Chapter 3
The Early Novels (Cont.)
A Handful of Dust (1934) is the first one of Waugh's novels to have a serious tone. It is, however, not uniformly serious like Brideshead Revisited. Rather the satirical and farcical elements intermingle with the serious to produce what many critics regard as Waugh's masterpiece. As Waugh wrote in a letter to Katharine Asquith "... for the first time I am trying to deal with normal people instead of eccentrics."1

Tony Last is the hero of the novel and the possessor of a Gothic mansion of which he is inordinately proud. He also has a wife, Brenda, whom he loves and a son, John Andrew.

Hetton Abbey is not very old, having been entirely rebuilt in 1864. In this it is unlike Broome and Brideshead which have been occupied successively by several generations of Crouchbacks and Flytes respectively. "But there was not a glazed brick or encaustic tile that was not dear to Tony's heart."2 Every penny that can be spared is employed for the upkeep of the place. It has many inconvenient and even ugly features. But "all these things with which he had grown up were a source of constant delight and exultation to Tony: things of tender memory and proud possession."3 The bedrooms of Hetton

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3 Ibid., p. 262.
Abbey are named after King Arthur's knights and ironically Brenda occupies Guinevere, presaging her infidelity. Tony himself occupies an adjoining bedroom, Morgan Le Fay, and has here preserved all the treasures of his adolescence. Indeed, Tony has himself in many ways not been able to outgrow the adolescent stage. Unwilling to admit that the feudal life he is living is an anachronism he continues to play the part of the village-squire. The only discordant note is struck by Brenda who has insisted on having a modern bed put into her bedroom and who is herself unequivocally modern. When she goes to London, for instance, she goes and visits a bonesetter. Brenda, in fact, is a Bright Young Person just like her counterparts in *Vile Bodies* whose antics kept the gossip columnists feverishly active in the Twenties. Like them, she is frivolous, vain and empty-headed. Waugh is here exploring the marital life of one of those scintillating beings who had come alive in the pages of *Vile Bodies*.

Brenda meets John Beaver, an accessible bachelor who haunts the fringes of the fashionable world. She falls in love with him and becomes his mistress. What tantalizes everyone is her choice of her partner. Beaver is a prig, a dullard "the joke figure they had all known and despised."\(^4\) He does not even return her love. There is an element of fantasy in the affair of the ill-assorted

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\(^4\) Ibid., p. 289.
for five years she had been a legendary, almost ghostly name, the imprisoned princess of fairy story, and now that she had emerged there was more enchantment in the occurrence than in the mere change of habit of any other circumspect wife."\(^5\)

At one level *A Handful of Dust* is a satire, the satire of the Bright Young People which Waugh had accomplished with such consummate artistry in *Vile Bodies*. But at another level it is a sardonic commentary on Tony's way of life at Hetton. Waugh himself admired the leisurely life of the landed gentry immensely, what Eric Linklater has termed an "aesthetically satisfying way of life."\(^6\)

But in *A Handful of Dust* Waugh seems to recognize the futility of such a way of life and its total inability to hold at bay the forces of modernism. Tony Last's way of life is a doomed one and in seeking to prolong it unnaturally, in seeking to withdraw into a sheltered existence where the disruptive forces of modern life are denied and ignored Tony is making a grave mistake. He is playing the part of the Victorian Squire. But it is not the Victorian age but the twentieth century, a time which has witnessed moreover, the holocaust of the First World War when the life of the stately homes of the English

\(^5\) Ibid., p.288.

landed gentry finally disintegrated. It has no relevance to the chaos of modern life. So Tony commits the ultimate sin in seeking to prolong it. His Victorian ancestors' Church-going, for instance, was an expression of their genuine piety. Tony goes to church merely because it is a part of the ritual that is expected of the squire and not because he believes in the religious practices to which he pays lip service. Indeed the utter meaninglessness of the Church services is borne out by the vicar's sermons which have reached the height of the ludicrous, for he preaches the same sermons that he had been used to preach in India without making any changes for the changed climate and circumstances in England. The vicar's sermons are, in fact, as meaningless as the piety of Tony is false. He, too, like Tony, lives in the Victorian era."

