of Dust, including alienation, self-centeredness, lying, and misplaced trust. Separately, these vices can be addressed and rectified; however, in the novel, compounded together, they make for a very disturbing, nihilistic group of people. According to Stannard, "What distinguishes *A Handful of Dust* from his earlier work is Waugh's ability both to mock and to sympathize with his second-rate protagonists" (Stannard 361). Sympathy for his characters is only generated in the downfall of Tony and in the death of John Andrew. One of the first problems the novel presents is the characters' failure to deal with each other. Characters have no real connection with one another and have difficulties in communication. Waugh satirizes this issue in Vile Bodies through nonsense conversations, but in A Handful of Dust he extends the issue to reflect how even though characters can converse and understand each other, there still remains a disturbing lack of real emotion.

### **I. Problems and Barriers in Communication**

Many important conversations in the novel take place through the telephone, highlighting characters' inabilities to deal with others face to face. It also indicates characters' reliance on the phone, where Waugh hated the telephone (Stannard 1). For example, Beaver depends upon the phone ringing with an invitation to go out. This is evident in the beginning of the novel, "After that the telephone was silent. At one o'clock Beaver despaired" (Handful 9). Despairing over a silent telephone seems to be an exaggeration, but it is indicative of Beaver's inability to do anything for himself. He does nothing productive all day, except escort dateless women to parties and luncheons, and he has no job. He takes no initiative in social settings, which is why after he leaves

school, the telephone is his only means of activity. "So he got up late and sat near his telephone most of the day, hoping to be called up" (Handful 5). When it rings, he has the opportunity to have plans and be social. If not, he is stuck home and bored.

Beaver's dependency on the phone brings to the surface the problem of other characters relying on others for their activities and happiness. Waugh utilizes the telephone to present the problems with disengagement in human connections. Later in the novel, Tony decides to venture to London to visit Brenda at her flat, only to be turned away. Most of Tony's communication with Brenda in this section occurs through messages from others or speaking to her on the telephone. The messages are very impersonal and cold, yet the telephone conversations are even colder. Even though she speaks to Tony, she lies and still refuses to see him. The first time this happens, Brenda sends a message, but in a very cruel manner. While at Brat's Tony picks up the phone to speak to Brenda's "messenger" who happens to be Beaver, who is having an affair with Brenda. The nastiness in which Brenda refuses to see or speak with her husband and allows the man she is having an affair with to speak with her husband for her is appalling. However, this behavior is not surprising for her. "Brenda's emotions are entirely social, those of the world and not the soul. She understands boredom, embarrassment, and even shame but remains absolutely unaware that there is such a thing as suffering" (Gorra 215). It never occurs to Brenda that she is hurting Tony. Waugh's tendentious humor begins to twist to a more vicious intent as the humor begins to be more uncomfortable.

The next conversation consists of Brenda and Tony on the phone, with Brenda trying to make sure Tony does not come to her flat, as she is with Beaver (Handful 89). This rigmarole with the telephone continues for about ten pages, while no one attempts to

speak face to face, and even Tony gives up at the end of the evening when he has drunk too much alcohol. Only John Andres realizes this escapade is ridiculous, and confronts and questions his father when he returns home. John Andrew queries, "But you can telephone her from here, can't you, daddy? Why did you go all the way to London to telephone her?...*Why, daddy?*" (Handful 100). It is in the question of an innocent child that the hilarity and despondency of the situation is recognized. John Andrew delivers Waugh's hostile tendentious joke. This begins with the bizarre circus of Tony wanting to see Brenda. Brenda frantically refuses because she is with Beaver. This charade concludes with Tony and Jock's drinking and phone calls with Brenda. All this is funny until the reader gets to the root of Waugh's intended reality: Tony goes to London to see his wife, but he never does because she does not want him involved in her life there. He speaks with her on the phone while he is drunk, and while Brenda is having an affair with Beaver.

