

# CULTURAL AND MORAL HERITAGE OF CATHOLICISM IN BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

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## Abstract

This article analyses the historical novel by an English novelist, Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*. Introduction to the novel provides a brief account of circumstances behind Waugh's motivation to write the novel and its criticism. The author analyses the conversion of the main character in the novel, Charles Ryder, to the Catholic faith. The re/conversion of another character, Julia, to the Old Faith is discussed and analysed further in the article. Through comparison of codes of behaviour of other characters from the novel, the author presents two miscellaneous characters of people. The author states that the difference between these people stems from their different approach towards the values that represent the Roman Catholicism, which formed the character of people in the past. The author focuses on the influence of religion accepted in childhood on the adult life of an individual. The paper also contains analyses of characters that represent the modern age era following the World War II. The analysis puts these characters, agnostics, in a sharp contrast with the Anglo-Catholics. The Marchmains represent the people of the past, who lean on their family traditions that originate from their long preserved history and Catholic culture.

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**Keywords:** Evelyn Waugh, catholic faith, modern era, culture, England

## Introduction

Considered by many to be Waugh's best work, the novel, on the background of 1920s and 1940s England, broaches a complicated structure of relationships among the members of an orthodox Catholic family of aristocrats. It reflects the gradual decline of the family in the modern era, which is, however, caused not only by the coming of a new era itself but by the influence that the two-thousand year-old Catholic faith and its demands had on lives of the characters from the novel.

The theme of the Catholic faith that prevailed in Waugh's fiction of the later period brought him much criticism based either on agnosticism or misconception of his critics. Edmund Wilson, an American literary critic and

editor, who praised Waugh's early satirical novels and carefully followed his work, despised *Brideshead Revisited* for being too "pious and poetic" (Adcock, 1998). Waugh explained that the novel, in fact, did not deal with his notion of Catholicism or the faith separately. Of the role of religion in the novel he said, that it is an "operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters" (Waugh, 1962, Preface, p.1). One of the characters to be favoured by God's grace is Charles Ryder who narrates the story through his rememberings of sophisticated inhabitants of the stately Brideshead castle. A variety of effects that Catholicism had on the old noble family of the Marchmains and Charles himself express the difference in everyone's psyche when confronted with such an emotive extortion. Some of the critics, however, did not attempt to criticize Waugh on purpose, and seemed to understand Waugh's choice of dealing with the theme of Catholicism in his novels. An example is found in an article published in *The Atlantic Weekly* by Charles Rolo, who writes; "The Catholicism of Waugh's fiction - it is not, of course, his faith which is under discussion, but his expression of it - is inextricably bound up with worship of the ancient" (Rolo, 1954). This is the notion closest to Waugh's own explanation of the purpose for the use of religious motives in his fiction, as Waugh's deep-seated repulsion towards all amenities of human society of the modern world creates here sharp contrast with the satisfying self-awareness that can be achieved through the past and present intertwined in the Roman Catholicism.

### **History of the novel and its criticism**

The novel was written in the period of the Second World War, when Waugh was on a longer rest from his army duties due to a knee injury he had suffered when parachuting. About that wartime period spent in an army Waugh wrote:

*„It was a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster - the period of soya beans and Basic English - and in consequence the book is suffused with a kind of gluttony for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful. " (Waugh, 1962, p.1"*

The novel was an immediate success and found its many admirers, as well as dissenters. Indeed, besides many more objections of different kinds, the book was often criticized by socially conscious critics as the one celebrating the pre-war period when the upper classes had their prime time, conversely to the working classes, raising their voices during the war and the post war years. It is not an unknown fact that Waugh had never tried even to disguise his contempt for the working classes. Whether it was for his disgust he had for the socialist ideas, or the lack of interest in uneducated masses that made him ignore certain layers of British society is not quite clear. But

the truth is that today, it seems ridiculous to imagine Waugh writing novels in which central characters would be the uneducated Prolets, descending from somewhere in North England, raiding with masses to participate in the 1926 General strike and - speaking the language that Charles Ryder or Sebastian Flyte from *Brideshead Revisited* did. On the whole, another one reason why Waugh is still widely read is his mastery of the English language, which creates a pleasure for a reader. That language is rich in allusions, metaphors, historical events and foreign-language words, which are characteristic for upper classes of British society. Moreover, it has always been the highest societal circles that served as the desired model for the formation of values, tastes, attitudes and manners to the rest of society.

