

BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

by Evelyn Waugh



THE AUTHOR

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) grew up in a family that loved books - his father worked for a publishing house in London, and his older brother published his first novel at the age of eighteen. Evelyn spent time at Oxford, where he experienced firsthand the dissipation of the youth of upper-middle-class England chronicled so colorfully in *Brideshead Revisited*. After several failed attempts at school teaching, he published his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, in 1928. The novel gained immediate popularity, allowing him to spend the rest of his life as a professional man of letters.

In 1930, Waugh was devastated by the unfaithfulness of his wife, Evelyn Gardner, and the dissolution of their marriage. His search for meaning led him to leave the bland High Church Anglicanism of his family and convert to Catholicism in October of the same year. His conversion deepened his perspective as a writer, and from that point on he left the biting satire of his earlier works in favor of a cultural critique that saw the Christian story of sin and redemption - grace in the face of decaying nature - as the only answer to the emptiness of the materialistic culture that had become increasingly ascendent following the Great War.

Waugh served in the military during the Second World War, and his experiences became the basis for his *Sword of Honour* trilogy. Near the end of the war, however, he sought and was granted leave from his duties, and during this sabbatical from the army produced his most popular novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). The book gained immediate popularity, and Waugh was contacted by an American film company that wanted to turn it into a movie. Waugh traveled to America, but found that the film-makers saw the novel only as a romance, and had completely missed its theological implications. The film project fell through, much to Waugh's relief, but his experiences in Hollywood provided the basis for his scathing satire of American materialism, *The Loved One* (1948).

Toward the end of his life, Waugh became increasingly disenchanted with the modern world, and retreated further and further into isolation. His writings fell out of fashion, though he is appreciated today as a genius of the twentieth-century novel, because of their rejection of modernity and its materialistic world view.

PLOT SUMMARY

Charles Ryder, the narrator of the story, is a British officer during the Second World War. As his company is being prepared for active duty, they are sent to a training facility at Brideshead. Ryder recognizes the old estate as the home of the Marchmain family, Catholic aristocrats, and the bulk of the story consists of his reminiscences concerning his relationships with various members of the Marchmain clan.

While attending Oxford University, Charles encounters Sebastian Flyte, younger son of the Marchmain family - a dissolute soul, and incipient drunkard, who draws Charles into his life of dissipation. After a year of drinking and carousing, Sebastian gets kicked out of the university and Charles decides to pursue the career of an artist.

In the interim, however, Sebastian has introduced Charles to the various members of his family. These include his mother and father, his older brother and his two sisters. They all admire Charles, and seek to enlist his aid in saving Sebastian from the consequences of his drunkenness. Charles refuses to engage in what he sees as betrayal of his friend, and Sebastian is sent off to Europe in the care of a hired tutor, while Charles goes off to art school in Paris, losing contact with the Marchmain family for many years.

The second major segment of the book occurs a decade later. Charles has by this time married and become a successful painter of notable architecture in England and abroad, while Sebastian has settled down in a dump in North Africa with his German lover, a runaway soldier. Sebastian's sister Julia has also married, having wedded the politically ambitious Rex Mottram. Charles and Julia are thrown together on a transatlantic voyage, and begin an affair. Upon arriving in England, they continue their relationship, and finally decide to obtain divorces from their spouses and marry.

In the closing segment of the book, Julia's father dies and, despite having been a lifelong rake and despiser of all things religious, makes the sign of the cross on his deathbed. In the wake of Lord Marchmain's final illness, Julia and Charles had quarreled over whether or not to summon a priest for the dying man. Charles, an agnostic, argued against it, affirming that the shock might very well kill the old reprobate. Julia, despite her apostasy from the Church, feels that a priest is somehow needed. She gradually becomes aware of her need for God, and after her father's death, tells Charles that they can never marry. Sebastian, meanwhile, has moved into a monastery in North Africa, serving as sort of a lay brother, assisting the monks in any way possible.

In the epilogue, Charles, surveying the ruins of what used to be a beautiful estate, but which is now overrun by soldiers turning it into an army encampment, wanders into the chapel, and there falls before the altar and prays to the God whose existence he had always denied. Thus, having lost all relationships with the members of the Marchmain family, he finally comes to know their God, and is content.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Charles Ryder - the narrator, and an officer in the British army during World War II.
- Sebastian Flyte - Charles' closest friend at Oxford, an alcoholic and homosexual who finally winds up as a lay brother in a North African monastery.

- Julia - Sebastian's sister, who marries for romantic love, leaves her husband for an affair with Charles, but ultimately refuses to marry him.
- Lord Marchmain - Sebastian's father, who for most of the novel is living in Italy with his mistress, but is converted to Catholicism on his deathbed.
- Lady Marchmain - Sebastian's mother, a devout Catholic who drives Sebastian away by trying to control his life. Her forgiveness of him creates a barrier of obligation that Sebastian is never able to overcome.
- Cordelia - the youngest of the Marchmain clan, a devout Catholic who serves as a nurse during the war.
- Rex Mottram - Julia's husband, a political opportunist who is unfaithful to her from the beginning of their marriage.
- Celia - Charles' wife, a "suitable match," who is unfaithful to him in his long absences while he pursues his art.
- Anthony Blanche - a friend of Charles and Sebastian at Oxford; an open homosexual who serves as a symbol of the dissipation of British youth in the era.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"*Living in sin*, with sin, by sin, for sin, every hour, every day, year in, year out. Waking up with sin in the morning, seeing the curtains drawn on sin, bathing it, showing it round, giving it a good time, putting it to sleep at night with a tablet of Dial if it's fretful.