## II. Misunderstandings in Communication

Problems with miscommunication are not only evident in phone conversations. Characters hear one another speaking, but hearing is not indicative of understanding. This is similar to the nonsense conversations in Vile Bodies in which two characters create the illusion of having one conversation, but in reality are speaking independently of the other. However, now the issue of miscommunication becomes more dire as it affects the lives of Dr. Messinger and Tony. For instance, failure in communication leads to the downfall of Dr. Messinger and Tony while in Brazil on their expedition. Dr. Messinger wants the Macushi guides to take them to the Pie-wie people, and continually asks "Understand?", but Rosa, their interpreter, continually says no. Dr. Messinger

chooses to believe that Rosa does not understand what he wants from the Macushi people, but she does. Dr. Messinger does not understand that the Macushi people will not take them to Pie-wie territory. When Dr. Messinger reveals the mechanical mouse to the Macushi tribesmen and women, he assumes he knew how they would react, ““But they’ll fall for the mice, you see. I know the Indian mind”” (Handful 262). The tribesmen and women behaved oppositely to how he predicts they will. They run from the camp after seeing the mechanical mouse, yet again Dr. Messinger assumes the reason for their behavior. He states, ““Oh it’s all right. They’ll come back. I know them”” (Handful 263). The problem in Dr. Messinger’s statement is the same problem Tony suffers from through most of the novel: placing trust in those who are not trustworthy. Tony always assumes he knows how Brenda will behave, yet in the end, Brenda proves him wrong by leaving him.

The most disturbing moment in the novel is Brenda’s reaction to the death of her son, John Andrew. Her initial assumption is that her lover, John Beaver has died. The whole idea that a mother would be more relieved to know that her only child had died instead of her lover is taboo. The satire is strained as the conversation between Jock and Brenda becomes equally as strained due to the misunderstanding, and the reader is drawn into the uneasiness. When she discovers the misunderstanding, she cries tears of relief that it is not Beaver: “ ‘John...John Andrew...I...Oh thank God...’ ” (Handful 162). Her emotions are misplaced, and instead of being a true mother concerned for her son, she is extraordinarily selfish in her reaction to the death of her only child. She falteringly claims to Jock, who told her of her son’s death, that she misunderstood what he said:

“When you first told me,” she said, “I didn’t understand. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

"I know."

"I didn't say anything, did I?"

"You know what you said."

"Yes, I know...I didn't mean...I don't think it's any good trying to explain."

(Handful 164)

Brenda tries to talk around her unconscious slip, but the damning evidence is there.

Brenda knows exactly what she says and knows exactly who dies as she had asked Jock for clarification. Waugh's hostile tendentious joke reveals how a lack of real emotions in characters, namely Brenda's lack of mourning for her son, shocks the reader into questioning the causes for society's absence of emotion.

### **III. Lying and Illusions of Truth**

Lying is present throughout most of the novel and provides a very disturbing outlook on how characters deal with others. Characters constantly lie in order to create an illusion of happiness, but it only fosters a false sense of companionship. Freud states "the more serious substance of the joke is the problem of what determines the truth...What they are attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions" (Freud 138). The joke is meant to point out the truth, yet with varied interpretations of what is the truth in a situation, it is the certainty of knowledge that becomes confused. It is, as Freud considers, a technique of absurdity, wherein the truth, written within the joke, is viewed as a lie. Brenda has an affair with John Beaver throughout most of the novel, and her relationship with Tony becomes a lie. During the years between the world wars, "The American view was adopted: marriage was regarded as a social habit, rather than as a sacrament" (Graves 98). Tony remains ignorant of his wife's betrayal, and when their son dies and Brenda has not heard the news yet, he feels guilty knowing some piece of information Brenda does not.

Tony says to Mrs. Rattery, "In a way I shall feel happier when she knows...it feels all wrong as it is at present, having it as a secret that Brenda doesn't know..." (Handful 151). Tony's guilt in knowing something Brenda does not presents the difference in character morality. While Tony feels badly, Brenda does not interpret her lies and adultery as wrong. Tony's reaction toward Brenda's quiet lies comes in Tony's delirium when he is in Brazil and ill. Mr. Todd is attempting to bring Tony to his home and heal him, yet Tony continually rambles and reveals the truth of what Brenda has done to him. Tony states:

I know you are friends with my wife and that is why you will not listen to me. But be careful. She will say nothing cruel, she will not raise her voice, there will be no hard words. She hopes you will be great friends afterwards as before. But she will leave you. She will go away quietly during the night. (Handful 288)

