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Waugh's Image of a Rootless Modernity in *a* Handful of Dust

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ABSTRACT

Evelyn Waugh focus on domestic spaces as sacred and regenerative loci where characters retreat to make sense of the political, social, and moral upheaval surrounding them. Evelyn Waugh employs the home as a space for spiritual reflection and regeneration.In this chapter, I will show how Waugh portrays the homes his characters inhabit as sacred spaces in the most literal sense of the word. For example, the ancestral homes in *A Handful of Dust* and *Decline and Fall* were built from quarried pieces of dissolved abbeys. Even, Brideshead, which is built from castle rather than church remains, is imbued by Waugh with religious properties. These structures strain against their secular roles as aesthetic spaces and attempt to have a spiritual effect on their inhabitants. The homes push individuals toward emotional collapse so that they must face their own spiritual voids. It is only when the characters confront their own nihilism that the houses reveal the transcendent and regenerative power that spiritual renewal can bring.

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Evelyn Waugh focus on domestic spaces as sacred and regenerative loci where characters retreat to make sense of the political, social, and moral upheaval surrounding them. Evelyn Waugh employs the home as a space for spiritual reflection and regeneration. Waugh, like Woolf, was drawing on the work of predecessors such as Conrad, Ford, and Forster while striving to create a new style of literature that would reflect the political and social unrest of the lost generation. Waugh's sinister view of urban spaces polarizes him from Woolf. Where she saw freedom and potential, Waugh saw destabilization and demoralization. The physical destruction of Europe necessitated a redefinition of all aspects of civilization.

In this chapter, I will show how Waugh portrays the homes his characters inhabit as sacred spaces in the most literal sense of the word. For example, the ancestral homes in *A Handful of Dust* and *Decline and Fall* were built from quarried pieces of dissolved abbeys. Even, Brideshead, which is built from castle rather than church remains, is imbued by Waugh with religious properties. These structures strain against their secular roles as aesthetic spaces and attempt to have a spiritual effect on their inhabitants. The homes push individuals toward emotional collapse so that they must face their own spiritual voids. It is only when the characters confront their own nihilism that the houses reveal the transcendent and regenerative power that spiritual renewal can bring.

In Waugh's satire *A Handful of Dust,* Tony Last's ancestral home Hetton Abbey exposes his spiritual crisis. For Tony, religion is nothing more than a habit. His greatest Sunday pleasure is not the comfort he receives from the liturgical elements such as prayer and reflection. Instead, he delights in the institutions he has created for himself: the after service chat with the vicar's sister, the choosing of a button-hole carnation, the few words

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exchanged with the gardener, and his glass of sherry drunk "rather solemnly" in the library at Hetton (Waugh, *A Handful of Dust,* 35). This "simple, mildly ceremonious order of his Sunday morning" is adhered to by Tony "with great satisfaction"; fulfilment is found in tradition and routine. (35-36). Tony effectively creates a new religion with the rigidity of a Catholic mass, and Hetton becomes the church where he can carry out his worship of tradition.

Indeed, at first the structural aesthetics of Hetton only serve to support Tony's belief that tradition provides meaning. In the novel, Hetton Abbey is described as belonging to the style of architecture known as late generation Gothic revival, at which point "the movement had lost its fantasy and become structurally logical and stodgy" (44). Although his friends and family view Hetton as stern and ascetic, for Tony, these qualities are the defining characteristics of beauty. In spite of his wife Brenda's censure of the house as "appalling ugly," Tony takes pride in "the line of its battlements against the sky," the stained glass windows, and the "ecclesiastical gloom of the great hall" (45; 13, 14). The line between aestheticism and asceticism becomes paradoxically blurred. For Tony, the most aesthetic art is that which is ascetic. However, the fact that the structural qualities of Gothic architecture were created to encourage religious devotion and piety is lost on Tony. Rather, the ascetic beauty of Hetton only adds to Tony's faith in tradition and self-imposed order.

The fact that Hetton was once a religious space is lost on its inhabitants. However, Hetton's distinction as a re-appropriated abbey is significant. Donald Greene, in his essay "A Note on Hetton and Some Other Abbeys," points out that at the time of the schism from the Catholic Church in Rome, Henry VIII confiscated the abbeys and redistributed them for secular use among wealthy English landowners. Abbeys and churches not sold to wealthy

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landowners were torn apart so that the raw materials could be used to construct new country manors, or they were kept as stone quarries or ruins. Although abbey ruins were not able to serve as either religious or residential centers, they "continued to be visited and were thus viewed in ways that transcended their original purposes" (Hall, 31). Thus, abbeys began to serve the British population's aesthetic, not spiritual, needs.

