

**THREE SYMPATHETIC CHARACTERS
IN WAUGH'S NOVELS**

BY

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THREE SYMPATHETIC CHARACTERS IN WAUGH'S NOVELS

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by
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Jerry Leon Hensley entitled "Three Sympathetic Characters in Waugh's Novels." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Introduction	1
II. <u>A Handful of Dust</u>	3
III. <u>Brideshead Revisited</u>10
IV. <u>Decline and Fall</u>15
V. Conclusion18
BIBLIOGRAPHY21

THREE SYMPATHETIC CHARACTERS IN WAUGH'S NOVELS

I. Introduction

Evelyn Waugh saw Great Britain in the Twentieth Century as an example of world-wide decadence and hopelessness. Waugh believed the loss of religion to be the cause of the decay in the Victorian style of morality. According to Waugh's sharp pen, nothing was sacred in modern England; therefore, his satire was sharp in telling the reader what should be done to improve the conditions. The characters who people Waugh's novels seem like lost souls from a Kafka novel or a Gogol play. There are no set standards for the characters to live by in Waugh's novels. Traditions have been abandoned. Religion ceases to exist, or if it exists, only lip service is paid to it and its teachings. Life has lost its patterns. Richard A. Long and Iva G. Jones describe Evelyn Waugh as a writer of "decadent novels" with unsympathetic characters.¹ Waugh does offer a solution to the problems of modern society in England, though. He tries to show how noble life can be if given a chance by people who still have a few standards

¹Richard A. Long and Iva G. Jones, "Toward a Definition of the 'Decadent Novel'," College English 22 (January, 1961), p. 245.

left. Three "good guys" in Waugh's novels suffer to try to make sense out of life. Tony Last in A Handful of Dust tries for a decent life but fails because of others.² Charles Ryder in Brideshead Revisited survives, but his survival is obtained with many scars.³ Paul Pennyfeather in Decline and Fall fails at first, but succeeds in the end through determination.⁴

Usually Waugh's satire is so biting that the reader refuses to identify with any of the characters. But with the three above-mentioned characters, he has softened his attack and lets the reader care for the persons involved. Goodness and innocence are the keys Waugh uses to get the reader to sympathize with Tony Last, Charles Ryder, and Paul Pennyfeather.

²Evelyn Waugh, A Handful of Dust (1934; rpt. New York: Dell, 1963) is the edition used for parenthetical page references in this paper.

³Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946) is the edition used for parenthetical page references in this paper.

⁴Evelyn Waugh, Decline and Fall (1958; rpt. New York: Dell, 1963) is the edition used for parenthetical page references in this paper.

II. A Handful of Dust

The tool which Waugh uses to show decay in modern Britain in A Handful of Dust is Tony Last. Last is held up to ridicule and punishment for being a Victorian man living in the Twentieth Century. Tony has no major flaws, unless one considers his lack of religion, pride in his family and boring nature to be flaws. For the lifestyle Tony Last wants, he has chosen the wrong wife. Brenda is not of the same temperament as her husband; therefore, one expects trouble. The irony of the entire Last household is established by Jock Grant-Mengies: "I often think Tony Last's one of the happiest men I know. He's got just enough money, loves the place, one son he's crazy about, devoted wife, not a worry in the world." (p. 14) At first, Tony did have all the things Jock said he had, but slowly his world began to crumble.

The home of Tony Last's idyllic life is Hetton Abbey. Hetton is a whole world, a philosophy, and a way of life as well as an architecture and a landscape.⁵ One sees only a hint of discord at Hetton before John Beaver arrives. Tony is not a party-goer, and this mildly upsets Brenda, but she is resigned to her fate of being a lady of the country. When the perpetual sponge, John Beaver, arrives

⁵ Stephen Jay Greenblatt, Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell and Huxley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 23.

at Hetton, the Camelot is disturbed. John Beaver tells Lady Brenda about all the parties and affairs which are happening in London at the time. This is more than Brenda, who was a society girl, can stand. She must see more of her old lifestyle. John Beaver helps to establish the main problem between Tony and Brenda. This problem is lack of communication.⁶

