Chapter 5

The Later Novels.
It would be profitable to pause here and take stock of the development of Evelyn Waugh's thoughts so far. He begins his writing career with Rossetti's biography. He then goes on to *Decline and Fall* and the five other early novels in all of which he regards life as a well-nigh meaningless absurdity and Death as an occurrence that puts a welcome end to this absurdity. In his next novel *Brideshead Revisited* he posits an alternative to the absurd ethos—that is, the Roman Catholic, religious, one of giving a metaphysical significance to life. However, for reasons that have already been stated, the religious angle fails to gain credence. It fails to dispel the overall impression of life as a wilderness of the spirit.

In this chapter I propose to deal with the last five of Waugh's fictional works excluding the Crouchback Trilogy. Two of the five of these novels were written after the Trilogy was begun—*Love Among the Ruins* was written after *Men-At-Arms* was published and *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* was written after *Officers and Gentlemen*. However, since it is obviously desirable to treat the Trilogy as a homogeneous whole, it will be convenient in this chapter to consider *Love Among the Ruins* and *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* together with *Scott-King's Modern Europe*, *The Loved One* and *Helena* all of which were written before the Trilogy. After the attempt to give life significance through the Roman Catholic faith
Waugh returns to viewing life as an absurd misadventure in Scott-King's *Modern Europe*. This viewpoint continues into *The Loved One*, but with *Helena* there comes a slight change— for *Helena* relates a Christian legend—the finding of the True Cross by Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. Next we go to *Love Among the Ruins* which is steeped in the absurd atmosphere. We end with *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, a "Portrait of the Artist in Middle Age" which relates the story of one of Waugh's own sea voyages, though the incidents are related as befalling Gilbert Pinfold, a middle-aged writer.

*Scott-King's Modern Europe* (1946) is one of Waugh's lesser known though not less effective satires. Briefly, it seeks to satirize the modern totalitarian state.

Scott-King's misadventures are numerous. He becomes drunk at a Vin d'honneur organized by the municipality. Then he is deluded by his hosts into paying homage to the National Memorial which commemorates the massacre of fifty leaders of the present dominant party by those who were in power ten years ago. Being tricked into this political action is much deplored by the other members of the Bollorius Association. Finally Scott-King is abandoned by Dr. Fe, the gentleman who represents the hosts and who over-night falls from power and no longer is in charge of the
The book contains many comic passages which are often directed at people who do not have a perfect grasp of English. Such are Miss Sveningen and Engineer Garcia. Some part of the conversation between Scott-King and Engineer Garcia goes like this:

"Do you know the Duke of Westminster?"

'No.'

'I saw him once at Biarritz. A fine man. A man of great propriety.'

'No.'

'My mother had a propriety but it is lost.'

Scott-King's character is interesting. He belongs to the same genre as William Boot of Scoop. They are both quiet, self-contained men who are content to muddle along inconspicuously in the little niches they have created for themselves in the world. They are both caught up by a huge and implacable machinery—a giant newspaper complex in William's case, a government organized ceremony in Scott-King's—and thenceforth lose all control over their actions as they are hurried hither and thither in meaningless activity by the vast and impersonal power.

In Scott-King bureaucratic rules and regulations are also satirized. For instance at London Airport a

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conductress tells Scot-King and Whitemaid (Scott-King's colleague at the Bellorius celebrations) to get ready their "embarkation papers, medical cards, customs clearance slips, currency control vouchers, passports, tickets, identity dockets, travel orders, emigration certificates, baggage checks and security sheets." Indeed by the end of the book Scott-King is so disgusted by the indignities he has suffered at the hands of the modern totalitarian state that he tells his headmaster,

"If you approve, headmaster, I will stay as I am here as long as any boy wants to read the classics. I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world.'

'It's a short-sighted view, Scott-King.'

'There, headmaster, with all respect, I differ from you profoundly. I think it the most long-sighted view it is possible to take.'

Waugh, through Scott-King, satirizes the modern world. He is confirmed in his rejection of it and the only possible alternative to it seems to be a return to the world of ancient traditions and cultures. Modern lines of study cannot equip a boy for any meaningful activity. Scott-King's Modern Europe is a romantic

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2 Ibid., p. 206.
3 Ibid., p. 250.
novel and the hero is a romantic. He prefers to inhabit a world of the past. The modern totalitarian state creates in him feelings of disgust and rejection. As Haugh's earlier heroes and heroines regressed into their childhood and adolescence because they could not face up to the demands of the adult world, so Scott - King would escape into past ages in order to escape from the disagreeable aspects of modern civilization. He cannot respond to the pressures exerted by contemporary society. He must retreat into a life of the mind.