...let us remember our Gracious Queen Empress in whose service we are here, and pray that she may long be spared to send us at her bidding to do our duty in the uttermost parts of the earth; ..." he preaches in one of his sermons. How hollow is Tony's piety is revealed when Tony's son John Andrew is killed. He has a talk with the vicar and then tells Mrs. Rattery one of his guests:

"I only wanted to see him about arrangements. He tried to be comforting. It was very painful ... after all the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like..."

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A Handful of Dust, p. 273.
this is religion."\textsuperscript{8}

Much later when Mr. Todd asks him

"Do you believe in God?" \textsuperscript{9}

Tony replies, "I suppose so. I've never really thought about it much." \textsuperscript{10} Tony Last bears out Waugh's contention that the religious impulse is absent in modern man.

Waugh does not seem to have had a good opinion of modern organized religion, if one is to judge from his books. Sometimes he satirizes clergymen irrespective of the sect to which they belong. At other times his treatment of them is savagely unkind. Even clergymen of his own denomination are not spared. Father Rothschild, the Jesuit priest in \textit{Vile Bodies} does not escape the barbed arrows released by Waugh's pen. In fact Waugh's castigations of clergymen serve to give point to his view that modern man is deeply irreligious. Mr. Prendergast in \textit{Decline and Fall} is a modern churchman who "need not commit himself to any religious belief."\textsuperscript{11} He is gruesomely murdered by a mad carpenter with religious delusions who considers himself to be "the lion of the Lord's elect."\textsuperscript{12} His end helps to place Waugh's attitude

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p. 326.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 384.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 384.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} \textit{Decline and Fall}, p. 87.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 108.
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to him. Mrs. Melrose Apo (her very name serves to define her) of *Vile Bodies* is an evangelist of the Aimee Semple Macpherson type without any religious fervour and her insincerity is exposed. The clergyman in the same book literally and metaphorically spends Christmas in the dark. The Nestorian patriarch in *Black Mischief* is not fanatical about his religion and he dabbles in politics like Father Rothschild. The Anglican bishop in the same book is more concerned for his personal safety than for his congregation. In *The Loved One* are mentioned priests of countless preposterous cults. Waugh castigates the essential frivolity of modern religious practitioners.

"The loss of the religious referent leaves no bond by which to tie the conscience of the individual person or of the community. Waugh stresses the absence of this referent in practically all his novels from *A Handful of Dust* to *The Loved One*. Whether the Loved One should wear a monocle, whether the huntsman should blow "Gone to the Ground" at the funeral of Tony's young son killed in a hunting accident in *A Handful of Dust* are the important problems where the peripheral associations of religion faintly survive after its essence has perished."¹³

The twentieth century world is a wasteland. The absence of the religious referent makes it an absurd universe in which no moral certainties are present to serve as a prop for the "poor, bare, forked animal"¹⁴ that is man. Man can find neither consolation nor support in the idea of a Superior Being for he no longer believes

in the existence of a Superior Being. Nietzsche wrote, 'God is dead.' Yet religious cults continue, barren without and hollow within. Just as Justice in *Decline and Fall* had been eaten up within by the canker of hypocrisy, so modern organized religion is devoured from within by the absence of true religious fervour, not only by her practitioners but by her acolytes as well.

Tony's life at Hetton, outwardly so smooth and well-run is just that little bit out of tilt, so that when there is a crisis, order is reduced to chaos. Mrs. Rattery's card game, in fact, is a good analogy for his life style.

"Mrs. Rattery brooded over her chequer of cards and then drew them towards her into a heap, haphazard once more and without meaning; it had nearly come to a solution that time, but for a six of diamonds out of place, and a stubbornly congested patch at one corner, where nothing could be made to move. 'It's a heart-breaking game,' she said."

