

# A Handful of Dust

Evelyn Waugh as satiric reformer



Tony Last (James Wilby) with Mr Todd (Alec Guinness)

Chris Bond shows how Evelyn's Waugh's comic genius sharpens his scathing moral indictment of social and spiritual decay

Traditionally, satirists have subscribed to the belief that their writings can help change society for the better. We can infer much about Waugh's satiric intentions in his fourth novel from its very title, *A Handful of Dust*.

It echoes a line from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

... I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Just as Waugh's first three novels, as the critic James Carens notes, are preoccupied with 'the decay of a civilisation, futile sensuality leading to boredom, the poverty of spiritual life', so is his fourth. *A Handful of Dust* stands as a damning indictment of contemporary society. Waugh seeks to expose the failings of the apparently carefree culture sweeping across sectors of British society after the First World War, the brittle world of 'Bright Young Thing', with their self-indulgent lifestyle and rejection of traditional responsibilities.

Naturally, there are many different interpretations of Waugh's purpose in this novel. For some critics Waugh is primarily a superb comic writer. Ian Littlewood argues that 'what matters to Waugh is the humour itself'. This would seem to suggest that humour is Waugh's primary objective, and that his caricatures and parodies of the social scene are designed to provoke a comic reaction.

This is too simplistic a response. It is, perhaps, more the case that Waugh creates a number of exaggerated scenarios to make wider points concerning the degradation of basic moral values. It is Waugh's focus on the flaws of society that manifests itself most prominently in this novel. The damning exposure of the true social ethics of the 1930s can be achieved only by Waugh's use of satire. The amorality of many of the key characters in *A Handful of Dust* is used as a means to criticise society as a whole.

## A corrupt cavalcade

The character of Brenda Last may have derived from Waugh's own experiences with women. Waugh, like Tony, found himself the victim of an unfaithful wife who chose to leave him. The biographical context helps to illuminate the themes he intended to develop through her character and its role within the novel.

We are first introduced to Brenda through Mrs Beaver's description of her, in a typically opinionated and sweeping character dissection: 'She was Brenda Rex, Lord St Cloud's daughter, very fair, under-water look. People used to be mad about her when she was a girl.'

Mrs Beaver is an obsessive gossip, but her description of Brenda, focusing solely on her appearance, suggests the superficiality of society. The use of marine imagery in 'under-water look', with its suggestion of movement and instability, hints at Brenda's infidelity — a motif that permeates the novel. Brenda also sleeps in the room at Hetton aptly named 'Guinevere', an allusion to King Arthur's legendary unfaithful queen.

Brenda's yearning for social activity is shown from the outset. Occasionally she lets slip her frustration with what she feels to be her monotonous existence, through comments that allude to a hope for a better — that is, more frivolous — life: 'I guessed not...though it sounds an amusing party'. This particular reference comes after Tony has, predictably, refused an invitation to a social gathering, much to Brenda's disappointment.

As the novel progresses, her trips back to Hetton become far less frequent. London becomes her real home and Hetton is a mere inconvenience. Waugh shows that Brenda has no trouble in distancing herself from her family attachments. The most shocking moment in the novel occurs when she is told the news of the sudden death in an accident of her son John Andrew. Her immediate reaction betrays her true state of mind. Only the name 'John' is mentioned, so Brenda initially believes it to be that of her lover, John Beaver. On realising that her son, not her lover, has died, she exclaims: 'John...John Andrew...I...oh, thank God...'. Here, Waugh uses the pauses to give the reader an insight into the exact thought processes of Brenda. Her relief that the person concerned is 'only' her son, and not her lover, conveys to the reader not just how important John Beaver has become in her life — he has become closer than her son — but how this is a perversion of the natural, maternal instincts traditionally valued and expected. Brenda is quick to realise that what she has said is severely immoral, but nevertheless we must remember that her performance of 'bursting into tears' comes after, not before, her expression of relief. Therefore, a hierarchy of importance for Brenda, and the social world she has joined, is established.

