

## The Absurdity of Modern Generation In Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*

**Jameel Ahmed Khalaf**

PhD Student at Al-Neelain University. Khartoum. Sudan.

**Dr. Eiman Abbas El-Nour**

Associated Professor at Al-Neelain University. Khartoum. Sudan.

Email: [Jameelgada60@gmail.com](mailto:Jameelgada60@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This paper concerns with Waugh's *Vile Bodies* which portrays modernity represented by the younger generation, 'The Bright Young People'. Through his characters, Waugh gives us a visible picture about the corruption, lack of faith, decline of values, and sterility in the modern world. Adam Fenwick is the main character in this novel who wants to gain money by any way in order to marry his fiancée, Nina, Who shares with him an adultery relationship though she has engaged to another man.

The paper also shows Waugh's satire of the modern generation and their meaningless conduct as they wandering in an absurd world without any purpose but only to feed their beastly desires. They wandering in an empty circle; looking for refuge or escapism in order to get rid of their boring life. In this flat world, intimacy or emotion is not found; it is omitted and replaced with mere talk. Waugh's satiric portrait of a coterie whose members are internally empty. The Bright Young People respond to their world with a totalizing emotional blankness manifested in brittle talk. *Vile Bodies* appears to celebrate the giddy world of the Bright Young

People who represented shame in a world in which human is reduced to mere object.

Key words: Aristocracy, wandering, escapism, melancholy, Shame

Actually, Waugh's *Vile Bodies* is mainly a satire of the aristocratic society and the aimless younger generation termed as 'Bright Young People' by Waugh. The novel portrays the alienated modern man and aimlessness of the younger generation after the First World War period. Waugh stressed that modern man is alienated among his society and even among his own family. Through his characters, Waugh has reflected this particular aspect of alienation from social merits. For example, the relationship between Lord Balcairn and his mother Mrs. Panrast, where on one hand Mrs. Panrast irrespective of her motherly duties that she got remarried and divorced twice after leaving her first husband and child. On the other hand, Lord Balcairn called her a nonentity as he felt ashamed in accepting her as his mother, and further accepted that even his family cannot bear her.

"Who's that awful-looking woman ? I'm sure she's famous in some way. It's not Melrose ape, is it? I heard she was coming,'

'Who?'

'That one. Making up to Nina.'

'Good lord, no. She's no one. Mrs. Panrast, she's called now.'

'She seems to know you.'

'Yes, I've known her all my life. As a matter of fact, she's my mother.'

'My dear, how too shaming. D'you mind if I put that in?'

'I'd sooner you didn't. The family cannot bear her. She's been divorced twice since then, you know.'

'My dear, of course not, I quite understand.'" (VB 43)

Through five minutes later disregarding of his own promise and the feelings of Lord Balcairn, Vanburgh reported the matter to the press, which not only shows his alienation from the people and their feelings but also his hypocritical nature.

"Five minutes later he was busy at the telephone, dictating his story. '.... Orchid stop, new paragraph. One of the most striking woman in the room was Mrs. Panrast – P-A-N-R-A-S-T, no, T for telephone, you know – formerly Countess of Balcairn.'" (43)

Moreover, the narrator proves that even the younger generation shows the feeling of alienation and lack of comradeship among themselves, which was clear in the way Malpractice reacted when his friend Agatha was lost during the car race. All he thought at the time was not about Agatha but the good disastrous story will make in the next edition of the newspaper.

"Hullo, everybody; No. 13, the English Plunket-Bowse car, driven by Miss Agatha, has retired from the race. It disappeared from the course some time ago, turning left instead of right at Church Corner, and was last seen proceeding south on the bye-road, apparently out of control."

"My dear, that's lucky for me," said Miles. "A really good story my second day on the paper." (148)

Even Agatha's friend, Adam, also took the news very casually without worrying about anything and thus referred it very vaguely in his wireless message to Nina while conveying the news about the drunk Major. "Adam accompanied him [Malpractice] and sent a wire to Nina: "*Drunk Major in refreshment tent not bogus thirty-five thousand married to-morrow everything perfect Agatha lost love Adam.*" (148). But the narrator mocks at them when despite being heartless themselves they called that person heartless who was hospitalized and did not know Agatha much therefore merely inquired about his car which Agatha was driving during the race.

"They went to the hospital tent after this – another amenity of the course – to see how Miles friend was getting on. He seemed in some pain and showed anxiety about his car."

