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## Awesome Inconsequence: Critique of Modern Society through Apocalyptic Frivolity in the Early Novels of Waugh and Fitzgerald

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Awesome Inconsequence: Critique of Modern Society through Apocalyptic Frivolity in the  
Early Novels of Waugh and Fitzgerald

by

Jessica Graves

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas

ABSTRACT

The early novels of both Evelyn Waugh and F. Scott Fitzgerald are beautiful works of moral decay – sparkling facades disguising toxic skeletons of modern society – yet their related semblances remain largely unexplored. *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *A Handful of Dust*, *The Great Gatsby*, *This Side of Paradise*, and *The Beautiful and Damned* are airy tomes of early twentieth century literature paradoxically heavy with the gravity of soulless society. They operate uniquely to each author through a signature moral relativism, attenuating the complex vagaries of American and English social stratification (and the brutal consequences of class rigidity), and ultimately signifying decentered societies pursuing their own destruction. In his early writing, Waugh’s satiric portrayal of British society ridicules progressive ideas, casting the behavior of the “bright young things” celebrated in his society as lives filled with useless endeavors and distractions from meaningful life. Fitzgerald’s early works examine the relationships between American greed and status-seeking, money and decadence, moral bankruptcy and the social status of the young and socially privileged. Waugh favors complex modes of irony and artfully weaves in elements of the grotesque, while Fitzgerald favors

symbolologies and depth of character development to produce meditative missives, but the admonitions of the two authors embody the apprehension each feels for the future of his respective society: the crumbling of traditional values and moral substance and the abandonment of human depth. Both critique the moral decay of modern society which ignores investment in moral responsibility.

This study critically examines three early novels of each author from the perspective of how they use characterization for social critique, methods of conveyance, and signature literary techniques to advance their overarching themes, which parallel each other trans-continently. Waugh consistently portrays moral carelessness in society with images of decay in situational irony and societal disintegration. Fitzgerald's early work carries the same moral message. Both authors acknowledge the reality of moral responsibility and juxtapose the gaiety of reckless youth with inevitable catastrophe in literary endings – which ultimately serve as cautionary morality lessons applying to the broader attitude of modern society.

Awesome Inconsequence: Critique of Modern Society through Apocalyptic Frivolity in the  
Early Novels of Waugh and Fitzgerald

by

Jessica Graves

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2013

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Early Novels of Waugh and Fitzgerald

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The early novels of both Evelyn Waugh and F. Scott Fitzgerald are beautiful works of moral decay – sparkling facades disguising toxic skeletons of modern society – yet their resemblances remain largely unexplored. *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *A Handful of Dust*, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby* are airy tomes of early twentieth century literature paradoxically heavy with the gravity of soulless society. The moral relativism of these novels attenuates the complex vagaries of American and English social stratification (and the brutal consequences of class rigidity), and ultimately signifies decentered societies pursuing their own destruction.

In his early writing, Waugh's satiric portrayal of British society ridicules progressive ideas, casting the behavior of the "bright young things" celebrated in his social world as lives filled with useless endeavors and distractions from meaningful life. Fitzgerald's early works examine the relationships between American greed and status-seeking, money and decadence, moral bankruptcy, and the social status of the young and socially privileged. Waugh favors complex modes of irony and artfully weaves elements of the grotesque into his social satire, while Fitzgerald favors symbolic systems and depth of character development to produce meditative missives. But the admonitions of the two authors embody the apprehension each feels for the future of his respective society: the crumbling of traditional values and moral substance, and the abandonment of human depth. Both critique the moral decay of modern society which ignores investment in moral responsibility.

This study critically examines three early novels of each author from the perspective of how they employ narrative voice, literary styles which advance their overarching themes, and finally the endings of these novels, which trans-continently parallel each other in surprising ways for searing societal critique. Waugh consistently portrays moral carelessness and decay in

society with situational irony, and his novels demonstrate the troubling societal disintegration that he observes in the modern world. Fitzgerald's early work carries the same moral message, but he chooses rhapsodic drama to highlight the realizations of his characters, aiming to achieve broader implications for society. Both authors acknowledge the reality of moral responsibility and juxtapose the gaiety of carelessness with inevitable catastrophe in literary endings – which ultimately serve as cautionary morality lessons applying to the broader attitude of modern society.

