

Decay, Disillusionment and the Modern British Mind in Evelyn Waugh”

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Abstract: The paper examines the influence of the social and moral decadence, the cultural confusion, and the spiritual insecurity, which Waugh explores, in terms of general anxieties about the post-war Britain. In the paper, one of the literary techniques that can be highlighted by the author is through the use of irony, satire, and nostalgia to reveal superficiality, institutional ineptitude, and the decline of traditional social hierarchies. The analysis of character development, narration techniques and thematic patterns allow outlining the theme in the research between the charm of the past and the realities of the modern world and movement and shows that in most cases the protagonists of the novels by Waugh tend to follow the route of alienation, existential uncertainty, and a sense of moral vagueness. In addition, the paper places the work of Waugh within the historical framework of the contemporary British literature by highlighting how he contributed to the perception of the transformation of society, moral issues, and psychological depth. Discussing how Waugh approaches the topic of decay and disillusionment, the paper does not only emphasize the perennial timeliness of the criticism that Waugh expressed towards the contemporary British psyche but also provides a glimpse of the immortal tribulations of cultural shift, human frailty, and the need to seek identity in the changing social environment.

Keywords: Evelyn Waugh, Modern British Literature, Decay, Disillusionment, Satire, British Mind, Social Commentary

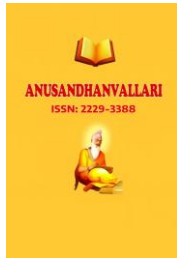
Introduction

One of the brightest representatives of the British literature in the last century, Evelyn Waugh, is known by his quick wit, moral sense and the ability to notice the social change. Waugh was born in 1903, therefore, he experienced the dramatic changes which occurred in the British society in his life; such as the decline of aristocracy, the two world wars and the cultural changes of the time between the wars. His writings, which include novels, essays and his travel pieces are characterized by a lifelong concern with social corruption, spiritual privatization as well as the loss of orientation of contemporary British soul.

The problem of corruption in the fiction of Waugh is commonly becoming interlaced with his satiric story of the present social life. In other novels, especially *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, Waugh reveals the hypocrisy, egoism, and senselessness of the upper classes in Britain, and he also proves the falsity of the characters as well as the institutions of the society in which the characters live. Likewise, the nostalgia and criticism used by Waugh in the *Brideshead Revisited* enables the author to depict the regalia of the once magnificent English aristocracy as a symbol of loss, alienation, and spiritual barrenness despite the section being set in the past.

Another theme, namely disillusionment, can be observed among the characters of the novel, as well as in the mind of the contemporary Britons. The theme of a strong alienation of his main characters to the surrounding world can be seen as the collision between the old and new values and the reality. Weakening of faith, degradation of social ranks, and instability of identity appears to be the common themes, making Waugh a satirist and a moral critic of modernity at the same time.

The given paper is intended to explore the themes of decay and disillusionment that are also interconnected in the key works of Waugh and place his critique in the perspective of the modern British literature. The different



anxieties, contradictions, and moral complications that characterize the modern British consciousness are aimed to be discerned by examining the narrative tactics Waugh uses, interpreting the development of his characters, and employing satire, which is the subject of the study.

Related works:

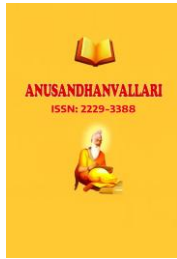
As a literature critic, Boyagoda (2001), in *The Longman Critical Reader: Evelyn Waugh*, gives a full sketch of the literary success of Waugh and his thematic interests. The compilation focuses on the sharp social observation and moral satire by Waugh who has placed his work in the context of the twentieth-century literature in Britain. Analyzing his writing style, motifs, and manner of satire, Boyagoda emphasizes that Waugh addresses such problems of the society as its decadence and disillusionment, and his fiction is the reflection of the concerns of the contemporary British soul. On the same note, Bradshaw (2001), in his introduction to *Decline and Fall*, discusses how the British upper and middle classes were satirized during its early days at the hands of Waugh. Bradshaw underlines ironic but keenly critical viewpoint under which rottenness and institutional incompetence are manifested and exposes the problem of decay and social instability, to which Waugh remained consistently preoccupied.

