Chapter III

Adam Fenwick-Symes’s Search for Identity and Aim in Life in Vile Bodies

“There’s only one great evil in the world today. Despair” (16).

This chapter highlights Adam Fenwick-Symes’s search for identity and aim in life in Vile Bodies. Vile Bodies is Evelyn Waugh’s second novel in which he continued to portray satirically the members of the upper and upper middle classes of the late twenties and thirties. Evelyn Waugh was born into the upper-middle class, yet his involvement with or relation to individuals similar to “The Bright Young Things” in Vile Bodies is unclear. However, the observation of such people led to his grim understanding of how their culture and lifestyle affected English society. Waugh’s characterization of the careless youths in Vile Bodies draws from his impressions and exposure to the early twentieth century Futurist art movement.

Waugh wrote a sophisticated satirical performance and it denies the twentieth century is capable of shame.
Peter Burra identified the same concern in the work of E. M. Forster:

It is probable that most people take the impressions afforded by art especially the novel so much for granted that they sincerely believe life itself to be quite a neat and tidy event and suffer from shock or melancholy if something occurs to disturb their belief. Paradoxically, the more actually ‘like’ life a work of art is, the more nonsensical it appears to them. (581)

*Vile Bodies* has disturbed critics alike since its publication. Particularly troubling is the novel’s abrupt shift in tone, from delight in the Bright Young People’s “too, too shaming” scandals to the unsettling pitch of the final chapters as their giddy world descends into total war. Waugh, though long seen as a conservative moralist, has increasingly come to occupy a position at the fringes of modernism; certainly he is a major satirist of modernity. *Vile Bodies* in particular is frequently read as modernist in feeling and construction, particularly in its rejection of sentimentality and emotion. Waugh ruthlessly expunges all interiority from his characters.
Vile Bodies satirically displays the impulsivity and irresponsibility of privileged English youths in their lack of concern for money, safety, or the wellbeing of others. Their actions show the impermanence of their class and economic situation in an unstable society and how these actions may contribute to their own downfall. Virginia Woolf rightly says about tradition dismissed:

Here is the British public sitting by the writer’s side and saying in its vast and unanimous way: 'Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot water bottles. That is how we know they are old women.' Mr. Wells and Mr. Galsworthy and Mr. Bennett have always taught us that this is the way to recognise them. (330)

However, despite their critical stances, Waugh fails to present a tangible alternative to the problems they explore. Instead, Waugh presents a prediction of war and destruction as the inescapable, natural path for Capitalistic societies.

In this flat world, intimacy or emotion is rendered illegible; it is effaced and replaced with mere talk. D.S. Savage says:
There is a core of gravity hard enough to resist dissolution into the waves of fatuity by which it is surrounded. . . . Gone is the surprised innocence of the undergraduate [Paul Pennyfeather] and in its place appears the blase sophistication of ‘that brilliant young novelist,’ Adam Symes, in quest of a large lump sum with which to expedite his marriage. . . . It [Vile Bodies] is close enough to real experience for the round of party-going . . . to pall upon, to nauseate Adam and to set him vaguely and vainly and most farcically yearning for some escape. (197-206)

The novel can fruitfully be approached by its interest in the text, particularly the visual qualities of the text. Typography, textual space, and textual markers are central effects in Waugh’s satiric portrait of a coterie whose members are, internally, empty. The Bright Young People respond to their world with a totalising emotional blankness manifested in finely planed, brittle talk; indeed, while they talk endlessly of “shaming,” their affective range is as flat as the page. Waugh’s novel skillfully prompts those feelings his characters seem to: lack, shame, disgust, and satiric laughter. In Vile Bodies, Waugh produces shame by making visible the affective flatness implicit in his characters’ textual
construction of selfhood. The textual selves of *Vile Bodies* argue peculiarly modernist constructs produced in an historical moment in which the conflation of literary and bodily indecency coincides with increasing anxiety about, and exhibition of both the physical and psychic self.

Here, Adam’s suffering has proceeded on three places. The first one is ‘Bright Young Things’. Adam Fenwick-Symes, the protagonist of *Vile Bodies*, is, in a sense, a man of the world: a novelist recently returned from Paris, and one of the “bright young people”:

...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)

Yet he is passive, an antihero like many other Waugh protagonists. Things simply happen to him as he drifts through the novel. When the young novelist disembarks
following a perfectly awful Channel crossing, an overzealous British customs officer leafs through the just-completed manuscript of his autobiography, determines it is too lubricious for native consumption, and seizes it on the spot. His action causes Adam to breach his contract with his publisher. Adam is then forced to sign a new one that commits him to virtual bondage. Because he has no money, he is unable to marry his fiancé, Nina Blount. The remainder of the novel is highly episodic; the plot movement emanates from two rather mild conflicts: establishment disapproval of the younger generation and Adam’s desultory journey for the means to marry Nina.