Brenda's selfish behaviour towards Tony may be modelled on that of Waugh's wife. Brenda appears unaware that she is treating Tony badly, and seems surprised at his apparent reluctance to agree to a divorce: 'It makes me feel rather a beast.' Brenda is expecting Tony to part from her in a passive manner, and not be at all affected by the divorce proceedings. In this assumption, Brenda reveals her lack of any serious spiritual consideration behind marriage, and furthermore shows herself to be entirely devoid of empathy for others' emotions. She exploits Tony's caring nature by demanding an extortionate divorce settlement which would force him to give up Hetton as he could no longer afford to maintain it. Ironically, Brenda demands the money in order to finance her new relationship. Here, her calculating nature is clearly evident. Brenda proves herself to be fully prepared to make Tony sacrifice the house he holds so dear, and the traditional values it

symbolises, in order to pay for her own selfish ends. What makes this situation even more farcical is the protective stance adopted by Brenda when Tony confronts her on the phone: 'Tony, don't be so bullying. The lawyers are doing everything. It's no use coming to me.'

Waugh is making use of what at the time was the relatively modern technology of the phone to highlight the way in which modern morals are about to destroy the traditional values represented by Hetton. He also exposes the amorality of a society that would give legal support to Brenda's adultery. Law should be associated with justice, yet the legal system here seems false and squalid.

### Amorality

Jeffrey Heath argues that 'Waugh's early novels are surreal, fantastically, and ostensibly amoral'. It is clear that there is an element of the surreal in the novel — the fate of Tony, for instance, condemned to read Dickens perpetually to a crazed Englishman in the Brazilian jungle. The character of the Reverend Mr Tendril could also be considered as surreal, since it is difficult to envisage such a clergyman preaching as he does. Much of what goes on in the novel is exaggerated and fantastic, a parodic version of reality exposing and ridiculing the absurdity of society. However, as Heath suggests, the novel only *appears* to be amoral. Waugh uses the amorality of characters such as Brenda to provide a scathingly ironic critique of them by means of what he called 'innuendo', and his novels are therefore profoundly moral. He accomplishes this in part through the inversion of expectation. We encounter characters and institutions with exaggerated and unexpected flaws — they make us laugh and yet we recognise that similar behaviour, in a less exaggerated form, can be found throughout society. Almost every character, from Mr Tendril to the unapologetically immoral Brenda Last, is presented through this literary technique.

### The pathos of Tony

Tony Last's ideals and values differ greatly from those of the London 'set'. The helplessness of his position with Brenda, as he struggles to comprehend the alien values, or lack of them, of others, generates much pathos. It takes him several days to comprehend what is really going on as he has got into the habit of loving and trusting Brenda. Tony's simple trust is thoughtlessly abused by others. Although Tony cannot be fully identified with Waugh himself, Waugh's own painful memories of divorce surely lie behind these scenes.

Throughout the novel, Tony is almost the lone representative for traditional moral values — values that are essentially a reduced version of medieval feudalism and chivalry. His stance is at odds with the one evident in London society, and his self-isolated, reclusive existence in his beloved Hetton reflects this. However, his fundamental naivety signifies a weakness in these moral values, and it is for this reason that they cannot provide a credible opposition to the urban savages. Still, this naivety does help generate sympathy from the reader, as we consider him to be a man of integrity and principles: 'Tony supposed Beaver must be fairly lonely and took pains to be agreeable to him.'

The suggestion here is that there is in Tony a co-existing elevation of fundamental moral values and personal naivety. The painful irony here is that Tony is doing his best to welcome the man who will eventually destroy his marriage. It is his charity which is the making of his own downfall. There is a scathing indictment of a society which would bring such unhappiness to a man of such simple, albeit hapless, grace.

The distinction between Tony and contemporary society is evident throughout the novel. He distances himself from the socialite ethos of London by residing in Hetton, where he seeks to uphold the moral values so lacking in the country as a whole. Perhaps a fair reflection of his quest can be seen in his battle to maintain the house, with, as already mentioned, its symbolic resonance. Although the running costs are extortionate, his devotion to Hetton means he will never willingly desert it: 'But I don't happen to want to go anywhere else except Hetton.'

His commitment towards Hetton is indicative of his commitment towards the values of the past — much like the seat of the Marchmains in *Brideshead Revisited*, although in a less elegiac, nostalgic and emotive manner. When he declares defiantly that he will not give up Hetton in the divorce proceedings, he is also taking a stand for the values so lacking in society.