Therefore, the approximate picture of the conditions of British society may be assumed from observation of the lifestyle and that what was typical for the British upper class when Waugh was writing the novel. Through Waugh's portrayal of an aristocratic family of Flytes, one can identify moral and religious lapses of the family members with the similar development anticipated in the whole of British society after the WWI.

### **Charles Ryder - Conversion of the narrator**

Waugh's intention to present "the operation of divine grace" on the novel's characters is, intentionally, most strikingly evident in the final conversion of Captain Ryder, the novel's narrator (Waugh, 1962, p.7).

In order to approximate Charles' conversion as close to the understanding of a reader as possible Waugh lets his character go through a long process. It starts with Charles' enchantment by the charming denizens of the Brideshead Castle and lasts for not less than twenty years to be, as implied by the conclusion of the novel, definitely completed. The technique of retrospective first-person narrative employed by the author might normally prove as inadequate in an effort to communicate the conditions of faith.

However, Waugh seems to have contrived a safe ground for explicating the difference, the contrast, caused by spiritual changes, that stands between the agnostic Charles from Arcadia: "But my dear Sebastian, you can't seriously believe it all, ...you can't believe things because they're a lovely idea," (Waugh, 1962, p.84) and later, the thirty-nine year old Charles from the Epilogue who, after visiting the Brideshead's Catholic sanctuary, accepting the faith with no need of evidence, is "looking unusually cheerful," which means that he already believes in a "lovely idea" (Waugh, 1962, p.331). Even if this straightforward conversion was accepted by the novel's critics as a mere fact of the novel's resolution, or, if the mysterious conversion of Charles Ryder was deemed improbable, surely the matter would not be the same for the novel's creator for there is a number of

reasonable details to prove that Charles' conversion is just as probable to happen in real life as is the loss of one's faith.

First of all, Charles strongly reminds of Waugh himself. In her review, *The triple conversion of Brideshead Revisited* (1993) Laura Mooneyham proposes that there is a similarity to be observed in the way that Charles accepts Catholic religion with that of Waugh's. She writes:

*"The elaborately worked imagery for Charles's conversion - that of the trapper in his hut crushed free by the relentless power of an avalanche - conveys the emotional, violent and irrational nature of Charles's first acceptance of God."*

By this "first acceptance" the author means the last chapter of *Brideshead Revisited* where Lord Marchmain, unconscious, shortly before he dies, makes the sign of a cross. Mooneyham views such a hastened conversion as short lasting because of the instancy of its acceptance. She further likens Waugh's unexpected conversion to the Catholic faith in 1930 to that of Charles's, and deems it as a search for "solace," a kind of an escape from the ills of this world. In spite of the fact that Waugh's tendency as a writer to borrow inspiration from his immediate surroundings regarding people, places, manners or stories is widely acknowledged in his writing, the comparison cannot be that simple.

At the very point, the possible way of understanding the nature of conversion to Catholicism in *Brideshead Revisited* by putting the two men, Waugh and Charles, in a pigeonhole must be desisted. To see the difference, since his unanticipated conversion to the Catholic faith, Waugh had been known as a steady churchman until his death. Father D'Arcy, who received the writer into the Roman Catholic Church wrote that Waugh "was a man of very strong convictions and a clear mind" (Sykes, 1975, p. 107) who had come to believe without unnecessary romantic emotions in "the truth of the Catholic faith, and that in it he must save his soul" (ibid, p. 107). It is no doubt that Waugh's religious regeneration was a thought-over step. The same thing cannot be assumed about his novel's character, Charles Ryder.