The second one is Adam’s love affair with Nina. Adam doesn’t have enough money to wed her fiancée. Finally, the hero sells Nina to Ginger to marry. Shortly after Ginger and Nina return from their honeymoon, Ginger is called up for military service. Adam and Nina spend Christmas with Colonel Blount. The Wesley film is finished, and the colonel, planning to show it as a Christmas treat, is too preoccupied to notice that his supposed son-in-law is a writer he met before as Fenwick-
Symes. On Christmas night, they hear that war was declared.

The third one is from the battlefield. Adam meets his drunken major again on a blasted battlefield during a lull in the fighting. The officer, who insists that he is now a general, announces that he lost his division. Adam is not so badly off; he loses only one platoon. The general offers to pay the thirty-five thousand pounds on the place, but Adam thinks the money will be useless. They do find the general’s car and in a case of champagne and Chastity, one of Mrs. Ape’s singing angels. Adam drinks some wine and falls asleep, leaving the general and Chastity to entertain each other.

In *Vile Bodies* the narrator frequently becomes a sort of a camera’s eye that cuts from scene to scene, revealing dialogue and external behavior only. Since the narrator, during these montage passages, does not go inside the minds of any of the characters, he appears more distant than does the narrator of Waugh’s first novel, *Decline and Fall*. The *Vile Bodies* of the book’s title taken from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians (3:20-21, Authorised Version): “Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto
his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (52). Two themes that appeared in the first novel—and which would be addressed with increasing seriousness in the novels to follow—are treated in a broadly comic fashion. These are the modern perversion of Christianity and the destruction of the stately homes of England.

Despite the putative inferiority of second to first novels, *Vile Bodies* (1930) is very nearly up to the standard set by *Decline and Fall*. Terry Eagleton sees these qualities as weaknesses in Waugh’s satires and has argued that Waugh’s early novels, “criticise [the] social environment without taking up an identifiable alternative standpoint,” and given the fundamental uncertainties that are inherent in both the thematic and structural elements of Waugh’s novels, they are unable to “offer genuine criticism” of society” (41, 48). The hero, Adam Fenwick-Symes, is more substantial and active than Paul Pennyfeather. Adam's adventures in clearing customs, as a society reporter, his attempts to raise enough money to marry Nina Blount, and so on, are the main plot, but the action includes the whole Mayfair set to which Nina and Adam belong, and the novel as a whole is a satirical
picture of fashionable London society midway between two world wars. Adam does share some quality of innocence that Paul and Tony show. Like them, Woodcock aptly says:

He is the unfortunate simpleton who falls the victim to perfidy, but for all this he moves among them as a whole person, a kind of Gulliver bringing his astonished normality into the Laputa where the madness of society, which he in part shares, is shown in monstrous forms. (52)

Waugh's own point of view is much more clearly revealed in *Vile Bodies* than in *Decline and Fall*. The ways in which he manages to do this without commenting explicitly himself can be conveniently grouped under three general, although not mutually exclusive, headings. First, he stakes out points of reference to guide the reader. Second, the Armistice and the First World War are both mentioned, a coming war is predicted. Third, the novel ends on the biggest battlefield in the history of the world. Waugh's gay Mayfair set is haunted by the memory of one world war and apprehensive of the approach of another. This helps to explain, and in some measure to justify, the furious round of pleasure upon which the Bright Young Things are embarked. Other points of
reference are provided by occasional comments by both the conservative aristocracy and the lower-middle-class. Often these comments have no direct bearing upon the gyrations of the Bright Young Things, but they do serve to indicate a more conservative system of values.

Indeed, what is peculiar about his early characters is that they do not seem to have a sense of the past, or of what they have done or thought in their own past. Critics have marvelled at Pennyfeather's ability to adapt to any situation, but he has no need to adapt, for he comes to each situation in the novel as though he had not existed before it. As James Nichols notes, Adam “is more real and active than Paul Pennyfeather” (52). Adam Fenwick-Symes, in *Vile Bodies*, behaves in much the same way. The thin plot of this novel consists of Adam's attempts to make enough money to marry his fiancée, Nina Blount. Several times he reaches the required amount (two thousand pounds) only to lose it through carelessness, naïveté, or sheer coincidence. Each time he has the money in his pocket and he calls Nina and announces his willingness to marry her immediately. Each time he loses it and he again calls her and tells her the wedding is off. None of his disappointments impinge on the
succeeding hopes and happy telephone calls. Even after he has “sold” Nina to a character named Ginger Littlejohn and she has married, Adam believes that he can buy her back. The traditional expectations of a romantic plot demand that marriage end the matter, and Waugh demonstrates throughout the novel that Adam is something of a romantic. Alvin Kernan comments, the institution of marriage “still represents the search for a traditional way of life. . . .” (212). But Nina's marriage to another man has no effect on him; given another chance at the money, he persists in his expectations of a happy ending to a traditional love plot.