As in all absurd literature death and violence are accepted as facts of life with casual insouciance. The person who escorts Scott - King and Whitemaid from the Airport to the Ministry tells them about recent terrorist raids.

"'Here,' he said, 'the anarchists shot General Cardenas. Here Syndico - radicals shot the auxiliary bishop. Here the agrarian league buried alive ten Teaching Brothers. Here the bimentallists committed unspeakable atrocities on the wife of Senator Mendoza.'" 4

A Swiss professor and a Chinese, both participants in the Bellorius celebrations go for a drive in the hills and are captured and perhaps killed by partisan terrorists. The presence of violence in the book is incipient and

4 Ibid., p. 209.
ubiquitous. This, and the meaningless activity in which Scott-King is involved, places this book firmly in the absurd genre.

The Loved One is one of Waugh's more virulent satires in which the peculiarities of the American way of life, the inanities of the resident British community in Hollywood and the fatuities of one of the super-cemeteries of Southern California are alike attacked. Other works have been written by equally distinguished authors on the mortuary business. They are Cedric Belfrage's Abide With Me, Aldoux Huxley's After Many a Summer Dies the Swan and Ape and Essence and Eric Linklater's Juan in America. Mr. Cyril Connolly's introduction of Waugh's novel to readers of Horizon is equally applicable to the central satire of all these novels.

"... Since Southern California is one of the most American places, with a society some ten years ahead of the rest of the country in a materialist sense, its burial customs are extremely important, for they reveal in all their empty enormity the American conception of death, the elaborate effort made by those who most worship comfort, beauty and life to euphemize that stark object which is of all the most ill-favoured and unreassuring. In its attitude to death and to death's stand-in, Mr. Waugh exposes a materialist
society at its weakest spot, as would Swift or Donne were they alive today.  

The title, The Loved One, has two meanings. It can mean the beloved as well as the corpse which is to be disposed of. It is significant that in Aimee Thanatogonos and through her in the satire both Love and Death are identified. The complexities and perplexities of Aimee's love affairs gradually resolve themselves into the death wish and Aimee commits suicide thereby translating herself from a real - life Loved One to a dead Loved One. That is ironical is that she is finally consigned to the flames in the pets' cemetery that she and Mr. Joyboy had looked upon with such contempt. Yet this very joke is a macabre and gruesome one for inevitably it has associations with the gas ovens in which millions of Jews had been killed barely four years before this novel was written, as D. S. Savage has pointed out.

In Whispering Glades the Loved One's remains are disposed of by "inhumement, entombment, inurnment, or inmurement" though many people just lately prefer "in - sarcophagusment." In an article published in Tablet on the 18th October 1947 and in Life Magazine

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6 D. S. Savage, p. 103.
8 Ibid., p. 37.
of Forest Lawn Memorial Park and the funerary rites practised there. Here there are no crosses to remind the visitor of Christ's suffering but only evergreen shrubs dotted about 300 acres of parkland and watered by 80 miles of pipes. The estate is divided into various zones that have been given appropriate names - Eventide, Babyland, Graceland, Inspiration Slope, Slumberland, Sweet Memories, Vesperland, Dawn of Tomorrow. Marble statuary, mostly of a secular nature are interspersed among the zones. There are three non-sectarian churches, all moulded on English churches. There are elaborately decorated Slumber rooms where the dead, duly beautified, are displayed. There is the Memorial Court of Honour where fame and not money can purchase a niche in the halls of honour. Waugh's Whispering Glades is closely modelled on Forest Lawn. The corpses are elaborately painted in order to look as life-like as possible.

"Waugh lamented the fact that the traditional concepts of the soul standing naked at the judgment seat, of the mystery and enormity of death, the body turning to corruption, eaten by worms, returning to the earth, were minimized and replaced by an infantile and imbecile idea of the permanence and beauty of life. He lamented the
fact that Forest Lawn deprived death of its dignity.  

Death with a painted and smirking mask has been turned into an absurdity, a travesty of what it should really be like. It has become an absurd parody of the real thing and denies it all dignity. A civilization which makes a travesty of death is a ludicrous civilization. What strikes one is that the ways in which the horror of death are sought to be minimized are ridiculous. There is no belief here of the soul preparing itself to meet with its creator. Instead the body is elaborately painted before attaining Instant Beatitude. Death is cheapened, vulgarized and commercialized like religion is by Mrs. Ape in Vile Bodies. Pain and suffering as preludes to Death are ignored and glossed over and only the overly painted facade is presented as the ultimate reality. Death is treated secularly instead of religiously. Thus Whispering Glades seeks to soothe rather than to terrify man by reminders of his mortality. The watered shrubs and lawns, the carefully reconstructed churches, the piped music, the flowers sprayed with scent are all part of an elaborate deception that seeks to deny rather than emphasize the dignity of man's death. Behind prettified euphemisms the fact of the corruption of the body turning to dust is concealed.