The cruelty of Brenda's actions revealed in Tony's ramblings brings to light the fact there was no fight or violent eruption in the marriage that led to Brenda's cruelty. The point revealed by Tony is that Brenda's quiet lies and duplicity seem to have hurt Tony the most, as he was blindsided by the whole ordeal. Tony is guilty of misplacing his trust in Brenda. Tony trusts Brenda to be faithful, but she having an affair with Beaver. Tony never questions Brenda, even when she insists on buying a flat in London and requests to take a course in economics (Handful 83). Waugh's attack on the marriage of Tony and Brenda is an example of a cynical joke (Freud 132). Waugh's joke attacks the "moral regulations" of the time (Freud 132). Tony's denial in conceiving that Brenda has left him to be with Beaver reflects Tony's realization that he could have never predicted this behavior in Brenda. He reflects, "He had got into a habit of loving and trusting Brenda" (Handful 172). Because he viewed their marriage as habitual, he never questioned Brenda's flat in London or her constant absence. Waugh's tendentious humor also

extends to the honesty of human beings, particularly in marriage. Waugh's first wife cheated on him in a similar manner to Brenda, therefore it is plausible for Waugh to poke fun at the naivety of married men (Stannard 181).

The most disturbing lie in the novel is told by Mr. Todd to the Englishmen who come searching for Tony. Tony has been forced to live with Mr. Todd for about a year, and when the Englishmen comes to find Tony, Mr. Todd lies to them to keep them away:

They had come all the way to find you, so – I thought you would not mind – as you could not greet them yourself I gave them a little souvenir, your watch. They wanted something to take back to England where a reward is being offered for news of you. They were very pleased with it. And they took some photographs of the little cross I put up to commemorate your coming. They were pleased with that, too. They were easily pleased. But I do not suppose they will visit us again, our life here is so retired (Handful 302)

Mr. Todd convinces the Englishmen that Tony is dead in order to keep Tony with him to read to him. This lie, as well as Mr. Todd's observations that the Englishmen were very "pleased" with the evidence presented, leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Waugh's tendentious humor reaches back to the mindlessness of the population as seen in Vile Bodies, but now the lack of independent thought affects human lives who aren't as mindless. Throughout the novel, Tony has been betrayed by those he feels he can trust, but now this misplaced trust has earned him a life sentence in the heart of a Brazilian jungle with a man who does not care that he is holding Tony against his will. Mr. Todd does not see his actions as wrong; he views them as a means to an end to get what he wants. "Mr. Todd's role is to represent Fortune, the deity who rules the universe of humanism, random, arbitrary, and permitting happiness to none of her subjects for very long" (Wykes 105).



#### IV. Self-Centered Behavior

In A Handful of Dust, characters cannot recognize their own flaws and each feels as if he or she is acting in the right manner. No one takes the blame for his or her actions. This becomes an issue when John Andrew is killed by being kicked in the head by Miss Ripon's horse. The first statement Waugh writes from the mindset of the hunting group after he narrates the boy's death is, "Everyone agreed that it was nobody's fault" (Handful 143). Miss Ripon does not take any blame, even though she could not control the horse that killed him. No adult will take responsibility for the boy's death. No one will accept poor judgment in letting him hunt in the first place. The life of this innocent boy is taken from him, and no one is angry or frustrated at the event, except for Tony. Waugh's tendentious humor shocks the reader into questioning the attitudes of the adults involved. Waugh wants his readers to ask why no one cares about John Andrew's death, and whether this lack of emotion extends its reach into other aspects of society.