The main theme of the novel is to target the sense of alienation in the modern man, the narrator tries to go deep into the subject by targeting other related issues that are either the causes or the result of this alienation. The novel raises the pertinent problems of youth - the search for identity and aim in life, the lack of which will be very devastating. Arthur Clement aptly says, “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 jungles of modern civilisation” (65). Waugh satirizes this generation that
in their meaningless pursuits, they are moving away from the reality of life, the ‘Static Middle’ pointed out by Prof. Silenus in *Decline and Fall* where he compared the life with the Wheel at Luna Park:

The topic of the Younger Generation spread through the company like a yawn. Royalty remarked on their absence and those happy mothers who had even one docile daughter in two swelled with pride and commiseration. ‘Everyone seems to have been talking about the younger generation to-night. The most boring subject I know.’ (109-110)

Waugh points out that the youth of today lack stability and vision to see the essence of life and the older generation unable to lead them finds the discussion about them boring.

*Vile Bodies* mainly portrays the aristocratic society and aimless young generation of 1920’s and 1930’s and termed as ‘Bright Young People’. The novel did not possess any straight story and fail in finding continuity in the narration, but the different incidents are combined together in an artistic manner which successfully portray the alienated modern man and aimlessness of the younger generation in that period.
James Carens says that, “one positive alternative to social and personal disorder . . . is war” (1). Waugh stresses that modern man is alienated not only from the interest of the society in general which is considered as a bigger family, but also for the interest of his immediate family. Drifted from his natural urge of being a social man, he does not take keen interest in the affairs of society. He is so involved with himself that the concerns of other people are becoming insignificant for him. This extreme form of alienation further leads him to become a liability for the society that cherished, preserved and supported his dreams and aims. Through his characters, Waugh has reflected this particular form of alienation from social moorings.

Additionally, the novel has portrayed the empty hedonism, futility, ennui, and endless parties of the fashionable London society of the roaring twenties. In Eagleton’s view, nothing can be useful to make of Waugh’s satire: society’s values are exposed as, “fraudulent and hollow, but really nowhere else to turn” (49). The satire is light because it is not direct. The sense that, the satiric thrust through what the characters say and do, and not through direct authorial commentary to us or a
satirical voice speaking to another character. As the object of attack is too general or as its opposite norm is vague, Waugh’s satire is light and tolerant. Waugh takes an amoral, cynical view of life in the post-WWI era and its lost generation; he uses an unsentimental style, mainly trivial dialogue, successive parties and dull conversations.

The absurdities of this society are then exposed in politics, social life, and religion. The end itself is apocalyptic and prophetic about an impending large-scale war. The endless party life is repetitive, and the absurdly inevitable tragic fate of the characters is in violent death, in a war battlefield, and in burning ovens. The writer uses grotesque humor to comment on the waste of this interwar generation and its irrational violence. The lack of plot itself suggests the emptiness of the characters’ lives. The Bright Young People described the brittle, amoral group whose drinking and social gatherings color the narrative. This generation is caught between two wars and has no faith to support it and no moral guidance; in addition to its cultural exhaustion and loss of past and future, it is even characterized by religious hypocrisy, illicit love, and
secularism. The mood captured is a witty, cynical and irresponsible one. The particular slang, the young set uses are repetitive, artificial and indicative of its ennui. Waugh offers no redemptive vision, and hence the satire remains light or beyond the reform agenda.

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 an unstable and amoral world. Moreover, along with him, the action also includes the complete young aristocratic society as through them the narrator portrays the satiric picture of superficial life led in London between the two world wars. Therefore being a part of an aimless group, with no direction or target in life, aimless partying every night makes Adam a protagonist, but not a hero. Waugh chooses him to be the central character of the novel, because through him, he wanted to describe the moral corruptness of the society. Thus, Adam becomes a hand maiden tool of the narrator to describe the social vices of the time. But like Paul in Decline and Fall Adam is also not a hero, he simply doesn’t have any heroic quality and so Waugh introduces him in a very
casual manner, with nothing distinguishable about him, which makes him a ‘standard product’ commonly found everywhere.

