

Original Paper

Evelyn Waugh: Evaluation in His Time Part III, *The Loved One*

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Abstract

Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* is presented as evaluated by contemporary critics. This last of a three-part study analyzes such criticism and finds Waugh's satire, controversial for his contemporaries, has particular applicability in a modern age.

Introduction

Contemporary criticism of *The Loved One* contains much that was said earlier of *Decline and Fall* and/or *A Handful of Dust*. (*Kawasaki Medical Welfare Journal*, (1994) IV, 2, 177-180, (1995) V, 1, 211-214.) Evelyn Waugh's first novel revealed a talent for original humor and smooth style, and reviewers found his frivolous people attractive in their very audacity and distance. By the latter novel, Waugh had grown, forcing critics to acknowledge deeper issues through a contemporary world of adultery and emptiness. With the publication of *The Loved One*, the critics were challenged even more.

The Loved One, 1948

Summarizing the Waugh novel proved particularly difficult when *The Loved One* was reviewed. Many critics avoided the problem

by correlating extensive story line and analysis throughout their reviews. To merely summarize *The Loved One* as a "satirical novel describing the tragic love affair of Dennis Barlow, a worker in a Hollywood Pet cemetery, and Aimée Thanatogenos, a cosmetician in a de luxe mortuary,"¹⁾ is to ignore the author's brilliance which breathes life into the story of the fashionable (or exclusive) place of rest, Whispering Glades.

Katherine Brégy somewhat indicates the scope of the story and explains Waugh's creation :

Authors, like other people, enjoy their 'mad magenta moments' of experiment, and in the present little book Mr. Waugh launches a suavely vicious attack upon the artificiality of morticians in particular, of Hollywood in general and symbolically of our modern civilization...²⁾

Her review is conservative, acknowledging Waugh's "fascination in imaginative irony for its own sake" and the effectiveness of this "diatribe," while she questions "whether it was worth further time and energy from one of our most artistic and perceptive Catholic novelists..."³⁾ The book, at least, proved re-viewing, for the following volume of *The Catholic World* contains an anonymous, much slighter review which finds *The Loved One* "ghoulish, hilarious, and salutary" while admittedly "not for every taste."⁴⁾

Another critic both approving and questioning, J. F. Powers, discusses the "Waughian dispensation" which characterizes *The Loved One* and other Waugh novels :

He realizes he cannot go into everything, every reaction, without dulling the finish, losing his edge. He does not attempt the impossible to him, to his method, and so he is never caught trying too hard, the common fault of satirists.⁵⁾

In finding the principal characters not representative, Powers challenges the subtitle, "An Anglo-American Tragedy," and Waugh's artificial Americanese.

The Booklist reviewer also occupies a center position, perhaps an ambiguous one, in stating: "The picture of Whispering Glades is one of the ultimate in bad taste, and is guaranteed to fascinate the reader in the same way that it fascinated Dennis."⁶⁾

Most of the negative reviews of *The Loved One* discuss the author's motivation and/or his artistry, although there are examples of criticism inadequate through personal bias or omission. Edmund Wilson, in a chapter on Evelyn Waugh written right after publication of *The Loved One*, claims that for the non-religious reader "... the patrons and proprietors of Whispering Glades seem more sensible and less absurd than the priest-guided Evelyn

Waugh"⁷⁾ — but Wilson does not justify his strangely isolated statement. And a librarian can reduce the novel to "high satirical humor that gets into the macabre..."⁸⁾ and then expect his brief plot summary to suffice.

Waugh, as artist and satirist, "crude and heavy-footed, comes nowhere within hailing distance of Swift and Donne..."⁹⁾ says Dixon Wecter of *The Pacific Spectator*. And both N. Elizabeth Monroe of *Books on Trial*¹⁰⁾ and America's Harold C. Gardiner feel Waugh's satire is overstrained in this story of "the super-melagorgeous resting place for human bipeds."¹¹⁾

Criticism of both Waugh's motivation and execution is surprisingly frequent. Charles J. Rolo of the *Atlantic* says: "Acrimony has blurred his vision and turned his fantasy sour,"¹²⁾ and W. S. Graham of the *New Republic* also regrets Waugh's undeveloped humanity.¹³⁾ Two other critics discuss Evelyn Waugh's hate. Ernest Jones in his *Nation* review says "... the hate pours out in uncontrolled retching, so that even the writing is often downright sloppy."¹⁴⁾ And R. D. Smith sums up his feeling in the *New Statesman and Nation* :

We feel a similar contradiction between what Mr. Waugh intends us to understand are his values, and what the feel and texture of his writing reveal. Satire requires less erratic values than Mr. Waugh's style and characters suggest; like Swift in *A MODEST PROPOSAL*, the writer must hate life steadily and hate it whole.¹⁵⁾