In the book, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Carey (2009) discusses the wider cultural and political context in which Waugh was writing. He gives perspective on the conflicts between conservative faith and modernity making the narratives of Waugh to be placed in the context of discussion of the issues of social responsibility as well as intellectual and social elitism and morality. The readings of this work allow uncovering the disillusionment of the characters in Waugh in the context of the failed relations between social values and nowadays realities in society. The same analysis is further developed by Davis (2018) when talking about *Brideshead Revisited* since Waugh also emphasized on the decline of aristocratic principles and spiritual crisis that his protagonists undergo in his work. The problem is that, according to Davis, Waugh does not use nostalgia as a literary device but as a process of questioning the effects of moral and cultural decadency in the middle of the twentieth-century Britain.

In the *Evelyn Waugh: A Life Revisited*, Eade (2017) offers a biographical perspective based on which one can explain the obsessiveness of Waugh with the decay of society and personal disillusionment. Following the course of events that Waugh went through, his relationships, as well as development of his ideas, Eade identifies the connection between life of the author and the reoccurring themes of moral ambivalence and cultural judgment, as manifested in his books. In his master thesis *Waugh* (2013) compares the work of his early years with that of other authors of the time like F. Scott Fitzgerald and studies them in terms of how the apocalyptic frivolity and social satire exist to criticize the contemporary society. The key point that Heath makes about the work of Waugh is his peculiar narrative style fused with humor, irony and moral cogitation to present the absurdities and decadence of the modern world.

Littlewood (1983) takes a critical survey of the entire literary oeuvre of Waugh, and places his work into the context of the British literature in general. Littlewood points out that Waugh is thematically consistent in covering the issue of human folly, the decline of the society and the problem of spiritual dislocation. Equally, in the journal, *Evelyn Waugh Studies*, Manley (2019) could focus on the current academic interests, emphasizing the changes in the interpretation of Waugh as a satirist, but he also effectively portrayed the contemporary British mentality. In his dissertation *My thesis*, Molineux (2016) examines themes cohesion in the context of all the novels of Waugh and explains that decay, disillusionment, and moral ambivalence are the red lines that make up the author's criticism of the twentieth century Britain.

Nazimek (2008) discusses early novels of Waugh, in which he wrote about decline and fall, and its context of deception and irony that is used to implement his social satire. According to Nazimek, the narrative approaches



of Waugh do show the nakedness and the farce of the human nature facing the social chaos. In Evelyn Waugh: The Writer and His Work (Pasternak Slater 2018), the author of the book offers a review of the critical methods to assess Waugh as a writer and points out the timelessness of satire and moral commentary about the author. Slater points out how Waugh is able to combine entertainment and critical assessment in his work by illustrating how his commentaries about the decay and disillusionment remain with contemporary readers.

All in all, all these studies help underline the fact that the Waugh fiction is an in-depth exploration of the ethical, social, and mental contradictions of his time. They highlight repetitive motifs of decay, spiritual and cultural lack of faith, and the satiric portrayal of the contemporary British psyche, which has created a holistic model of seeing the literary work of Waugh.

Evelyn Waugh

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) was a pro-life English novelist, essayist and critic whose writing is attributed to his incisiveness, moral examination as well as observation of British society. His literary life was more than 40 years of years and was marked by the themes of satire, nostalgia, and social comment on his works. The crumbling of the traditional institutions and previous moral ambiguity of Waugh characters are evidence of their strong interest in the cultural and spiritual questions of the time, which revolved around the true issues of the day. Waugh made his mark as a reporter of the contradictions, superficialities, and disappointments of the modern British life through such works as *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, and *Brideshead Revisited*. His elegance, irony, and precision allow him to provide entertainment and criticism at the same time and thus, his narratives can be called the reflection of the changing British conscience.

Modern British Literature

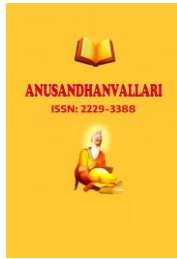
The contemporary British literature, which has appeared in the first part of the twentieth century, is the literature of the time of the social crisis and the rapid industrialization, the time of the culture change. Writers of this period experienced the challenge of the upheavals of the World War I, the loss of the former British Empire, and deterioration of old forms of social stratification. The literary world found a way of making inquiries about disillusionment, alienation and moral doubt to some extent challenging the existing norms and values. There is no doubt that the work of Evelyn Waugh fits the tradition of realism with satire by commenting on the psychological and social consequences of evolving Britain. His novels display the way the modern British literature does not just record the changes that transpire in the society but also challenges the ethical and cultural implications brought by changes.