Adam is not merely unheroic in his physical appearance, but he is also unheroic in his mental capabilities. Like Paul in *Decline and Fall*, he was also a part of a corrupt world, but unlike Paul, he did not want to come out of it. He is unheroic, not because he found himself in the wrong situations, but he never tried to find a solution to his problems. Moreover, unlike Paul, during the course of his journey on the path of life Adam willingly became a part of all that was happening, which turned out to be more for worse than for the better.

After showing Paul’s immunity to his surroundings, the narrator intentionally made Adam, a part of all this knowingly, in order to show that a person is bound to fail if he becomes a part of this rat race that can never take anybody, anywhere. 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.
The satire of Adam’s lack of moral and constant need of money is characterised by one of the critic Phillips:

Han as an exile from Eden is epitomised in the central character—named, by no coincidence, Adam. Adam Fenwich-Symes’s total lack of moral convictions is illustrated in his turning over his fiancee, Nina Blount, to a rival in exchange for having his hotel bill paid; he later retrieves Nina with a worthless check. (16)

In addition, starting from hundred pounds, he even negotiated the price. Then unashamed of 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.

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. And later on as Ginger was called by his regiment, Adam went with Nina impersonating as Ginger, as Ginger has to meet her Father. Nina’s father failed to identify him and recognize him as Adam and 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 felt that this cheque would be presented over three days and by that time, he would be able to deposit the required amount to stop this cheque from being bounced. Here Adam also hoped that something might happen in between or the Major turned up in between and would give him his money. Moreover, if nothing positive happened, he will again give Nina back to Ginger as if she is not an individual, but a mere commodity, which can be bought and sold:

‘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 you again.’

However, despite committing all the despicable crimes, Adam might be termed as an 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, and thus found nothing wrong in selling his fiancée and later continuing an adulterous relationship with her, after her marriage 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)

Therefore, at the end, being morally blank, Adam failed to succeed. In *Decline and Fall* where at the end, Paul was back at Oxford from where he had started, but with a purpose and aim in life. On the other hand, in *Vile Bodies* 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 worthless.

Moreover, the narrator criticized Adam when he started using the power of the press to change the particular habits or dressing sense of the people, by saying that he saw some famous person in a specific dress or outfit, and so the narrator conveys that later totally misleading and aimless like Adam’s own life. The narrator
further portrays a world that is full of confusions and contradictions. In the beginning of the novel, the people confused about the name of the Prime Minister, and in the words of Ex-King of Ruritania, the narrator mocks at their lack of knowledge.

Therefore, the confusion in which Lottie denied breakfast to Adam is merely an example of the bewilderment that surrounds the characters in the novel. While telling Adam the story of Flossie’s suicide and police enquiry she got so puzzled that when the waiter brought the breakfast she told him that Adam already had his breakfast and does not want another one. Moreover, when poor Adam tried to deny it, she said that he is supporting her statement and does not want a second breakfast.

Waugh further emphasizes that the whole generation is aimless and does not know the direction in which they are heading. As one night after the party, without knowing where to go they kept wandering from one place to another. Firstly, they went to Lottie Crump’s Shepheard Hotel, but unable to meet her they went to Agatha’s house and since she failed to find her latchkey, finally they went to Miss Brown’s place. The loss of direction while
going to the race also symbolically shows the aimlessness of this generation, as in the process they forgot their way and travelled miles in the wrong direction.

All the characters in the novel, whether they belonged to the younger generation or older generation, were not concerned about the happenings in their family or society. The narrator further illustrates this with the help of the relationship shared by Lord Balcairn and his mother Mrs. Panrast. Where on the one hand Mrs. Panrast irrespective of her motherly duties 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. Though five minutes later, irrespective 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 women in the room was Mrs. Panrast – P-A-N-R-A-S-T, no, T for telephone, you know – formerly
Countess of Balcairn. She dresses with that severely masculine chic, which American women know so well how to assume, stop. Her son, comma, the present Earl, comma, was with her, stop. Lord Balcairn is one of the few young men about town.... (43)

Moreover, the narrator proves that even the younger generation shows the feeling of alienation and lack of comradeship among themselves, which was visible in the way Malpractice reacted when his friend Agatha was lost during the car race. All he thought at that time was not about Agatha but the good story the disaster will make in the next edition of the newspaper. Even Agatha’s friend Adam also took the news very casually without worrying about anything and thus referred to it very vaguely in his wireless message to Nina while conveying the news about the Drunk Major. “Adam accompanied him 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. ‘That seems quite clear,’ he said” (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.