For Waugh, literal gaiety in careless lives without examination of faith and consequence bodes ultimately catastrophic for the future of society. Waugh's early novels provide a broad canvas for cautionary storytelling. In *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, and *A Handful of Dust*, Waugh portrays the crumbling of traditional values and he critiques the abandonment of traditional societal values – family, morality, and the old order. For Fitzgerald, the problem is (perhaps more horrifically) that one has abandoned moral responsibility in favor of fleeting, temporal pleasure. In *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby*, the consequences of coming to terms with oneself in the wake of such horrifying realizations become the problem for the characters and ultimately the indelible mark of the novels.

Both authors sought to express their disapproval of a rapidly changing social order, both in the deeply rooted English tradition for Waugh, and in the old/ new money American dichotomy for Fitzgerald. Curiously, this changing social order benefitted both authors personally, as both were members of middle class society by birth and desperate social climbers, seeking recognition as aristocrats. Both men create beautifully detailed and delightfully dialogued fictional stages for the very real societal problems they present for consideration, with the specific purpose of exposing contemporary moral decay.

Waugh and Fitzgerald are instructively different in approach and technique with regard to narrative voice and literary modes, but I argue that their attempts at a moral critique are equally effective. Conspicuous consumption and decadence illuminate lush backdrops for their modernist narratives of moral decline. Their novels capture the essence of an era on two continents that both authors considered foreboding for the future of society. This study seeks to draw conclusions about the ways in which two prominent twentieth century authors sought to illuminate social concerns with tales of shallow indulgence belying the deeper and more sinister reality of humanity's decline. The six novels specifically discussed are all morality tales – social documents – depicting a lethargic society struggling desperately to find a cause for which to progress.

Waugh and Fitzgerald were producing and working at the same time, in very similar social situations; their social aspirations and tendencies toward social climbing were almost identical. Both from modest middle-class beginnings, they invented snobbish personas for themselves and were accepted into established universities, both ultimately dropping out. Fitzgerald was an American Catholic who renounced the faith and Waugh converted to fervent Catholicism later in his own life. These similarities in their early lives may account for their shared disdain for the future of modern society, or perhaps the similarities arose directly from the historical atmosphere of the period, poised as it was between two world wars.

Social and literary critics alike have written extensively on the respective styles and techniques of both authors, and the body of critical insight available for reference is broad. Notably absent from the scholarship, however, is criticism comparing the techniques of the two authors, as their moral assessments are closely aligned. This study compares and contrasts the key literary methods and techniques of the two authors' early novels. Both authors achieve



success in creating worlds in which their characters serve to illuminate facets of the society in decline. A closer look at Waugh's early novels reveals a deft sense of irony and satiric convention, which produced works that stand as jarring responses to the values and social strata of his era. The grotesque aftershocks of his lighthearted portrayal of tragedy require an examination of how his technique functions in the endings, which highlight the profound implications and sociological context of his narrative voice. Waugh's notable use of narrative distance in these early works serves to illustrate the breakdown of society with a comic-ironic sensibility that at once repulses and attracts. His distant narrative tone contains the apparent paradox of pithy shallowness as devastating truth. Employing a sardonic tone throughout these early novels, Waugh conveys the unsettling perspective that we can laugh our way through his novels and our lives, but the shallow insouciance that pervades modern society produces tragedy in the endings of both.

Fitzgerald's approach is entirely different, but no less effective in its critique of modern society and his disappointment in society's moral decay. Fitzgerald's chosen symbologies in the selected works emphasize the manner in which he delineates complex class hierarchies through interweaving symbols, and this reciprocity forms – implicitly or explicitly – an aesthetic critique of the dominant social order. Fitzgerald favors the use of rhapsodic engagement in his narrative, and dialogue becomes a vehicle by which he reveals character and inspires revulsion for the moral dearth apparent in his careless representatives. He employs symbolism and foreshadowing throughout his early novels to drive his moral critique and to enrich the theme of moral responsibility. Moreover, while all of these early works by both authors culminate in tragedy or catastrophe to some degree, the treatment of the conclusions further delineates each author's technique while mirroring each other's moral stance.

