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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.

Key words

religion in literature, Catholicism, childhood, Catholic novel

Religia i obraz dzieciństwa:
***Znowu w Brideshead* Evelyna Waugha**

Abstrakt

Powieść *Znowu w Brideshead* jest często postrzegana jako moment kulminacyjny wczesnej twórczości Evelyna Waugha. Mimo elementów satyrycznych powieść podejmuje poważną dyskusję o charakterze religijnym i staje się historią o nawróceniu. Motyw dzieciństwa jest bardzo widoczny w różnych aspektach powieści: przyczynia się do kreacji bohaterów oraz do opisu relacji między nimi; miejsca utożsamiane z dzieciństwem stają się kluczowe dla życiowych doświadczeń bohaterów; odniesienia do literatury dla dzieci pomagają kształtować świat powieści; wreszcie, odniesienia do dzieciństwa pozwalają na prezentację różnych, często kontrastujących ze sobą postaw wobec religii (w szczególności katolicyzmu). Artykuł ma na celu zbadanie wszystkich tych elementów i wskazanie, w jaki sposób motyw dzieciństwa kształtuje sferę tematyczną i stylistyczną w pierwszej otwarcie katolickiej powieści Evelyna Waugha.

Słowa kluczowe

religia w literaturze, katolicyzm, dzieciństwo, powieść katolicka

1. Narration of a search

Due to a number of recurring elements and themes, novels and short stories by Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) comprise a remarkably coherent collection. It is even argued that his works from *Decline and Fall* (1928) to *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), with their parallel literary themes and motifs as well as similar sociohistorical concerns, can be read almost as “one developing narrative” (Spender 1953: 159). Waugh repeatedly relies on episodic plot, dialogue-based, satiric characterisation and on specific characters who function either in extremely primitive or sophisticated surroundings (from the jungle and

kingdoms of East Africa to aristocratic houses and European capitals).[1] While repetition and economy of expression in the early comedies may be ascribed to the comic writer's reliance upon types, in the later much more serious and increasingly complex novels, it may indicate attempts at revising and retelling the same story in different versions in order to enrich and clarify it. In fact, most of Waugh's works reveal his deep concern with demonstrating in various ways the contrast between the greatness of "the old England" and the extravagance and absurdity of the "Bright Young Things" of the 1920's and early 1930's (Spender 1953: 159). In this context, childhood, especially upper-class childhood combining high sophistication and innocence, is depicted as a very deep experience. Moreover, Waugh returns to this motif in a number of works. Much attention is given to relations between children and their parents and, in a broader perspective, to the way one generation affects the other, and to the inevitable lack of understanding. Waugh's presentation of these relations indicates his concern with growing indifference towards traditional social and family values.[2]

The issue of values, present throughout Waugh's oeuvre, is particularly visible in *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh's first overtly serious novel, published in 1945.[3] His "narration of a *search*" (Spender 1953: 162), initiated in *Decline and Fall,* seems finally to come to an end here, as religious preoccupa-

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[1] For more information see Stephen Spender (1953), Marston LaFrance (1964), and Thomas Churchill (2003).

[2] The rejection of these values, which resulted from dramatic social and cultural changes that took place in England after the First World War, was particularly painful for Waugh and his generation, as their own childhood memories were those of pre-war idyllic country life, with the nursery at its centre (Spender 1953: 159).

[3] When in 1930 Waugh was received into the Catholic Church, his writing did not seem affected by his newly acquired religious affiliation. In 1933 he decided to express his spiritual concerns in "Out of Depth", a short story of the future. However, as Richard Griffiths argues, the story is highly derivative, and it is *Brideshead Revisited* that should be treated as Waugh's first work with serious Catholic content (Griffiths 2010: 180-183).