However, even later they went to search not for
Agatha but rather for their car:

‘Hullo, everybody; I have to contradict the
announcement recently made that No.13, the
English Plunket-Bowse, driven by Miss Agatha,
had established a record for the course. The
stewards have now reported that No.13 left the
road just after the level crossing and cut
across country for five miles, rejoining the
track at the Red Lion corner. The lap has
therefore been disallowed by the judges.’

A few minutes later:

‘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 byeroad, apparently out of
control.’

‘My dear, that’s lucky for me,’ said Miles. ‘A
really good story my second day on the paper.
This ought to do me good with the Excess-very
rich making,’ and he hurried off to the post
office tent— which was one of the amenities of
the course— to dispatch a long account of Miss
Runcible’s disaster. (147-148)
The narrator might have used the statement that they went to search Agatha, but to show their mental depravity. Moreover, in between leaving the search 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, who is though not physically but mentally estranged from the society. And so despite living in the society he only thinks about himself and after considering himself from all aspects tries to think anything about anyone else.

However, Waugh is not a misanthrope, as is evident through the different relationships described in the novel. He tries to unravel 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 doings of his wife;
as a result, he failed to respect them. The narrator
describes the meeting of father and son in a very
satirical tone.

The narrator justifies Peter’s behaviour by showing
Lord Metroland’s 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:

Lord Metroland went into the study to finish
his cigar. It would be awkward if he met young
Trumpington on the stairs. He sat down in a
very comfortable chair....
He heard the front door open and shut behind
Alastair Trumpington.
Then he rose and went quietly upstairs, leaving
his cigar mouldering in the ash-tray, filling
the study with fragrant smoke.... (113)

Therefore, only when he heard Alastair going from the
house, he went upstairs leaving his blazing cigar.
Through this, the narrator confirms that until parents
will not realise their moral duty and will not mend their
own behaviour, they can never become the role model for their children.

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 motor car in the race, where she went round and round before finally crashing, and later her death at the hospital facing nightmares and hallucinations brings about an end to her aimless life. The narration of these incidents brings out the narrator’s viewpoint about the aimlessness of human life as passed by certain people.

Through one of Agatha’s hallucinations, the narrator indirectly tried to portray the future of this aimless generation that is going round in circles, and will ultimately result in a crash. The portrayal of Flossie, who died while swinging on a chandelier also proved the young generation’s craze for trying everything new without knowing or worrying about the outcome:

‘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)

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.

This sounds sadder as despite knowing everything and its futility, modern generation is becoming a part of all that which is worthless and trash. The narrator also raises a pertinent question about the search of identity in the modern generation. He conveys that there is a kind of vacuum in the society, where everybody is trying to search the real value of his existence, in order to find out his real identity. The burning of Adam’s autobiography by the customs officials proved to be a symbol of ‘loss of identity’ to Adam, and throughout the novel it seems that Adam was searching for his lost identity. The absent-minded Colonel Blount also forgot
Adam’s identity every time he met him. During 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.

Further, the narrator efficiently brings out the hypocrisy in London’s cocktail society, where on the one hand, people enjoy things and on the other hand, they criticize them. As for Archie Stewart’s party on one hand, people criticize Archie for calling the photographers, whereas on the other hand they desperately wanted to be photographed. 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.

Hypocrisy even prevailed in the social circles where people to hear about Agatha’s treatment at the customs, but in front of her, they showed sympathy and then forgetting everything again got busy discussing about their parties. Hypocrisy even prevailed in the social
circles where people cheered to hear about Agatha’s treatment at the customs, but in front of her, they showed sympathy and then forgetting everything again got busy discussing about their parties. Even Adam’s publisher Sam Benfleet turn out to be a person of the hypocritical nature as he blackmails Adam and forces him to sign a new contract by telling him that old Rampole is a 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 cannot 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)

Furthermore, the narrator proves that it is not only the younger generation which is guilty, even older people like Fanny and Mr. Outrage stand 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. Moreover, later she even fails to identify her own son Miles and Kitty reminds her that he is her son.

On the other hand a person socially as high as Mr. Outrage shows the decaying morality, who, despite holding a position as high as Ex-Prime Minister, was more notorious for his love affairs than being famous for his tenure as a Prime Minister. Even at the Margot Metroland’s party, at the call of the Mrs. Melrose Ape, in a row of emotions, everybody belonging to the aristocratic class or ‘Bright Young People’ accepted their sins. Simon Balcairn, the journalist, who reported the news, for the first time in his life felt so happy that he committed suicide, as if he has achieved the purpose of his creation.