This is the kind of place where Dennis goes to purchase a last resting-place for his departed friend. Here he meets Aimée Thanatogenos and falls in love with her. Formerly, American womanhood had struck Dennis as uniformly antiseptic and unappealing. But Aimée is a decadent and this quality goes straight to Dennis' heart. He woos her with poems lifted from the popular anthologies. Mr. Joyboy also woos her with the implements of his trade, where other girls "had to work on faces that were stern or resigned or plumb vacant; there was always a nice bright smile for Aimée." Conversely, when his suit is not prospering, Mr. Joyboy sends Aimée corpses with expressions of "bottomless woe." With a piece of cardboard inserted over the gums of the corpses Mr. Joyboy is able to achieve the desired effect. Torn between the claims of her two suitors, Aimée commits suicide in Mr. Joyboy's room at Whispering Glades. Horrified at the thought of the impending scandal Mr. Joyboy appeals to Dennis for help and Dennis arranges to dispose of Aimée's remains in the incinerator at the Happier Hunting Ground. As long as the Happier Hunting Ground is an existence, according to the conventions of the pets' cemetery, a postcard will go to Mr. Joyboy on every anniversary of Aimée's death:

10 *The Loved One*, p. 79.
11 Ibid., p. 100.
"Your Aimee- is wagging her tail in heaven tonight, thinking of you."  

In the end, with nothing to hold him in America, Dennis decides to return to England.

As has been noted by most critics, the central jest of *The Loved One* is a cruel one. Beginning with the ghastly suicide of the aged and unsuccessful Sir Francis—"... the sack of body suspended and the face above it with eyes red and horribly starting from their sockets, the cheeks mottled in indigo like the marbled end papers of a ledger and the tongue swollen and protruding like an end of black sausage."  

and ending with the pathetic death of the perplexed young girl, the book revels in the kind of macabre humour that reaches its apotheosis in the cannibal feast of Basil Seal in *Black Mischief*.  

Moreover, instances of this amused disregard for death and suffering abound in the other satires. Prendy's head is sawn off by a mad carpenter in *Decline and Fall*. In the same novel when Lord Tangent is injured by the starter's pistol

"... First blood to me!" said Mr. Prendergast gleefully."

A little later

"... Tangent's foot has swollen up and turned black,"

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12 Ibid., p. 127.  
13 Ibid., p. 39.  
15 *Decline and Fall*, p. 48.
said Beste ~ Chetwynde with relish.  

Simon Balcairn is dispatched with his head in a gas oven in *Vile Bodies*, and Agatha Runcible is harrowed to death by her frivolous friends. In *Black Mischief*, Mrs. Youlcoumian is treated outrageously by her husband presumably to tickle the reader's sense of humour. Violence lurks sinisterly under the urbane surface of Waugh's novels. Indeed Waugh has a predatory wit that is often on the side of the exploiters and against the victims. The heroes are often mild - mannered, good - natured young men like Paul Pennyfeather or Adam Symes and they stand at the receiving end. We smile, for instance, at the dexterity with which the unscrupulous Margot Beste - Chetwynd shifts the guilt of her nefarious enterprises on to the shoulders of the unsuspecting Paul (*Decline and Fall*). We laugh at the canny dexterity with which the wily Mr. Benfleet forces Adam to sign a contract in *Vile Bodies*. Again in *Decline and Fall* the unjust rustication of Paul from Oxford is given a humourous treatment. Basil Seal's scornful laughter rings out with Waugh's against his victims. Lady Metroland, Solomon Philbrick, Captain Grimes, prey delightedly on the innocence of their dupes.

"Virtuous innocence is his laughing - stock, personified by any of Seal's pathetic victims, or Paul Pennyfeather, or Adam Symes or old Prendergast, or Cedric Lyne, or *Tony Last* whose only fault was that he

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was a dull husband who did not know the ropes, and lived in an innocent (but to Waugh dangerous) dream of Gothic worlds with dappled unicorns on the lawn.\(^17\) Indeed despair, unhappiness, injustice, death, suicide, all seem to attract Waugh's mordant wit. It is as if Waugh is viewing the grown-up world of suffering and death with the gleeful irreverence of the schoolboy. Indeed this attitude of wilful innocence adds another dimension to Waugh's absurdist stance.