tions offer a possible solution to the problem of disintegrated values. The book introduces the motif of Catholic faith and it instantly becomes the dominant element of discourse. For the first time Waugh presents his characters' emotional, moral and spiritual development largely without elements of comedy or satire. It is argued by some critics that this substantial change in tone and subject matter was introduced at the cost of stylistic integrity and was not altogether beneficial to Waugh's writing.[4] On the other hand, however, it enabled him both to recapitulate the ideas encompassed in his early works and to offer a new point of departure (Spender 1953: 168). The motif of childhood is exemplary in this regard, as the childlike innocence of "the Garden of Eden in *Decline and Fall*" gives way to the "false dream" and "awakening into the nightmare of war" in *Vile Bodies* (Spender 1953: 163), to reappear once again in *Brideshead Revisited* as an evocation of "the lost paradise of childhood" (Kennedy 1990: 23).

In the latter novel the theme of childhood is more strongly emphasized than in other texts by Waugh. As I will show, imagery of childhood contributes to the presentation of characters, settings and events. My main argument, however, is that childhood in *Brideshead Revisited* becomes a crucial element serving to explore problems of theology and to show how religion shapes and transforms human life. The importance of the theme of childhood is emphasized by references to classic children's texts by Lewis Carroll, Frances Hodgson Burnett and J. M. Barrie.

[4] Critical comments were voiced, among others, by Edmund Wilson who considers the final scenes "extravagantly absurd" (1946: 72), Ian Littlewood (1983) who finds the use of miracles unconvincing, and Valerie Kennedy (1990) who points at deficiencies in narrative technique and characterisation.

2. Childhood and the comical

The plot of *Brideshead Revisited* revolves around Charles Ryder and his gradual progress as an artist and a man of faith. Vital to this process of artistic and spiritual development is his relationship with the aristocratic and recusant Catholic Flyte family. Although it is they who influence his art and faith the most (especially Sebastian, his friend, and Julia, his lover) much attention is also given to the relationship with his father. The scenes of their meals and conversations are what Thomas Churchill recognises as “happy recollections” of the earlier Waugh, reminiscent of the old conflict between the generations “which Waugh had seen as the principal agent of his comedy” (Churchill 1967: 214).

Inherent in the presentation of Charles’ family life is an insistent military metaphor. The word “battlefield”, for instance, characterises their dinner table; “war aims”, “manoeuvres” and “counter-attack” depict their everyday occupations, an example being the “weapon” which Charles uses against his father when, to irritate him, he asks an old and disliked acquaintance of his, Mr. Jorkins, to dine with them. Mr. Ryder, to the great confusion of his guest, treats him as if he were an American. Subsequently Mr. Ryder delivers his “counter-attack”: he organizes a dinner party and, pretending he wants to entertain Charles, invites people who, in fact, are “carefully chosen to [Charles’s] discomfort” (Waugh 2000: 59-63). These elements of petty deceit and malice are stressed by Thomas Churchill, who also points out that the skirmishes which occur between Charles and his father are similar to those presented in Lewis Carroll’s Alice novels, as in both cases “the characters change shape and may impose another identity upon their combatant” (Churchill 1967: 215). Charles’s and his father’s pretences and astringencies are never voiced openly but are always disguised as friendly remarks, which as such might result in equally “friendly” reactions. It seems that in the presentation of the

difficult father-son relationship Waugh was inspired by the children's story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* He used this inspiration to comical effect and to evoke the light tone of his early works; this "revival of the Alice-like relationship", as Churchill calls it, in *Brideshead Revisited*, can be traced back, for example, to *Vile Bodies* and the relationship between Adam Symes and Colonel Blount (1967: 214).