At the beginning of the novel, the young Charles is introduced as a full-fledged atheist by upbringing, as his rational judgment of the world and his scornful views on religion were enhanced by Charles' scientifically engaged father. Throughout the whole story Charles' antagonistic insights on Roman Catholicism are yet encouraged due to his observation of the wrong doings of the most prominent Catholic in the novel - Lady Marchmain.

Therefore, Ryder's conversion to the Catholic faith at the moment of Lord Marchmain's receiving the Last sacraments is a somewhat surprising, paradoxical conclusion. The reader, whether he is a believer or a non-believer must necessarily ask himself if seeing a miracle at Lord Marchmain's deathbed really made Charles closer to God's grace. The

answer to this question is to be found in the novel's prologue "Here at the age of thirty-nine I began to be old. I felt stiff and weary ... reluctant to go out of camp ... I developed proprietary claims to certain chairs and newspapers" (Waugh, 1962, p. 11). This self-disclosure is hardly a confession of a man who feels God's grace. It seems like only some four years after his acceptance of the Catholic faith Charles is unaware of that fact. Not only he avoids any mentioning of God or faith but the immediate emotional condition he finds himself in uncovers an alienated and reserved man whose life appears somewhat empty and purposeless: "I never built anything, and I forfeited the right to watch my son grow up. I'm homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless" (Waugh, 1962, p. 330). Even work as one of the possible sources of self-determination and fulfilment in one's life fails to arouse Charles' interest. Having been through unsuccessful marriage Charles makes an analogy of his relationship to an army and a relationship to a woman. Indifference and lethargy, however, is the feeling that he gets about this affair:

*„[Charles] felt as a husband might feel, who, in the fourth year of his marriage, suddenly knew that he had no longer any desire, or tenderness, or esteem, for a once-beloved wife, ...no wish to please, no curiosity about anything she might ever do or say or think.” (ibid. p. 11)*

Further, the narrator appears to deal with his military duties responsibly, but in fact Charles performs his tasks mechanically without an inner participation in the matters regarding the army or his accompanying soldiers "And I, who by every precept should have put heart into them - how could I help them, who could so little help myself?" Charles' resignation is so deep that he is "entirely indifferent" as to the next camp his company of soldiers is about to arrive (ibid. p. 10-12).

In his essay Augustine - Elements of Christianity, James O'Donnell writes that one of the primal Christian teachings is to love your neighbour. Charles is not, yet despite his former conversion to the Catholic faith, able to be the source of moral support to his subordinate soldiers as he is unable to help himself find the fulfilment in his own life and this means that he does not observe the doctrines of the Catholic faith he had accepted. To put it short, Charles' hopelessness in the prologue is the evidence that he had not been prepared for adopting the Roman Catholic faith when he did and that this adoption was not based on a mature decision of reason, but on an immediate reaction to what he had witnessed at Lord Marchmain's deathbed. This first conversion was hastened and proved fruitless, as Charles' poor state of mind reflects in the prologue. The work tries to answer what makes the difference between the "stiff and weary" (Waugh, 1962, p.11) Charles in the prologue and an "unusually cheerful" Charles from the epilogue, (ibid, p. 331). There is a point that should be considered before the critic acclaims or

dishonours the novel's im/plausibility to demonstrate the "workings of divine grace," and that point is unpredictability and power that the human memory hidden in subconsciousness has over one's consciousness. Human mind is a powerful device of which Waugh was perfectly aware when writing the novel. In her critical essay Mooneyham suggests an explanation for Charles' first conversion lacking in permanence. She writes:

*"Waugh's strategy is to demonstrate Charles' first conversion, while shaping through the process of retrospection a deeper and more ordered reconversion. This double conversion is meant to create a third, that of the reader" (Mooneyham, 1993, p.2.)*

