

A General Commentary of the novel

The whole story of A Handful of Dust is a negative one. Tony is cuckolded by a lively country man, a counter-Tony, in a cottage which, like Mrs. Beaver's flat, is very suitable for base love.

John Beaver is London's only spare man because the slump ended his job with an advertising agency and since then, no one has been able to find anything for him to do. The necessity of paying death duties has left Tony's estate in relatively bad circumstances, and a second imposition of these taxes after Tony is declared legally dead leaves the heirs only a little less impoverished than they has always been.

Theme:

Writing after the Second World War, at a period when he was more concerned with religious values, Waugh commented that "A Handful of Dust" deals entirely with behaviour. At last, Tony finally refuses to sell Hetton in order to buy Beaver for Brenda. It is easy to see why readers sympathize with Tony. Thus, Waugh refers to him as a "betrayed romantic". Tony is a helpless victim and he is a good character but that, when imprisoned by Mr Todd, it is Tony's heroic faith which helps him accept his fate for the foreseeable future. For that matter, he is the only character in the novel who gives evidence of having virtue of any kind. If everyone else is wrong, then Tony must be right.

The Writer and his Beliefs:

Writing just after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he asserted that in the present phase of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and Chaos. Civilization has not in itself the power of survival.

Place:

The chief symbol of this decline is Hetton Abbey, formerly one of the notable houses of the country, until it was rebuilt by Tony's great-grandfather. Tony's ancestor destroyed the building. Tony ends the practice of holding daily prayers in the chapel, and at church his attention shifts easily from divine judgement to renovations in Hetton's plumbing. Even when confronted with the death of his son, he remarks that "the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion". Nor are traditional virtues much regarded- the bedroom named after Sir Galahad is so uncomfortable that it is reserved for the most unwelcomed guests.

Tony is faithful to his vision of Hetton, but that vision is based upon a false and sentimental conception. Readers can sympathize with Tony's personal

unhappiness when his whole Gothic world had come to grief. However, we know from the beginning that the house is doomed by the names of the bedrooms, and that legendary story of infidelity. It seems that moral disintegration follows humanity wherever it goes.

Tony is a very feeble imitation of King Arthur. John Beavre is unrecognizable as Lancelot. There is no Round Table, and Tony goes in quest not of the Holy Grail but of another way of escaping the politely savage world of Brenda's London. Brenda's infidelity destroys Hetton as Guinevere's did Camelot, but only for Tony. Oddly enough, Brenda's "Thank god" at learning that her child, not her lover, has died does not wholly destroy sympathy for her. She is a victim of her husband's bad treatment and indifference.

London:

The London characters have no taste, only an eye for fashion, and no morals whatever. Adultery is not a sin or even an indiscretion. Adultery helps Mrs. Beaver to let her flats, gives John Beaver new status, and provides the gossips; "if Brenda had at last broken away with Jock Grant-Menies or Robin Beaseley or any other young man with whom nearly everyone had had a crack one time or another". Brenda begins the affair partly out of boredom and partly because Beaver seems indifferent to her.

Language:

At times, the characters use the vocabulary associated with traditional standards, but it has been emptied of content. "Hell" is invoked almost a dozen times in the course of the novel, but it is used to describe minor inconveniences or, at worst, the assessment of faked adultery. On the first page, Mrs Beaver remarks that "the fire never reached the bedrooms, I am afraid", and then encourages her son to eat yoghurt which she describes as nasty. Tony wonders "whether he was as amiable when people he did not know were brought over unexpectedly to Hetton", without staying for the obvious answer in the negative. Brenda's brother finds 'even the Christian era full of significance'. No one else seems to find significance in anything.

The significance of the titles:

Tony goes to some blasted jungles or other and imagine that everybody will be interested in it. Waugh's response seems to have more to do with the theme than with the structure. He agreed that the Todd episode is fantastic. It is a conceit – wishing to bring Tony to a sad end made it an elaborated and improbable one. The sentimental episode is probably a mistake. But the Amazon stuff had to be there. The scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages- first Mrs. Beaver, then the real ones. At that quest for a city seems justifiable

symbolism. Waugh had attempted to embody this intention in the novel's external structure.

