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EVELYN WAUGH, SATIRIST

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Despite the division in critical opinion as to whether Waugh was essentially a comic writer or a satiric writer, the early works of Waugh may be analyzed to see if they contain the elements of satiric writing and are imbued with the satirist's point of view. The satirist, for the purpose of this paper, can be described in the following manner: he is a stern moralist castigating the vices of his time or place; his topics can vary, but are usually concrete, frequently topical, often personal, he may conceal his standards behind a mask of detachment, but the comic strain generally mixes contempt with amusement.

The first six novels comprise a body of work of similar style and outlook. They deal with members of the Mayfair set in England, the "Bright Young People" of the late twenties and early thirties up through the "phony" war start of World War II. It has been said that Waugh's writings are part of a disguised autobiography. As such his background and experiences provide him with the underlying values which generate his satiric outlook.

Waugh's background gives evidence of a stable tradition and culture. His father was a writer and publisher; his older brother was also a writer. Although Waugh went to an inferior public school and a not very distinguished college at Oxford, his acceptance by the English upper

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classes at Oxford provides him with an ambiguous attached-detached attitude towards their foibles. In 1930, Waugh was converted to the Roman Catholic Church as an act of adherence to an older tradition. Many of Waugh's experiences also provide background material for his satires: college life, schoolmastering, newspaper reporting, and travel to the hinterlands.

The plots are not elaborate although they are predicated on a logically compelled chaos. Despite their wild and outrageous incidents, they have the static quality of a world unaware of its headlong thrust towards nothingness. Slight deviations from ordinary routines set off widening ripples of comic irony and grotesque fantasy throughout which the characters move as pawns of societal forces.

Waugh uses the satirist's weapons of incongruity, violence, irony, extravagance, and anticlimax. Death comes in a shockingly off-hand way. Wickedness presents its ironic triumph over virtue. Misidentification of people and motives heightens the incongruities of life. The settings in remote countries act as a mirror to reflect the barbarism in Western "civilization." The demolition and chrome "modernization" of buildings is used as a symbol of change and decay in society.

The characters in the early novels are flatly depicted in that they show no expansion of understanding for the experiences which they have encountered. Irony lies in the fact that the good are static and the corrupt only are

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dynamic. The so-called hero himself is the victim of forces which he cannot control. The scoundrels outshine the heroes and heroines midst the fatally negative lives of the Bright Young People.

Waugh is a consummate user of the English language. He is admittedly preoccupied with style, and, in his early novels, his style provides the control to mask the satirist's passion with detachment. He is an accurate observer with a fine ear for the contemporary speech of the class he depicts. The wit is often oblique as allusive, economical dialogue carries forward both character and action. The shock effects frequently come through the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated events, while atmosphere or a set of relations is set up by implication. The counterpoint technique implies standards by contrasting modes of behavior. The Century of the Common Man stands indicted by Waugh for its mechanistic, negativistic, dehumanizing qualities.

A later work, The Loved One, shows that Waugh found that only the techniques of satire could appropriately handle the theme of moral decay in those times which obtained in England before World War II and in the United States after the war. After a period of writing non-satiric works, Waugh returned, in The Loved One, to the themes and style of his earlier satiric works. Once again he uses the shock effect of death, the architectural symbolism of the dehumanizing nature of concrete and steel, the flat characterizations depicting the hero and heroine as pawns

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of societal forces. In the macabre setting of The Loved One, all of Waugh's earlier satiric techniques combine to present a ferocious satire, pure and undisguised.

As in Put Out More Flags, The Loved One ends on a non-satiric note in recognition of the changing problems of the postwar times which demanded, Waugh felt, a more direct approach. Thus, although Waugh had already been engaged in a brilliant career as a satirist, he relinquished this form as being no longer effective, or even pertinent, for the standards he wished to project in subsequent works.