

## **The Abnormality of the modern World**

### **A Study of Evelyn Waugh's *Love among the Ruins***

**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 analyses and studies the Novella *Love Among The Ruins* written by the English Writer Evelyn Waugh in 1953. It also shows the main reasons behind Waugh's pessimistic vision against the modern society. Furthermore, the paper sheds light on Waugh's satiric and humourous style in which he mocks upon the social disorganization and the destructive system of the British Welfare State that deals with human being as numbers or objects without any spiritual or emotional values, to the extent that the life inside the prison is quite better than outside it.

In fact, the paper also presents the shallowness, sterility, and absurdity of the modern World which lacks faith, principles, and moral values during the postwar period. Actually, Waugh presents the Character of Miles Plastic to play the role of the modern man who becomes just like one who is wandering and searching for refuge even by going into the prison or by committing dreadful deeds. However,

according to Waugh, the British government failed to rehabilitate the criminals and sex offenders.

Actually, many critics and scholars rejected Waugh's works and accused him of cruelty against modern world. They said that the society Waugh is looking for does not exist anywhere except in his mind. But, in fact, Waugh has seen the continuity of absurdity, chaos, disorder, corruption, and decline of moral values became visible with a deep sorrow as it will be shown in this paper.

**Keywords:** Waugh; *Love Among The Ruins*; Modern man; Death

### **A World of Depression and Melancholy**

*Love Among the Ruins* (1953) is a satiric and strange dreadful story conveying the hard situation of modern man in England. Crime is treated not much seriously by the government that makes the life in prison is quite better than the case outside. Thus, many people suffer from depression and melancholy to the extent that the modern man prefers prison to freedom and death to life.

In this novella, Waugh presents the character of Miles Plastic as the protagonist of the story who was convicted with the crime of arson to represent the picture of modern man. In the prison, Miles listens to classical music as a lover of Tennyson. After his release, Plastic gets a job at a state-run euthanasia center in which the government selects people who have negative qualities. Actually, the drama of the story begins when Clara, a bearded ballerina woman, who has changed her

mind about the process, does not want to die. Plastic arranges her escape from the centre and then the two begin to live in romantic life. Clara suddenly disappears and later she is found in a hospital recovering from an abortion and her former bearded face is replaced by a rubber jaw. After visiting her in the hospital, Plastic goes to his former prison to set it on fire. Unidentified as the perpetrator of the crime, Plastic is elevated as a lecturer on the worthiness of the system. Hysterically, Plastic burns himself at the end of the process.

Actually, There is a great difference between the nineteenth century writers and the twentieth century ones. The nineteenth century writers like William Morris, Alfred Tennyson, and Edward Bellamy imagined that the future would be better than the present due to the sense of confidence, innocence, faithfulness, simplicity, and stability of their society at the time, whereas most of the twentieth century writers imagined a worse future as Evelyn Waugh predicts that the modern life will be absurd, meaningless, and inhuman due to the changes in beliefs and political conceptions that are influenced by the events of the First and the Second World Wars. According to Waugh, that the real criminals get a comfortable and relaxing life whereas the innocents suffer much from the hard circumstances they live in. In this sense, G. C. Thornley and Gwyneth Roberts state that:

Waugh enjoys the comic effects of confusion, physical as well as moral; his characters can be persuaded to do anything and to accept any idea, however laughable it is, and the innocent people suffer while the real criminals are not punished. (Thornley and Roberts, 1984, 155)

However, in *Love Among the Ruins*, Waugh tries to reflect a horrible future led by the Socialist State of Euthanasia centre as it is presented in the main scene of the story. In such a world, only prisoners feel comfortable, whereas the people outside are arranged in a long queue for euthanasia. It is a horrible world empty of justice and mercy; a world of no responsibility. Actually, the Welfare State has acquired a complete power to slay many innocent people. Waugh criticizes such a dreadful deed by making fun on the government of the Labour Party. The politicians, like most of our politicians of our time, only make promises and shaking hands with voters before elections but after they win they do nothing.