This selection of six novels - *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *A Handful of Dust*, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby* - provides the basis for an examination of both the similarity of theme and of the differences in literary techniques. While moral decay and increasing societal “carelessness” are central to each author’s message, the resulting effect initially distances one from any obvious comparison of the two author’s works. Fitzgerald’s narrative tone and his characters’ own personal reflection and growth provide a force for solemn meditation after the novels end. Waugh’s tragicomic endings produce horrified laughter at tragedy, but with a sense no less reflective upon the moral character of modern society. These novels are works that situate their characters precipitously between two world wars during a time of decadence, teetering on the brink of collapse, and providing a societal looking-glass for collective confusion and broken moral compass. While my critical approach is not historically based, it is worthwhile to note that this crucial period in British and American history fueled the problems in idealism and abandonment of faith central to the authors’ concerns.

In *Decline and Fall*, central character Paul Pennyfeather’s inner thoughts and intentions are presented through third person narration. The narrative focus is on Paul’s development in contrast with the contradictions of the other characters as they are presented. At several points in the novel, the narrator directly addresses the audience regarding Paul. When the commentary is directly addressed to the audience, and really is at Paul’s expense, it establishes the distance Waugh is hoping to effect. The narrative of Paul’s thoughts is contrasted with Waugh’s external approach towards the other characters in the novel. The narrator comments on events in the narrative without apparent engagement or emotional investment. Consider the narration of events during the absurd sports day at Llanabba School where Paul has secured a teaching position after an embarrassing dismissal from Scone College, when, before the “race” has actually begun, little

Lord Tangent is accidentally shot in the foot by the drunk and careless master of ceremonies: “Clearly Tangent was not going to win; he was sitting on the grass crying because he had been wounded in the foot by Mr. Prendergast’s bullet” (71). The depiction of the event is concise and straightforward, demonstrating little empathy for the character, who has been outrageously wounded by the carelessness of an authority figure. Poor Tangent merits hardly an afterthought for the remainder of the novel, until of course we learn of his death due to complications from his absurd injury.

In *Decline and Fall*, Waugh uses rhetorical repetition to draw attention to the embarrassing, incongruous details of various characters’ lives. The effect is humorous, deepening the impression of the narrator’s detachment. The novel opens with the naïf Paul Pennyfeather, anti-hero, getting literally caught with his pants down as a result of a drunken prank by other, more gregarious members of the student body at Scone College. He is cited for “indecent behavior”, and is disgracefully “sent down”, yet he accepts his fate and the narrative is repetitive in ensuring the outcome is clear for several pages:

‘I expect you’ll be becoming a schoolmaster, sir. That’s what most of the gentlemen does, sir, that gets sent down for indecent behaviour’... ‘Sent down for indecent behaviour, eh?’ said Paul Pennyfeather’s guardian... ‘Sent down for indecent behaviour, eh?’ said Mr. Levy, of Church and Gargoyle, scholastic agents... This was the question that Paul had been dreading, and, true to his training, he had resolved upon honesty. ‘I was sent down, sir, for indecent behaviour.’ (14-18)

Paul’s embarrassment is abundantly clear after having the episode pointed out by everyone he meets in the span of just a few pages. Additionally, this repetition enhances the humorous

narrative effect, by spotlighting the lack of any social tact of anyone he meets in his disgraced state immediately following his dishonorable dismissal.