Macabre humour abounds in The Loved One. Mr. Joyboy, for instance, declares that he loves little children's corpses. "There is something in the innocent appeal of a child that brings out a little more than the best in me.\(^18\)

What Waugh finds so objectionable about the mortuary business of Southern California is the totally false view of life that it presents. It glosses over the fact of the ugliness of death, it seeks to ameliorate the sorrow of parting, and thereby distorts one of the most profound of human experiences. Indeed, as A.A. De Vitis has pointed out, The Loved One is one of Waugh's most Catholic novels because in it he has directed his indignation at those who seek to deny the Catholic eschatology, the specifically Christian concepts of Death, Heaven and Hell. In his article in Tablet referred to above Waugh deplores the

\(^{17}\) Sean O'Faolain, The Vanishing Hero (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956), p. 57.

\(^{18}\) The Loved One, p. 58.
elimination of the Christian conception of Hell from the prospectus of the cemetery. He feels that the reminder of man's mortality (which is denied by the elaborate cosmetic rituals of the mortuary) is necessary for a realization of death's dignity, its overwhelming, undeniable irrevocableness. By elaborately painting and embalming the earthly body, they seem to be trying to deny the destructiveness of Death; by reconstructing the life-like features of the body they seem to be trying to nullify the awful power of Death; by emphasizing the happiness of those who have "passed on," they seem to be disclaiming the mystery of the after-life.

Edmund Wilson disagrees with Waugh's view of the American way of treating death, insisting that the Roman Catholic view on which Waugh grounds his satire is not a tenable one.

"To the non-religious reader, however, the patrons and proprietors of Whispering Glades seem more sensible than the priest-guided Evelyn Waugh. What the former are trying to do is, after all, to gloss over physical death with smooth lawns and soothing rites; but, for the Catholic, the fact of death is not to be feared at all; he is to be solaced with the fantasy of another world in which everyone who has died in the flesh is somehow supposed to be still alive and in which it is supposed to be possible to help souls advance themselves by buying

\[19\] Ibid., p. 44.
Edmund Wilson may sneer at Waugh for his religious beliefs but it is true that religion has assumed a peculiar form in Southern California. Churches of various denominations have been replaced by the non-sectarian church. People do not wish to commit themselves to any particular religious belief and yet wish to partake of the comforts of religion; so they have devised the absurdity of the non-sectarian church. We may remember how, in his earlier novels, Waugh at various times castigated the religious practitioners of all denominations in turn. His satirical viewpoint logically leads his satire to fasten upon the non-sectarian denomination—as if one can partake of Grace without committing oneself to a definite religious viewpoint. Waugh the devout Roman Catholic certainly finds this attitude objectionable.

It is not merely the insulation from the inevitabilities of death that Waugh is satirizing. The satire turns on the absurd attempt of the weak ones to pluck whatever comfort they can from a self-styled eschatology. The satire parodies the serious concepts of death and resurrection. If Christian theology—or St. Paul—talks of a body rising from corruption into incorruption after the evolution of the soul through faith, here is a feigned resurrection which betrays the dead souls under mummified bodies. Of course the parody turns the possibly serious

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theological criticism into an absurd fun.

Dennis, the protagonist, decides to become a non-sectarian clergyman. He does not wish to embrace a particular religious vocation. In America this is the way of becoming a successful pastor and Dennis hopes to improve his position. The absurdity of non-sectarian churches and non-sectarian pastors is highlighted by Waugh. In this Alice in Wonderland world anything is possible. Thus Mrs. Theodora Heinkel's dog is disposed of with all the solemnity and dignity of a human corpse whereas poor Aimee's corpse is hurriedly consigned to the pets' cemetery's crematorium.

It is fairly clear that for Waugh the Americans are barbarians, as barbaric as the Hoopers and Trimmers who have severed their connections with their traditions and espoused the causes of the modern age.

"All day the heat had been barely supportable but at evening a breeze arose in the west, blowing from the heat of the setting sun and from the ocean, which lay unseen, unheard behind the scrubby foothills. It shook the rusty fingers of palm-leaf and swelled the dry sounds of summer, the frog-voices, the grating cicadas, and the ever-present pulse of music from the neighbouring native huts.

In that kindly light the stained and blistered paint of the bungalow and the plot of weeds between the veranda and the dry water-hole lost their extreme
shabbiness, and the two Englishmen, each in his rocking-chair, each with his whiskey and soda and his outdated magazine, the counterparts of numberless fellow-countrymen exiled in the barbarous regions of the world shared in the brief illusory rehabilitation. 21 A few pages later we realize that Waugh is writing about Los Angeles. The super-materialist civilization of Southern California is, to him, an outlawed one. Waugh always regards the modern world and modern customs with loathing. He wishes always to return to the older world of civilized graces, of the manor house, the village church and the feudal overlord.