Tony does not understand Brenda's discontent with Hetton. It doesn't matter to Brenda that John Beaver is the one man no one else in London will have. He is available, and that is all that matters to Brenda. "Brenda's choice of John Beaver is completely thoughtless and completely appropriate, for they inhabit a world and share a set of values about which Tony Last, content at Hetton, can know nothing."⁷

Tony Last, then, is a victim of an age without feeling. Neither Brenda nor Beaver could understand the values of life which Tony has. Tony has feelings; Brenda and Beaver do not. Waugh is saying that this is what is wrong with the world, and especially England, in the Twentieth Century. Waugh believes that there are a few people capable of love, but these people are crucified by the non-caring. Tony Last is an example of this type of crucifixion.

⁶Greenblatt, p. 24.

⁷Greenblatt, p. 25.

He loves Brenda and gives her the freedom to move about, which she so desperately wants. In return she takes advantage of his generosity.

After Brenda and Beaver are ensconced in their affair, little is thought of Tony. Brenda does make one feeble attempt to find a mate for Tony. The person intended for the affair is a revolting "princess," Jenny Abdul Akbar, a woman Tony would refuse even if he desired a lover. Although Tony is not a religious man, he does believe in honor. Taking a mistress would not be an honorable thing to do, especially since he loves Brenda and his son, John Andrew, so very much. Tony is gullible and too trusting. He never suspects his wife of any clandestine affair. He truly believes that she is taking an economics course in London. Tony, who goes on a drunken binge after Brenda refuses to see him, feels ashamed after he visits London unexpectedly and spoils Brenda's plans. Even after Brenda refuses to stay in the country for the annual fox hunt, Tony doesn't find fault with her. It is only the consequence of the hunt which brings about the truth of Brenda's rendezvous.

John Andrew is killed during the hunt, while Brenda is in London making love to John Beaver. Tony, who is deeply hurt by the death of his son, worries about every-

one's feelings but his own.⁸

... there's got to be an inquest the doctor says. It's purely formal of course, but it will be ghastly for that Ripon girl . . . It's going to be so much worse for Brenda. You see she's got nothing else much except John. I've got her and I love the house . . . but with Brenda. John always came first . . . And then you know she's seen so little of John lately. She's been to London such a lot . . . I know Brenda so well. (pp. 109-112).

Tony doesn't realize that the John he is speaking about matters little to Brenda. Her John is her lover, John Beaver. In fact, when Jock first reports John's death, Brenda is horrified, thinking he means John Beaver.

John Beaver is much more important than John Andrew. With the death of her son, Brenda has nothing more to keep her tied to Tony. Almost immediately after John Andrew's funeral, she goes away to a party. At this party, she calls Tony and informs him of her lover and her plans for a divorce.

Tony, being the decent chap he is, consents to the divorce and even permits himself to be the one sued, so the whole divorce proceeding will not shed a bad light on Brenda. Tony's bastardized attempt to throw harmful evidence upon himself is the most comic part of the novel. Tony hires a prostitute to go with him to Brighton, so the detectives he has hired can come up with some damaging

⁸Greenblatt, p. 24.

evidence against him. The prostitute brings her young daughter along with her on the holiday. After the return from Brighton, though, the comedy ceases. Brenda is going to sue Tony for much more than the original plan, so she can keep John Beaver living well. To pay this new suit, Tony would have to sell Hetton, and this he refuses to do. He refuses the divorce, disclosing the silly carryings-on at Brighton where nothing happened. He tells Brenda he will never give her a divorce.