Waugh's narrative voice tends to present a contradiction between his characters' interior motivations and their social (i.e., actual) behaviors, a reflexive tool of estrangement between storyteller and story, author and reader. The narrator relates the story matter-of-factly, yet the "facts" as they emerge in dialogue between characters and the circumstances of surrounding events collectively destabilize the narrator's authority, rendering him unreliable and, worse still, uninformed. Guilty parties are never found guilty, innocents are punished (specifically the protagonists), incompetents are in positions of power. Waugh's indictment of modernity is subtle but clear. In a social order based on rapacity, mechanization, and avarice, one without a mandate dictated by the traditional moral imperatives (unselfishness, thrift, humility, etc.), facts are jokes and truth is, at best, a well-timed punch line. As Lane Patey affirms, characters in Waugh's novels "seem empty, without psychological depth, because they have no depths to probe; an 'external', un-subjective presentation accurately captures their modern selves" (57). These characters are flat, in the sense that they are hollow representations of people Waugh saw as the modern society – without capacity for depth of feeling, and thus rendered flatly within his novels.

The narrative arcs of Waugh's early protagonists (Paul Pennyfeather, Adam Fenwick-Symes, and Tony Last) are telling in what they do not accomplish. These characters remain relatively static, which is fitting, considering the detachment necessary to sustain the satiric, ironic rhythms that make the novels so effective. If in the beginnings of the novels these characters are naïve, guileless in their confrontations with the madness and decay of the fallen world, they ultimately learn about the absurdity and futility of existence without evolving a capacity to cope with this knowledge. Paul Pennyfeather has journeyed full circle to essentially

accomplish nothing and end up literally where he began, and he recognizes only that he has not evolved in any truly important sense, but that he does at least recognize his own stasis after the events that have befallen him. In the epilogue of *Decline and Fall*, Paul recognizes his changed nature when talking to a former student years later: “‘We’re different somehow. Don’t quite know how. Don’t think that’s rude, do you Paul?’ ‘No, I know exactly what you mean. You are dynamic, and I’m static’” (215). Paul’s assertion refers back to what he learned earlier about himself at the great wheel at Luna Park. According to Murray Davis, when Paul returns in the full circle of events to Scone College after losing his identity and coming back from the dead, “he assumes an identity which he could not find in the outer, dynamic world. Paul’s retreat is not so much a rejection of that world, however, as a recognition that it is not for the likes of him” (66). Similarly, in *A Handful of Dust*, Tony Last removes himself from the familiar, known world and retreats to the jungle to cope with the unfortunate events that have befallen him. He, too, recognizes that the familiar world is rife with amorality and strives to escape, if not reject, the reality of lost tradition.

In his detached narrative tone, Waugh’s characters’ thoughts are presented in free indirect style, and thus there is practically no distinction between the figures of the narrator and the characters. The characters’ thoughts are presented by the narrator, who remains a distant mediator of their interior lives. The characters are detached and aloof in their stasis, even from their own circumstances, which they accept and absorb in spite of their ignorance. For instance, when *Vile Bodies* opens, the central character, Adam, is planning to get married upon the completion of his manuscript, which he is carrying through customs in his suitcase along with some other innocuous books. In the absurd and painfully funny scene, the customs officer seizes

Adam's books and burns his manuscript – his livelihood – and sets up the rest of the story involving a series of lost-and-found fortunes effecting an on-again-off-again engagement.

'You can take these books on architecture and the dictionary, and I don't mind stretching a point for once and letting you have the history books too. But this book on Economics comes under Subversive Propaganda. That you leaves behind. And this here *Purgatorio* doesn't look right to me...but as for this autobiography, that's just downright dirt, and we burns that straightaway, see.' (25)

Despite the protestations expected by the absurd dialogue and the ignorant customs officer's character presented in the narrative, Adam blithely accepts his fate.

Waugh does insert some narrative commentary for the sake of clarity. For example, in *Decline and Fall*, after Paul is unfortunately arrested for crimes he did not commit, the narrator explains, "Before this happened, however, a conversation took place which deserves the attention of all interested in the confused series of events of which Paul had become a part" (160). In contrast with other characters in the novel, Paul's psyche alone receives a considered exploration in the narrative. His thoughts are narrated according to the situation in direct or indirect style: "I wonder whether I'm going to enjoy being a schoolmaster", thought Paul" (22); and later, the narrator says that "Paul found himself reflecting that on the whole the last week had not been quite as awful as he had expected" (42). Interestingly, on a few occasions, the detached narrator establishes a direct interaction. Toward the end of *Decline and Fall*, he provides some unexpected analysis: "From the point of view of this story Paul's second disappearance is necessary, because, as the reader will probably have discerned already, Paul Pennyfeather would never have made a hero, and the only interest about him rises from the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness" (123). The fact that Paul's character

is receiving special treatment from the narrator is notable, because it shows the particular irony of a narrator who draws even more attention to the fact that the primary character is essentially a shadow of himself.