While the relationship of Charles and his father pertain to the theme of parents-children relation, a direct reference to childhood is made in connection with Anthony Blanche. One of the central characters in *Brideshead Revisited*, he introduces another aspect of the parent children relations which connects the novel to the earlier works of Waugh. Anthony accompanies Charles and Sebastian Flyte in their adventures at Oxford and, with his exotic past and cheeky character, is presented as a ruthless critic of art as well as a valuable source of information on the Flyte family. It is he who first recognises artistic sensibility in Charles and encourages him to take up painting; it is also he who warns Charles against the Flytes. Also, his presence invariably introduces elements of comedy, as his behaviour is strikingly different from the commonly accepted social norms. Moreover, his originality and rich experience seem to have their roots in his unusual childhood, as it is described by Charles:

> […] while we have been rolling one another in the mud and gorging with crumpets, Anthony had helped oil fading beauties on sub-tropical sands and had sipped his aperitif in smart little bars, so that the savage we had tamed was still rampant in him. He was cruel, too, in the wanton, insect-maiming manner of the very young, and fearless like a little boy, charging, head down, small fists whirling, at the school prefects. (2000: 40-41)

Forced to escape from Europe with his mother due to their Jewish origin, Anthony became accustomed to highly sophisticated surroundings and acquired unusual habits and inter-

ests. His exotic travels and extravagant lifestyle sharpened his artistic sensitivity, but at the cost of a healthy childhood. He did not learn as a boy to harness his instincts, and as a grown man he is unwilling to conform to social standards of conduct, which leads to a number of awkward situations, for instance, when he takes a bath in a fountain in front of a group of "meaty boys" or recites "The Waste Land" from a balcony to a group of students. Anthony very consciously effuses the air of extravagance around him and constantly draws the attention of others with his outfits and actions. His childish need for attention and his shocking behaviour, acquired and developed during his early years spent abroad, result also in his lack of attachment to any particular religion, tradition or culture; his disturbed system of values and lack of cultural identity connect him to Waugh's other humorous characters.

What is more, Anthony is strongly contrasted with Sebastian Flyte, as the two represent strikingly different models of childhood. Sebastian, with his nursery innocence and profound attachment to Catholicism, makes religion a point of reference in most of his decisions though he not always follows the rules of his faith, in spite of being well aware of them. While it is relatively easy to sympathise with him, this can hardly be said of Anthony. Although very perceptive, sophisticated and definitely original, Anthony is, as Spender states, "more or less condemned" in the novel (1953: 169). Waugh seems to convey in him the features that he finds so displeasing in the generation of the Bright Young things: cynicism, frivolity and superficiality.

3. The nursery

The novel, apart from constituting a stylistic and thematic continuation of Waugh's early satires, is one of his most elaborate works. Its main purpose – to depict "the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters",

later considered "presumptuously large" by the author himself (Waugh 2000: ix) – involves the implementation of the over-arching childhood metaphor which governs the first part of the novel and echoes in the next two. Departing from his comical mode, Waugh approaches the matter seriously, to the extent that the narratorial voice reveals a sense of yearning – tinged with nostalgia for the lost past. The elements that refer to the period of childhood and its various manifestations are prominent in the creation of spaces, the nursery being an important part of the family's estate and an object of frequent visits by the protagonists. Childhood is also a vital aspect of characterisation: the Catholic upbringing clearly affects the children of the family, their worldview and life choices. Images typical of childhood are also employed in the presentation of the most prominent character, Sebastian Flyte.

On Charles's first appearance in Brideshead, the Flytes' family estate, he is prevented by Sebastian from entering any other room but the nursery. The short visit clearly shows that this is the only place that Sebastian is willing to share; he leaves the rest of the house closed to his guest. The nursery, incorporated into the family house, is frequented on a number of occasions by the youngest generation of the Flytes. They clearly value the place even when most of them are already adult. On his first visit Charles briefly describes the place:

> It was a charming room, oddly shaped to conform with the curve of the dome. The walls were papered in a pattern of ribbons and roses. There was a rocking horse in the corner and an oleograph of the Sacred Heart over the mantelpiece […] Sebastian's nanny was seated at the open window; […] her hands lay open in her lap and, loosely between them, a rosary; she was fast asleep. (Waugh 2000: 30-31)

Already at this first glance it is suggested that the nursery, apart from fulfilling its original function as a place of care and fun, serves also as a source of early religious instruction; ele-

ments of Catholic devotion and the nanny, with her habit of praying daily, inculcate devotional practices in the children's minds. The nanny is part of the family as much as the nursery is part of the family home.

