

RELIGION AS A GUIDING FORCE IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF EVELYN WAUGH

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Abstract

Faith is the core of every religion. This faith, according to Evelyn Waugh, is reposed in God, although He may bear different names in different religions. Waugh sees religion in a wide perspective and discusses its dark and bright aspects. His religious characters are tinged with God's mercy, but somehow, life is a rigorous ordeal for the race of religious, God fearing and moral beings. The novelist also depicts immoral and atheist characters as a contrast to the ones who have unshaken faith in Almighty and His actions. Blasphemy is one aspect which is much ridiculed by Waugh. In addition to blasphemy, superstitious practices and hypocrisy that dominate the religious practices are also squarely attacked by the writer. Evelyn Waugh firmly believes that genuine religious faith imports concord and happiness into the life of man. Waugh advocates the fact that the world without genuine faith and spirituality will be a world of citizens with unfulfilled desires staring them in the face as ghosts and spirits.

Key Words: Religion; a way of life, Faith, Culture.

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Faith is the core of every religion. This faith, according to Evelyn Waugh is reposed in God, although He may bear different names in different religions. Guy Crouchback, the last hero of Waugh rightly comments “all differences are theological differences” (Waugh, 152). Except for the difference of names, the fundamental goal of every religion is the pursuit of good. Waugh sees religion in a wide perspective and focuses on its positive as well as dark aspects. In his novels, he has discussed various shades of religion and seems to believe that despite its dark side, religion is essentially the guiding force in human lives.

It may be said that the life of Waugh's upright and religious characters is tinged with God's mercy, His omnipresence and blessings but it is also a fact that life is a rigorous ordeal for the race of God-fearing, religious and moral beings. Cordelia in *Brideshead Revisted* is one such character whose life is dominated by religion and this makes her moral, simple and firm. Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust* is a simple God-fearing man. Waugh mentions that Tony's wife Brenda Last teased him “whenever she caught him passing as upright, God-fearing gentleman of the old school and Tony saw the joke but this did not at all diminish the pleasure he derived from his weekly routine, or his annoyance when the presence of guests suspended it” (Waugh, 30). Tony Last, the simple and religious hero, is devoted to his wife and loves her a lot but Brenda falls in love with John Beaver. Not only this, her behaviour with her son John Andrew, is also unacceptable and when he dies in an accident, Brenda distances herself from the Last family. Similarly, the family of Crouchbacks in *The Sword of Honour* is another religious family which faces the ordeal of extermination.

In spite of the fact that the atheist characters of Evelyn Waugh suffer in their lives but the novelist makes it sure that readers must not believe that the righteous characters get nothing in return of their devotion to God except for pain and suffering. Although Waugh shows that his God-fearing characters lead a tough life, but he makes it sure that God, the saviour comes to the rescue of His followers and saves them. For instance, Paul Pennyfeather, a student of theology, in *Decline and Fall*, gets associated with a criminal,

Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde and she wants to marry Paul on the approval of her son who is a student of the latter. But such is the mercy of Almighty that the criminal is arrested and jailed at the last moment. In the same way, Guy Crouchback is also saved by God when he is succumbing to temptations in the company of his once divorced wife Virginia Troy. While the two are in a hotel, they are continuously disturbed by the ringing of the phone, which helps Crouchback get rid of his momentary weakness. Evelyn Waugh rightly points out in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, "God never tempts us beyond our strength" (Waugh, 39).

Evelyn Waugh also does not shy away from presenting irreligious characters who are immoral, criminal and fashionable. The novelist conveys this impression through some of the members of his *beau monde* described in his early novels. Adam Fenwick-Symes, an irreligious and immoral character, in *Vile Bodies*, sells his girlfriend Nina Blount to his rival. She gets married to someone else, but prefers to continue her relationship with Symes as well. Similar is the case of Virginia Troy in *The Sword of Honour* who is not at all repulsed by her relationship with many men. In *The Loved One*, Waugh describes the scene of death in America where it is a money-making business, as people are emotional about their loved ones and those who run mortuaries and crematoria make full use of such situation. This full-fledged business runs on the lines of any other business, says Evelyn Waugh. The following extract from *The Loved One* makes it clear how the owners of mortuaries and crematoria adopt 'marketing strategy' for the 'services' they provide, "Squadron Leader the Rev. Dennis Barlow begs to announce that he is shortly starting business at 1154 Arbuckle Avenue, Los Angeles. All non-sectarian services expeditiously conducted at competitive prices. Funerals a specialty. Panegyrics in prose and poetry. Confessions heard in strict confidence" (Waugh, 122).

Evelyn Waugh also attacks the immoral saints and priests in order to highlight that in the modern times there is a marked decline in the very spirit of religion. In *Vile Bodies*, the innocent and moral Rector has to pass the whole Christmas weekend in darkness because the immoral *beau monde* of Waugh is too dominant to be swayed. In *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh tends to denounce both the non-spiritual sensual tendencies of men and women operating against the sacred bonds of marriage and the hypocrisy of the priests of the Roman Catholic Church who care more for money than for the spiritual content of their faith. Another hypocritical saint called Guru Brahmin in *The Loved One* is used to excessive intake of alcohol and smoking special cigars which often keep him out of his senses and coughing half of the day. His disciple Aimee Thanatagenos

is not married by either of her boyfriends. So she looks forward to Guru Brahmin for consolation. He, in a state of drunkenness, suggest her to take lift to top floor and jump from there. She blindly follows his advice to meet her end. The episode reveals not merely the erosion of the spirit of religion in the saints and their vile habits and practices, but also the total and blind ignorance of their followers.