Waugh's ironic detachment is the central component of his scathing social critique. His novels offer some of the harshest criticism of the modern culture that the literature of the period affords. He is undoubtedly a master of the aesthetic critique of the social order. His novels offer profoundly corrective insights through his detachment and ironic voice, instructive without being didactic. The withering of moral responsibility and the decay of the social order are apparent in how the novels flow with a sensuous ease, in Waugh's gift for the precise word, and in his remarkable use of the right detail to summarize a place or a person. Consider the revelation in the first two pages of *Decline and Fall*, describing the parade into town for the annual Bollinger Club dinner: "For two days they had been pouring into Oxford: epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands..." (2). This description conveys the sense of absurd pomp and circumstance surrounding the immediate circumstances of the opening scene. In this inaugural novel, his talent for lampooning the conventions of his society and highlighting the absurd shines through in narrative depictions of its high moments, with all their concomitant insanity: public school sports day, prostitution trafficking, white-slave trade operations, bad behavior of elected officials, celebrity hijinks for the press to feast upon, escapades inside prison, antics of Oxford officials – Waugh's succinct narrative choice achieves the effect of placing ironic distance between the audience and characters, and allowing the characters to remain empty and depthless, while still retaining their compelling hilarity.

Waugh's early novels were better received critically than the later, more serious works. The first two, *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, employ objective points of view, and in *A Handful of Dust* the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona become more complexly identified. The third person narrative voice retains its distance, however, and expands its darkly ironic study in public and private morals. In a *Paris Review* interview in 1963, Waugh states, "I regard writing not as investigation of character, but as an exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech and events that interest me" (70). Charles Rolo observes, "Waugh's sense of the absurd and talent for lampooning social institutions of the time speak volumes about the grievous social devolution he took as his subject" (80). Waugh himself explains that he did not put stock into the psychological investigation of characters: "All fictional characters are flat. A writer can give an illusion of depth by giving an apparently stereoscopic view of a character – seeing him from two vantage points; all a writer can do is give more or less information about a character, not information of a different order" (70). Waugh's dismissal of the importance of portraying his characters with any depth or complexity is a weak position, indicating that because he creates flat characters, other authors' characters are also flat, even when the reader perceives them as dynamic. His approach is evident throughout his novels and accounts for many of the techniques he employs to ironically distance his characters from the audience. Waugh highlights the decaying morality of twentieth century society, and his early novels capture his repudiation of this time carried to extremes in his characters, descriptions, and dialogue. The following passage from *Decline and Fall* provides as intimate and direct an interpretation of Paul's character as any place in the novel:

For an evening at least the shadow that has flitted about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather materialized into the solid figure of an intelligent, well-educated, well-



conducted young man...the whole of this book is really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part of hero for which he was originally cast. (163)

This peculiar aside adds to the apparent distance the narrator has created for Paul, who is specifically described as hollow and empty, a shadow of the self he once was. Intimacy between the audience and a shadow is impossible and the narrative distance is effectively retained. Modern society has created hollow men: heroes – real and fictive – no longer exist as substantive personalities. Paul Pennyfeather is everyman, and Waugh uses this narrative distance to address the sense of detachment from humanity that, in his view, has become the modern norm.