Nanny Hawkins is the first and for a long time the only member of the family Charles is allowed to meet (Sebastian even avoids having his friend meet his sister Julia who, by chance, is also in the house). She is an inconspicuous figure; events central to the plot seem not to concern her in the least and her main occupations seem to be listening to the stories told by the "children" (who by now are already grown-ups) and voicing conservative and slightly disapproving opinions on Julia's hairstyle and manners or Brideshead's tardiness in finding a wife. It might seem that she can hardly be called a character at all, rather a part of the setting, together with her oleograph and collection of children's souvenirs. Yet she is one of the very few elements in the world of Brideshead that remain unaltered by the anxieties, perturbations and dramatic changes taking place all around. Also, her disapproval, aimed mainly at Julia and Brideshead, is not coincidental or based solely on personal preferences.

Throughout the novel the younger siblings, Sebastian and Cordelia, the objects of Nanny's unconditional love and tenderness, are repeatedly presented as more sincere in their faith, more impulsive and straightforward, driven by emotions rather than obedience to any fixed set of rules. The ritual and theological dimension, so important to Brideshead, is ignored by Sebastian, who does not even bother to attend Mass but often feels a sudden need to visit the Botanical Gardens; the social aspect, which is Julia's main concern throughout a large part of the novel, is of no importance to Cordelia, who openly admits to her strange religious habits (a novena for her pig being one of them). At the same time, however, the religious attitudes of the younger siblings seem more profound, as religion, taking more emotional forms, penetrates different as-

pects of their lives. They are evidently more open to dynamic changes that spiritual transformation may bring. Nanny Hawkins' sympathies, then, despite her seemingly simplistic reasoning, reveal great depth and turn out to be very accurate. Her presence not only provides a vital point of view on other characters' behaviour, but also indicates a larger Catholic paradigm against which their actions may be interpreted. Her easily underestimated role in the novel resembles Charles' initial treatment of Sebastian's Catholicism as nothing more than a minute irrelevant detail, only a decorative element of his colourful personality; with time Charles realises that, in fact, it constitutes a powerful driving force that governs his friend's and eventually his own life.

4. A catalogue of unexpected things

The oleograph and the rosary in Nanny's hands (mentioned in the passage quoted above) point to the Catholic status of the Flyte family and the deep and early-developed connection of the children with Catholicism. As the years pass, this strong influence is still visible and seems to govern their lives, although it takes Charles some time to realise how profound this connection is. Catholic values are most overtly professed by the eldest and the youngest offspring, the other two humorously called "half-heathens" by Sebastian. Brideshead, the heir, well acquainted with the rules of his faith, plays the role of the family theologian. He does not hesitate to voice his opinions on religious matters but, although he seems to practise what he preaches, his remarks are hardly ever practical or helpful; he clearly lacks the sensitivity and compassion necessary in a truly Christian life. The youngest child, Cordelia, also treats religion as an integral part of everyday life, although in her case this takes a much more emotional form. In her naivety and straightforwardness she connects various aspects of her faith with her daily duties, often to a hilarious effect:

> D'you know [Charles], if you weren't an agnostic, I should ask you for five shillings to buy a black goddaughter [...] It's a new thing a missionary priest started last term. You send five bob to some nuns in Africa and they christen a baby and name her after you. I've got six black Cordelias already. Isn't it lovely? (Waugh 2000: 84-85)

The simplicity of her faith as well as her fearlessness in voicing her opinions is often a source of conflict with her guardians:

> [...] I refused to be an Enfant de Marie. Reverend Mother said that if I didn't keep my room tidier I couldn't be one, so I said, well, I won't be one, and I don't believe our Blessed Lady cares two hoots whether I put my gym shoes on the left or the right of my dancing shoes. Reverend Mother was livid. (Waugh 2000: 82)