"I think it's very heartless of him,' said Adam. 'he ought to be worried about Agatha. It only shows...' 'Motor men are heartless,' said miles, with a sigh." (148)

Though even later they went to look not for Agatha but for their car. The narrator might have used the statement that they went to search Agatha, but to show their mental depravity he precisely said, "Then Adam and Miles and Archie Stewart went to look for their car." (149). Moreover, at the middle of the search, leaving it incomplete they started searching for food. "I shall die if I don't eat something soon," said Miles. "Let's leave Agatha until we've had a meal." (149). Meanwhile Adam went to see the drunk Major to get back his money, and at last failing at it,

they finally decided to search for Agatha. The whole incident brings out the reality of emotionally deprived modern man.

As the main theme of the novel is to show the sense of alienation in the modern man, Waugh tries to go deep into the subject by presenting other related issues that are either the causes or the results of this alienation. The novel raises the relevant problems of youth – the search for identity and the aim in life. Waugh satirizes this generation who are wandering aimlessly in meaningless lifestyle and they are living away from reality towards devastation. He points out that the youth of today lack the stability and vision to see the essence of life, as well as the older generation unable to lead them, so they find the discussion about them boring as it is mentioned in the novel: "Everyone seems to have been talking about the younger generation to-night. The most boring subject I know"(56).

However, Waugh was not a misanthrope, as it is evident through the different relationships described in the novel. He tries to reveal the root cause of this alienation through the relationship shared by the parents and their children, and concludes that despite criticizing the younger generation, the root cause lies with the morals and values they imbibe from their parents. Peter Pastmaster failed to respect his parents Lord Metroland and Lady Margot due to their moral depravity. He saw his mother having extra marital affair with Alastair Digby-Vane-Trumpington and his stepfather's lack of concern with the infidelity of his wife; consequently, he failed to respect them. Waugh describes the meeting of father and son in a very satirical tone.

'Good night, Peter', said Lord Metroland.

'Oh go to hell', said his stepson thickly, then, turning on the stairs, he added, 'I'm going abroad to-morrow for a few weeks. Will you tell my mother?'

'Have a good time, said Lord Metroland ..... Would you care to take the yacht? No one's using it.'

'Oh go to hell' (113)

The narrator justifies Peter's behaviour by showing Lord Metroland mental cowardice, as after seeing Trumpington's hat, he quietly went to his study on the pretext of finishing his cigar, whereas in reality he did not have the courage to face Alastair on the staircase while coming out of Lady Margot's room. Therefore, only when he heard Alastair going out the house, he went upstairs leaving his blazing cigar.

"Lord Metroland went into the study to finish his cigar. It would be awkward if he met young Trumpington on the stairs ..... He heard the front door open and shut behind Alastair Trumpington. Then he rose and went quietly upstairs, leaving his cigar smouldering in the ash-

Through this, Waugh confirms that unless parents realize their moral duty and mend their own behaviour, they can never become the role model of their children. After admitting that the principles used by the younger generation are wrong, and will lead them to devastation, the novelist tries to convey a solution through the words of Mr. Outrage, the former Prime minister, in the form of distribution of energy required in every work as he says:

"What a darned silly principle. I mean to say, if one didn't do anything that wasn't worth doing well-why, what *would* one do? I've always maintained that success in this world depends on knowing exactly how little effort each job is worth....

distribution of energy.... And , I suppose, most people would admit that I was a pretty successful man." (111)

Thus, the whole novel contains Waugh's satirical treatment of Bright Young People, though chiefly it is the story of Adam Fenwick Symes, who sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally commits most abhorrent crimes in unstable and amoral world. Moreover along with him, the action also includes the complete young aristocratic society. Through such characters, Waugh portrays the satiric picture of superficial life led in London between the two world wars. Therefore, Adam is presented as the protagonist of the novel, but not a hero, as long as he is a part of an aimless group who are just wandering and partying every night with no obvious direction or target in life. Waugh chooses him to be the central character of the novel because through him he wanted to convey the moral corruption of the modern society. Thus, Adam becomes a hand maiden tool of the narrator to represent the social vices of the time. But like Paul in *Decline and Fall* Adam is not a hero, he simply does not have any heroic quality and so Waugh presents him in a very casual manner, with nothing distinguishable about him that makes him a 'standard product'. The narrator says:

" ....a young man came on board carrying his bag. There was nothing particularly remarkable about his appearance. He looked exactly as young men like him do look; he was carrying his own bag, which was disagreeably heavy, because he had no money left in francs and very little left in anything else. He had been two months in Paris writing a book and was coming home because, in the course of his correspondence, he had got engaged to be married. His name was Adam Fenwick Symes."  
(10)

The narrator showed no attachment for Adam who behaving in the most immoral manner sold his fiancée Nina to Ginger for settling Lottie Crump's hotel bill of seventy-eight pounds sixteen and two pence to the extent that he negotiated the price.