In *Vile Bodies*, the narrative voice doubles as the unofficial chronicler (in the form of a semi-anonymous gossip-columnist, Mr. Chatterbox) of the Bright Young Things' frivolity – “the hard kernel of gaiety that never breaks” (69). As Mr. Chatterbox, the narrator is riotous and vicious. Retaining his use of the third person, Waugh creates a cast of characters including an evangelist, a corrupt man of the cloth, a group of “former” prostitutes made choir girls, idle gossipers, the reemergence of Margot Beste-Chetwynde (the white slave broker from *Decline and Fall*), and of course the group of hard-partying Bright Young Things, and no character is spared his narrative assault. Waugh's disdain for his society's moral erosion takes shape again in forms of narrative detachment and ironic distance. William Myers likens Waugh's use of “collages of brief scenes and snatches of conversation” in *Vile Bodies* to *The Waste Land*. As in Eliot's poem, Myers argues, “the play of voices is controlled by a presiding voice which combines studied neutrality with a calculated disruption of linguistic expectations” (8). Waugh's brief scenes and short conversational asides are unexpected narrative patterns and create distance

and simulate the disruptions rampant in modern life. This similarity in narrative structure is a nod to the themes of Eliot's mythic vision of the fallen modern world.

In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh's depictions of emptiness among the affluent class are as relevant to issues of today as ever. In this novel, too, Waugh examines the extent to which his characterizations comment on the reality of modern ignorance and offer an insight into community and identity as powerful as any from the era. Agatha Runcible, a spoiled socialite, ends up in a nursing home after she drunkenly crashes a racecar she shouldn't have been driving even when sober. Her "bright young" visitors arrive and assemble a loud and drunken party in her hospital room, amid half-hearted attempts from the nurses to explain she should be resting. The narrator's utter detachment from the seriousness of the situation is apparent in this scene, just before Agatha ultimately dies from her injuries: "That evening Miss Runcible's temperature went rocketing up the chart in a way which aroused great interest throughout the nursing home" (272). The nursing home staff are more interested in the curious nature of her rapidly rising temperature, and the fact that a gossip columnist has been in their establishment that afternoon, than the fact that the patient's prognosis is grave.

*A Handful of Dust* provides narrative distance by focusing even more distinctly on the ironic mode. In his extensive study of Waugh's masterful use of irony, Frederick Beaty highlights *A Handful of Dust* as Waugh's most darkly ironic contribution and explains how his ironic tone is facilitated in part through the narrative itself. Beaty explains, "In translating his views [of modern society] into novelistic form, Waugh was able to approach this fashionable, permissible society with an ambivalence highly conducive to irony" (53). These juxtapositions and contrasts allow the ironic distance to effectively bring the characters to life and the stories to their morally instructive conclusions. "It is this ability to identify with the irrational as well as

the rational, the disorderly as well as the orderly, and to be both antagonistic and sympathetic that makes his ironic presentation of the Bright Young People extraordinarily rich” (53). Beaty specifies the Bright Young People, but arguably, all of Waugh’s characters are extraordinarily rich, despite his own claims that his characters are flat. In fact, this is the brilliance of his irony – his characters are hollow, and yet vibrant and compelling.

In his 1954 article “Evelyn Waugh: The Best and the Worst,” Charles Rolo observes, “At his best - that is, when he remains detached - Waugh is the finest comic artist...His style is swift, exact, almost unfailingly felicitous. His inventions are entrancing, his timing inspired, his matter-of-fact approach to the incongruous produces a perverse humor that is immensely effective” (41). In contrast, and referring to later works that abandon the tone of the earlier novels, Rolo continues, “But when Waugh abandons the detached stance, when he seriously articulates his opinions and attitudes, the results are often distressing, and sometimes disastrous ” (41). Rolo extends his discussion to Waugh’s effectiveness at using ironic distance: “The artist who repudiates the realities of his time must of necessity...work in the ironic key, as Waugh did in his earlier novels which transmute repudiation into blandly destructive laughter” (42) and writes extensively upon the positive consequences of Waugh’s choice of narrative detachment. “Without the restraints of the ironic stance, his critical viewpoint reveals itself as bigoted and rancorous; his snobbery emerges as obsessive and disgusting; and his archaism involves him in all kinds of silliness” (42). There is nothing particularly profound in general commentary on society’s moral decline; indeed, the observation that human interaction is increasingly shallow and corrupt is hardly worth noting. But Waugh’s gift for portraying depthless characters is wedded to the way he mobilizes that soullessness in the service of literary art. Waugh’s contemporaries found his novels intriguing and entertaining, and his body of work endures as

first-rate literary social commentary. The genius of his satire endures, though, as a studied disdain for an unprincipled spirit of the time, and that disdain finds full expression in the estranged detachment of his narrative voice.