Shortly afterwards Tony sets sail with an explorer for Brazil to find a lost city. But the city isn't lost to Tony. He knows what it will look like. The city will look like Hetton, and everything will be the same as it was before Brenda first went to London. This is one of the many examples in the novel of Tony's inability to face reality. After many days in the jungle, Tony develops fever and is left by the explorer who soon afterwards drowns. A mad Barbadian rescues Tony and nurses him back from his fever. But Tony isn't safe; he is condemned to read the words of Dickens to the madman until his death. In the meantime, John Beaver has left Brenda because she has no money. Brenda then marries Tony's best friend, Jock, and Hetton is passed on to some impoverished Lasts. Waugh proves his point that the world is indeed becoming a more barbaric place. The country gentleman, a good man, must spend the rest of his

life in a jungle reading Bleak House to a madman. The irony of Tony's reading the moralistic Dickens is that he must read about the very standards which he has wanted to uphold. Tony is punished even in the jungle for his beliefs while Brenda and Jock lead the type of life he hates. His goodness is repaid by his unfaithful wife's marrying his best friend and his family estate being passed to ignoble relatives who have made it into a fox farm.

Waugh shows Tony Last as a simple-minded creature of the past who has never grown up.⁹ Because he has never grown up, he sees everything from a child's point of view and doesn't readily see the horrors of the modern world. Tony Last is a misfit, never comfortable or contented in his savage world, but never able to escape from it.¹⁰

The novel is concerned with a corrupt society founded on materialism and amorality and the declining effect of the aristocracy.¹¹ This world is that of a generation of lost souls between the two World Wars. Tony Last, though, is lost through little fault of his own. He is a good man

⁹Greenblatt, p. 24.

¹⁰Greenblatt, p. 24.

¹¹William V. Cook, Jr., Masks, Modes and Morals: The Art of Evelyn Waugh (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), p. 123.

who loves his wife, son, and home. He is completely innocent to the possibility of other people's not being as caring as he is. Tony Last's downfall comes because he loves Brenda too much. Trust in marriage is a Victorian principle which has not been carried over to the modern age and Tony Last still has Victorian principles.

III. Brideshead Revisited

Brideshead Revisited, usually considered Waugh's most important work, provides the reader with a main character, Charles Ryder, who is a loving and caring individual. Not only Ryder, but the entire family of Sebastian, Julia, Cordelia, and Bridey are concerned people. In Brideshead Revisited, the younger generation proves to be a more whole and compassionate group of people than their elders. True, the ancestors built Brideshead, but the younger characters tried to build human relations by caring. All of the present generation tried to add more to Brideshead than just mortar.

Charles Ryder first came into contact with the Brideshead family at Oxford, where he met Sebastian, the second oldest child of the Marquis of Marchmain. Sebastian, at first, gave an impression of noncaring to everyone. He was all for the good time. Sebastian and Charles became best friends and started their childish pranks. Sebastian seemed so immature his first year at Oxford with his teddy bear, Aloysius, that few people would have ever expected that he would turn into a soldier of mercy. Charles thought Sebastian to be the most foolish, but the most wonderful, man he had ever met. Sebastian, in fact, was the first member of the family with whom Charles fell in love. Sebastian introduced Charles to the good life of parties, travel, and danger.

Later, though, Sebastian began to grow away from Charles. He needed more than what Charles could give him. He needed someone to take care of. He had always been looked after by Nanny and Mummy. Sebastian became an alcoholic, and the only time he didn't drink to drunkenness after he had left Charles was when he had the German soldier to look after. In his own way, Sebastian was a caring person. He gave of himself to Charles when Charles needed some fun and needed to be introduced to the right people. He gave of himself when the German soldier needed him because of the injured foot.

Julia was forever giving herself. Even though she was a flighty socialite, Julia managed to be concerned with everyone's welfare, especially Sebastian's. She gave of herself, not for happiness but mostly for another's good, when she married Rex. She endangered her life when she tried to give Rex a child even though a physician had warned her against childbirth. And finally, Julia was giving of herself when she provided Charles with a means out of the rut his life was in with his marriage to Julia Mulcaster.

Although not so directly concerned with Charles, both Cordelia and Bridey Flyte were loving and caring people. Cordelia, after coming of age, provided her services through Europe as a nurse on the battlefields. At great personal danger, she provided these services because she felt needed.

Bridey Flyte, the stuffed shirt of the family, was often a subject of ridicule by the rest of the family and friends because of his pompous airs, but he did all of the business for Brideshead that no one else wished to do. Bridey and Cordelia performed their services for other people and got very little recognition and love in return.