To understand better how Charles comes to accept Christian doctrine at the end of the novel, some more background information regarding the Catholic faith will provide a clue. Doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church are clearly explained in the writings of one of the most accepted theologians St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) the bishop of Hippo. In his tract Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen the father of theology explains ethereal nature of the Christian religion; ..."we are not able to show unto human sight those divine things which we believe, yet do show unto human minds that even those things which are not seen are believed" (St. Augustine, A.D. 399). As St. Augustine had claimed, Christianity is not something that is external and, therefore, cannot be observed by our five senses. The exact concept of the Roman Catholic faith was even not to be found in observance to certain clearly-defined laws. Christianity is something inner in a man than outer. St. Augustine believed that men are predestined to believe in the Catholic faith even if that is not palpable, and used many similes from an ordinary life where we do not require any proofs since we believe unconditionally:

*"For surely, if we ought not to believe things not seen, since indeed we believe the hearts of our friends, and that, not yet surely proved, and, after we shall have proved them good by our own ills, even then we believe rather than see their good will towards us, ...we ought therefore to believe, because we cannot see." (St. Augustine, Concerning the Faith of Things not Seen)*

Charles says he wants to understand the matter of the Catholic faith, but due to his practical perception of reality he is not capable of fathoming the true substance of the religion. At first, it looks as if his empirical intelligence was not prepared to match with metaphysical ideas of the Roman Catholicism. Sebastian, who befriends Charles seeing an ally in him against Lady Marchmain, finds out that there is a wall between him and Charles, and that wall is his religion. This split of their spirituality suggests that their ways will separate in future. Moreover, Charles is so blind in his assertion of truth, that he considers the faith of his friend to be nonsense.

*"Do you think you can kneel down in front of a statue and say a few words, not even out loud, just in your mind, and change the weather; or that some saints are more influential than others, and you must get hold of the right one to help you on the right problem?" (Waugh, 1962, p. 84)*

Even if he starts a conversation about the religion, Charles cannot apprehend its matter, nor can he understand the meaning of the Catholic faith to those who are Christians. Therefore, he makes jokes about religion. This is a common reaction of people, if they do not understand something, to prejudice or laugh at such things as religion, homosexuality, politics or alcoholism. In an essay on St. Augustine, O'Donnel says that; "The root of all lovelessness is the self-assertiveness of pride" (O'Donnel, 2004). This statement explains why Charles is not able to take Christianity seriously at first. He is too conceited and self-assured about righteousness of his logic, reason and empirical knowledge that to even admit that there are uncontainable mysteries about which the Marchmains, and all the Catholics, are convinced seems ridiculous to him. It has been mentioned that the Catholic faith cannot be explicitly defined, which is exactly what Charles demands in order to understand that faith. Charles represents the difference between traditional and pragmatic western philosophy and Christian theology. First, he wants evidence only then he can believe but that is precisely how religion simply does not function. O'Donnel explains:

*"...we cannot exist in the world simply as knower and observer. To do so is to condemn ourselves to a partial existence, imperfect and incomplete. The fullness of human life comes only when knowledge and observation are perfectly integrated with action and participation." (O'Donnel, 2004)*

In the novel, the text shows Charles' double persona - Charles who is involved in the story, and Charles, who narrates his story. Waugh, whose passion was study of theology, certainly did not employ that Charles' "double self" [the term is Mooneyham's] accidentally. His aim was to make the reader follow the first, conversion of Charles - the participant in the story and then compare this to the second conversion which comes as a direct effect of Charles' story telling. The aim is to point at the difference between the real and superficial conversion of Charles and make clear through exegesis that a true conversion is a process that cannot be hastened or indicted through any miracles or by other person. Above all, Christians do not believe in miracles or mysteries, they are a part of their lives. Waugh's intention regarding his ambitions in literature in his later years puzzled many of his non-Catholic admirers and, on the other hand, pleased those who had understood the importance of faith and its place in the life of a man. Waugh explained: "In my future books there will be two things to make them unpopular: a preoccupation with style and the attempt to represent man more fully, which,

to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God" (Rolo, 1954).