Blasphemy, deep rooted superstitions and hypocrisy are dark aspects of religion which are much ridiculed by Evelyn Waugh. For instance, in *Decline and Fall*, the college sports are in progress and the bandmaster is not playing any tune but *Men of Harleck*, which Fagan, the principal does not like. When he asks the bandmaster to change the tune, he refuses to do so since Margot Beste-Chetwynde is smoking, so it would be blasphemous to play any religious tune. Fagan cannot stop Margot Beste- Chetwynde but he makes extra payment to the bandmaster who then starts playing the tune, *In thy Courts no more are needed Sun by day and Moon by night*.

In *Brideshead Revisited*, some superstitious beliefs are beyond the understanding of Rex Mottram, a new convert to Roman Catholicism, who asks, "And what about Pope who made one of his horses cardinal? And what about the box you keep in church porch and if you put in a pound note with someone's name on it, they get sent to hell" (Waugh, 187). Hypocrisy dominates the religious practices no less than superstitions. Waugh in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* writes that Pinfold can commit suicide as "he really doesn't believe in his religion. He just pretends to because he thinks it aristocratic" (Waugh, 101)

Notwithstanding the dominance of hypocritical persons like those mentioned above, there are characters who find real consolation in religion because its genuine practice not only relieves the tension-laden heart but also build character. The Marchmains in *Brideshead Revisited* have two sons. Bridey, the elder one, is religious and he leads a happy and contended life whereas, his younger brother Sebastian, who is irreligious becomes a drunkard and leaves his parents' house. Thus, one brother finds relief in the religious atmosphere, while the other does not.

All the novels of Evelyn Waugh firmly establish that genuine religious faith which imports concord and happiness into the life of man is no less important than political belief which brings national freedom. The word without genuine religious faith and spirituality will be a world of citizens with unfulfilled desires staring them in the face as ghosts and spirits. Rex Mottram in *Brideshead Revisited* believes if the Pope speaks of the

clouds raining and there is no rain, his speech implies “a sort of raining spiritually” (Waugh, 185). Thus, according to Waugh such is the power of religion that it can completely transform the lives of people for the better provided they choose the righteous path and are determined to face all the hardships.

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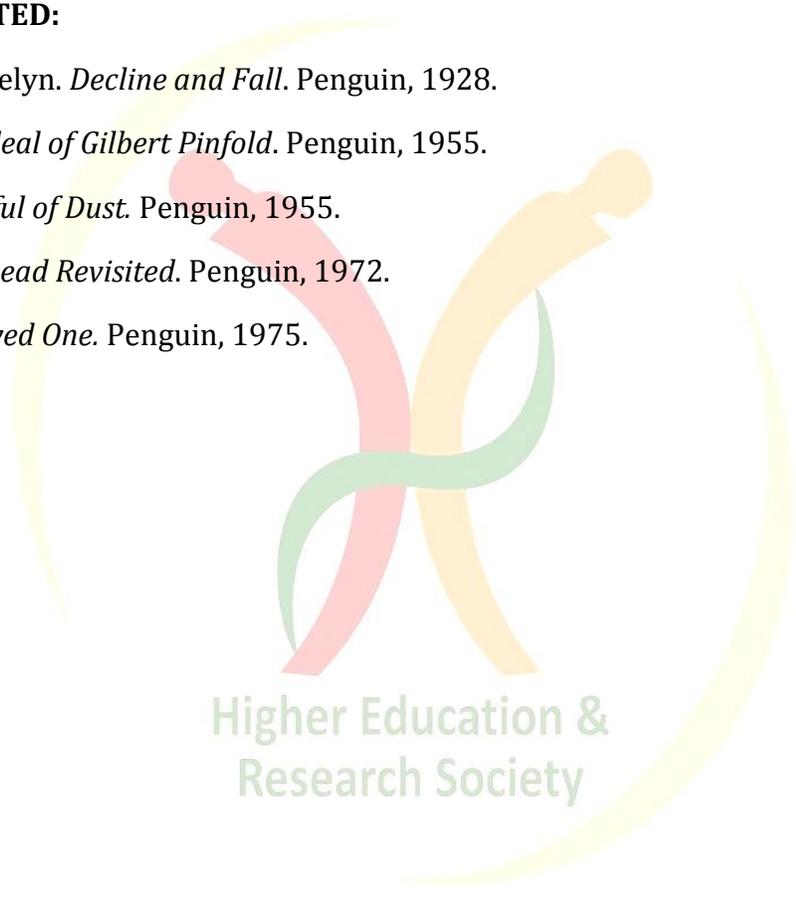
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