In every aspect of his life Tony lives in the past. The bedrooms at Hetton Abbey are named after King Arthur's knights. He occupies the room which he had been occupying ever since he left the night nursery and it is full of the relics of his childhood and adolescence - "the framed picture of a dreadnought (a coloured supplement from *Chums*), all its guns spouting flame and smoke; a

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15 *A Handful of Dust*, p.323.
photographic group of his private school; a cabinet called 'the Museum,' filled with the fruits of a dozen desultory hobbies, eggs, butterflies, fossils, coins; his parents, in the leather diptych which had stood by his bed at school. When faced with the prospect of having to divorce Brenda he agrees, with old-fashioned gallantry to be the defendant. In fact, so steeped is he in the romanticism of the Victorian era that he "has no forces to pit against the mechanical and materialistic faithlessness of modern society except those transmitted to him by the Victorian imagination." Tony has retreated from adult life into adolescence and from the modern age to the Victorian era. He cannot face up to the pressures of contemporary existence. Indeed, as Richard Wasson has pointed out the city in search of which Tony goes has many features of the city that Sir Percival sees in his vision of the Grail in Tennyson's 'The Holy Grail.' Even the dream-life Tony had led in Hetton was a thing of the past, not the present. "A whole Gothic world had come to grief ... there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled ..."  

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16 Ibid., p. 262.  
18 Ibid., pp. 331-332.  
19 A Handful of Dust, pp. 348-349.
The punishment that Tony suffers is out of all proportion to his deserts, for he had been the innocent and injured party. But in the absurd world everything is possible. Tony's life is reduced to a futile round of meaningless activity. Ironically, steeped as he had been in the ethos of the Victorian era, he is condemned to read the arch-Victorian novelist Dickens' books everyday to the madman Mr. Todd. In a way this is a symbol, in microcosm, of the kind of life that mankind in general is condemned to live. Each man's life, even though he may not be living in the jungles of Brazil reading Dickens everlastingly, is comprised of a round of meaningless and futile activity. It is only the man who becomes consciously aware of his miserable existence and learns how to extract enjoyment and meaning out of every passing moment, that is able to break out of this round. One feels that Tony's life at Mr. Todd's is not more futile than his life at Hetton. That is why the alternative ending to the book leaves the reader with the same feeling that life is a round of meaningless movement. In the alternative ending published in Harper's Bazar in America Tony returns to Hetton and a chastened wife. He resumes his old life but maintains a flat in London where he occasionally comes down to stay a few days and have a fling. The roles of the betrayer and the betrayed are reversed. Yet Tony does not invest his life with significance merely by setting up a pied à terre in London in which he can enjoy
his weekends.

What is particularly striking about the novel is the fact that Tony is so severely punished when Brenda is let down much more lightly. She has come to terms fully with the modern world. Not for her are the Gothic, feudal dreams. And as a consequence she is better able to adjust to an amoral world. She suffers only a temporary period of financial embarrassment. In the end she marries Jock Grant-Menzies and achieves a certain measure of prosperity and happiness.

One of the central themes in *A Handful of Dust* is the treatment of marital relationships and the break-up of a family. It is the only one of Waugh's novels which begins with a happy marriage and a contented family. We are shown how the disruptive forces of the modern world have broken up forever not only the traditional way of life of the landed classes but family life itself. Brenda is cruel and heartless, an inhabitant of the jungles of Mayfair. Her life is a denial of all decent feelings and values. Not only does she embark on a love-affair with a heartless cad, a man in every point inferior to Tony; even her maternal feelings are eclipsed by her lust for her unsuitable lover. When Jock Grant-Menzies tells her that John is dead she at first thinks that John Beaver is dead and is stunned with grief. Then she realizes that it is her son John Andrew who has been killed and she breaks out with
In the vicious amoral world in which she moves with feline grace even the maternal instinct has become defunct. Critics have pointed out that the vicar's Christmas sermon refers with unconscious irony to the inhabitants of the modern world. "Instead of the placid ox and ass of Bethlehem we have for companions the ravenous tiger and the exotic camel, the furtive jackal and the ponderous elephant." Brenda and Polly Cockpurse, Jenny Abdul Akbar and Mrs. Beaver indeed hover over the London scene like beasts of prey. But even the ravenous tiger and the exotic camel have maternal feelings. They are ready to die to protect their young. Brenda and her set are not so much ferocious beasts as automatons without any heart or feeling. But in the absurd universe the natural affections do not seem to have any existence. We may recall how Meursault in Camus' *The Outsider* felt no particular concern and certainly no grief when his mother died. To him the incident was merely a nuisance interrupting the rhythm of his life. We may remember how Françoise gloated over her husband's sufferings in Arrabal's *The Two Executioners*. Maternal love, filial affection, such emotions are in abeyance in the absurd universe.