Despite their promises at the last election, the politicians had not yet changed the climate. The state Meteorological institute had so far produced only an unseasonable fall of snow and two little thunderbolts no larger than apricots. The weather varied from day to day and from county to county as it had done of old, most anomalously. (*LATR* 1)

In an interview, against the justifications of the government's supporters concerning the use of taxes. Waugh comments that "the real enemies of society are sitting snug behind typewriters and microphones, pursuing their work of destruction and popular applause..." (Davis, 1989, 221). In 1951 when he presented himself as a candidate of the public private figure for the Rectorship at Edinburgh University, Waugh again confirmed his negative stand against the public figures, especially the politicians, and remarked that:

I have never gone into public life. Most of the ills we suffer are caused by people going into public life. I have never voted in a parliamentary election. I believe a man's chief civil duty consists in figuring for his King when the men have raised a family and paid such taxes as I find unavoidable. I have learned and practiced a very difficult trade with some fair success. (Bradbury, 1964, 1-2)

However, in this story, one can find that Waugh has selected different ways to signify his impression on chaos and the decline of values and culture in such a fallen modern world. Waugh ironically depicts the prison of Mountjoy as a five star hotel with a very joyful garden and the rooms of murderers and sex offenders lay along the garden front. "His room was not one of the grand succession which lay along the garden front. Those were reserved for murderers. Nor was it on the floor above, tenanted mostly by sexual offenders. It was a humbler wing". (*LATR*, 2)

Fredrick L. Beaty says that one of the most appealing ironies in the story is the way in which the narrator introduces the reader to Mountjoy. His description of a splendid manor house and its magnificent gardens give no hint of its being a place of jail until he explains that the best rooms "along the garden front are given to murderers and sex offenders". (Beaty, 1992, 21). Waugh presents the atmosphere in which the hero of this novella, Miles Plastic, takes a walk in the beautiful garden as "a rich, old-fashioned Tennysonian"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This name refers to 'Lord Tennyson', the Poet Laureate of United Kingdom during Victoria's reign (1809-1892), and remains one of the most popular British poets. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

night" (*LATR*,1). All this beauty of Tennysonian night is dissolved before the brute and gracelessness of the Welfare State. Here, Waugh shows a contrast to give a symbolic atmosphere of such nights associated with stagnancy, lifelessness, and death. He uses special words and descriptions like "the basin, folded lilies, no gold fin winked in the porphyry font"(*LATR*, 1) as well as the killing of the whole flock of the peacocks that stand as a symbol of life "... for the whole flock of them [peacocks] had been found mysteriously and rudely slaughtered a day or two ago in the first disturbing flush of this sudden summer". (*LATR*, 1)

In fact this slaughter is a savage picture; it is like the picture of the soldier in Abyssinia in the novel *Black Mischief* when the soldiers ate their boots. Depicting such an awful deed, Waugh wants to prove that the prisoners are not in a good condition of rehabilitation. On this sense, Stopp reflects Waugh's deep attention when he comments that:

The slaughtering of the peacocks may be seen as both satire and burlesque farce. Satire, it reveals the pointlessness of the new penology of reclamation by culture. Human nature is unregenerate at this level; Sweat slaughtering the peacock is Connolly's native levies eating the boots. Farce, because the destruction of an over-ripe aesthetic perfection is pleasurable in itself. But satire is caricature and burlesque when informed by moral indignation; and the besetting weakness of many critics of Mr. Waugh is to infer satire when it is not uniformly present, but only the mixed ingredients of farce, satire, and the comedy of manners. (Stopp, 1958, 189-190)

Waugh presents the protagonist, Miles, in a humorous manner when he is sent to prison because he committed an arson with the first group of prisoners and then, when he is about to be released from the jail as a recovered man "in the morning, the Governor and the Minister of Welfare congratulate him for he is the first successful product of Mountjoy, inform him for his new job in the Euthanasia Service and pose for publicity stills". (Davis, 1989, 227) . Confirming that the life inside the prison is more pleasant than the world outside, in his first scene, Miles is portrait that he is very sad and feels boring because he approaches his release from Mountjoy. Therefore, he asks the officials about what he can do to come back to prison, "what must I do to get back here?" (*LATR*, 13).

Actually, Miles is like the other characters in most of Waugh's novels for he is seeking a refuge or comfort by making a love relationship with a woman. He is wandering aimlessly and feels disappointed because of this sterile world – looking for escape to achieve his desire of revenge by burning fire in the buildings and institutions. Here, Waugh focuses satirically on the image of modern man who is surrounded by chaos and disorder. The world in which the psychologists defend Miles' act as normal, so the Air Force authorities has sympathized with him and the charges of multiple manslaughters are reduced to a plain arson and simple charge of antisocial activity.

In fact, Waugh criticizes the social system which products criminals and negative members. So, according to him, Miles Plastic is represented as the 'Modern Man' who has been molded by the Welfare

State as the Minister declares that: "But I understood that Plastic is from one of our own Orphanages' ... 'Exactly', said the Chief Guide, 'Miles is our first success, the vindication of the Method" (*LATR*, 10). Waugh mocks at the speech of the Chief Guide of the New Penology when he says: "In the New Britain which we are building, there are no criminals. There are only the victims of inadequate social services"(*LATR*, 10). Accordingly, no one is "held responsible for the sequence of his own acts"(*LATR*, 10) and 'maladjusted' persons are no longer called criminals and they received better treatment than the ordinary people.