Most of Waugh's books deal with the incomplete men and women who are a product of the modern world. It is significant, as noted before, that a great number of Waugh's heroes and heroines have only one parent. This incomplete family is the cause of the degeneration in the moral fibre of Waugh's characters because the family is the formative and stabilizing factor in a child's life. 22 Mr. Joyboy has only one parent, his mother. Aimée is an orphan. Moreover, she tells us that her mother had been an alcoholic. Aimee is incomplete in a peculiarly American way. Though a college graduate she is not familiar with any of the popular classical poems with which Dennis woos her.

21 The Loved One, p. 7.
22 Christopher Hollis, p. 37.
She accepts eagerly and naively, even reverently, the high-pressure salesmanship of Dr. Kenworthy. She gets an artistic satisfaction out of her work of transforming cadavers. In the absurd world even the work of painting corpses is considered to be high art.

"But you have a very poetic occupation here."

Dennis spoke lightly, teasing, but she answered with great gravity. 'Yes, I know. I know I have really.

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Dennis is from the Old World. He seeks the romantic, the inscrutable, the intangible. The mass-produced sameness of American womanhood does not appeal to him. What does strike him about Aimee is a quality that sets her apart from the others - "... sole Eve in a bustling hygienic Eden, this girl was a decadent." She is a citizen of an older, more classical cosmos transmogrified to modern America. Her love for Dennis is part of her nostalgia for "Attic voices" and the "Boeotian waterfront."

Whispering Glades is the symbol of America and Dr. Kenworthy's dream the epitome of the American dream.

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23 The Loved One, p. 71.
24 Ibid., p. 46.
25 Joan Griffiths, p. 166.
26 Ibid; p. 166.
The Edenic imagery employed to describe the cemetery is the echo of other more extravagant fancies about the nature of America itself that its discoverers had. Columbus called it "the terrestrial paradise" and it was compared to the prelapsarian world of perfect happiness before sin was known. At the entrance to Whispering Glades is a huge wall of sculptured marble on which is inscribed "Behold I dreamed a dream and I saw a New Earth sacred to HAPPINESS." But Dennis' experiences parody the American dream. He works in a pets' cemetery which has been faithfully modelled on Whispering Glades. Dr. Kenworthy, too, in his efforts bodily to transplant culture from Europe only succeeds in caricaturing it. His dreams are translated into reality by his High Priest Mr. Joyboy and his handmaiden Aimée. Aimée herself is the contemplator of Art and Death. But in the end she is incinerated in the pets' cemetery. And on every anniversary of her death a card will go to Joyboy stating that his little Aimée is wagging her tail in heaven, thinking of him!

Incidental to the central satire of Californian burial customs is the satire of the English community in Hollywood and the American way of life in general. The English expatriates make strenuous efforts to maintain British standards. About a fellow countryman, Sir Ambrose

27 *The Loved One*, p. 34.
Abercrombie says, "Clever chap but he went completely native - wore ready-made shoes, and a belt instead of braces, went about without a tie, etc at drug stores." Sir Ambrose himself wears, on sunny days, an Eton Rambler tie, and an I Zingari ribbon in his boater hat. In inclement weather he dons a deerstalker cap and an Inverness cape. By some mysterious process of selection the respectable occupations have been decided by the expatriate and these all centre around Hollywood. It is all right for Sir Francis Hinsley to be a script-writer and for Sir Ambrose Abercrombie to play "acrobatic heroic historic" roles in the movies. But the English community speak in disapproving undertones when Dennis embraces the avocation of pets' mortician and are downright scandalized when he decides to become a non-sectarian clergyman.

Though brief, the satire on the American way of life is equally trenchant. Waugh regards caustically the American predilection for standardization and mass production. Just as Eric Linklater's hero Juan observes that American womanhood is uniformly bland so also Dennis muses on their mind-wearying sameness. Equally sleek is Huxley's glamourous heroine Virginia Maunciple.

Then there is the ubiquitous cult of Mom with Joyboy's Mom presiding as the personifying deity of the species.

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28 Ibid., p. 13.
29 Ibid., p. 9.
She is typically overbearing and Joyboy is typically obsequious. Indeed, serious anthropological studies have been made of American momism by such scholars as Geoffrey Gorer and Philip Wylie.