### Savages

Much can be made of Tony's adventure into the Brazilian jungle. The obvious irony here is that Tony finds himself equally lost in both Brazil and the social scene of London. Waugh alerts us to the alarming similarities of events in both England and Brazil, with the two locations seemingly juxtaposed in terms of 'savagery'. While in Brazil, Tony is the captive of the eccentric Mr Todd (notably suggestive of the German for 'death'), yet in England he is essentially consigned to Hetton. Outside Hetton, he is vulnerable, unwitting, and very much 'lost'. A similar fate awaits him if he were to dare to venture far from the control of his captor in Brazil. Tony's hallucinations further conflate the two locations: 'She [Brenda] said she would come back that night but she didn't. I expect she's staying with one of her new friends in Brazil.'

Here, Waugh juxtaposes London society and Brazil, and we begin to realise that they are not altogether different. The savagery of the jungle, manifested in the hostile conditions and wild beasts, mirrors the predatory social climate of London. A more ironic blending of London and Brazil comes in the description of Polly Cockpurse as a 'chattering monkey'. Waugh also uses his chapter titles to bring London and Brazil closer together. The title of the first chapter, 'Du Côté de Chez Beaver' complements that of the penultimate chapter, 'Du Côté de Chez Todd'. In terms of the plot, we see Tony driven from one death trap into another. This emphasises both the dangers of London and the futility of Tony's cause — there is probably nowhere where this bearer of chivalric values can find sanctuary.

A final comment should be reserved for Tony's role as a 'King Arthur' figure. There is much Arthurian imagery throughout the novel, for instance in the naming of the bedrooms, and the presentation of Hetton as Tony's fortress, his Camelot. However, in spite of these links, Tony is clearly no



Rupert Graves and Kristin Scott Thomas in *A Handful of Dust* (1988)

King Arthur. He is likeable, yet lacks the strength and wisdom of that king. The reader sees a man who could have offered a form of chivalric resistance to the onslaught of degraded social values, but ultimately is conquered by a combination of his innocence, naivety and ineptitude.

### The decay of the spirit

Religion, as a symptom of social malaise, also enters into Waugh's satiric focus in *A Handful of Dust*. As a converted Catholic himself, Waugh had deep-rooted views as to how the church should conduct itself and how Christian values could influence society. The almost implausible Mr Tendril served in the army for most of his life, and his service experiences have left an indelible imprint on his sermons.

Let us remember our Gracious Queen Empress in whose service we are here, and pray that she may long be spared to send us at her bidding to do our duty in the uttermost parts of the earth.

Here the reader is confronted with a country vicar who subjects his parishioners to sermons focusing on the hardships of war. This scenario acts as a direct criticism on the state of the Anglican Church at the time, as Waugh offers the judgement that it has lost its ability to communicate a meaningful message, and that the consequent spiritual decline will lead to a moral void in society. Hence, in Tendril, a form of *reductio ad absurdum* is effectively used for satiric effect.

Hetton Abbey is also used to emphasise the decline in morals and absence of Christianity. Once a flourishing place for Christian worship, it underwent extensive redevelopment when one of Tony's ancestors rebuilt it entirely in the Gothic style. The bleak, guide-book assertion that Hetton is now 'devoid of interest' refers not only to interest from visitors, but also a loss of spiritual interest. Thus through the fate of Hetton Abbey, we can see the gradual disappearance of Christianity from daily life.

Waugh devotes much time to describing the intricate design of Hetton, and covers everything from the 'lancet windows of armorial stained glass', which further links to the medieval chivalric period, to the 'cavernous chill of more remote corridors'. Not only does this detailed description of the house encapsulate Tony's love for Hetton, but it also conveys the theme of encroaching superficiality. Aesthetics and home comforts have gradually displaced Christian beliefs and values. This theme is developed with the introduction of Mrs Beaver, the interior designer who seeks to further redevelop Hetton. At the conclusion to the novel, after the tenure of Hetton has changed hands, Mrs Beaver appears as keen as ever to alter the home that was once a place of worship: 'She proposed that we should have the chapel redecorated as a chantry.' In this instance, the proposed conversion of the chapel to a chantry mirrors the extinguishing of Tony, as it represents a shrine to death.

*A Handful of Dust* is one of Waugh's funniest novels, but also one of his bleakest. He removes social facades and shows society for what it really is, satirising corruption, hypocrisy and self-interest through a whole range of deftly drawn caricatures. The autobiographical element, which lends pathos as well as absurdity to Tony Last's fate, merely serves to heighten the sharpness of the satire.

### References and further reading

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