This brings out the reality of the so-called high profile people, who are supposed to be the ‘ideals’ for the weaker and less privileged sections. Later this news practically paralyzed the complete judicial system, and
where an older generation took shelter at the court, the younger generation comprising bright young people got most of their matters resolved outside the court and then gave a great party to celebrate it. The narrator proves that, there is nothing that rich and famous cannot do, and above all they never feel guilty for their deeds.

In the novel, the narrator shows that 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. Moreover, where on the one hand Lottie’s Champagne worked in saving her reputation, as in the article reporters and police instead of referring it as a case of suicide while swinging on a chandelier referred it as an accident case, while Flossie was mending the chandelier, on the other hand, unable to handle the press properly in the case of Agatha Runcible, Sir James Brown lost his post of Prime Minister, which shows his incapacity to deal with the corrupt system. Through the newspaper article read by Adam the narrator elaborated this situation in a very comic vein.
The corrupt police officials again became evident when at St. Christopher’s Social Club, the waiter refused whisky to the bright young people by saying that he got a call from the police that they would be raiding any minute:

The Government had fallen that afternoon, he read, being defeated on a motion rising from the answer to a question about the treatment of Miss Runcible by Customs House officers. It was generally held in parliamentary circles that the deciding factor in this reverse had been the revolt of the Liberals and the Nonconformist members at the revelations of the life that was led at No. 10 Downing Street, during Sir James Brown tenancy. The Evening Mail had a leading article, which drew a fine analogy between Public and Domestic Purity between sobriety in the family and in the State.

There was another small paragraph which interested Adam.

‘Tragedy in West-End Hotel
The death occurred early this morning at a private hotel in Dover Street of Miss Florence Ducane, described as being of independent means, following an incident in which Miss Ducane fell from a chandelier which she was attempting to mend...’
Which only showed, thought Adam, how much better Lottie Crump knew the business of avoiding undesirable publicity than Sir James Brown. (63-64)

This exposed the hollowness of the claim of law enforcing agencies to be vigilant against the aberrant activities in the society. 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 the wine.

The novel, thus, depicts a world that has lost its direction and is moving round and round in circles. The narrator uses a number of symbols to describe this aimless world, that will reach nowhere in its meaningless pursuits. Through the car race in which everybody goes in circles and a number of them are injured, the narrator tries to describe the purposelessness of modern generation, which is going in circles without any aim and thus frequently gets injured by opting wrong direction in life. Agatha injured herself, finally paid the price with her own life.

The casual relationship of Adam and Nina is a symbol of indecisive nature of modern youth. The narrator raises
the question about the value and need of relationship in
the modern world. Their vain attempt to get married
symbolically shows their ‘fatal hunger for permanence’ as
referred to by Father Rothschild S.J. There is a constant
search for an order and this fatal hunger for permanence
shows the character’s lethal search for meaning and
values in life that saves the novel from merely being a
love story.

The morally deprived parents like Mrs. Margot, Lord
Metroland, and Fanny are the symbols of the root cause of
moral blankness of the younger generation. Blount’s
failure to identify Adam, not only shows Adam’s loss of
identity, but it also shows Col. Blount’s lack of
interest in the life of his daughter, as he often forgets
with whom his daughter is going to marry until she
finally gets married and then even he wrongly identifies
Adam as Ginger (his real son-in-law). His unintelligent
investment in the picture on John Wesley that resulted in
depriving him all his money symbolizes his lack of
experience despite his age. Through this, the narrator
proves that till the older generation, which is the
torchbearer continues making mistakes; the world cannot
expect the wiser decisions from the younger generation.
The narrator succeeds in proving that modern civilization is decaying at a fast pace and through Nina he gave his readers a glimpse of the decaying world. A world where factories are closing, destruction is spreading everywhere and people have no other aim left in their lives except making money, marrying and having children, thinking of which made Nina sick. 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”. Moreover, the novel presents a historical review, and truly depicts the England of that time, including all the events like the car races that used to take place at that time. Arthur Clement also noticed the vagueness of their search:

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 a goal of life. (56)

The social gatherings in the cocktail society of London, the aimless young generation termed as Bright Young People, the corrupt officials, the functioning of the government and the evangelist all took inspiration from the real world.
Waugh's world is the world of the “Bright Young Things” of the late twenties and early thirties, and, it is perhaps best described in Vile Bodies. But, this is a world beyond the reach of someone like Adam Fenwick-Symes. In fact, it is a “passing order” because it is becoming engulfed by the “Bright Young Things” and their flashy, meaningless whirl of parties and social activities. In his nostalgia for the passing aristocracy, Waugh is implying that there has been a loss of an establishment that had provided meaning and permanence for a certain segment of society. But now, that time is no more.