Another example in which no one can take responsibility for his or her individual actions is in the divorce proceedings between Tony and Brenda. Brenda, though she has deliberately lied to Tony and had an affair with John Beaver, refuses to see her husband as the injured party. When Tony declines to provide Brenda with a divorce, thereby stopping her plans to marry Beaver and acquiring a monetary settlement, Brenda and her brother, Reggie, become indignant. Reggie says to Tony, "Besides, you know...it isn't as though it was all Brenda's fault" (Handful 204). Even though Brenda has made a conscious choice to have an affair with Beaver and lie to her husband, Reggie feels as if it cannot be all Brenda's fault. Reggie does say, "I mean to say, it takes two to make a quarrel and I gather things had been going wrong for some time" (Handful 204). This

bizarre rationale does have a modicum of sense to it, as two people can create a fight; however, Tony was never aware a problem even existed. He could not possibly address any issue with his wife if he had no idea there was any problems. In addition, when the solicitors speak to Tony about his defense, because Tony is appearing as the defendant, he was told that "...by the present arrangement since she is the innocent and injured party she will be entitled to claim substantial alimony from the courts" (Handful 176-77). The entire situation from this point on becomes exceedingly farcical, as Brenda is hardly the injured person in the divorce. However, during this time, it was seen as chivalrous of the men to create a farce of adultery in order for the women to be viewed as the injured party, even if the woman was the one guilty of adultery (Graves 98). Waugh's uses the divorce proceedings as a topical joke, as the population of England at the time would understand the issue Waugh is satirizing (Freud 150).

#### **V. Isolation and Alienation**

Part of the problem with miscommunication and lies is that characters in the novel remain isolated from one another. Their inability to make any connection with one another fosters their ability to live selfish lives. Waugh uses this failure in his tendentious humor. Because of their self-imposed alienation, they develop amoral lives, and they do not care about anyone else but themselves. A prime example of alienation is visible in Tony's obsession with Hetton, a building far removed from modernity and everyday life in London. For example, rooms at Hetton are named after characters from Thomas Malory's King Arthur stories (Handful 14). It is an embodiment of a fairy tale existence, where nothing exists in real time. Tony wants to live in a medieval fantasy (Wykes 106), but that is not reality. Hetton is Tony's greatest pleasure: "all these things

with which he had grown up were a source of constant delight and exultation to Tony; things of tender memory and proud possession” (Handful 14). Waugh creates Tony’s obsession with Hetton as a tendentious joke to convey the futility in clinging to a past that no longer exists: “Tony’s own world of Gothic splendor and the ineffectuality of the aristocracy with its age-worn trappings is slyly ridiculed” (Cook 131). Waugh impresses the fact that as the reader laughs at Tony’s fixation with Hetton, what is being satirized is other characters’ lack of understanding and compassion towards someone who does not revel in modernity. Hetton is stuck in a past time, and Tony remains stuck with the house, where he and Brenda grow apart. She wishes to be social, and Tony desires to be left alone. When the reader is first introduced to Tony, the narrator makes this commentary: “All over England people were waking up, queasy and despondent. Tony lay for ten minutes very happily planning the renovation of his ceiling” (Handful 16). Waugh makes sure to point out how Tony has no relation to the majority of England. Most everyone else is waking up with hang-overs from a night of drinking and partying, yet Tony plays no role in this part of society. Tony purposely avoids parties and guests visiting his home (Handful 17). Yet Tony’s purposeful alienation from the rest of society proves to be his downfall. He does not want to understand English society as it is, so people are able to take advantage of him.

Mr. Todd’s house is another site of alienation. His deliberate removal from modern society is different from Tony’s self-imposed, semi-isolation at Hetton. His home is bordered on all sides by forest, and “The stream which watered it was not marked on any map; it ran through rapids, always dangerous and at most seasons of the year impassable...” (Handful 284). Mr. Todd’s home is an extended nightmare from

Paul Pennyfeather's tenure at Llanabba Castle, yet Tony's nightmare is more hostile and hellish than Paul's, because Waugh portrays it more seriously. Mr. Todd purposely removes himself from modern civilization, yet still embodies the selfishness that has consumed London. Even by removing oneself from the center of amoral living, it does nothing to fix his moral code. He is used to living solely for himself, so when Tony wanders innocently into his tentacles, he does not care that Tony has a life elsewhere. All Mr. Todd cares about is keeping Tony around to read to him.