Thus, being lived in this bad and corrupted social system, Miles' promotion of his new job in the Euthanasia is not gained by his good qualifications but by his antisocial merit as an arsonist. It is his special way of escaping the boredom, disappointment, or things bother him. Therefore, miles finds a relief in committing pyromania opposing to any logical instructions and without any responsibility on his part. For example, his burning of the air force base which causes the death of many air-men helps him to change his job of unknown dishwasher and a washer of officers' underclothes to a distinguished official in the department of Euthanasia. Actually, Waugh in most of his writings uses such portraits to criticize the faithlessness and rootlessness of a new generation that has arisen in the postwar world, especially whom he called The Bright Young people. He ironically ridicules them in this novella as in some of his novels like *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. "Only the very bright boys get posted to Euthanasia" (*LATR*, 19).



Stopp comments that: by an ironic signal on communal need of enterprise and worthless plans provided by the 1951 festival buildings, by their most distinguished features, the "Dome of Discovery', Waugh portrays the Dome of Security that is an example of the complete self-defeating nature of social security projects"(Stopp, 154).

The eponymous dome had looked well enough in the architect's model, shallow certainly but amply making up in girth what 'it lacked in height ... But to the surprise of all, when the building arose and was seen from the ground, the dome blandly vanished (*LATR*, 15).

In such unavailing social system, security is provided for all but it fails to give a straight answer to planners, exactly as Waugh says in this story "great sheets of glass to 'trap' the sun, admitted few gleams from stretches in their coat of tar"(*LATR*, 18). In this sense, the officials lived and practice their acts in a decaying and dark domes to be a sort of chaos. To confirm Waugh's theme of worthlessness, aimlessness, and bewilderedly plans, Davis comments that:

Like many novels set in the future, *Love Among the Ruins* is really about contemporary society, in this case Welfare State English, black and unlovely under the postwar austerity program instituted by Attlee's Labour government. The festival of Britain in 1951 was intended to announce to the world that England had recovered in finances and moral, and a central feature of the exposition was the Dome of Discovery – which Waugh converts into the Dome of Security (Davis, 1989, 220).

After a month at the Health Centre, Miles meets Clara, the heroine of this story, a girl whose beard is the result of Voluntary Sterilization. Here, Waugh wants to reflect the abnormality of modern society through these characters, Miles and Clara, when Miles wants to declare his love and his admiration to Clara's beard, he says "I think your beard is beautiful" (*LATR*, 26). It seems that Waugh wants to show his interest in the image of bearded ladies like Pimpernel a friend of Parsnip, "a poet of the 30s who came daily but usually jostled to the back of the crowd" (*LATR*, 44). Cyril Connolly comments that:

He does, however, reveal two unexpected interests, in pyromania and in bearded ladies. It is the heroine's beard which lures Miles Plastic into the classical past and enfranchises him from his compulsory freedom. This is very odd because a bearded lady is also a central figure in Mr. Auden's libretto, 'The Rake's Progress', and Messrs. Auden and Isherwood are connected in my mind with Mr. Waugh's characters Parsnip and Pimpernel, who are resuscitated for a parting thrust in 'Love Among the Ruins' (Connolly, 1953, 353).

The poet, Parsnip who is mentioned in two Waugh's literary works is used as a symbol of Waugh's fictional history. In *Put Out More Flags*, Waugh satirizes W. H. Auden and his friend Christopher Isherwood represented by the characters of the two poets Parsnip and Pimpernel as they talk to each other that 'they should not leave their native land in a difficult time' (*LATR*, 45). In *Love Among the Ruins*, Parsnip seem to be a feeble character and he is no longer a literary figure just like Dr. Beamish, a man of thirties who always queues at the

Euthanasia centre but loses his stomach in order to get the door. Then, in a calm day, Parsnip gets an admission to the centre and stands firmly. Waugh, in this scene, seems to be enjoyed by portraying these two characters to be an embodiment of Auden and his friend Isherwood, who wants to ruin themselves rather than live in their own world they have created. As David Lebedoff states that: "for Waugh, these writers became the new Cruttwells, though English libel laws being what they were, he changed their names to Parsnip and Pimpernel when he ridiculed them in print" (Lebedoff, 2008, 94).