Thus, Waugh dismisses the world of the aristocracy as a thing of the past. Tony Last had, in some respects, tried to live in that world, and Paul Pennyfeather assumed that it still existed. But the author rather nostalgically but realistically implies that the aristocratic society which had provided stability and tradition no longer exists.

There is much movement in Vile Bodies, but it is random motion that leads from one episode to another rather than from one phase of the quest to another. This is particularly true with Adam Fenwick-Symes. Adam's
quest appears to be the pursuit of the young woman he loves [Nina Blount], and sufficient money to let him marry her. This goal is originated when his memories are burned and he must turn to other resources to look for the money that will enable him to marry. But although Adam finds himself on the threshold of adventure, he never finds the path that will lead to his goal.

Adam just continues from one riotous episode to another. His first attempt to get money occurs when he naively gives the winnings of a bit of gambling to a drunken major who promises the protagonist a “sure bet” on a race horse. The major later claim Adam is the winner of £35000. But Adam never gets the check in his hands until the final pages of the novel when he meets the major on the battlefield. And by then, Nina is married and the money practically worthless.

Adam's financial quest leads him on two other major paths that also turn out to be dead ends. The first of these is a route leading to Colonel Blount, Nina's father. Adam visits the Colonel with the hope of getting the money necessary for his marriage. But, the thousand pound cheque that Adam receives from him is rather humorously signed “Charlie Chaplin.” Thus, this path of
the quest ends abruptly with a “bogus” joke. Left with no other possibilities, Adam—as a last resort—attempts working for the money. He becomes Mr. Chatterbox—the newspaper gossip columnist. But his career is short—lived, and Adam soon finds himself jobless and still without the funds for his marriage. Adam's quest is perhaps most closely equated with the events of the motor races episode. This is typical of Adam's own quest—off the road and in the wrong direction.

Adam never gets on the road that will lead to his goal. Rather, he goes round and round as the race cars do, getting engaged and unengaged according to the financial circumstances of the moment. And further, his audience consists of the “Bright Young Things,” who tend to induce futile meanderings rather than encourage Adam to achieve his boon, and, as Agatha Runcible is left alone in her dream, so too does the protagonist find himself lost on the biggest battlefield in the history of the world.

For Adam never really gains his goal. But one cannot dismiss Adam's quest as a total failure, because he at least attempts to find permanence in marriage. Stephan Jay Greenblatt aptly says:
*Vile Bodies* is not a love story. Adam and Nina are significant only as representative of the sickness of an 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. (13)

In many respects, the hero's attitude toward the institution of marriage suggests that Adam, like all the "Bright Young Things," does not really consider it either serious or meaningful. And yet, one can justifiably assume that Waugh he does view marriage and the family unit as a source of order and purpose. Thus, although Adam does not perhaps the full implications of marriage, the fact that he at least quests in that direction suggests that he certainly has greater awareness and motivation than such a hero.

So in the end, Adam is rather humorously left alone on the battlefield in a field car with the drunken major and one of Mrs. Ape's angels (Chastity). The searcher—Adam Fenwick-Symes can be considered in some ways opposites to Paul Pennyfeather and Tony Last, because they are opportunists who move in the context of their modern society rather than innocents moving in a romantic
and antiquated world. And yet as his name suggests, Adam does share some of the quality of innocence that Paul and Tony exemplify.

Adam is often the victim of other people's follies (e.g., giving the drunken major a thousand pounds to bet on a horse); and, in this respect, he is an innocent. But he is an improvement on Tony's naivete that distorted and often destroyed their visions of the world about them. Paul, and to some extent Tony, stand on the sidelines of their fast moving societies; however, Adam can not only keep up his social settings and he can also momentarily step outside of it and perceive its meaninglessness.

Here, differentiate that Adam is more substantial and active than Paul Pennyfeather. The hero of Vile Bodies demonstrates a greater degree of awareness and a greater desire to find some meaningful pattern in life. The protagonist sees that the continuous partying of the "Bright Young Things" is meaningless. Adam, and yet still does not quite have the strength to make a clean break with the society that harbors him.

Adam sees the worthlessness of his society and thinks that perhaps marriage might offer a sense of permanence and meaning that is absent in his world. But,
he is guilty of a kind of thinking that Father Rothschild considers prevalent among the younger generation. The hero of *Vile Bodies* passively desires marriage, he must not think it worthy of active endeavor because he very blithely and satirically sells his “share” in Nina to his rival, Ginger Littlejohn, for a hundred pounds. Thus, Waugh has endowed Adam with a certain amount of thinking power—minimal though it might be—to wish for something permanent and meaningful, but the author still denies his hero enough energy to actively attempt to attain his boon.