### **VI. Complete Emotional Detachment**

In A Handful of Dust, some characters pretend to be people they are not in order to achieve their gains. In connection to play-acting in Vile Bodies, where characters put on false personas for entertainment and escaping reality, in A Handful of Dust, characters who play-act do so as a means to an end. Tony has to pretend he is having an affair with Milly just so he and Brenda can get a divorce. There is a purpose to achieve in play-acting, and Waugh uses this tendentious joke to reveal the falseness of society. This is not a type of play-acting in which pleasure is taken from the masks and roles. Play-acting here functions more seriously, since it is necessary to Tony to successfully play the part of an adulterer in order to gain his divorce. Evidence needs to be produced that Tony is being unfaithful, so he takes Milly, and under duress her daughter, Winnie, to the beach. According to the rules during this time, because adultery was the only grounds for divorce, evidence had to be presented, and even manufactured if that was the case. Men went to Brighton in order to compile the evidence of the fabricated adultery (Clarke 165). Everything is a set up, from the affair to the detectives watching them. Even when the plan is presented to Tony by his solicitors, the entire idea sounds ridiculous. "Lately we

had a particularly delicate case involving a man of very rigid morality and a certain diffidence. In the end his own wife consented to go with him and supply the evidence. She wore a red wig. It was quite successful” (Handful 177). Waugh’s tendentious satire here is very effective as he presents the connection between morality and deceiving the courts to gain a divorce by lying. Also, as an effective tendentious joke, it attacks the divorce laws of the time (Freud 129). Waugh levels a “real though humorous blow leveled at the courts and the legal system in the farcical ‘arrangement’ by which Tony provides Brenda grounds for divorce” (Cook 131-32). In essence, what is stated in this section of the novel is that lying and deceit are acceptable as long as you get what you want and it suits your purposes. Tony needs to be the one to fake a lie, yet it is Brenda who commits adultery. Because Waugh wrote satire, the reader understands that this is a ridiculous moment and can discredit the justification of the actions by the characters.

Another role Tony fills is that of an explorer. He decides to leave England for six months, and decides to journey with Dr. Messinger in search of the City. He fully accepts this role when a passenger on the boat exclaims, ““You’re the explorer, aren’t you?”” (Handful 214), and Tony accepts this role and title. The significance of this title is not initially recognized, as Tony thinks, “It did not come easily to him to realize that he was an explorer. It was barely a fortnight ago that he had become one” (Handful 214). This is play-acting to an extreme, because Tony has committed himself to a position he does not fully understand. This is not an example of play-acting as with Millie. In the Brighton Beach divorce scenario, Tony is presented with a character to play and his every move in that role is monitored. Once Tony decides to be an explorer, no one is present as a safety net to catch him if he once he becomes lost and ill in the wilds of Brazil. As a

result of Tony's ignorance of what it means to be an explorer, he is forced to fill another role for life, reader to Mr. Todd.

Beaver is another character whose ability to play-act is disturbing. He behaves exactly how he feels he should as a houseguest, but it is not the way he wants to behave. While he is a guest at Hetton, he is invited to Church by Tony, and agreed to go even though he did not want to, "Beaver always did what was expected of him when he was staying away, even on a visit as unsatisfactory as the present one" (Handful 37). This ability to pretend to be someone else is a problematic quality, as the characters begin to portray traits they feel as if they should embody, not traits they actually have. Waugh creates his characters as envelopes who present farcical ideas (Freud 109). The issue with play-acting is that characters do not act as they ought to; they behave as they feel others would want them to. The problem is that the characters they are trying to please are not genuinely good people, but are just as fake.

Beaver uses Brenda as a means into society and entertainment. She takes him to parties, and for Beaver, who has nothing else to do during the day, Brenda is his daily agenda. She has become bored at Hetton, and Beaver is an outlet from her daily drudgery and monotony at home. Because they both leech off the other, the fact that Brenda feels as if she is in love with Beaver is humorous. In a letter to Tony, Brenda blatantly states her intentions towards Beaver, "*I am in love with John Beaver and I want to have a divorce and marry him*" (Handful 172). Waugh plays with human emotion here to present the idea that love here is not genuine or fostered from pure affection, but from opportunism and manipulation. His characters cannot generate real emotion, which is

fodder for his tendentious humor. The reader is meant to wonder why real emotions are attainable.