Waugh's novels proved prescient in some ways - the impending war put an end to the gay times - and, (as Google blogger Keith Law recently noted) "the tendency of economic boom times to spawn legions of wealthy twits doing twitty things" is narrated in today's tabloids with the same sense of narrative detachment and lack of empathy for the moral rot of society. But Waugh perfectly calibrates ironic distance to effectively and economically portray the events and development of his characters within his fictions. *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, and *A Handful of Dust* show with clear third person narrative detachment that Waugh's artistry manifests with a talent for precision and craftsmanship, wasting nothing on intimate filigrees of attachment within the narrative. Waugh prides himself on the economy of his prose and, for him, the very flourishes that provide a sense of intimacy in Fitzgerald's novels are considered wasteful and would subtract from his self-described literary precision.

In notable contrast, F. Scott Fitzgerald's rhapsodic engagement is the mark of his narrative voice in *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby*. While his narratives offer a damning indictment of the American dream and its accompanying imperative of ruthless, consumerist class ambition, they effectively highlight moral decay via the intimacy of poetic language. Fitzgerald's use of the first person narrative and an engaged third person narrator contrasts sharply with Waugh, and the effect is lyrical, even melodramatic, at times.

Criticizing Fitzgerald's misuse of language and technique in *This Side of Paradise*, revered critic and Fitzgerald contemporary Edmund Wilson writes damningly in an essay on

Fitzgerald's early fiction: "[it] is one of the most illiterate books of any merit ever published" (40). While this seems excessively harsh as an overall assessment of the novel, Wilson's discussion highlights the approach that becomes better honed in Fitzgerald's later works. He continues, "Not only is it ornamented with bogus ideas and faked literary references, but it is full of literary words tossed about with the most reckless inaccuracy" (40). Indeed, Fitzgerald's showy narrative technique is less mature in *This Side of Paradise* than in later works, but the poetic language contributes, for others, to sensory delight in the prose. In an oft-cited passage, Fitzgerald describes Princeton's Ivy Club through Amory's experience as "detached and breathlessly aristocratic" (41). While his overwrought descriptions come across as merely immature at times, they add a heightened sense of excitement to the words on the page.

Of Fitzgerald's social commentary, Marius Bewley observes, "In Gatsby's America, the reality is undefined to itself. It is inarticulate and frustrated...the reality is a thing of the spirit, a promise rather than the possession of a vision, a faith in the half-glimpsed, but hardly understood, possibilities of life"(32). It is fair to suggest that this inarticulation and frustration may be seen in print in some of the very passages to which Wilson refers. Fitzgerald's tendency toward overwrought prose and rhapsodic poetry pour onto his pages with mixed results, but ultimately creates a sense of intimacy with the audience that is lacking in Waugh. Edmund Wilson indicts *This Side of Paradise* further: "It has almost every fault and deficiency that a novel can possibly have...its intellectual and moral content amounts to little more than a gesture- a gesture of indefinite revolt" (80-81). But for all its weakness, Fitzgerald's writing endures and compels – it is attractive, if seriously flawed.

Fitzgerald's narrative proves poetically extravagant. After the death of Amory's revered friend Humbird in a reckless driving accident (due to his own stubbornness and drunkenness) in

*This Side of Paradise*, Amory is badly shaken and describes the accident as “horrible and unaristocratic” (79). While of course the accident is horrific, the juxtaposition of the realization for Amory that it is “unaristocratic” belies his horror is more in the facts surrounding the death of a friend he revered for his stylish and seemingly dignified existence – he is horrified more at how undignified Humbird’s life ends, than the fact of his death. Fitzgerald’s choice of language is indulgent but enhances the intimate tone. “All tragedy has that strain of the grotesque and squalid – so useless, futile...” (79). In *The Art of Social Fiction*, Way notes, “[Fitzgerald’s] sense of excitement could carry him too easily into self-indulgence, and his feelings of disappointment or revulsion could result in melodramatic extravagance” (51). In contrast to Waugh’s narrative detachment, here is another instance of Fitzgerald’s poetic engagement, however immature it might prove in literary retrospective. And Bewley writes, “What Fitzgerald is intent on is a revelation of the emptiness of those so-called values by which the American world lived, and he makes it by revealing the grotesquerie in which its implications, if extended far enough, would inevitably end...The grotesquerie, and also the inhumanity” (31).