But with the earlier heroes, very few—if any—of the other characters seem to feel the presence of Paul, Adam, or Tony. These three earlier heroes have little lasting identity. Paul, Adam, and Tony are disappearing heroes. Paul retreats to his religious haven, Scone College; Adam is “lost” on the battlefield; and Tony disappears into the jungle.

Paul, Adam, and Tony had been passive in that they had allowed themselves to be buffeted—in varying degrees—by their societies. Waugh concludes this world of *Vile Bodies* with Adam is selling Nina to his friend Ginger so he can pay off a hotel bill. Ginger is drafted, however,
after his marriage to Nina, so Adam goes with Nina as her husband to go through Christmas with Colonel Blount, Nina’s father. The last scene discovers Adam alone in the biggest battlefield in the history of the world reading a letter from Nina, who is back with her husband but carrying Adam’s child.

*Vile Bodies* is a novel which demonstrates the overthrow of many kinds of order, moving ultimately to the overthrow of its own thin pretensions to be an ordered narrative. In *Vile Bodies* the plot is forwarded by an arbitrary logic, with crucial decisions taken whimsically and much greater concern expressed over irrelevancies. Nina’s response to Adam’s reluctance to marry without an income is typical of this logic. The novel is more concerned with the different social sets and the generation gap than were *Decline and Fall*, and, although Adam Fenwick-Symes is the central character in the work, he does not have quite the same importance to *Vile Bodies* as Paul had to *Decline and Fall*.

“Happy Ending,” the final chapter of *Vile Bodies*, deserves a separate discussion for various reasons. On a superficial level, its outstanding position derives simply from the fact that it is the end of the book and
expects it somehow to round off the message of the novel. On a deeper level, “Happy Ending” introduces an entirely new dimension into the novel, viz. the anti-utopian vision of a world whose dominating characteristic is futility. Walter Allen appreciates the book for its historical value and facts of the time it describes. He says:

_Vile Bodies_ is one of those rare novels, like _The Great Gatsby_, that seem to define and sum up a period. It can stand for one aspect of life in the England of the twenties.... _Vile Bodies_, like _Decline and Fall_, is a fantasy, but a fantasy based on the observable reality of the times. So there is much more satire, of the kind one might find in a very brilliant theatrical revue; its targets are essentially the world as reflected in the popular press, which means the press itself, the Bright Young People it helped to bring into being, evangelists like Aimée Semple MacPherson, the world of motor racing, the book-banning activities of Sir William Joynson-Hicks, and so on. The truly remarkable thing is that it has survived its topicality; it is a triumph of style and the comic spirit... (211)

On yet another level, the epilogue serves as a harsh criticism of the Bright Young People, an approach
fundamentally different from the satire in the main part of the book.

“Happy Ending” shows typical features of the short story, the principles of reduction and compression being discernible from various angles. Jerome Meckier aptly says:

All of Waugh’s novels... move in circles, a sign of the world’s loss of direction, a refutation of complacent belief in inevitable progress.... *Vile Bodies* is organised around three circle symbols that reveal life’s purposelessness: the auto race in which Agatha Runcible goes faster and faster but only achieves her own death, the drunken Major who circles in and out of the plot and is finally linked with the world’s return to war, and the reels of Colonel Blount’s absurd film about John Wesley.... (12)

It might not even be too daring to suggest that “Happy Ending” could take its place as a self-contained anti-utopia short story which aims at criticism of human behaviour on a wider scale. To return to the starting-point: “Happy Ending” is another proof of Waugh’s familiarity with short story techniques; in *Vile Bodies* he blends them successfully with those of the novel.
The novel succeeds in not only pointing the problems prevalent in those days, but also offers the methods using which the modern society can avoid such conditions in the present scenario. In a humorous vein, Waugh addresses the pertinent problems of that time like the aimlessness of the younger generation and the mental depravity, hypocrisy and superficiality of the older people that is increasing the seriousness of the situation. Thus, he succeeds in efficiently conveying that by merely referring to the younger generation as aimless, will not solve the purpose, as the older generation is an equal culprit in making them what they are. 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 for their children.

The highly immoral and unethical action in which Adam sold Nina and Ginger purchased her shows the moral depravation of their upbringing. The failure of the younger generation to have stable and long lasting relationship further brings out the lightness with which they take serious matters of life. The narrator’s concern
becomes evident regarding the future of this deteriorated modern society that is breaking it to pieces.

Thus, behind Waugh’s satire, there is a moral lesson for the younger as well as the older generation. Waugh conveys that both of them should imbibe morals and ethics in their life by following the path of righteousness. Only then they can attain the true meaning of life. Otherwise they will keep wandering aimlessly throughout their life.