One of the devices that Waugh makes full use of in his novel is the technique of irony. As has already been noted,

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20 Ibid., p. 327.
21 Ibid., p. 290.
Brenda's bedroom is named Guinevere. "But you see, I know Brenda so well," Tony tells Mrs. Rattery though in fact he is completely ignorant of Brenda's infidelity as well as her lack of affection for her son. When John Andrew is told to return to Hetton on his horse Waugh comments "So John's fate was decided." And indeed a page later he is dead. In another sphere, in London, the furtive jackal and the ponderous elephant have indeed usurped the place of the peaceful ox and ass as the vicar preaches, with unconscious irony.

In *A Handful of Dust* Waugh makes liberal use of the technique of montage. Scenes from the Brazilian jungles are interposed with scenes from Mayfair with carefully calculated artistry. It is a technique that is borrowed from the cinema where scenes in widely disparate places follow each other. The effect in *A Handful of Dust* is to show how much similarity there is, in fact, between the jungles of Brazil and the thoroughfares of Mayfair. As Waugh wrote to Henry Yorke "The scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages - first Mrs. Beaver etc. then the real ones, finally the silver foxes at Hetton." The Mayfair that Tony has left behind him is not more civilized than the beast - haunted jungles of Brazil. In London, too, there are stealthy beasts of prey as there are in Brazil; here, too, Mrs. Beaver preys on her customers as the vampire bats suck human blood in Brazil. In fact, in some ways the Brazilian jungle is superior to London. The Indians, when they

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22 Ibid., p. 322.
23 Ibid., p. 318.
abandon Tony and Dr. Messinger take nothing but what is their own. Brenda, on the other hand, wishes to strip Tony of all his possessions. The predators of Mayfair outdo their primitive savage counterparts in venality. In one of his travel books Waugh notes about a visit to a supper restaurant in London:

"I was back in the centre of the Empire, and in the spot where, at the moment, 'everyone' was going. Next day the gossip writers would chronicle who were assembled in that rowdy cellar, hotter than Zanzibar, noisier than the market at Harar, more reckless of the decencies of hospitality than the taverns of Kabalo or Tabora."25

The latent violence in human beings which is brought out so clearly in absurd literature (e.g. Camus' The Outsider, Jean Genet's The Blacks, Edward Albee's Zoo Story) Waugh shows to be omnipresent. It flourishes whatever the surroundings, whether the lush green jungles of Brazil or the concrete jungles of London.

Tony, the central character of A Handful of Dust around whom the story revolves is depicted as the eternal victim. He is made a fool of by Brenda and later is imprisoned by the sinister Mr. Todd. Fate, life, circumstances, all combine to defeat him. His good nature and love are exploited shamelessly by Brenda. He blindly trusts her, never dreaming that she is capable of betraying him. So when he discovers her infidelity

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he is all the more shocked.

*A Handful of Dust* is the first one of Waugh's works where the element of fantasy is almost completely absent. Waugh's earlier novels move through a dream world where fantastic adventures befall the characters who move through an Alice in Wonderland landscape. This story is narrated on a realistic plane and the characters, though lacking in depth have realistic responses to real life and adult situations. They are not simply caught and whirled about in the whirlpool of circumstances over which they have no control, as happens to Paul Pennyfeather in *Decline and Fall* or Adam Symes in *Vile Bodies*. Brenda deliberately selects and then follows a chosen course of action. She falls in love with John Beaver and her actions are governed by this circumstance. Tony, too, is not will-less like Waugh's earlier heroes. Faced with a certain situation he chooses to follow a certain course of action. Moreover in *A Handful of Dust* there are no fantasy characters like the drunk major who owes Adam thirty-five thousand pounds in *Vile Bodies* or Philbrick the butler in *Decline and Fall*. The characters are created on a realistic plane.

