

*A Handful of Dust*, Evelyn Waugh

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Jacques wrote this week to say he had surgery due to pneumonia and would I introduce Waugh in his stead. Alas, I only had an hour to prepare this essay, so it is not a good one.

As with many of the novelists I love, when one reads Waugh one either admires him or despises him. Knowing a bit about him will only make the pressure to choose sides worse, but since we can't comprehend him apart from knowing a bit about him, this essay will consist mostly of biography and commentary off the top of my head.

The important biographical facts are these: Waugh's father was a literary man—publisher and book reviewer. Waugh's schooling was at Lancing, and he was admitted on scholarship to Hertford College, Oxford. There he began his life-long career of driving his friends mad and enraging his enemies. The generation of his youth, a generation he abandoned, was the generation that grew up after WW I. He married his first wife, also named Evelyn, in 1927 and for reasons no one wants much to talk about the marriage ended in divorce only 15 months later. Prior to the collapse of the marriage, Waugh was already being drawn to the Catholic Church, to which he converted in 1930, even though he was not raised in a religious family. After his conversion, Waugh knew he could not remarry unless the Vatican annulled the marriage, which it eventually did after some years' delay. During the delay Waugh was perfectly calm about it, never dreaming of going against the Church's authority. Waugh remarried in 1937 to Laura Hall, with whom he raised a family and remained faithful until his death in 1966. Waugh served in the British Commandos in WW II, despite a complete lack of any previous physical training. At one period he was part of an intelligence unit in Croatia, serving alongside Randolph Churchill, son of the Prime Minister, and he tells the story in his masterful *Sword of Honor* trilogy.

It was in fact the deep appreciation of the need for authority in human life that both brought Waugh to the Church and gave Waugh his literary outlook. Waugh viewed the modern world as lost, debauched, and depraved, and his response to the debauchery and depravity was to veer sharply toward authority in every corner of society. He upheld the Church, researched and wrote about saints, supported monarchy and aristocracy while deploring the consequences of common-man democracy, and radically disapproved of anyone displaying in his presence a lack of appreciation for traditional mores and respect.

Waugh's penchant for slash-and-burn rudeness was legendary. He did not suffer fools gladly and had no desire to meet strangers. His attacks were primarily launched at pretention and cowardice, and in the face of these he was merciless. When one person questioned how Waugh could be so rude and still be a Christian, Waugh replied, "but my dear, you do not know how I was *before*." In his later years, when television was ascendant, the then-famous Waugh mostly avoided television interviews and the like. But in one interview, when asked why he lived in the country when he did not engage in country pursuits, Waugh replied, "to get away from people like you."

As a writer, Waugh is known for being one of the most devastating humorists and satirists in all of English literature. Indeed, there are moments in *A Handful of Dust* when the satire soars, as with the hilarious response of Brenda and her friends to Tony's refusal to be a good sport by allowing himself to be sued for divorce and giving away Hetton in the bargain. Waugh appreciated the aristocracy as an institution, but he gloriously skewered them. But the comedic satire in *A Handful of Dust* is somewhat restrained. As I said, you will either admire Waugh or despise him, but if you admire him, as I do, then you will want to read some of his truly hilarious satires, including *Decline and Fall*, *Scoop*, *Black Mischief*, and *The Loved One*. These are all delicious, but *The Loved One* is especially noteworthy for its devastating critique of the unbelievable Forest Lawn memorial park in Los Angeles, the Disneyland of cemeteries. In Waugh's version, Whispering Glades memorial park has a pet cemetery and crematorium right next door, where one's furry "loved ones" could be retired properly.

To return to Waugh's distaste for modernity, here is a quote in reference to *The Loved One* from one of his biographies, *Evelyn Waugh and his World*:

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Waugh's attitude toward the United States in this novel is closely tied to his entire attitude toward the modern world; and that attitude was by no means simple. In the later years of his life, from the end of the war onward, Waugh's bitterness about social evolution and the movement toward equality, welfare and progress was considerable; it was a bitterness about the loss of civilisation and the hierarchy that maintained and ordered it, the devaluation of life, and individuality and privacy, the reducing of human nature to homogeneity and equivalence, the decline of complexity and form in social relationships and in the individual conduct of living, and the disappearance of serious and dedicated faith.

The critics are united in praising Waugh's comedic satire and his *Sword of Honor* trilogy. On two of his works the critics are divided right down the middle: *Brideshead Revisited* and *A Handful of Dust*. Appreciating Waugh is much easier if you appreciate his faith and his traditionalism, which are, in fact, key themes in these books. In *Brideshead* Waugh pulverizes the modern world, most memorably in the grand swan ice sculpture during a party onboard a ship. Throughout the party the swan is melting, and in the pool of water surrounding it men are putting out their cigarettes—blazing satire so understated as to be unforgettable. *Brideshead* is a very Catholic novel, with Waugh's faith put strongly forward as the antithesis of the laziness, tawdriness, and decay he sees all around him. Because of the strong faith element, the critics cannot decide whether to admire the book or pan it.

*A Handful of Dust* has been described as the novel in which Waugh said "what he had to say about modern society without the religious dimension." In this novel, our subject tonight, the critics' issue is not about the presence of Christian themes. It is about Waugh's risky decision to include the long ending detailing Tony's trip to South America and his entrapment by the evil Mr. Todd into an eternity of reading Dickens. (One can imagine worse imprisonments than being forced to read Dickens, but that's not the point here.) After we read the novel, Waugh invites us to read the much shorter and happier ending attached to the serialized American edition of the book. In this revised ending, instead of being lost forever in South America Tony merely goes on a cruise and then returns to England to be more or less reconciled with Brenda. Ironically, in this ending it is Tony who sets up a flat in London as a potential love nest—a freedom Waugh allows to him because Brenda, in her infidelity, has already broken the marriage covenant.

We will no doubt review these two endings at length here tonight and make our own judgments about the novel's integrity. After some reflection, my own judgment is positive. Waugh was a romantic, just like Tony; very deeply so. Because of this, the ending is not at all unrealistic—it is easy to imagine Tony launching off into the wilderness after his sudden betrayal by Brenda. (And Brenda's infidelity, even though it seems at first to be out of the blue, is explained by her being lured into the orbit of the utterly feckless John Beaver, the very emblem of the slack, undisciplined modernity Waugh despises.) In fact, Waugh himself traveled to the interior in Africa and South America, so Tony's trip is not at all as far-fetched as it might seem to someone who does not know of Waugh's deeply held beliefs and physical courage in the face of danger.

In conclusion, I will note that it was Waugh's romantic attitudes toward both faith and traditional society that eventually brought about his end. Waugh was a cosmic drinker, so we could blame his death on that. But he died on Easter Sunday in 1966 when the reforms of Vatican II were fully implemented. To Waugh, the loss of the Latin liturgy and its replacement by a liturgy in the English vernacular was aesthetically devastating, and he came home from church that Easter Sunday and simply died. When the ancient authority of the Church, which had held the line against so much apostasy through the centuries, allowed modern tawdriness and egalitarianism to come crashing right into the Catholic Mass, it was too much.