Beaver attends to Brenda not because he cares for her, but because she can provide introductions to parties and money for their expenditures. Beaver wants to be included at all the parties and be social. He states, “ ‘There’s my telephone. Perhaps it’s Margot. She hasn’t asked me to anything for weeks.’ But it was only Brenda” (Handful 247). When she fails at getting him an invitation to the gentlemen’s club Brown’s, he has no further use for her. Brenda extends him an invitation to a weekend party, but even when Brenda explicitly states that Beaver should attend as she will be there, he declines (Handful 248). At the end of the novel, once it is determined that Brenda is poor and cannot get Beaver the invitations to clubs he wants, he decides to accept his mother’s offer and go to California. He leaves her, and Brenda’s last statement to him is, “I never was one for making myself expensive” (Handful 265). This is a very appropriate statement for Brenda to make, as she does make herself cheap and too available.

A Handful of Dust offers a disheartening view into what Waugh believes will happen to British society if it carries on its path of amorality. The novel presents a harsh glimpse of the lives of people who care only for themselves and their pursuits and who disregard others around them as if they were annoying flies to be swatted away.

According to William J. Cook, “*A Handful of Dust* is Waugh’s most poignant expression of the terrifying nature of contemporary society and the irreversible fate of the cultured, traditionalistic, religious innocent” (Cook 144). Lack of communication and problems in understanding lead the characters into decay. Waugh presents the decline and fall of

Tony Last, the probable “last” remnant of a chivalrous Britain, a connection that can be made due to Hetton and its Gothic, medieval relationship. Modern society and those who exist within its new parameters and laws destroy the honest, trustworthy Tony. Tony is not without his flaws, yet no one would argue that human beings, by nature, are flawed. Waugh’s tendentious humor reveals these flaws through the satire, but Waugh’s characters cannot recognize their faults and amoral behavior. This sends the novel on another course of immorality insinuated at the end of the novel when Teddy Last states how he wants Hetton to be as it was in Tony’s time (Handful 308). The epigraph of the novel reflects this, as Waugh chose the most appropriate quote from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,

I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust (27-30)

Waugh teaches his readers to fear human beings, as they are the most frightening creatures in how they behave towards others and themselves. Callousness and selfishness drive them, leaving the rest to suffer in the wake of their destruction.



### Conclusion

When Evelyn Waugh decided to get a divorce from Evelyn Gardner, he said to his brother, Alec, "The trouble about the world today is that there's not enough religion in it. There's nothing to stop young people doing whatever they feel like doing at the moment" (Stannard 189). Evelyn Waugh's characters embody amorality and a detachment from life, and it is through that separation between action and morality that Waugh constructs his hostile tendentious jokes. Waugh pokes fun at the lack of religious guidance through creating self-centered, amoral characters. The role religion plays in his characters' lives is farcical, and Waugh exploits this illusion of religion in his satire. He structures a commentary on religion as an institution that should be the vessel for morality, yet cannot perform that function because of the immorality of those characters who either feign being moral or are truly amoral. In Vile Bodies, Father Rothschild is a religious figure, yet he cannot completely be that representative of moral living, because Mrs. Ape's overpowering presence taints the credibility religious figures. She represents the convenience of religion, not the necessity of it. In terms of moral living, the youth of England are not provided with proper models of moral behavior. For example in Decline and Fall, the school masters at Llanabba and Scone foster self-centeredness and existing for one's pleasures. Moral living is never presented as fruitful, as Prendy, one character who truly attempts to follow a religious path, is killed because of his orthodoxy. In A Handful of Dust, the issue of living a moral life becomes almost nonsensical, as even the laws of the day, divorce laws to be precise, provided for the deceitfulness of the characters. For Waugh, "Moral issues were fundamental to his writing" (Wykes 72). He chronicled the problems surrounding divorce in A Handful of Dust, farcical morality in

Decline and Fall, and complete disregard for others and self in Vile Bodies. David Wykes writes that “Waugh saw what his fear showed him, and made general truth out of sharp, selected details” (Wykes 52). Waugh’s fear of a developing amoral society in England inspires trepidation in the reader as well, as we are witness to the decay and nihilism in the characters and how their disillusionment and complete disregard for morality affects their, sometimes, horrific downfalls.