*Scoop* (1938) is one of Waugh's most uproariously funny efforts. It deals with the adventures of a young innocent in the jungles of commercial journalism. Like most of Waugh's heroes and heroines William Boot also comes from an incomplete family. Of his parents his
father is dead. Only his mother is alive. William is the head of a household comprising numerous elderly relatives and servants. William leads a bucolic existence in their midst with unalloyed contentment. The life of a rural squire suits his placid temperament. In fact "the moment he left the confines of Boot Magna he found himself in a foreign and hostile world." 26

Waugh's predilection for cruel humour is kept in abeyance in this book though it is not entirely missing e.g. "Various courageous Europeans, in the seventies of the last century, came to Ishmaelia . . . They came as missionaries, ambassadors, tradesmen, prospectors, natural scientists. None returned. They were eaten, every one of them; some raw, others stewed and seasoned - according to local usage and the calendar (for the better sort of Ishmaelite have been Christian for many centuries and will not publicly eat human flesh, uncooked, in Lent, without special and costly dispensation from their bishop)." 27

There is a strong vein of fantasy in Scoop. This is in keeping with the characteristics of the absurd genre. We may remember how in Ionescos' Rhinoceros human beings turned into rhinoceroses or how in the same author's Amédee the corpse of a man started growing. Fantasy is of the essence of Absurd literature, and Waugh's Scoop is no exception. Towards the end of the action Mr. Baldwin,

27 Ibid., p. 440.
William's mysterious friend, descends from an aeroplane in a parachute like the *deux ex machina* of Greek drama, to set matters right. Of course he contrives to land at the spot where William is standing. He then asks William to accompany him to his retreat where his man - servant has managed to prepare for luncheon fresh river fish, a rare local bird roasted and stuffed with bananas, almonds and red peppers; a baby gazelle, a dish of pastry and an assortment of fruit. All these items have been prepared in a town whose gastronomical provisions have so far been distressingly meagre. Mr. Baldwin's servant Othbert also has a wireless transmitter by means of which William is able to send his despatches to London since the official wireless station is closed to foreign newspapermen.

Mr. Baldwin contrives to get the Swede Eric Olafsen drunk and in this state the gigantic Swede, single - handed, manages to stage a counter - revolution in which the Communists led by Dr. Benito are routed and British interests represented by Mr. Baldwin emerge triumphant. Here again we have absurd fantasy for it is virtually impossible for a man, however strong, to fight and win a revolution single - handed.

All these improbable events lend an aura of whimsical fantasy to the novel. Even Mr. Salter, the Foreign Editor of *The Beast* adds his touch of whimsy when he tries to explain to William who is fighting whom in Ishmaelia.

"You see, they are all Negroes. And the Fascists
won't be called black because of their racial pride, so they are called white after the White Russians. And the Bolshevists want to be called black because of their racial pride. So when you say black you mean red, and when you mean red you say white and when the party who call themselves black say traitors they mean what we call blacks, but what we mean when we say traitors I really couldn't tell you.'

There are also many instances of Waugh's irony. The journalists in Ishmaelia, for instance, are issued with identity cards that were originally printed for the registration of prostitutes. It is apt, for the journalists have prostituted their talents and sacrificed the truth at the altar of sensational journalism. At another point Salter says, "'It's a great experience to work for a man like Lord Copper. Again and again I've thought he was losing grip. But always it turns out he knew best. What made him spot Boot? It's a sixth sense . . . real genius.'" But the reader knows that Boot has been selected to go to Ishmaelia by a misunderstanding.

Like Paul Pennyfeather William in Ishmaelia is an innocent abroad. In fact what A.E. Dyson has written about Paul can with equal justification be said about William with Kätchen substituted for Margot Beste -

28 Ibid., p. 420.
29 Ibid., p. 492.
"In equipping Paul with his futile blend of decency and naïveté, it has prepared him as a sheep for the slaughter. When he meets Margot Beste – Chetwynde he is simply impressed by her. The gaiety, the charm, the appearance of fragility convince him, and he sees nothing else of what is there. An education conducted along impeccably Arnoldian lines has turned him into a wasteland character, without convictions, without insight into evil, without any felt or understood values. Given the loneliness of modern man as well, he seems fated to mistake appearance for reality; to become an incarnation of the liberally nurtured innocent abroad."

Kätchen is one in a long line of Waugh's predatory females. She is eager to exploit William's love for her. Whenever she is hard pressed for money she appeals to William and William responds with unfailing generosity. Yet while she takes whatever she can get from William she is not willing to give him anything in return. She is little better than the native boys who shamelessly fleece their masters the journalists and betray their activities to the secret police. Yet if Ishmaelia is depicted as savage London is no less so. For instance the boy at the hotel where William stays in London charges five shillings

for a toothbrush and when William protests that that is too much he cheekily answers that after all it is not William who pays. William indicates some loose change on the table and the boy takes it all. There seems to be no moral centre in Waugh's universe. He satirizes but he satirizes all equally. There is no specific norm which he holds up for emulation. He admires the leisurely life of the country gentleman and, in a way, this is the ideal which he sometimes holds up for admiration. Even so, if London and Ishmaelia are both jungles infested with savages Boot Magna and the country are not free from the taint of savagery. Cruelty lurks beneath the surface of idyllic calm. We are told that "outside the owls hunted maternal rodents and their furry brood."