The most loving and giving character in Brideshead Revisited, though, is the main character, Charles Ryder. Granted he was in love with, first, Sebastian, and then, Julia, but this was not the only reason Charles helped the Flyte family. He felt as though they were his own family. Even after he and Sebastian had quit their relationship, when someone else in the family asked Charles to get in touch with Sebastian for some reason, he would. Lady Marchmain had begun to look upon Charles as a member of the family. The only disappointment Charles ever gave her was his failure with Sebastian's drinking problem at Brideshead. Later, she recoiled from her harshness to Charles. And even though he enjoyed the work, Charles sacrificed in painting the walls of one of the rooms of the Flytes. All of this work he did because he loved the family. True, some of his work was done because Lady Marchmain seemed to control his life the same way she did

her own children's lives. But there was loving and caring involved. If the Lady Marchmain had given her children nothing else, she had given them the ability to love. And with the ability to love, she gave them the ability to hurt, but never did any of her children, or Charles, intentionally hurt someone else.

With all this loving and caring, then, one might suspect there might be happiness in this Waugh novel--an oddity, to be sure. But there is no lasting happiness at Brideshead, only momentary fits of happiness. This is more happiness, though, than Waugh lets most of the characters in his books have. The people in Brideshead Revisited may not be nice people, but they are good people, which is something one must be thankful for in a Waugh novel. The circumstances of life, not cruel people, cause many of the problems in Brideshead Revisited. Also, the modern world, which causes so many problems in other Waugh novels, is not to blame for any troubles the characters might have.

On the contrary, the modern world is helpful to the lives of Charles and the Flyte children. Although Brideshead produces an overpowering effect on everyone who comes in contact with the estate for a very long time, the young people try for meaningful relations. They do not give up on life as the Lady Marchmain does. Neither do they run away from life as Lord Marchmain tries to do, only to be

pulled back to Brideshead in the end. The modern world, then, gives hope in Brideshead Revisited, because of the loving and caring of the younger generation, and this caring has continued through to the present in the form of Charles.

Charles Ryder's concern and love for the Flyte family has stayed with him to the present time in the novel. When his troops come upon Brideshead, his mind and soul again become entangled in the lives of the Flyte household through memory. Also, Ryder is one of the few soldiers in the prologue of Brideshead Revisited who shows even an inkling of concern for his men. Ryder has not been hardened by his contact with Brideshead. He has, instead, learned to live with lost loves.

IV. Decline and Fall

Although Waugh suggests in the novel, Decline and Fall, that Paul Pennyfeather is no hero :

In fact, the whole of this book is really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part of hero for which he was originally cast, (p. 332).

he does survive with a semblance of a happy life. It is only after a change of identity, though, that his life begins to prosper. Paul's innocence causes his first life to be a disaster. Only a young man, ignorant of his surroundings, would have become involved with such an episode as that which happened at Oxford with the Bollinger. Paul should have realized what the hazing of the Bollinger was like. Even after he was stripped naked, he acted as though he was still unaware of what was going on. His ignorance or innocence caused him to be expelled from Scone College.

After Pennyfeather had settled in at Llanabba Castle, life progressed steadily, if slowly, for him. His life at the school was dull, but comfortable. He was respected by the students, which was more than could be said for the other masters. Things went well for Paul at Llanabba until the spring sporting event.

This was when he met Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde, the mother of one of his students. Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde had a fl  ir

for the fun life with her various lovers, and she became interested in Paul, probably because she had never been close to a public schoolman. Paul instantly fell in love with her and accompanied her son, Peter, home to King's Thursday over the Easter holiday. He then quit his job as master at Llanabba to accompany Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde to all of her little affairs. Things were beginning to look good for Paul because of his upcoming marriage to Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. However, Paul Pennyfeather's world fell apart when he was arrested for being involved in the white slave market.