The playful combination of religion and childhood logic may result on the one hand in comically exposing adult expectations and hidden intentions, as it reveals Reverend Mother's attempts at forming the children's habits of orderliness; on the other hand, Cordelia's passion, honesty and complete trust in religion make her one of the most devout and cheerful characters in the novel. She never loses her sense of purpose and is able to face difficult life choices. Although presented as not so attractive as Sebastian and Julia, and far less theologically informed than Brideshead, her childhood equips her with something far more important: trust and the need to offer help and consolation to the less fortunate.

In actual fact, Waugh's combining religion with childhood logic may contribute to better understanding of religious truths, especially when they are to be grasped by non-believers. In one of her conversations with Charles, Lady Marchmain (Sebastian's and Cordelia's mother) uses a children's story to reveal to him what she considers one of the basic rules of Catholicism:

> [...] of course, it's very unexpected for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but the gospel is simply a catalogue of unexpected things. It's not to be *expected* that an ox and an ass should worship at the crib. Animals are always doing the oddest things in the lives of the saints. It's all part of the poetry, the Alice-in-Wonderland side, of religion. (Waugh 2000: 116)

The reference to Lewis Carroll's story allows her to explain to an agnostic the mystery behind various aspects of the Catholic faith that he cannot comprehend.[5] Later in the novel the ability and readiness to accept the mysterious and the miraculous become a substantial part of Charles's life and, eventually, contribute to his conversion.

Although the use of references to childhood and children in religious contexts usually produce humorous effects or at least lighten the tone, there are also instances when the effect is much darker. When Julia Flyte decides to live with Rex Mottram, a divorced man who treats her religion merely as a peculiar decoration, she consciously condemns herself to living in the state of sin. She refuses to go to confession and without her contrition the sin cannot be absolved; it haunts her, taking in her imagination the form of a burden that a mother of a handicapped child is forced to carry:

> *Living in sin*, always the same, like an idiot child carefully nursed, guarded from the world. 'Poor Julia,' they say, 'she can't go out. She's got to take care of her sin. A pity it ever lived,' they say, 'but it's so strong. Children like that always are. Julia's so good to her little, mad sin'. (Waugh 2000: 268-269)

[5] In fact, a number of Catholic writers choose to employ metaphors related to childhood experiences in depicting religious aspects in their works. David Lodge in *How Far Can You Go?* (1980) uses the analogy of a children's board game to describe the Catholic worldview (sin and virtue as Snakes and Ladders); the metaphor of the candy in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938) may suggest that even the devilish Pinkie, due to his Catholic upbringing, hides a capacity for goodness deep in his heart.

Julia is fully aware of the consequences of her actions, especially the heavy weight on her conscience and the destruction of her spiritual life, as well as the growing burden of guilt and shame that she is unable either to reject or to cope with.

5. The secret garden

However, images connected with childhood and children's literature in Waugh's novel do not serve religious purposes exclusively. Apart from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a number of other literary references are made which determine the way the fictional world is constructed. For instance, the image which governs the first part of the book, that is, Charles' first meeting with Sebastian, has a children's story as its source:

> I went there uncertainly, for it was foreign ground [...] and I went full of curiosity and the faith, unrecognized apprehension that here, at last, I should find that low door in the wall, which others, I knew, had found before me, which opened on an enclosed and enchanted garden, which was somewhere, not overlooked by any window, in the heart of that grey city. (Waugh 2000: 26)

The image is evoked again when Charles is to visit Sebastian's home for the first time: "suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us" (Waugh 2000: 29). The reference to Burnett's *The Secret Garden* allows Sebastian's world to be presented as alluring and full of secrets, which are especially important to Charles who as a child was utterly lonely while Sebastian was "given a brief spell of what [Charles] had never known, a happy childhood" (Waugh 2000: 39).

