

原 著

Evelyn Waugh: Evaluation in His Time Part II, *A Handful of Dust*

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Abstract

Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* is presented as evaluated by contemporary critics. This second of a three-part study analyzes such criticism and finds Waugh's polished humor and style reveal a deepening satire on the unhappy contemporary scene.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary reviewers acknowledged that Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1928), a first novel, exhibited unusual mastery of technique. The most perceptive reviewers went further and hailed the author as worthy of a new literary age. Waugh's extremely witty comment on the frivolous continued in the novels *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *Black Mischief* (1932). After producing some travel books as well, Waugh wrote a fourth novel, *A Handful of Dust*, and the critics continued their attention.

A HANDFUL OF DUST, 1934

Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* is transitional in its tragi-comedy. It is:

A satirical novel dealing in the first part with smart London society, and in

the second with adventures in the Brazilian wilderness. Tony Last was a commonplace young British squire, with a romantic love for his home, his wife, and his small son. But his wife falls in love with another man, his son is killed on the hunting field, and Tony himself goes off to South America when fate steps in to add an ironic touch to the solution to his problems.¹⁾

Beatrice Sherman's negative reaction to *A Handful of Dust* is based on Waugh's:

.... two distinct manners. In one he writes audaciously amusing, sparkling nonsense about the Bright Young People of London. . . . The other style he uses for his travel books. . . . In his latest novel, 'A Handful of Dust,' Mr. Waugh undertakes to combine his two manners, and the combination doesn't quite come off. He

retains the best features of both, but they don't mix well. It's like tossing champagne and cassiri into a cocktail shaker.²⁾

Her article approves the bright sophistication in the first part of *A Handful of Dust* and cites the jungle episode as excellent short story material. She concludes: "But all the merry wit isn't sturdy enough to withstand transplanting to a South American jungle, and the contrast is grating rather than impressive."³⁾

While praising Waugh's readability, the *Saturday Review of Literature* critic is also puzzled by the two-fold structure:

In Mr. Waugh's new novel, it is as if he had set himself the problem of imagining the most outlandish misfortune that could conceivably beset a modern civilized English country gentleman; and no one will deny that his answer to this problem has a devilish ingenuity.

Whether the author means anything by this, other than to make our flesh creep, or merely *épater les bourgeois*, is another matter.⁴⁾

The savagery underlying the society Waugh portrays remains hidden to such reviewers.

The majority of Waugh's critics find *A Handful of Dust* a triumph. And most discuss the social scene and its characters, the "morality" of the book, and/or its interdependence of tragedy and comedy.

William Plomer, reviewing four authors in *The Spectator*, can serve as touchstone for other reviews. With an opinion like that of Terence Holliday who states of Waugh: "It is an extraordinary and compelling talent that can wrench consistent amusement and interest from such a social scene,"⁵⁾ and like *America's* reviewer who finds *A Handful of*

Dust "remarkably objective and notably immoral" and yet "... in between the laughs, of which there are many, Mr. Waugh contrives to show how bitterly cruel adultery can be,"⁶⁾ Plomer praises both the literary and moral achievement of *A Handful of Dust*:

Mr. Evelyn Waugh seems to be moved chiefly by a kind of fascinated disgust, and the irritation which this useful emotion set up in him caused him to produce another of his cultivated pearls.

.... The fear chiefly exhibited by his characters seems to be the fear of living anything like what used to be called a God-fearing life.⁷⁾

In discussing Waugh's treatment of character, *The Spectator* critic's approach is somewhat different from that of at least two other reviewers. Plomer says:

Mr. Waugh has such an economical method of showing up the fool in his folly that he does not allow himself scope for elaborate characterization, and his virtuous hero remains a little vague, but his method might well be studied by some of his untidier contemporaries,⁸⁾

while the *Boston Transcript* critic finds: "Best of all the portrait of Tony Last shadows the novel, small, human, somewhat of an ass (to be frank), but always real and mostly to be pitied."⁹⁾ *The Saturday Review* critic is less specific in stating: "And for all their futility the characters, or some of them at least, are not without their appeal to the readers' sympathies."¹⁰⁾

