Religion and the nursery: Evelyn Waugh’s 'Brideshead Revisited'

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Abstract

*Brideshead Revisited* is often seen as a culmination of Evelyn Waugh’s early literary endeavour. In spite of its satirical elements, the novel engages in a serious religious discussion and acquires features of a conversion narrative. The motif of childhood is vividly present in various aspects of the novel: it contributes to the creation of characters and depiction of relationships between them; places associated with childhood become central to the characters’ life experience; references to children’s literature help shape the fictional world of the novel; finally, the motif of childhood is also employed to present various, often contrasting, approaches towards religion (Catholicism in particular). The article seeks to explore all these elements and indicate how the motif of childhood contributes to the thematic and stylistic aspects of Waugh’s first overtly Catholic novel.

References


Evelyn Waugh. Penguin books. "Brideshead Revisited." Lay between bare clay banks, and on either side a chequer of open ditches showed where the municipal contractors had designed a system of drainage. Another year of peace would have made the place part of the neighbouring suburb. Thus in the dark hour before reveille I sometimes pondered: ‘Hooper Rallies’, ‘Hooper Hostels’, ‘International Hooper Cooperation’, and ‘the Religion of Hooper’. He was the acid test of all these alloys. So far as he had changed at all, he was less soldierly now than when he arrived from his OCTU. Arguably Evelyn Waugh’s best novel, and certainly his most famous, Brideshead Revisited follows the aristocratic Flyte family from the 1920s through to the Second World War. The novel is subtitled “The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder,” and the narrator first meets Sebastian, an aesthetic from the Catholic Flyte family, at Oxford University. Keywords: classical tradition, Arcadia, Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited.

ET IN ARCADIA EGO is the frontispiece of Book One of Brideshead Revisited, a novel written by Waugh in 1944, between February and June. He had been declared on leave shortly before the Normandy landing, and the book was published in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. All the quotations correspond to the following edition: Waugh 1962, and the numbers in brackets refer to it. 5 About Waugh and war, see, e.g.: Lebedoff 2008; York 2004; St. John 1974. 3. Arcadian experience as a fair compensation but rather as an inalienable human right that everybody should be permitted to enjoy before assuming the responsibilities of adulthood.