The white slave trade, though, was not Paul's idea. He was only taking care of one of his fiancée's business ventures. Again, Paul's ignorance caused him trouble. If Paul had not been such an innocent, he might have realized why Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde was interviewing the girls for positions in South America. The wedding was cancelled; Paul took the blame for Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde; and Paul was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Paul found prison life accomodating, though. His food was good, he had the newest books to read, and he enjoyed his solitude. The new books and good food were presents from his former fiancée. She even managed to get him released from prison for an emergency appendectomy. He supposedly died during the operation. Paul then went

to Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's villa in Corfu to recuperate. There his second life started with a new identity. He began college again at Oxford under a new name. Paul's new life was a success.

When Paul is alone, he functions well. He succeeds in solitary confinement at prison. He also succeeds at Oxford when he doesn't have to come into contact with anyone. It is only when Paul Pennyfeather has to trust someone that his troubles begin. Paul is too gullible and too trusting. He believes only the best of everyone. According to Christopher Sykes in Evelyn Waugh: A Biography, "the main theme of the book is that of the natural victim exposed to forces with which he cannot contend."¹² He is an innocent, and only his determination helps him to survive. Even though Paul gets out of prison by dishonest means, he is still a sympathetic character. He was innocent of the charges lodged against him, and rather than put the blame on the person he thought he loved, he decided to serve the sentence quietly. Prison nor his loss of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde dampens his spirits. He is determined to start life over again.

Paul Pennyfeather survives and thrives simply because he refuses to give up. He believes only the best of people and cannot see the injustices around him. His ignorance or innocence becomes a type of honor to him. This honor is what helps Paul Pennyfeather to survive.

¹² Christopher Sykes, Evelyn Waugh: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 86.

In Evelyn Waugh's novels, the major character is usually no more a sympathetic character than any of the rest. Most of his main characters are hopeless, stranded individuals who behave intolerably in these modern times. The modern age of little values has imposed upon these characters the habits of their contemporaries. In a trying situation, the modern hero of Waugh's novels usually cannot cope. The character loses what little dignity he might possess. Only in a few of Waugh's works does the main character survive with some clear set of values for caring.

In A Handful of Dust, Tony Last is a Victorian gentleman stuck in the modern world. He tries to establish an ordered life for himself and his family at Hetton Abbey. But his wife Brenda does not want a structured life. She wants the freedom to come and go as she wishes. Because he loves her, Tony permits Brenda to have the freedom in marriage which she desires. Because of Tony's trust, Brenda destroys him.

One always sees the sympathetic side of Tony Last. He is the agreeable person who looks after everyone else's happiness except his own. It is Tony's genuine concern for everyone else which causes the reader to be concerned for Tony. Tony Last is a person whose life is worth

saving; therefore, it is a crushing blow when he fails. Being confined to a jungle to read from Charles Dickens' moralistic novel is a cruel trick for life to play on Tony Last.

Charles Ryder in Brideshead Revisited is a sympathetic character because he loses at love so many times. Charles does not become an embittered person because of his losses at love, even though none of the losses are his fault. Charles continues to love Sebastian and Julia at a distance. This new love, though, is a more mature love. It is a love of acceptance. Because Charles is hurt so much by love and survives, the reader can see honor in Charles Ryder. He is a person worth caring about.

On the other hand, Paul Pennyfeather of Decline and Fall seems to be a muddleheaded, silly young man unworthy of the reader's sympathy. But little by little, one's concern for Paul grows because he is such an innocent with blind determination. Never does Paul give up on life. He just makes the best of any given situation and creates his own little pocket of existence within that situation. Paul Pennyfeather is a survivor.

Waugh might believe that the future of the world is bleak, but he doesn't believe it is hopeless. In the characters of Tony Last, Charles Ryder, and Paul Pennyfeather,

he teaches one how to survive in the modern world.

Waugh says to keep one's principles at any cost, as does Tony Last. He also teaches one to obtain a mature ac-

ceptance toward failures the way Charles Ryder does.

And Waugh says to always keep one's determination the way Paul Pennyfeather does. But most importantly, one must try to keep little sections of civilization alive as all three characters do, even if the rest of the world is falling down around one.

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