Decay

The theme of decay is a prevailing topic in the fiction of Waugh as it occurs not only socially but also morally. In portraying the upper class of the British society, Waugh reveals loss of aristocratic power, the insignificance of the social customs, and the decrease in the importance of old institutions. A piece of work such as *Decline and Fall* brings out the inefficiency, political and cultural system full of ineptitude, corruption, and pretentiousness in the system that brings social degradation as a second consequence. This theme is not simply as a critic of a certain institution, but reflects more overtly a society that is losing its form due to the rapid modernization and cultural shift.

Disillusionment

The disillusionment has saturated the narratives by Waugh and reflects on the psychological and emotional reactions of the characters when it comes to moral and social instability. Alienation, existential doubt, spiritual emptiness, the main characters often convey the sense of disorientation of the society of post-war Britain in



general. In particular, the characters of Vile Bodies are torn between the shallow glamour of the high life and the futility of the activities going on beneath it (the disenchantment with everything is permeated). These descriptions allow Waugh to explore the ways of people in dealing with the conflict between the ideal traditions and harshness of contemporary life which shows the intricate nature of space between personal discontent and total social disintegration.

Satire

One of the most effective literary devices that Waugh uses is satire, which enables him to comment and criticize society at the same time keeping a sharp, and in most times humorous narrative style. Through underlining social vices and hypocritical action of morals as well as underlining the ridiculousness, Waugh provokes the readers to a critical reflection of the institutions and cultural values of the British people. This satire is best reflected through his novels such as the one titled declining and fall through the absurdity of the characters and events in the novel, the decay in the society is underlined by the absurdity of the individuals. Irony and wit are also employed by Waugh not only amusingly but thought-provoking, which is why satire is one of the prime vehicles of his critique of the human actions and social structure of the Great Britain.

British Mind

The term British mind used in the work by Waugh is the idea of the common consciousness, political values, and psyche of the British society as it existed in the time of the cultural and moral shift. Waugh examines attitudes, apprehensions and contradictions that characterize such an attitude, especially among the upper and the middle classes. His novels show the conflict of emotion and yearning of the old standards with the hardships of modern life that symbolizes mental and emotional turmoil of getting used to social and cultural development. The British psyche according to Waugh is an intricate blend of conservatism, cynicism, and susceptibility hence provides a subtle insight into the character of the nation.

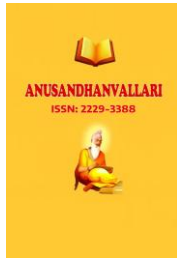
Social Commentary

The literary work by Waugh serves as an excellent commentary in the social context, commenting critically on the changing formations of the British society. Among other issues that are studied in his works are issues of hierarchy in the classes, moral decadency, spiritual disenchanted and how modernity affects the traditional norms. Waugh reveals the flaws of the society with the help of narrative irony, characterization, and plot structure and makes people think about moral, cultural, and psychological aspects of modern life. His books both chronicle the outer changes of the British society but also explore the inner most trials and contradictions of the people and make Waugh a key commentator about the intricacies of the twentieth century Britain.

Final Conclusion:

The literary works of Evelyn Waugh can be seen as an interesting piece of work on the theme of decay, disillusionment and the turbulence of the contemporary British psyche. Waugh castigates the loss of traditional values, moral emptiness of social institutions, and spiritual and cultural dislocation of his contemporary generations through his novels. His satire, irony and nostalgia make it enjoyable as well as deliver a deep understanding of the contradictions and anxieties of the twentieth century British society.

The literature review shows that researchers continue to find that the theme of societal decline and disillusionment of a person is a key theme of Waugh. Critical of society as in the Decline and Fall, or thoughtful of nostalgia in Brideshead Revisited, the writings of Waugh positively show a latent struggle between the past and the present between tradition and modernity. The impression of his defective characters through instability of moral and cultural world highlights the instability, complexity and ambiguity of the human condition.



After all, the works of Waugh are as topical nowadays as before because of their literary quality and their critical exploration of the eternal dilemma of right and wrong, identity and transformation of society. Focusing on display of decay and disillusionment thus this paper illuminates how the fiction of Waugh can be seen to reflect not only on his era but also on every era as represent and remark on the stability and the frailty of the human soul confronting cultural and moral forbearances.

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