In fact the ideal that is so desperately sought is not to be found in any sphere of life. This is in keeping with the absurd ethos which has no positive values to offer. In the absurd world all values are found equally wanting, all ways of life are equally futile. What Beckett sets forth in a mood of tragic melancholy, Waugh presents through comedy and satire. But it is largely a negative satire. No positive value in the place of the values satirized are offered. James W. Nichols has pointed out:

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31 Scoop, p. 532.
"Thus far his point of view is a good deal like that of the satirists of the past. But these satirists tempered attacks upon their times by at least implying that there was an alternative set of values, or an alternative course of action, which could rectify the evils they portrayed. Waugh too has an alternative, one which he examines in his early novels. The alternative is a romantic one—a hope that a return to the traditions and values of the past offers a way of ameliorating the beastliness of the modern world. But when this idea is put to the test, it is found wanting."32

In places in his novels Waugh has indicated his belief in the ability of ancient traditions to keep alive a life of culture and graciousness while at the same time describing the inability of these frail cultural forces to withstand the disruptive forces of modern civilization. Everywhere the ancient bastions of order and tradition are crumbling under the onslaught of the fierce winds of modernity. But *Scoop* in places strikes an optimistic note. William manages to triumph over the modern age gladiators who fight metaphorically to the death with 'scoops' as their weapons. At the same time, by returning to Boot Magna after his sensational success as a journalist William is asserting the superiority of the ancient and

traditional over the modern world he has so effortlessly conquered. But in returning to his country retreat William is abdicating the responsibility he owes to the larger world of action. The times are out of joint and it is men like him who are sufficiently armed to set them right.

"In their return to the world of reason two things are implied - a condemnation of the chaotic world and a condemnation of their failure in that world. They who were most fitted by birth and education to be the guiding lights, the stabilizing forces in a dark and restless world have not faced the challenge; they have buried their heads in the sand." 33 William retreats from the wider world of action represented by London to vegetate at Boot Magna. And yet Boot Magna, no less than London and the wider world of action outside is infected with savagery and brutality.

As has already been mentioned William is akin to Paul Pennyfeather and also to Adam Fenwick - Symes. He is an innocent, an ingénue, caught up in the mad world of events he does not understand and over which he has no control. However, unlike his predecessors, William is not entirely will-less. Thrice in the novel he exercises his powers of choice - once when he decides to accept the job of foreign correspondent offered by

33 Patricia Corr, p. 392.
Mr. Salter, again when he refuses to co-operate with Dr. Benito and in the end when he decides to return to Boot Magna instead of staying on at London. Nevertheless if we were to categorize Waugh's heroes as Basil Seal on one side, Guy Crouchback and Charles Rider on the second side and Paul Pennyfeather and Adam Symes on the third then it is definitely to the latter group that William belongs, the group that is designed by Nature to be spectators rather than participants in the human drama and yet somehow find themselves caught up in the dizzy world of human affairs. And when plunged in the sphere of practical concerns he becomes temporarily an absurd hero, a doer, a conqueror. Though in the beginning and again in the end William is a passive spectator of the human drama, in the middle he becomes a participant in this drama and while he is one, he excels himself. He steals a march over all his fellow-journalists and shoots up meteorically to the topmost heights of the journalistic profession.

