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


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. About Waugh and war, see, e.g.: Lebedoff 2008; York 2004; St. John 1974.

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. 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 aesthete from the Catholic Flyte family, at Oxford University. Evelyn Waugh, first published in 1945. The author transports us back to the golden age before the Second World War. “Brideshead Revisited” relates of a dull-witted Charles Ryder, and his acquaintance and relations with the family of Lord Sebastian Flyte, residing in Brideshead. Being charmed by his new friends, Ryder understands spiritual and social distance, separating him from the Marchmains. Besides, the book is considered to have for an object an attempt to express the Catholic faith in a temporal literary form, bringing the reader in conta