By setting many of the major scenes in the novel at Hetton, Waugh evokes the memory of the secularization of the church and points to the ways in which religion has been reduced to an empty tradition. Just as Hetton is only the shell of an abbey, Tony Last's religiosity is an empty shell of spirituality. Furthermore, the "dissolution of the monasteries" into residential homes would have been regarded by Waugh, "a staunch Catholic," to be "one of the great disasters in English history" (Greene, 2). Indeed, the image of sacred spaces being torn down permeates the text of *A Handful of Dust*. After Tony is forced to sell Hetton Abbey, his "impoverished" cousins take over the estate and remodel it into a "stinkery" or a fox farm. Thus, for Waugh, "the collapse of traditional structures does not lead, as Woolf had promised, to self-discovery; rather, it reveals the shallow inconsequence of characters who are left to lead absurdly pointless lives amidst the wreckage" (McCartney, 74).

In *A Handful of Dust*, the literal collapse of Hetton Abbey is concurrent with the figurative dissolution of Tony's marriage. Throughout the novel, Brenda distances herself from her husband by rejecting the house. She deems the space "appallingly ugly" and insists on sleeping in a separate bedroom from Tony that is decorated with modern accouterments (*HoD*, 45). Ironically, her separate bedchamber is named Guinevere. By deeming the room Guinevere, Waugh is alluding to the unfaithful wife of the Arthurian Legend. This is

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appropriate since it links Brenda to the medieval structure she inhabits while it also foreshadows her infidelity with John Beaver.

Brenda's rejection of Hetton Abbey is also a refusal to embrace the spiritual overtones of the Gothic architecture. Although "the spires of six church windows are visible from [her] bedroom," Brenda has no desire to devote herself to the worship of any religious or secular god; she does not care about church and refuses to subscribe to Tony's belief in the transcendent power of ancestry and tradition. Brenda further rejects the sacred qualities of Hetton by destroying the heart of the house: the great hall. With the help of John Beaver's mother, the two women gut the living room for the purpose of installing chromium plating. This scene directly parallels the event in *Decline and Fall* where Margot Beste-Chetwynde (who, it is later revealed, runs an collection of South American brothels) "replaces her sixteenth-century home with a 'surprising creation in ferro concrete and aluminum' that has been designed to eliminate 'the human element from the consideration of form'" (Hall, 73).

In both instances, the women reject spaces which are imbued with religious and historical significance, preferring to associate themselves with modern architectural, social and moral conventions governing London high society. This connection between architecture and morality may seem tenuous, but Waugh, another student of John Ruskin, parroted the theorist's belief that architecture necessarily reflected the morals and values of society. In fact, he exerts a considerable amount of narrative effort to show that houses can be either concrete, stable spaces or props-cheap or flimsy imitations that only pretend to provide shelter and stability.

It is therefore unsurprising that the space where Brenda chooses to carry out her illicit love affair with John Beaver is a London flat. The very word "flat" is an accurate and

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succinct depiction not only of Brenda's character, but the collective identity of Britain's youth. Reflecting on the collective works of Waugh, George McCartney points out that in "novel after novel, ancestral homes are razed to make way for functional structures, usually apartment buildings comprised of one-room flats suited for an unsettled generation of self-obsessed transients" (McCartney, 74). This, he argues, "is Waugh's image of a rootless modernity in which people are too preoccupied with themselves to consider anything more than the satisfactions of the present moment" (74). And yet, tearing down the walls that link them to some sacred and meaningful past does not enlighten or change these individuals. Rather, they are left in their primitive moral state, "blandly and uncritically acquiescing" to spiritual death (74). Thus, the modern urban spaces glorified by Virginia Woolf are, for Waugh, un-regenerative spaces that retard rather than promote spiritual wholeness.