Waugh skilfully parodies American speech:

"'The poeticest place in the whole darn park,'" says the coxswain to Dennis while Joyboy's speech to Aimee takes the peculiar form of baby-language which American lovers address to each other:

"'Now, honey-baby, I'm going to be firm with you. Just: you do what poppa says this minute or Poppa will be real mad at you.'"31

Many small features of the American way of life are portrayed. "Mr. Heinkel7 was formally dressed for the evening in the high fashion of the place - Donegal tweeds, sandals, a grass-green silk shirt, open at the neck with an embroidered monogram covering half his torso."32 Then there are the two gloomy young men and a bright young secretary who function as the Guru Brahmin, and dispense comfort to those who are perplexed or distressed.

The novel lacks a moral centre. This, as we have seen already, is true of all Waugh's satires. Waugh postulates no alternatives that are viable to the values he is criticizing - the American way of life and death.

30 Ibid., pp. 66-67,
31 Ibid., p. 113,
32 Ibid., p. 18.
He is also holding up Dennis' conduct of his love affair and his mode of leaving America, as well as Aimee's suicide, to a critical view. This lack of a moral centre is peculiar to the absurd work of art. The absurd artist has purely a negative way of looking at life and has no constructive values to offer as alternatives to the ones he is satirizing.

There is a strong vein of fantasy running through The Loved One. Aimee's adventures and her ultimate fate have a touch of absurd fantasy about them, particularly her gruesome end in the cemetery of the Happier Hunting Ground.

Helena (1950) like Brideshead Revisited is a Catholic novel. It deals with the discovery of the cross by Helena in the fourth century. Little is positively known about Helena but Waugh creates a very convincing piece of ancient history by piecing together the little that is certainly known with much that is conjecture and invention.

Helena's birthplace is given by Waugh as Colchester though some scholars have given it as York and others still as Drepanum in Turkey. Waugh ascribes her fatherhood to King Coel, Paramount Chief of the Trinovantes - the Old King Cole of the popular nursery rhyme. From the beginning Helena is conscious of a restless desire to go on a quest. In the opening pages of the story, her
imagination captivated by the legends of the heroes of Troy and Greece, she dreams of one day finding Troy. Instead, a visiting member of the Roman Imperial family, Constantius, sees her, falls in love with her and marries her. He carries her off to his hometown Nish. On the way to Nish Helena sees the wall enclosing the Roman Empire for the first time. Constantius waxes almost lyrical when he regards it. "Think of it, mile upon mile, from snow to desert, a single great girdle round the civilized world; inside, peace, decency, the law, the altars of the Gods, industry, the arts, order; outside, wild beasts and savages, forest and swamp, bloody mumbo - jumbo, men like wolf - packs; and along the wall the armed might of the Empire, sleepless, holding the line. Doesn't it make you see what the City means?" He says. This is one of Waugh's perennial themes. Behind the qualities of harmony, virtue, decency, lurk the forces of barbarism and anarchy, waiting to force their way in and destroy the civilized values of tradition and culture. Thus Brideshead was a bulwark of culture threatened by the philistines. Helena naively wonders why the barbarians too cannot have a share in the City - the City like that of Troy which assumes almost a mythic character in her imagination. But the more practical Constantius knows that the barbarians can never enter the City as

friends, that there can never be a truce between the Romans and the barbarians and that when the barbarians do reach Rome it will be as conquerors and the life of culture that has been so carefully built up over the centuries will be laid waste.

Many of Helena's cherished illusions are destroyed by her experiences in the wider world of her married life. The betrayal of Totiucus by her husband and Aurelian wounds her deeply. The myth of the chivalric soldier which had occupied her imagination since childhood is exploded. She had created a hero out of her old nurse's father who was a soldier. He had been brave and generous and chivalric, the epitome of the man of action.

"Something had died in her heart that had lived there from her earliest memories. Her nurse's father, that redoubtable sergeant, was dead, had died in vain, and his grave had been dishonoured. This was Chlorus's victory, this his mystery; for this his journey, his furtive interviews, his fox-like doubling on his tracks, his lies and silences; this butchery of a betrayed army, this traffic with the betrayer; this and herself were his joint prizes."34 There is massive irony here, for later Constantius will betray her too, abandon her, divorce her and marry again for the sake of gaining the Empire.

34 Ibid., pp. 47 - 48.
A little later Helena learns of the death of Longinus, the other of the twin heroes of her youth. With the death of this remote philosopher whose books she had never read, she leaves behind the country of her childhood with its myths and illusions. She learns slowly and at first hand the harsh ways of the world of reality.

Waugh skilfully paints a picture of Imperial Rome. He contrasts the profligacy of the Emperor Carus’s son Carinus with the daring victories won by the Roman generals. While the Roman eagles march towards Persia Carinus stages a battle between ostriches and alligators. While the Roman soldiers bleed to death Carinus makes merry with pseudo-skirmishes.