Therefore, it is from this angle, the examination of the relationship man - God, that the readers of *Brideshead Revisited* should concentrate on and not the "splendours of the recent past," or the meaningless lives of the aristocracy in the 1920's and 1930's. (Waugh, 1962, p.1)

### **Parallels between Charles and Waugh as representatives of Catholic identity in opposition to the characters of modern men - Rex and Hooper**

Character of Charles strongly reminds of the personality of its creator, Evelyn Waugh. The outer parallel aspects between the two men can be observed in nearly every sphere of life. First of all, they both are artistic. They come to study in Oxford but leave their studies prematurely without achieving an academic degree. Charles becomes an architectural painter and is quite well respected among the public. Waugh had also painted and done calligraphy in his youth. Later, they marry but their wives adulter them and their marriages end in divorce. Next, they are about the same age as Charles is thirty-nine when he starts retelling his story and Waugh was forty-one when he wrote the novel. Both men experience military service in WWII and both feel exhausted and disappointed with life in an army. Finally, the most important parallel about their lives becomes the Roman Catholic faith which they accept in mature age as a result of a long process of development.

It is however, spiritual fragility in both men that puts them in an opposition to the characters of Rex Mottram or Colonel Hooper. In the novel Waugh shows how a memory of an individual deals with history and how past is connected with present through living memory. Waugh's intention in the novel was to "point that faith needs to be linked simultaneously to the preservation of a Catholic identity, a sense of historical continuity, threatened with extinction by the forces of modern culture" (Rothstein, 1993, p.3). Based on this statement, the past represented in the text by the Catholic tradition stands against the future of modernity which may destroy roots of historical identity in people, if they turn their backs to the religion. Waugh's concern was to remind people of their personal responsibility to explore their historical roots because it is only when one knows religion, culture and history of his family or nation that he/she is able to define his place within that community. In other words, religion united with history can help people realize where they come from and what message they want to leave to the next generations. Without acknowledging history one cannot appreciate culture or understand religion or recognize artistic significance of old buildings. This directly leads to an assumption that understanding can only be achieved through education. To Waugh education was primarily important, he was known for his arrogant looking down on uneducated

people. Charles, despite his gentle manners, shows at least a bit of Waugh's contempt for lack of cultivation in people of the modern era. He does so in amusing way, for example, when he drinks cognac with Rex Mottram, Julia's husband, in a renowned restaurant in Paris:

*„The cognac was not to Rex's taste. It was clear and pale and it came to us in a bottle free from grime and Napoleonic cyphers. It was only a year or two older than Rex and lately bottled. They gave it to us in very thin tulip-shaped glasses of modest size. 'Brandy's one of the things I do know a bit about,' said Rex. 'This is a bad colour. What's more, I can't taste it in this thimble.' They brought him a balloon the size of his head. He made them warm it over the spirit lamp. Then he rolled the splendid spirit round, buried his face in the fumes, and pronounced it the sort of stuff he put soda in at home. So, shamefacedly, they wheeled out of its hiding place the vast and mouldy bottle they kept for people of Rex's sort. 'That's the stuff,' he said, tilting the treacly concoction till it left dark rings round the sides of his glass. 'They've always got some tucked away, but they won't bring it out unless you make a fuss. Have some.' [Charles] 'I'm quite happy with this.' [Rex] "Well, it's a crime to drink it, if you don't really appreciate it." (Waugh, 1962, p. 171)*