William is also kin to Tony Last, so different from him in many ways. Both are trying to keep alive the Victorian ethos and the Victorian way of life in their own life styles. As Tony Last ventures into the jungles of Brazil, William plunges into the Fleet Street jungle which abounds in as many predatory beasts as the Brazilian jungles. Both also cling tenaciously to the relics of their adolescence. Both their rooms are decorated...
with memorabilia. They have shut themselves away from the adult world. They are akin in many ways to Harold Pinter's characters who have shut themselves off from the world and have retreated into their rooms. In *The Room* Rose feels safe and secure in her room. So also Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Aston in *The Caretaker*, draw comfort from their rooms. Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame* are confined to their room. These characters, like Tony and William have all retreated from the world of adult affairs. But Tony and William are forced into the outer world of action and adventure against their will — only their ultimate fates are different since the tone and mood of the two books are different. Tony meets with a macabre fate at the hands of Mr. Todd. William is restored to the Victorian comforts of Boot Magna. But though their fates are outwardly different, essentially they are the same. As Tony is trapped in the wildernesses of Brazil so William is relegated to the bucolic fastnesses of Boot Magna. If Tony is condemned to read the works of Dickens everlastingly, no less is William doomed to the futile round of *rural* inactivity. Both escape from the confused sphere of human affairs only to be trapped in the absurd wasteland.

*Put Out More Flags* (1942) is a significant work of Waugh's because in it many of his ubiquitous characters make their last bow and then fade away from the scene.
The story is set in the period of the Phoney war that preceded the Second World War.

In Put Out More Flags Basil Seal is the Absurd hero, as a Don Juan. He is Angela Lyne's lover. In addition he conducts love affairs with Poppet Green, the young girl at Grantley Green and Susie, the beautiful lance-corporal who works in the War Office. Knowing the ephemeral nature of all pleasure he seeks to savour life to the full. This again is the hallmark of all Absurd heroes. In addition Basil is like other Absurd heroes in that he is a conqueror in the sense of being a doer. Unlike Paul Pennyfeather or Adam Symes who are passive victims of fate, Basil is an active person. He tries to dominate his environment. He is in control of his own fate and tries to control the fates of others. He chalks out a scheme for making money out of evacuee children and then proceeds to put it into effect. He gets a job at the War Office and hounds poor Ambrose Silk out of the country as a traitor Fascist. He does not merely drift into the army but joins up purposefully because "There's only one serious occupation for a chap now, that's killing Germans."34

Alexander Boyle writes, "There are those who prey and those who are preyed upon. For both writers (Greene and Waugh) life is a jungle."35

35 Alexander Boyle, p. 76.
Basil is certainly one of those who preys upon others. He exploits Angela Lyne's passion for him, neglecting her and squandering her money on his other girl friends. He puts into effect a cynical scheme to make money by exploiting evacuee children. He sends the unoffending Ambrose Silk into exile in Ireland. As a result of his machinations the innocent publisher Mr. Rampole is incarcerated in prison. In all this he is the hunter preying upon his victims. Those who are strong and ruthless survive in Waugh's world. Those who are weak and submissive perish.

"It is always the innocent and the pure of heart who suffer, even unto the end; no retribution (except occasionally boredom) overtakes the betrayers, who are generally gay, charming and not at all unkind. In two of them, Black Mischief and Put Out More Flags, the hero, Basil Seal, an adventurer in the true picaresque tradition is, in fact an incredibly wicked person who betrays his friends, robs his mother, and is not unduly concerned to find, after he has partaken of a cannibal banquet in the jungle, that the principal dish was his fiancee."

Often, though, the unpleasant characteristics of his characters are covered by a sugar-coating of Waugh's humour. The predatory characteristics of his men and women are made palatable and thus, acceptable. In reality they

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36 Anthony Cronin, p.32.
are almost thoroughly unpleasant and despicable. Moreover there appears to be no moral centre to his book. None of the culpable characters are held up to censure. They seem to thrive and succeed where their weaker, more foolish but better - natured brethren fail ignominiously. Of course Ambrose Silk would not be considered as either innocent or good - natured by Waugh. He is, first of all, a renegade and wishes desperately to sever his connections with Poppet Green and her friends who have communistic tendencies. Waugh is also contemptuous of intellectuals. Writing about Ambrose's flat Waugh remarks "It is true that the bath was served only by a gas - burning apparatus which at the best gave a niggardly trickle of warm water and, at the worst, exploded in a cloud of poisonous vapours, but apparatus of this kind is the hallmark of the higher intellectuals all the world over."\(^\text{37}\)

Waugh disliked all intellectuals, aesthetes, social reformers and communists and these qualities are all typified in Ambrose Silk. But Mr. Rampole the publisher who is sent to prison is an innocuous old man, certainly not deserving of such a fate. Waugh wishes to show us that a certain quality of toughness is required to survive and prosper in the modern world. Though he admires the old-fashioned gentlemanly qualities as typified by Tony Last, he recognizes that such qualities have no value in the

\(^{37}\) Put Out More Flags, p. 646.
conditions that obtain in today's absurd world.