In fact, Sebastian is presented in the novel as a child; it is revealed for example in the way he treats his mother, Lady Marchmain: he repeatedly calls her 'Mummy' (2000: 27, 54) and relies on her in virtually all matters. He has a teddy bear

Aloysius as his closest friend and companion, and his life "is governed by a code of imperatives:

> 'I *must* have pillar-box red pyjamas,' 'I *have* to stay in bed until the sun works round to the windows,' 'I've absolutely *got* to drink champagne tonight!' (Waugh 2000: 34)

Although not all of them are typical of a child, they nevertheless evoke the picture of a small boy and his fancies. This image, combined with Sebastian's stubborn refusal to face adult life, makes him a truly Peter Pan-like figure, which is further reinforced in the name of his horse Tinkerbell as well as the fact that when accompanied by him, Charles feels as if he were suspended "a few inches above the ground". To Charles, Sebastian becomes much more than a childlike (and childish) figure. He is depicted as incredibly beautiful, "entrancing, with that epicene beauty which in extreme youth sings aloud for love" (Waugh 2000: 26). At his approach other people "seemed quietly to fade into the landscape and vanish" (2000: 23). His influence on Charles is remarkable, as the latter states: "It seems to me that I grew younger daily". Sebastian is a hero of his own story, a boy who refuses to grow up and, in love with his childhood, celebrates youth, indulges in innocent pleasures and introduces nursery freshness into Charles's life.

However, like all other stories, their own must also eventually come to an end. Both Charles and Sebastian are forced to abandon their carefree lifestyle, the illusion of childhood that they had created for themselves, and it is this newly acquired disillusionment that resonates so bitterly in Charles's memories:

> I had left behind me – what? Youth? Adolescence? Romance? The conjuring stuff of these things, 'the Young Magician's Compendium', that neat cabinet where the ebony wand and its place beside the delusive billiard balls, the penny that folded double, and the feather flowers that could be drawn into a hollow candle.

> 'I have left behind illusion,' I said to myself. 'Henceforth I live in a world of three dimensions – with the aid of my five senses […]I have since learned that there is no such world, but then, as the car turned out of sight of the house, I thought it took no finding, but lay all about me at the end of the avenue. (Waugh 2000:158)

In *Brideshead Revisited*, childhood is not something to be easily rejected or forgotten. It takes considerable courage and determination from Charles to finally realise that he must renounce the newly found innocence and happiness and that, after all, they might have been only a trick of his own imagination. At the time this painful rejection appears definite and the Paradise seems irrevocably lost, and yet Charles and other characters sooner or later realise that these moments constitute a vital part of their experience, that they might become the source of freedom and imagination that allows them to grasp what is otherwise out of reach.

6. Conclusion

In *Brideshead Revisited* the theme of childhood is developed much more elaborately than in any other novel by Evelyn Waugh. Its imagery is evident in the presentation of events as well as in the creation of characters and their surroundings. Elements characteristic of Waugh's early satires connecting childhood mainly with mischief and misguided morality are also present, especially in the depiction of the protagonist's family life and in the characterisation of some of the major figures. However, these aspects are not central and seem only to supplement Waugh's new endeavour: to make childhood a crucial element, a starting point from which to present theological questions and investigate various ways in which religion informs and transforms human life. To achieve this aim, the novel not only makes use of the motif of childhood itself, but also draws heavily on literature for children, mainly on

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

The way Waugh elaborates on the motif of childhood and incorporates it into the fictional world of *Brideshead…* results from personal as well as literary engagement. The conversion of the narrator Charles Ryder, as well as his idealised vision of high-class country childhood, bears a close resemblance to Waugh's own experiences (Crowe 2010: 46). This may be considered both a great advantage of the novel and, due to sentimentality, its most serious flaw; but however the novel is judged, *Brideshead Revisited* is generally seen as the climax of Waugh's writing. Its vision of a traditional English country childhood in an aristocratic home, with the nursery at its centre, greatly contributes to this perception.

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