Waugh experimented with various principles while dividing the chapters as he wrote the novel. By the time he reached what is now chapter five he had settled on its title, "In Search of a City", though he numbered it 'Book Two'. A Cote de Chez Todd and 'English Gothic – III' followed. These divisions and titles support his theme. The first and sixth chapters describe two strongholds of barbarism. 'Hard Cheese on Tony' and 'In Search of a City' show the death of two versions of a dream. The second, fourth and seventh chapters use the words 'English Gothic' in their titles, but the meaning changes significantly in each repetition. At first, the words seem merely to describe the architecture of Hetton, but as chapter two develops, they encompass Tony's way of life and that of his class. The third use refers to Hetton again, but a Hetton occupied by Tony's successors. The final chapter demonstrates that, unlike characters in tragedy, the Lasts have learned nothing; that delusions as well as property are handed down.

Perhaps the most startling thing is in the pairing of John Andrew Last and John Beaver, not only for the confusion in their first names but in Brenda's maternal failure towards the first and interest in the second. John Andrew's death causes his parents' marriage to fail.

In chapter five and six, the comparisons become more obvious and painfully ironic as Waugh uses the apparent differences of Brazil to emphasize the realities behind the pretensions in the manners and language of the English. For instance, in chapter five, pigs are hunted and eaten in the jungle. In England, in Jock's question about the basic pig in parliament, they are merely a paper concept.

Characters and situations are not only paired, as in the counterpoint of Brenda's and Tony's increasing isolation, but conflated, as in Tony's delirium. In addition, it is in delirium, and only there, that Tony is able to formulate, to an unseen audience of Londoners 'walking round in circle' as in Eliot's poem, his understanding of what has happened:

I know that you are friends of my wife and that is why you will listen to me. But be careful. She will say nothing cruel, she will not raise her voice, there will be no hard words. She hopes you will be great friends afterwards as before. But she will leave you. She will go away quietly during the night. She will take her hammock and her rations off Listen to me. I know I am not clever but that is no reason why we should forget all courtesy. Let us kill in gentles manner. I will tell you what I have learned in the forest, where time is different. There is no City.

Cured of his fever by Mr Todd's medicines, Tony relapses into his usual state of dulled acceptance of the unfamiliar. Like many readers of the novel, he does

not realise the most devastating parallel in the novel: himself and Mr Todd. Instead of 'a transfigured Hetton', he is condemned to 'recklessly mixing starch and protein' in defiance of his and Brenda's diet at the beginning of the novel. There he is forced to read aloud, as earlier he had unwittingly forced Brenda to listen and then failed to listen to her. He is kept captive. Brenda, at least in the imaginations of the London gossips, had been the imprisoned princess of fairy story. Most significantly, by juxtaposing Tony's hallucination at the end of chapter five and the reality of Todd's place, Waugh emphasises the emptiness of Tony's ideal and presents not a sentimental, Gothic estate but a feudal community, based on Todd's real patriarchal authority and upon force. That is what Tony finds in the Brazilian jungle: secular feudalism unredeemed by the saving grace of Christianity, without which, to use Waugh's comment on his conversation, 'it has no significance or power to command allegiance'. The only spirit informing Todd's clearing is a limited and sentimental understanding of Dickens, whose writings Waugh regarded as limited and sentimental.

Ironically, therefore, Tony has found the reality behind the delusive of his quest. Having sought the form without awareness of spiritual content, an embroidered Camelot rather than the Grail, he is left bound in undifferentiated time. He is, like Ovid's Sybil, reduced to a voice, without hope or rescue or redemption.

Jock's satisfaction at having done something for his constituents has kept him in Parliament. Brenda marries Jock Grant-Menzies, as "everbody thought she would".