However, this is not to say that Tony Last does not share in his wife's defilement of their home. Indeed, over the course of the novel, Hetton becomes a problematic space for Tony. He attempts to reconstruct the house to fit his idealistic image of the English country home; he worships the past and wants to set himself up as an echo of the landed gentry. However, the house will not bend to his attempts to manipulate it, and so it becomes an empty signifier of secular conceit and aestheticism. Tony fails to associate Hetton with its spiritual past and instead can only muse on the time, "perhaps in [his son's] day, when [popular] opinion would reinstate Hetton to its proper place" (*HoD,* 14,15). Tony Last's concern for family notoriety and legacy is a historically characteristic quality; English aristocrats would model their houses after the Gothic revival style in attempts at "asserting their ancestry" (Hall,18). Waugh recognized the pretentious nature of these endeavors, and thus cast a critical eye toward the Englishman seeking to construct a fictive heritage.

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Yet, Waugh does not promote Tony Last as an entirely unsympathetic character since Tony is an extension of Waugh himself. Like Tony, Waugh placed a significant amount of social importance on domestic spaces. Because of this, in 1936 he purchased what he saw as an elegant "gentleman's house" with extensive grounds that he could lend out to tenants (Carpenter, 308). The house of Piers Court allowed Waugh to play the role of country squire. Indeed, he exerted a considerable amount of time and money refurbishing the house and was known to wear a dinner jacket every evening "whether or not there were guests" (309).

Eventually however, Waugh's carefully constructed fiction was thrown into relief against the backdrop of encroaching urban sprawl. For Tony Last, however, Hetton Abbey fails to be a refuge. It cannot protect him from the pain or consequences of his divorce; Brenda manipulates the divorce settlements so that Tony must sell Hetton in order to meet her alimony demands. The loss of Hetton is devastating, even more so than the death of his son, John Andrew. Since Tony has trusted in the material aspects of his domestic space-the sense of tradition, ancestry, and social stability that the country home represents- he loses all sense of himself when he loses the house. He laments that his "whole Gothic world [has] come to grief" (*HoD*, 209). Without Hetton to cling to, his world is "suddenly bereft of order" as though "the sum of all he had experienced …were an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object" (189). Unlike Howard's End which operates as a womb-like space healing relationships and shielding its inhabitants from the pressures of the world, Hetton pushes Tony to the brink. And yet, the house is still a sacred and regenerative space. By resisting Tony's attempts to subjugate the space for vain purposes, Hetton forces its owner to examine his own spiritual darkness. Before redemption and spiritual regeneration can occur, there must be repentance, and Hetton forces Tony to confront the meaninglessness of his life.

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Hetton Abbey works to sanctify Tony Last by pushing him toward the epiphanic void that reveals his need for spiritual re-birth. Even in hindsight, Tony is incapable of seeing that Hetton represented his need for spiritual regeneration. Thus, just as his blindness transforms the once sacred space of the abbey into a prison, so the jungle becomes a spiritual purgatory. After Tony get lost in the wilderness he begins to suffer from a fever and madness and is left for dead. His salvation appears to come in the form of Mr. Todd who nurses Tony back to health within the spatial confines of his jungle hut.

Conclusion:

The image of purgatory at the end of the novel suggests that, while Tony is damned for his empty religiosity, he is not yet condemned to hell. According to Catholic tradition, purgatory is a liminal space where the sinner is given time to atone for his sins and reconcile himself to God before entering heaven. Mr. Todd's hut, therefore, can be seen as purgatorial place which functions in a similar capacity as Hetton. It does not provide Tony with a refuge, but it does give him a space to work towards sanctification. Ultimately, *A Handful of Dust* is a work of black satire, and yet there is a glimmer of hope for Tony provided by the spaces of Hetton and its shadowy reflection, Mr. Todd's hut.

Sacred spaces in Waugh's novels are not necessarily safe or peaceful spaces. However, they are nevertheless sacred because they force their inhabitants to confront their sins. They push characters towards an acknowledgment of their spiritual emptiness so that repentance and, by extension salvation, can occur. Homes like Hetton Abbey, although they may appear to be purgatorial, constrictive spaces, are ultimately regenerative since they prompt spiritual awareness and renewal.

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Thus, homes such as Hetton Abbey were, in their original forms, houses of worship. In their essentials (stone, brick, mortar) they are houses of faith. Thus, it makes sense that Waugh imbues the raw materials with the same mystic and transcendent power that they are meant to inspire in individuals. Furthermore, it is both ironic and appropriate that characters who need to be incorporated into the metaphorical house of worship are situated in structures that are, essentially, just that.

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