In counterbalance, a substantial number of other critics find both Evelyn Waugh's writing and his satire very much to their liking. John Woodburn in the *New Republic* gives highest praise to Waugh just three months after W. S. Graham's complaint in the same

periodical. Woodburn's conclusion, representative of much positive criticism, mentions both Waugh's point and polish :

As a piece of writing it is nearly faultless; as satire it is an act of devastation, an angry, important, moral effort that does not fail. THE LOVED ONE is not outrageous but outraged, sickened but not sickening; its macabre humor is the shocked, protective laughter of the civilized man confronted with the unas-similable horror that permits no other means of rejection.¹⁶⁾

Time says: "It is Evelyn Waugh caught between laughter and vomiting,"¹⁷⁾ and Ben Ray Redman in *The Saturday Review of Literature* concurs, calling *The Loved One* "... a little jewel of a yarn, conceived in a commingling of fascination and nausea, etched in acid, and expertly executed with loving horror."¹⁸⁾

Other perspectives on satire in *The Loved One* include Orville Prescott's in the *Yale Review*: "... a trivial but brilliantly amusing satire,"¹⁹⁾ and Wolcott Gibbs' *New Yorker* comment on Waugh's daring a satire which flirts with the burlesque. Gibbs then says of Waugh: "... his sympathy with the usual aspirations of the human heart, never marked, had reached this time a pure and absolute zero."²⁰⁾ Yet Riley Hughes feels "the author's touch is gentle. His method is, as usual, assassination by tiny incisions."²¹⁾

Iris Barry of the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* is alone in her simplistic approach:

Obviously, the whole thing is a fable which kids the life out of visiting Britons and resident Americans alike.

... It is the oddity of America which is being described, and most humorously.²²⁾

The majority of critics who recommend Waugh's *Loved One* go deeper, probing the morality of the book. Cyril Connolly set this pace in his introduction to the novel which first appeared in *Horizon*: "In its attitude to death and to death's stand-in, Mr. Waugh exposes a materialistic society at its weakest spot as would Swift or Donne were they alive today."²³⁾ *The Times Literary Supplement* reviewer agrees: "Mr. Waugh upbraids the materialists with creative passion,"²⁴⁾ and the *Times* further finds Waugh's shock value comes from his characters living as-though-dead among the dead. Similar thoughts about *The Loved One* are voiced by Robert Lee who reviews seven authors in *The Spectator*: "... it is in fact a moral tale, bringing us face to face with the full fatuousness and bankruptcy of our own civilization."²⁵⁾ Lee finds Waugh's characters "logical extensions of all too real human beings."²⁶⁾ Alice S. Morris flatly states, although Waugh never does: "It is, then, the thesis of 'The Loved One' that American tribal patterns of love and death are profoundly inhuman."²⁷⁾

Finally, Harold F. Ryan of *America* reverses Harold Gardiner's negative point of view given earlier in the periodical:

Back of the witty facade of movies and morticians is the portrayal of the decline and fall of human values, the antics of these handfuls of dust, the parable of a traditionless age which has reduced its citizens to subpersonalities...²⁸⁾

So the reader is reminded of two of the earlier works, *Decline and Fall* and *A Handful of Dust*, which have their own place in a study of Evelyn Waugh's fiction and his time.

Synopsis

With *The Loved One*, a substantial division among critics is apparent. Pluralistic and

contradictory when compared, the contemporary reviews are surprisingly uniform in topics emphasized. And many refer to earlier Waugh works in recognition of the author's contemporaneity yet development in style and satire. A summary analysis of the 1948 - 1949 Waugh reviews, then, will fittingly conclude this study of the novelist in his time.

Created within the long-established structure of the novel and in the Christian tradition, Waugh's *Loved One* is original in its motivation and its artistry. The reviewers, both those enthusiastic and those disappointed, talk of the "hate" with which Waugh approaches the story of Whispering Glades, of his less-than-human or frighteningly sym-

bolic characters, and, most of all, these critics discuss the applicability of Waugh's morality in their modern age. For some, Evelyn Waugh is the satirist who embalms a civilization.

Is Evelyn Waugh a worthy novelist of his time, one whose works have contributed to a theory of modern fiction? His *Decline and Fall*, *A Handful of Dust*, and *The Loved One*, as analysed by perceptive and positive contemporary critics, are strong points in his favor. And perhaps the dissenters over *The Loved One*, a considerable number, might add force to the possibility that Evelyn Waugh is one of the novelists ahead of his time, and therefore controversial for his contemporaries.

NOTES

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