When Constantine, Helena’s son becomes Emperor he grants the Christians the freedom to pursue their religion unmolested. Even his new wife Fausta is a Christian. One suspects that this is a shrewd political move for Christianity has by now become a force to be reckoned with and in order to reign with safety and peace Constantine must compromise. Yet he hesitates to take the final step himself and get baptized. Helena herself, though, gets baptized. The new religion satisfies her life-long thirst for a precise religion that is far removed from the mystery cults and other religious sects like those of the Gnostics and others.
Helena, shrewd as she is, realizes that Constantine has power but does not have the Grace that should accompany it. In a moment of prophetic insight she declares:

"'Sometimes . . . I have a terrible dream of the future. Not now, but presently, people may forget their loyalty to their kings and emperors and take power for themselves. Instead of letting one victim bear this frightful curse they will take it all on themselves, each one of them. Think of the misery of a whole world possessed of Power without Grace.'"  

Her words echo across the centuries to our own age which has embraced the democratic form of government and has voted not one but many power-crazed politicians to high offices where they rule without Grace. Perhaps they do not enjoy the absolute authority of a Roman Emperor. Nevertheless the limited Power that they wield does not have the Grace that mitigates it and Grace alone can invest Power with compassion and understanding. All Waugh's portraits of modern politicians, Metroland, Outrage, Rex Mottram, project a sense of incompetence and futility. We see Helena's prophecy maturing in our own age. All our politicians are, in their own limited spheres of Power, devoid of Grace.

In Helena's mind a clear-cut difference is marked out between Christianity and the other religions which preceded it (as Christopher Hollis has pointed out).

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36Christopher Hollis, p. 32.
and which were but a preparation that readied people's minds to receive the new religion. Helena, with her sharp mind wants facts, not mysteries. Her husband Constantius had been a follower of the cult of Mithras. She questioned him relentlessly about his beliefs and when she received vague answers she remained unsatisfied. Later on Helena cross-examines the Gnostic Marcias in the same way and scornfully rejects his quibbling statements. It is only when she questions Lactantius about the Christian religion that she gets concrete answers that satisfy her curiosity. And later she adopts Christianity as her religion.

There is in Helena the desire to fulfil two quests. The first is the quest to find the City. She identifies the City first with Troy and then with Rome. But when she actually arrives in Rome she is disappointed. Rome is very different from the City of her dreams and not at all beautiful. Her second quest is for the Holy Cross and in this she is successful. This quest is indeed man's eternal quest to discover religious truths for himself as A.A. De Vitis has remarked. So the finding of the Cross in a way resolves the religious theme of the book and justifies Helena's faith in her new religion. Here there is no mythic lore but literal truth. Christ was a man who had come to redeem mankind and had actually died on the cross. Beside these concrete facts

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^A.A. De Vitis, p. 60.
the vague mysteries of the older religions fade away into insignificance. Helena’s profound quest for true faith is only satisfied by tangible evidence.

Helena’s portrait is sharply and concretely drawn. She has from childhood displayed an intellectual curiosity which never deserts her throughout life. Every myth, every cult draws from her the same sharp responses - How do you know? Where did this happen? Her character changes to this extent that in girlhood she would often lose herself in daydreams of her own masterly horsemanship. In maturity her mind becomes more matter-of-fact and the childhood fantasies slowly fade away. Her rather sudden and thinly described conversion to Christianity is not surprising, for hers is the kind of mind that is invincibly curious and at the same time yearns for literal truth.

Another convincingly drawn portrait is that of Constantine. Though he seems weak and vicious he is not really so according to the standards of Rome at the height of its glory. For he is practical enough to know that in order to preserve his power he must eliminate his enemies - even if they happen to be his brother-in-law or nephew or even his own son, and even if in the process of killing his enemies some innocent men get killed. He knows how ephemeral his power is and how soon snatched away. He is a pragmatist. Indeed when he realizes that his wife Fausta has become an evil influence
in his life he quite casually has her murdered. Unlike in the Christian way of life, in Constantine's ethics human life has no sanctity. The expedient thing is the right thing and if one or two lives have to be sacrificed for expedience, no one is surprised or horrified. It is only with the spread of Christianity that human life achieves sanctity.

It is interesting to reflect that the Roman Emperors are as barbaric in their own way as the Picts and Goths whom the Romans termed barbarians. No doubt the Roman had attained to a high degree of sophistication but in their cruelty and callous disregard of human life they were no better than the Goths. In the heart of the Roman Empire, in the city of Rome which is the seat of supreme power there is this decay, this putrefaction. The rind of the apple may be sound but the core is rotten.