In the modern world Rex's lack of intelligence is not a barrier to him. Contrary, he is so assured of himself that he does not even consider possible that he might be wrong somewhere. Everyone else may be wrong but not him. In addition, Rex's agility and physical charm together with his connections with 'the right' people enable him achieve a chair in the House of Commons. It is because of his predatory character and not through education or suitability that he gets so high in a rank. Unlike Charles, Rex is a specimen of a modern man that Waugh distasted so much. He is a man without scruples, who, in order to get married to Julia is willing to convert to the Catholic faith. After he is informed that a mixed marriage between a Catholic and Protestant is unacceptable, he simply finds a minute solution; "Well, if that's all, it's soon unmixd. I'll become a Catholic. What does one have to do? (Waugh, 1962, p.185)

Rex's shallowness of spirit exhibits in nearly every moment, which adds to the sorrow of Lady Marchmain, who immediately knows that Rex is the sort of a person that is totally unsuitable a husband for Julia because the background he came from formed him into a person very different from the Marchmains. Rex's marriage to Julia brings them both disappointment just because they are so different in opinions on life, marriage, politics, nearly everything. Although she tries to deny it, Julia's way of thinking is determined by her Catholic upbringing. Although she marries Rex in a Protestant chapel, because he had been divorced before, and so betrays a

family tradition, she cannot change all in herself in favour of their wedlock. She finds out that Rex:

*"...wasn't a complete human being at all. He was a tiny bit of one, unnaturally developed; something in a bottle, an organ kept alive in a laboratory. I [Julia] thought he was a sort of primitive savage, but he was something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce. A tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole."* (Waugh, 1962, p. 193)

Another character in the novel that represents Waugh's notion of a modern man is colonel Hooper. Hooper's appearance in the prologue and epilogue of the novel is miniature, but unforgettable one. His cruelty and ruthlessness are depressing, especially because he fights in the war against fascism and, at the same time he sympathizes with Nazi ideas. As Charles' troops pass a lunatic asylum he speaks out his opinion on madmen "Hitler would put them in a gas chamber ...I reckon we can learn a thing or two from him (Waugh, 1962, p. 10). For Charles, Hooper personifies a pioneer of the new era that follows the Golden Age of pre-war England.

*"...a symbol to me [Charles] of Young England, so that whenever I read some public utterance proclaiming what Youth demanded in the future ... I would test these general statements by substituting 'Hooper' and seeing if they still seemed plausible."* (Waugh, 1962, p. 10)

Charles' abhorrence of Hooper has been explained wrongly as Waugh's snobbism and looking down at "common" people. This work attempts to explain that it was not for his plain language or low descend why Hooper arouses such negative emotions in a reader. It is but due to his narrow-mindedness and lacking originality of intellect that make him blindly follow the set order by adopting ideas of someone else only if that is for his own good. When he grumbles about too much military training when there is no utter danger of going into an action and is reminded by Charles that this may come anytime, Hooper replies "Oh, I don't want much you know. Just enough to say I've been in it" (Waugh, 1962, p. 17). Hooper cynically expects his military career will help him back in civilian life of a businessman after the war.

The gap between those two kinds of people stems from their different perception of history of their families which, in fact, makes apart of their own history. Julia's predecessors were generations of people who preserved and built family heritage, not just cultural but material too.

*"We were knights then, barons since Agincourt, ...the days of wool shearing and the wide corn lands, the days of growth and building, when the marshes were drained and the waste land brought under the plough, when one built the house, his son added the dome, his son spread the wings and dammed the river "* (Waugh, 1962, p. 317).

## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that as they passed this heritage from one generation of barons to another, the Marchmains developed a sense of responsibility and reverence towards their family history. These aristocrats represent historically conscious characters that are on extinction in the modern era. For them "noble defeat means more than vulgar success" of Hoopers of our age (Toynnton, 1993, p. 7).

On the other side, there are characters of 'common men' who represent the age of modernity and who lack this sense of historic affinity to certain values because they do not have any traditions to hold on. These modern people embody direct threat to the people of classical thinking in the modern societies because they are overpowering them by great numbers.

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