Rose Macaulay has pointed out that *Put Out More Flags* "stands on the border between fantasy and actuality."\(^{38}\) There are elements of the fantastic which bring this book close to absurd literature, also rich in fantasy. Basil's adventures in the War Office and his handling of the fascist hunt savour of fantasy as do the comings and goings of the lunatic with the suitcase full of bombs. Then there is the ludicrous description of the fictitious Huckleberry Squib, Bartholomew Grass and Tom Barebones - Abraham provided by Mr. Bentley.

*Put Out More Flags* like Waugh's other novels portrays the broken family circle. Angela Lyne's father is a widower. Basil Seal's mother is a widow. Peter Pastmaster's mother is a widow who has married again. The disintegration that has taken place in modern society is reflected in microcosm in the broken families of Waugh's characters and these two conditions reinforce each other. But in this book some attempts are made to heal the broken family. The universal disruption arrives at a climax and reaches a point where reconciliation begins. Not only do Angela Lyne and Basil decide to marry, Sonia Trumpington conceives a child and even Peter Pastmaster decides to marry in order to found a family and have a son.

In *Put Out More Flags* childhood and adolescent

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characteristics play an important part. The characters often lapse into the language and behaviour of childhood. Their states of mind, their reaction to events taking place around them have the imprint of adolescence. It is as if they have translated themselves into the world of the school - room. Basil and Barbara, for instance, often lapse into the language of the nursery. Peter Pastmaster appeals to his future wife's maternal instincts. She tells him, "'You looked like a little boy at his private school when his father has come to the sports in the wrong kind of hat. An adorable little boy.'"\(^{39}\)

Alastair's emotions when war is declared is one of boyish enthusiasm. Peter Pastmaster has already enlisted and Alastair "studied Peter, with the rapt attention of a small boy, taking in every detail of his uniform, the riding boots, Sam Browne belt, the enamelled stars of rank..."\(^{40}\) When Alastair hears about the commandos he decides to join them, still infected with the same juvenile enthusiasm. "He was excited, turning a page in his life, as, more than twenty years ago lying on his stomach before the fire, with a bound volume of Chums, he used to turn over to the next instalment of the serial."\(^{41}\) As we have noted again and again in his early novels, Waugh's characters take refuge from adult life in their adolescent pasts.

\(^{39}\) Put Out More Flags, p. 625.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 560.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 659.
Waugh's world is full of unattractive characters - Margot Metroland, Krikor Youkoumian, Brenda Last, John Beaver; but of them all Basil Seal is easily the worst. His callous unscrupulousness would be hard to beat. He steals his mother's emeralds, he takes money from his mistress Angela Lyno and cynically uses her, tossing her aside as a rag doll when any other silly creature takes his fancy - and the sillier the better. He has an invincible sense of superiority over the rest of the world and rejoices in the minor social solecisms of his companions. He watches with glee his girl friend Poppet Green's alarm when the first air-raid siren sounds over London. "This was how he liked to see women behave in moments of alarm. He rejoiced always, in the spectacle of women at a disadvantage; thus he would watch in the asparagus season, a dribble of melted butter on a woman's chin, marring her beauty and making her ridiculous, while she would still talk and smile and turn her head, not knowing how she appeared to him."\(^242\) Angela Lyno is his most long-suffering victim. She loves him and passively allows him to exploit her. Of course she betrays her husband Cedric Lyno and in that she is one with Margot Metroland and Brenda Last. But as far as Basil is concerned he is her Achilles' heel. Even though he betrays her with other women again and again, she cannot sever her connection with him.

\(^{242}\) Ibid., p. 552.
In the early novels of Waugh the impression of life as an absurd adventure is very strongly present. As has been pointed out, the background, themes and characters exhibit the characteristics of absurd literature. Life is a meaningless circus of futile and self-defeating activity as expressed in the image of the big wheel at Luna Park in Decline and Fall. No actions of significance invest this wilderness with meaning.