"Always the same, like an idiot child carefully nursed, guarded from the world. 'Poor Julia,' they say, 'she can't go out. She's got to take care of her little sin. A pity it ever lived,' they say, 'but it's so strong. Children like that always are. Julia's so good to her little, mad sin...

"A word from long ago, from Nanny Hawkins stitching by the hearth and the nightlight burning before the Sacred Heart. Cordelia and me with the catechism, in Mummy's room, before luncheon on Sundays. Mummy carrying my sin with her to church, bowed under it and the black lace veil, in the chapel; slipping out with it in London before the fires were lit; taking it with her through the empty streets, where the milkman's ponies stood with their forefeet on the pavement; Mummy dying with my sin eating at her, more cruelly than her own deadly illness.

"Mummy dying with it; Christ dying with it, nailed hand and foot; hanging over the bed in the night-nursery; hanging year after year in the dark little study at Farm Street with the shining oilcloth; hanging in the dark church where only the old charwoman raises the dust and one candle burns; hanging at noon, high among the crowds and the soldiers; no comfort except a sponge of vinegar and the kind words of a thief; hanging for ever; never the cool sepulchre and the grave clothes spread on the stone slab, never the oil and spices in the dark cave; always the midday sun and the dice clicking for the seamless coat." (Julia, p.261-263)

“You know the whole of me. You know I’m not one for a life of mourning. I’ve always been bad. Probably I shall be bad again, punished again. But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can’t shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean; starting a life with you, without Him. One can only hope to see one step ahead. But I saw today there was one thing unforgivable - like things in the schoolroom, so bad they are unpunishable, that only Mummy could deal with - the bad thing I was on the point of doing, that I’m not quite bad enough to do; to set up a rival good to God’s. Why should I be allowed to understand that, and not you, Charles? It may be because of Mummy, Nanny, Cordelia, Sebastian - perhaps Bridey and Mrs. Muspratt - keeping my name in their prayers; or it may be a private bargain between me and God, that if I give up this one thing I want so much, however bad I am, He won’t quite despair of me in the end.” (Julia, p.309)

“Something quite remote from anything the builders intended has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time: a small red flame - a beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design, relit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones.” (Charles, p.318-319)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. “For Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, Sebastian was the forerunner of Julia, and Julia was the forerunner of Christ.” Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer with specific information from the novel.
2. “By the end of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles had discovered that, as far as love was concerned, neither *eros* nor *phileo* would suffice - only *agape* would do.” Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer with specific information from the novel.
3. The Great War left the young disillusioned - society as they knew it, with the old values, had crumbled in the wreckage of pointless carnage. The Roaring Twenties, portrayed in both F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, ushered in an era of hedonistic dissipation and meaninglessness. But the perspectives of the two novels are very different. To what extent is it true that, while *The Great Gatsby* asks the questions, *Brideshead Revisited* answers them.
4. The Great War left the young disillusioned - society as they knew it, with the old values, had crumbled in the wreckage of pointless carnage. The Roaring Twenties, portrayed in both Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, ushered in an era of hedonistic dissipation and meaninglessness. But the perspectives of the two novels are very different. To what extent is it true that, while *The Sun Also Rises* asks the questions, *Brideshead Revisited* answers them?

5. Evelyn Waugh has gained a reputation as a critic of modern life, of the Age of Hooper, “The Era of the Common Man.” Yet his dislike for modernity was not a mere reactionary crotchiness. He himself wrote, “Civilization - and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe - has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance.... It is no longer possible, as it was in the time of Gibbon, to accept the benefits of civilization and at the same time deny the supernatural basis on which it rests.... Christianity ... is in greater need of combative strength than it has been for centuries.” How does *Brideshead Revisited* illustrate Waugh’s convictions about the bankruptcy of modern society?
6. Near the end of the story, Julia says to Charles, “I’ve always been bad. Probably I shall be bad again, punished again. But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can’t shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean; starting a life with you, without Him. One can only hope to see one step ahead. But I saw today there was one thing unforgivable - like things in the schoolroom, so bad they are unpunishable, that only Mummy could deal with - the bad thing I was on the point of doing, that I’m not quite bad enough to do; to set up a rival good to God’s. Why should I be allowed to understand that, and not you, Charles? It may be because of Mummy, Nanny, Cordelia, Sebastian - perhaps Bridey and Mrs. Muspratt - keeping my name in their prayers; or it may be a private bargain between me and God, that if I give up this one thing I want so much, however bad I am, He won’t quite despair of me in the end.” In what ways do these words reveal the Christianity of *Brideshead Revisited* to be Catholic rather than Protestant in nature?
7. In some novels or plays, some of the most significant events are mental or psychological - for example, awakenings, discoveries, or changes in consciousness. Choose one such internal event from Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, and describe how the author manages to give the event the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action. Do not merely summarize the plot.
8. Compare the conversion experience at the end of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* with one of our Russian novels, Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. How do the conversions of Charles and Levin or Raskolnikov reflect the Catholic and Russian Orthodox versions of Christianity held by the respective authors? With which, in the light of your own Christian experience, can you identify most readily?
9. Compare and contrast the characters of Lady Brett Ashley in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Julia in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. Pay special attention to the moral and spiritual dimensions of the characters. Be sure to refer to specific incidents from the novels in your essay.

10. To what extent does the fact that Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is told in flashback from the standpoint of World War II influence the narrative? Does the reality of the Second World War play a role in overcoming the *ennui* that is never resolved in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*? Would *Brideshead Revisited* have been a significantly different book had it been written in 1938, before the war began?