'A hundred down, and I leave Nina to you. I think it's cheap.'

'Fifty.'

'A hundred.'

'Seventy five.'

'A hundred.'

'I'm damned if I pay more than seventy-five.'

'I'll take seventy-eight pounds sixteen and two pence. I can't go lower than that.'

'All right, I'll pay that.' (166)

Then, unashamed for his action, he rang Nina, just to tell her that he sold her to Ginger for a fixed amount, and so he will not be seeing her anymore.

'Well, I did something rather extraordinary.... My dear, I sold *you*.'

'Darling... who to?'

'Ginger. You fetched seventy-eight pounds sixteen and two pence.'

'Well?'

'And now I never am going to see again.' (166-67)

Later when Lottie told him that Major came searching for him to give him his money, unashamed of his action Adam again called Nina to tell her that he may purchase her back again from Ginger, but unluckily by that time, she got married to Ginger.



"Then Adam rang up Nina. 'Listen,' he said. 'Don't do anything sudden about Ginger. I may be able to buy you back. The drunk Major has turned up again.'

'But, darling it's too late. Ginger and I got married this morning..." (167)

Then, later on as Ginger was called by his regiment, Adam went with Nina taking the place of Ginger and pretending that he is her husband who has to meet her father. Nina's father failed to identify him and recognize him as Adam so thought him to be his real son-in law Ginger. Again behaving immorally, Adam left a cheque for Ginger paying for Nina, although knowing this fact that he did not have the money. He thought that this cheque would be presented after three days and by the time, he would be able to deposit the required amount to stop this cheque from being bounced. Moreover, if nothing positive happened, he will again give Nina back to Ginger as if she is not an individual but a mere commodity that can be bought and sold.

'... I left him a cheque to pay for you.'

'Darling, you know it's a bad one.'

'No cheque is bad until it's refused by the bank. Tomorrow's Christmas, then Boxing Day, then Sunday. He can't pay it in until Monday, and anything may have happened by then. The drunk Major may have turned up. If the worst comes to the worst I can always send you back to him.' (174)

However, despite committing all the despicable actions, Adam might be termed innocent because he never knew that he was breaking any moral laws, and so never felt ashamed of his deeds. That is why he dared to tell Nina that he sold her. It was a moral deprivation of his

upbringing that he was ignorant about the moral codes of the society. Thus, he found nothing wrong in selling his fiancée and later continuing an adulterous relationship with her. Therefore, at the end, being morally blank, he failed to succeed. At the end, Adam was found wandering in the desert with no aim in life. Although he gets the money at the end that he was chasing throughout his life but, by the time he got it, it became in vain.

Adam achieved his career's peak only with his stint as Mr. Chatterbox after Simon Balcairn's suicide, through short lived, he succeeded in bringing him a lot of acclaims. His series of 'Notable Invalids', and 'Titled Eccentrics' proved to be an all through success giving details about the physical and mental handicap in the high profile people, as general public started associating themselves with the high profile people mentioned in the column. However, the public became a butt of Waugh's satire when Adam started inventing people on the pretext that "people did not really mind *Whom* they read about provided that a kind of vicarious inquisitiveness into the lives of others was satisfied." (94). He invented a sculptor called Provna, a Captain Angus Stuart-kerr, and Mrs. Andrew Quest, and later found that taking the advantage of these popular characters, the hypocritical aristocratic people started proving that they know them, just to raise their social acclaim. As it is mentioned in the novel that "... Mrs. Hoop announced to her friends that Provna was at the moment at work on a bust of Johnny, which she intended to present to the nation." (95). Adam even heard some of his characters like Mrs. Andrew Quest being talked about in the party circles.