It is Peter Quennell who treats Evelyn Waugh with widest range. *The New Statesman and Nation* review discusses *A Handful of Dust* as the first of four new novels. Mr. Quennell is delighted that the satirist has escaped from the solemnity which threatened

him since *Black Mischief*, and gives high praise to Waugh's novel of pain and hilarity:

... A HANDFUL OF DUST, if not the most exhilarating, is certainly the most mature and the best written novel that Mr. Waugh has yet produced. Here tragedy and comedy are interdependent. It is true that the reader of DECLINE AND FALL [,] no longer interrupts his reading to put down the book and laugh aloud. On the other hand, he is kept lightly, skilfully and continuously amused throughout the entire volume, and smiles and is subtly horrified at the same instant. In essence, the harrowing is often farcical; and there is a touch of tragedy in many comic situations.¹¹⁾

The same review lauds the economy and heartlessness of Waugh's method of characterization, regretting only the sentiment of young John Last's death.

Quennell sums up his close reading:

Cruel A HANDFUL OF DUST certainly is; a more 'moral' book — though Mr. Waugh is too intelligent a novelist to append any explicit moral message — has seldom come my way. I rise from Mr. Waugh's new novel as from a reading of one of the sterner and more uncompromising Fathers, convinced that human life is a chaos of inclinations and appetites, and that few appetites are strong enough to be worth gratifying.

Immediately the critic who hoped "comic

equilibrium" would win over seriousness of tone undercuts his own solemnity: "Strange to add, I am also amused and enlivened; but it is not the novelist's fault that he is a brilliantly diverting storyteller."¹²⁾

SYNOPSIS

The reviews of Evelyn Waugh's fourth novel continued to reveal critics who were not able or willing to grasp the author's conviction that moderns have fashioned an unhappy and unwholesome habitation for themselves. Structure and readability were discussed by these critics, while the greater number of reviewers turned to deeper issues in the novel. By the publication of *A Handful of Dust*, reviewers and readers expected mastery of language and narrative on Waugh's part, and criticism focused instead on the "morality" of the novel.

A fear of the religious tract gave way to painful delight in the Waughian tragedy-comedy, exemplified by *A Handful of Dust*. Characterization in the social scene continued to be discussed, and it was noted the audacious *Decline and Fall* characters were succeeded by people more pitiable in their grasp of "dust."

Analysis of the Waughian humor was thoughtful and more frequent, as Waugh's polished satire on the contemporary scene deepened. In fourteen years, Waugh's very brief novel, *The Loved One*, would cause contemporary critics to declare themselves in greater number and intensity.

NOTES

- 1) (1935) *Book Review Digest*, 1934. Wilson, New York.
- 2) Sherman B (1934) Nonsense and Tragedy. *The New York Times Book Review*, September 30, 7.
- 3) *Ibid.*
- 4) (1934) *Saturday Review of Literature*, XI, September 29, 142.

- 5) Holliday T (1934) *Books*, September 23, 10.
- 6) (1934) *America*, LII, October 20, 44.
- 7) Plomer W (1934) Fiction. *The Spectator*, CLIII, September 14, 374.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) H. P. B. (1934) *Boston Transcript*, October 17, 3.
- 10) (1934) *The Saturday Review*, CLVIII, September 29, 184.
- 11) Quennell P (1934) New Novels. *The New Statesman and Nation*, September 15, 329.
- 12) *Ibid.*

イーブリン・ウォーに対する当時の評価 *A Handful of Dust* について (2)

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要 約

本研究は三つのシリーズから成る。本論(第二部)においては、Evelyn Waugh の *A Handful of Dust* が当時の批評家によって、いかなる評価を受けてきたかを論ずる。さらに、これらの批評を分析し、彼の洗練されたユーモアとスタイルによって、当時の社会の不幸な行為がより鋭く諷刺されていることを論証する。