Waugh’s novels Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, and A Handful of Dust address the problems involved with a British society that indulges in mind-altering, riotous excess and pretence. Waugh’s characters are caricatures of the amoral younger generation. For example, the younger generation “rambling clubs” would instead ride the new London Underground extensions, or “Metroland” from place to place (Graves 114) instead of attending Church on Sunday. It is no coincidence that one character who makes her presence known through all three novels happens to be Lady Metroland, a character known for her parties. His characters play-act at being happy, while their inner conflict is hidden by their continual partying and excess drinking; ambivalence towards other characters, especially in death; costumes and masks to hide their true selves; and forms of escapism through suicide and disappearance. Here Waugh presents a Britain that is neither happy nor malcontent. He is critical of their bad behavior, and in order to express this criticism, Waugh employs Freudian hostile tendentious jokes. Waugh’s criticism of this degenerate lifestyle reflects the criticism from the Church. Waugh saw, as the Catholic Church did also, a decline in social and moral awareness and a development of the “new Disillusion” (Graves 128). In his novels, Waugh’s critique exposes how a

crazed, unethical existence eventually leads to the downfall of the party set and those around him or her.

Richard Lynch claims, "we still demand a message from fiction, and Waugh seems to deny us one" (Lynch 373). Waugh's message is in fact clear; one only needs to read through the humor and decipher the intent behind the hostile tendentious jokes. In order to understand Waugh's message the reader needs to isolate the sections of satire and peer closely at the hostility. In Decline and Fall, Waugh clearly satirized members of academia, the function of academia, religious doctrine, and immoral behavior. In Vile Bodies, he continues his commentary at the deplorable amorality of the younger generation but also abhors the fast-paced, uncontrolled way of life. In A Handful of Dust, Waugh satires how the population will eventually decay and rot because of amorality and a resistance to human connections and communication.

Lynch argues continually that Waugh's "early characters...do not seem to have a sense of the past, or what they have done or thought in their own past" (Lynch 376). Waugh's tendentious jokes would illustrate a need to know oneself, and through that knowing, come to a better understanding of self and surroundings, and perhaps find a new respect for the self. Waugh's characters do have a disturbing tendency for self-destruction. In Decline and Fall, Grimes continually places himself in the soup, and even though he does have past recollections, he has no understanding or ownership of any action he has done. In Vile Bodies, characters exist in only the moment, and that is all that matters for them. When Simon Balcairn dies, all that is mourned is that he left a lot of work to be done. A Handful of Dust forcibly brings to light the lack of self

knowledge, as Tony thinks he needs Hetton to survive, but what he really needs is a human connection.

Substantive characters are full of morality, which Waugh's characters lack. Waugh's characters embody statements and agendas, the purposes behind his tendentious jokes. If Waugh's characters had moral values, they would not fit in the satirical moments in which he places them. "In denying Tony and the other early heroes logical connections with the past, Waugh objectifies his characters, makes them like so many well-made chessmen, to be examined curiously, but not probed or humanized" (Lynch 377). We can delve into the characters, but there won't be a lot of substance, as is Waugh's intention. We are not supposed to humanize his characters; to humanize them would make them too real. Waugh's characters are, as Paul Pennyfeather is in Decline and Fall, shadows. Michael Gorra writes, "Real people are 'static,' in some sense dead. Only their shadows, their surfaces, are 'dynamic' enough to be alive" (Gorra 204). The tendentious joke here is that while readers can be relieved to know that real people aren't being personified, what is caricatured is their shadows, parts of themselves they are either ignorant of or too afraid to reconcile.

Waugh depicts an amoral society that precipitates its downfall because of excess, neglect of self and others, lack of identity, and refusal of morality is disturbing. "Waugh's early novels describe a world without God, in that they do not offer the comforts of religion, the assurance that men are more than things" (Gorra 218). This absence of religion produces what Daniel Robinson states that "Waugh, through comedy, reveals the absurdity of evil in a world without faith" (Robinson 85). The satire is biting, and meant to be so. "Indeed, the Bright Young People's reactions to the violent events

that befall them appear generally to be mechanical rather than emotional, and these affectless responses only add to the characters' already impenetrable masks" (Allen 326). Through the decline and fall of the younger generation, their empty, vapid, vile bodies maneuver through life aimlessly and will eventually decay and mold into a handful of dust that will blow away with the slightest puff of breath.

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