"... He could hear her name spoken reverently in cocktail clubs, and casually let slip in such phrases as 'My dear, I never

see Peter now. He spends all his time with Imogen Quest', or 'As Imogen would say...' or 'I think the Quests have got one like that. I must ask them where it came from.' (97)

Waugh emphasizes that the whole generation is wandering aimlessly. For example, one night after the party, without knowing where to go, the socialites kept wandering from one place to other. They went to Lottie Crump's hotel, but unable to meet her they went to Agatha's house and since she failed to find her latchkey, they finally went to Miss. Brown's place. Another example, when they were going to the race also they lost their direction and traveled miles in the wrong direction, as it is shown in the novel that "Archie said he was too sleepy to drive anymore, so Adam changed places with him and lost the way, and they traveled miles in the wrong direction down a limitless bye-pass road." (129)

Moreover, after reaching the town where race was going to take place they vainly kept searching for accommodation to spend the night. At first they went to a hotel where dirt-track racer were staying, then to Station Hotel, then at other hotels and as all were full they finally found accommodation at a terrible place where they got bitten by bugs all night. Arthur Clement comments that: "The randomness with which the young people look for their lodgings during the races is symbolic of their life-attitudes and the general randomness of contemporary life, lacking in a central point of faith or goal of life." (Clement 56).

Agatha Runcible proves to be an epitome of the young aristocratic but aimless generation. Thus, wearing the brassard of spare driver, Agatha's unsuccessful attempt to drive the motorcar in the race, where she went round and round and ended in crashing that led to her death at the hospital facing nightmares and hallucinations brings about an end to her

aimless life. The narration of these incidents brings out Waugh's viewpoint about the aimlessness of human life as represented by certain characters. Through one of Agatha's hallucinations, Waugh indirectly tried to portray the future of this aimless generation that is going round in circle, and will ultimately result in a crash.

"D'you know, all the time I was dotty I had the most awful dreams. I thought we were all driving round and round in a motor race and none of us could stop and there was an enormous audience composed entirely of gossip writers and gate-crashers and Archie Schwert and people like that, all shouting to us at once to go faster, and car after car kept crashing until I was left all alone driving and driving – and then I used to crash and wake up." (VB 158)

The portrayal of Flossie who died while swinging on a chandelier also proved that younger generation's craze for trying everything new without knowing or worrying about the outcome. Therefore, despite being a part of all the parties Adam admits their futility while referring to them, and calls the people as mere vile bodies partying every night.

'Oh, Nina *what a lot of parties*'.

"...Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris – all that succession

and repetition of massed humanity ... Those vile bodies..."

(104)

Actually, this sounds more sadder as despite knowing everything and its futility, modern generation is becoming a part of all that worthless trash.

### **Search for Identity**

Waugh raises a pertinent question about the search for identity in the modern world. He shows that there is a kind of vacuum in the modern society, where everybody tries to search the real value of his existence in order to find out his identity. The burning of Adam's autobiography by the custom officials proved to be a symbol of 'loss of identity' to Adam and throughout the novel it seems that Adam is searching for his lost identity. The absent-minded Colonel Blount also forgot Adam's identity every time he met him. In their first meeting, he took Adam as a sales representative selling vacuum cleaner, in their second meeting he took Adam as a journalist Whereas in their third meeting he understood him to be his son-in-law Ginger. These instances show Waugh's existentialist viewpoint. Arthur Clement aptly says that: "The characters lack identity and even if they are to search for identity, their quest is doomed to disaster, benighted as they are in the jungle of modern civilization." (Clemet 65).

Moreover, Waugh efficiently shows the hypocrisy in London's cocktail society, where on the one hand, people enjoy things and on the other hand, they criticize them. As at Archie Stewart's party, people criticize Archie for calling the photographers, whereas they desperately wanted to be photographed: "...everyone looked negligent and said what a bore the papers were, and how *too* like Archie to let the photographers

come, but most of them, as a matter of fact, wanted dreadfully to be photographed." (VB 45).

Again the hypocritical nature of the people became evident, when Simon took Adam to have dinner at the second most expensive restaurant, where people used to come regularly due to their likeness of the place, but due to their habit, they still used to criticize the place: "They lunched Chez Espinoza, the second most expensive restaurant in London; it was full of oilcloth and Lalique glass, and the sort of people who liked that sort of thing went there continually and said how awful it was." (71). Even Adam's publisher Sam Benfleet turns out to be a person of hypocritical nature as he blackmails Adam and forces him to sign a new contract by telling him that old Rampole is very strict man of principles regarding contracts, whereas in reality Rampole never interfered in such matters. However, after Adam leaves, he admits that he will have difficulties after the death of Rampole as then he will not be able to befool people.