Apart from giving us a portrait both of human beings and of an era, the book is also a religious "apologetic" as A.A. De Vitis has termed it. The superiority of the factual Christian religion over the vague mythological cults is exposed through Helena. The importance of baptism among the rites of the Church is dwelt upon. The Christians believe that baptism washes away all sins. Through Helena's discovery of the cross the importance of relics in the body of beliefs in the Christian Church is

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38 Ibid., p. 65.
emphasized. The cross itself and the nails are reverently disposed of by Helena in places where they will be venerated.

Yet the book is not devoid of the sense of the meaninglessness of existence. The great Roman generals and Caesars are capriciously cruel. This is seen in whatever details are afforded of the life of Constantine the Great. The slightest suspicion of disloyalty is enough to send the offender to a violent and untimely death. Sometimes the offence may be merely kinship to the Imperial family for such kinship breeds suspicion of Imperial ambitions. Life and death are mere playthings in the hands of the Emperor. Under such circumstances Death, being arbitrary, invests life with a grotesque meaninglessness.

The nature of Waugh's material in Helena also restricts the imaginative bent of his mind and hence the thought content of the novel. Waugh is here dealing with intractable historical material which he cannot bend to his will. Hence the sense of the meaninglessness of life is under restraint. But whenever his imagination gets full play the overwhelming sense of the absurdity of life and death is expressed in full force.

*Love Among the Ruins* (1953) is a novelette set against the background of a futuristic society like Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. 
In this tale the absurd bent bursts into prominence. Clara's beard posits the kind of fantasy that is to be found in Ionesco's *mêlée* where a corpse starts growing or the same author's *Rhinoceros* where human beings turn into rhinoceroses. The Department of Euthanasia is also straight out of the absurd ethos. When life becomes meaningless death gains prominence as a welcome alternative and it is logical for people to queue up in order to be put away. When there is some exciting news the queue dwindles but as soon as the excitement dies down the people are back again waiting to be put to death.

We have seen that most of Waugh's characters lack one parent. Miles lacks both parents and is therefore all the more an incomplete, stunted human personality. He gains a kind of ecstasy from the act of destruction and he destroys not only buildings but human beings as well for many men perish in the two fires he causes. When he feels ill at ease he gains comfort from a small hard object in his pocket. It is his lighter and when he presses the catch it bursts into flame —"gemlike, hymeneal, auspicious." Human life has no sanctity for him and he regards his work in the Department of Euthanasia without aversion. In the absurd sphere Death holds no horror for the submen who inhabit it. It is the logical outcome of a life lived without significance.

The older, more gracious way of life symbolized by Mountjoy does, however, have significance and Miles responds to it positively. Clara has a few old possessions and Miles is captivated by the old paintings, the looking-glass framed in porcelain flowers, the gilt irregular clock and the old-fashioned tea-cups. When Clara changes her face and he turns away from her, he expresses his frustration by burning down Mountjoy, the symbol of the happiest time of his life and of the old-fashioned, cultured way of living.

Clara is a negative character. Though in the beginning she forms a relationship with Miles she later repudiates that relationship in favour of her dancing—that is to say she destroys her baby, the fruit of that relationship, and thereby antagonizes Miles. She cannot, for long, sustain human ties. A sterile art form is more important to her than her baby or her lover. She is, in a muted form, of the same lineage as Margot Beste-Chetwynde. Hers is an equally predatory nature, destructive, sterile and amoral.

*The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) is an autobiographical piece describing one of the author's ocean voyages during which he suffered from hallucinations. It is a very interesting book for it reveals the dark side of the human psyche. We are given a glimpse of the forces that take over the mind when under the influence
of drugs and drinks. The hallucinations invest the book with the kind of atmosphere that is to be found in absurd literature. Again and again Pinfold hears voices that are mostly hostile and aggressive. The subconscious comes into its own and actually achieves an objective existence. As in a play like Ionesco's *Amédee* the corpse represents the guilt complexes and fears of Madeleine and *Amédee* or the stranglehold that Death has over life, so also in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* the hallucinations externalize the guilt complexes of the protagonist.

In these five novels we find Waugh persisting in the absurd genre. His comedy veers, in *Helena*, to the legendary and the religious but still touches upon the absurd. Always his imagination, when given free play views life through a deeply pessimistic haze. Beneath the light-hearted tone there is a sombre sense of life's futility, its deep, irrevocable purposelessness. Even when steeped in religious pietism his works betray an obsession with negative factors. Whether set in hoary antiquity or in the twentieth century, whether dealing with the jungles of Brazil or the thoroughfares of Mayfair, the novels betray always his vision of life as governed by implacably absurd forces.