However, the relationship between Miles and Clara become very strong in an extent that they spend most of their time in Clara's room which is furnished with pictures and other old objects belong to the past. These things remind Miles of jail as he said "it reminds me of prison" (*LATR*, 30). So, in this occasion, the narrator says that Miles' comment is "... the highest praise he knew" (30). Here, Waugh refers to the shallowness of modern man represented by the character to be gentle in such occasion. In this sense, Patricia Corr says that:

...the most incisive comment on the monster modern man is to be found in the description of the state made Miles Plastic, hero of *Love Among the Ruins*: 'No clean-living, God-fearing, Victorian gentleman he; no complete man of the Renaissance; no gentile knight nor dutiful pagan nor, even noble savage he was the modern man'. (Corr, 1962, 389)

Actually, Miles' love for Clara is increased and flourished mostly because of her silvered beard that reminds him of flam which he loves

more than the pure human love. One night while they were sitting together at a moony summer, Miles said that "On such a night as this I burned an Air Force Station and half its occupants" (*LATR*, 30). In this regard, it can be noticed that Waugh has linked Miles' memories of arson with the description of Clara's beard as it is shown in the novella that "Clara's beard was all silvered like a patriarch's in the midnight radiance" (30).

In fact, Waugh wants to ridicule upon the abnormality and absurdity of the wandering modern man. For Miles, Clara's long, silken, corn-gold beard is the complete beauty and enjoyment that inspires him with a flame of love, but such a flame is not the human's real love. This flamed unnatural love gives the impulse to throw it out of his body in a savage and brutal way, which is normal for him, to complete his pleasure, especially when it linked with his burning of the Air Force Station. Therefore, Miles feels with a moment of high delightfulness when he burns a building.

In fact, Waugh mocks at the wandering modern man through the character of Miles and his escapist enjoyment in burning a fire. It is Waugh's style to express his deep feeling of disillusionment and to criticize the modern society in which he lives.

In fact, Waugh sees the contemporary world as futile and anarchic; a world without principles. Therefore the absence of authentic conservers provokes him to express his own philosophy that "man is, by nature, an exile and will never be self-sufficient or

complete on this earth" (Sykes, 256). Justifying Waugh's disillusionment, Bradbury remarks that:

...his view [Waugh] that man is by nature an exile, that his chances of improving his condition are small, that there is no form of government ordained by God as being better than any other, that men naturally arrange themselves into system of classes, that government is necessary because of the anarchic impulse in mankind, and that Art is a natural function of man which can exist in any social system...his historical picture seems, in fact, to be founded on the view that, by schism and political activity, European Catholic civilization went into decline which has gradually brought about a lapse into anarchy, paganism and meaningless action. (Bradbury, 12)

However, many critics and scholars rejected Waugh's works and accused him of cruelty against modern world. They said the society Waugh is looking for does not exist anywhere except in his mind. Others like Richard Johnstone observe that it was Waugh who first began "...to feel that he and his generation were not perhaps destined for great things" (Johnstone, 14). As a result Waugh has seen the continuity of absurdity, chaos, disorder, corruption, and decline of moral values became visible with a deep sorrow.

In one of his letters to Graham Greene, on June 1953, Waugh humbly wrote "*Love Among the Ruins* was a bit of nonsense begun 3 years ago and hastily finished and injudiciously published. But I don't think it quite as bad as most reviewers do" (Letters, 459). On the other hand, David Wykes remarks that *Love Among the Ruins* "...is a tiny

skirmish in his [Waugh] war against the Modern Age and almost the exception to the rule that nothing he wrote is unreadable. The time of its publication was one of mounting mental stress that was about to come to a crisis" (Wykes, 178-179). While Christopher Sykes eagerly supported Waugh's *Love Among the Ruins*:

...if the book is not easily defended, it was the occasion of a not easily forgotten tribute. At a chance gathering of people, all of whom read and knew Evelyn, one of the company remarked that the book was not only disappointing but even bad, to be met with the telling rejoinder: 'Oh yes, but even so Evelyn writing badly is so much better than other people writing well'. (Sykes, 476)

However, with all the respect for such views, one can feel and touch what is happening nowadays, whether socially or politically, over the entire world, especially in the third world countries. The same images are embodied in clear portraits mentioned in most of Waugh's literary works that make him one of the main satirical novelists of the twentieth century. Lebedoff asserts that "For a man who had found the Modern Age untenable even in the 1920s, one can imagine his [Waugh] disgust with the 1960s" (Lebedoff, 217). But, on this base, how can we imagine Waugh's disgust of our present time!

The author has sum up his own annoyance, resentment, and disappointment. It is a foolish, hypocritical, and disgusting world in which the modern man turned to be as a number or an object empty of passion and spiritual love. In this futile world, the socialites have lost their authentic existence, and they become wandering; searching for



asylum even by death to get rid of this boredom within an absurd world.

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