"Square old Rampole,' repeated Mr. Benfleet thoughtfully as Adam went downstairs. It was fortunate, he reflected, that none of the authors ever came across the senior partner, that benign old gentleman, who once a week drove up to board meeting from the country... He often wondered in his uneasy moments what he would find to say when Rampole died."(27-28)

Waugh proves that it is not only the younger generation is guilty, even older people like Fanny and Mr. Outrage stands as an epitome of degeneration and moral blankness. Hypocritical and superficial Fanny questions Agatha's behaviour and her mother's lack of concern about her, whereas she herself does not know anything about her own daughter and

that Lady Margot Metroland with whom her daughter was earlier working is involved in white slave trafficking:

'I wonder Viola allows her to go about like that. If she were my daughter...?'

'*your* daughter, Fanny...!'

'Kitty, that wasn't kind.'

'My dear, I only meant ... have you, by the way, heard of her lately?'

'The last we heard was worse than anything, Kitty. She has left Buenos Aires. I am afraid she has severed her connection with Lady Metroland altogether. They think that she is in some kind of touring company.' (22)

Moreover, later she even fails to identify her own son Miles and Kitty reminds her that he is her son.

'why, look, there's Miles.'

'Miles?'

'Your son, daring. My nephew, you know.' (23)

On the other hand a person, who is socially as high as Mr. Outrage shows the decaying morality, who despite holding a position as Ex-Prime Minister, was more notorious for his love affairs than being famous for his tenure as a Prime Minister.

"These men had been with Mr. Outrage in Paris, and what they did not know about his goings on was not worth knowing, at least from a novelist's point of view. (When they spoke about him to each other they called him 'the Right Honourable Rape', but that was more by way of being a pun about his name than a criticism of the conduct of his love affairs, in which, if the truth

were known, he displayed a notable diffidence and the liability to panic.)" (9)

In the novel, Waugh shows that the corruption prevails at all the levels in the society and no part of the society is untouched by it. It prevailed when Lottie Crump succeeded in saving her reputation, after Flossie's suicide in her hotel, just by offering few bottles of Champagne to the police officers, investigators, and reporters.

"There were policemen and reporters teeming in every corner of the hotel, each with a bottle of Champagne and a glass... A clear case of misadventure, eh, Mrs. Crump? There'll have to be an inquest, of course, but I think probably I shall be able to arrange things so that there is no mention of your name in the case, sir ... well, that's very kind of you, Mrs. Crump, perhaps just one more glass." (54)

And even in the hospital after bribing the nurse with chocolates and wine, Agatha succeeded in having a party with her friends, with gramophone playing music and everybody enjoying wine.

'Well, you are noisy ones, and no mistake.' she said 'I don't know what the Matron would say if she were here.'

'Have a chocolate, sister?'

'Ooh, chocs?' ...

'Adam brought her a cocktail. 'Shall I?' she said 'I hope you haven't made it too strong. Suppose it goes to my head? What would the patients think if their sister came in tiddly. Well, if you're *sure* it won't hurt me, thanks.' (159)

In fact the novel depicts a world that has lost its direction and is wandering round and round in circle. Waugh uses a number of symbols to



describe this aimless world, that will reach nowhere in its meaningless conduct. Through the car race in which everybody goes in circle and a number of them are injured. Waugh tries to describe the purposelessness of modern generation, which is going in circles without any aim and thus frequently get injured by choosing wrong direction in life. As Agatha injured herself and finally paid the price with her own life.

The casual relationship of Adam and Nina is a symbol of indecisive nature of modern youth. Waugh raises a question about the value and need of spiritual relationship in the modern world. Stephen Jay Greenblatt aptly says that:

*Vile Bodies* is not love story. Adam and Nina are significant only as representative of the sickness of entire generation, and their thwarted attempt to marry is meaningful and interesting only as a symbol of the frustrated search for values of all the Bright Young People. (Greenblatt 13)

In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh succeeded in proving that modern civilization is morally decaying. Thus after showing all the degeneration at the end of the novel, and starting of Second World War, Waugh ironically called the last Chapter as "Happy Ending".

Further, the moral degradation of the older generation as depicted in the novel conveys that in their meaningless pursuits of attaining uncountable wealth and power they failed in providing a good upbringing to their children.

Actually, Waugh's concern becomes evident in his description to the failure of this deteriorated modern society that is breaking itself to pieces. So, behind Waugh's satire the scholar finds a moral lesson for the



younger as well as the older generation. Waugh illustrates that both of them should imbibe morals and ethics in their life, otherwise they will keep wandering aimlessly throughout their lives.

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