Way contrasts Fitzgerald’s lack of ironic voice (the counterpoint to Waugh’s ironic distance) with his different but equally effective approach:

Fitzgerald’s own kind of wit – and especially his ability to write good comic dialogue – appear in other ways...he shows a talent for the grotesque – the almost Dickensian sense of comic vulgarity...Irony itself as a mode of writing Fitzgerald learned to use only with difficulty. Being ironical has little value unless it is a form of intellectual and moral control over experience (67).

And Way agrees with the technical criticism that Wilson puts forth, but softens the critique with the assertion that passages of the novel are poetically intense: “*This Side of Paradise* is formless,

pretentious, sentimental, self-indulgent, and intellectually weak: at the same time, it contains a few passages of true poetic intensity, some isolated moments of keen perception, the first signs of a capacity for acute social observation, and occasional gleams of an exquisite comic sense” (49). There is redemption in Fitzgerald’s early writing, despite its literary flaws. There is much to criticize, but his work is praiseworthy in equal measure.

Fitzgerald’s talent for descriptive narrative within his early novels commands attention. His descriptions convey the social scenes and manners of the time with astonishing detail. Lionel Trilling describes the sense of manners to which Fitzgerald was so attuned in his essay “Manners, Morals and the Novel”:

What I understand by manners, then, is a culture’s hum and buzz of implication. I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made. It is that part of a culture which is made up of half uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning (206-7).

This technique is particularly noteworthy in Fitzgerald’s illustration of the emptiness of Daisy’s character. Her assertions of bored sophistication (“I’ve been everywhere and done everything.”) are drawn with such depth of critical understanding that she becomes a multi-faceted character despite her vapid shallowness. And when she is no longer out of Gatsby’s reach, the dimensions of her real character become less enchanting. “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to him, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted

things had diminished by one” (98). The narrative engagement here is rich and engaging and unmistakably Fitzgerald. The detail and unspoken elegance that Trilling describes is conspicuous in passages such as this.

Fitzgerald’s choice of narrative mode is wholly unlike Waugh’s. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway’s first person narration provides the rhapsodic engagement that Fitzgerald favors. From the beginning of the novel, Nick’s poetic descriptions and florid language weave a sumptuous texture that fosters intimacy as opposed to the ironic distance of Waugh. From the opening line of the book to the final paragraph, poetic drama permeates the text. The technique is effective for Fitzgerald’s purposes, for it insulates Gatsby himself, effectively protecting his “greatness” while revealing him piecemeal through Nick’s narration. And Nick’s descriptions are highly evocative; his impressions of Gatsby and the other characters are vivid and provide rich sensory details. His speculations as to what the characters are thinking and feeling are revealed without hesitation.

An excellent example is Nick’s palpable description of the trauma from which he has emerged in the wake of tragedy and transformation: The “foul dust” which “floated in the wake of [Gatsby’s] dreams” has “temporarily closed out [Nick’s] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men”(7). Such a description draws one closer to the character of Gatsby before the story even begins, and here is an instance where Fitzgerald’s technique creates an intimate portrait of a character whose distance is effectively maintained throughout.

In *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, the narration is in the “close” third person, directly reporting on the central characters’ feelings and opinions, emotions and desires. Their perspectives and biases are recorded by the narrator in a manner quite different from the detachment of Waugh’s ironic and purposefully unreliable narrators. This narration is



rhapsodic and verges at times on the melodramatic. His characters' sense of themselves in these first two novels is entirely egotistical and immature, yet communicated with such force of imagery that the poetic language drives the otherwise ridiculous character development. Toward the end of *This Side of Paradise*, the narrator directly describes Amory Blaine's perspective as he reflects upon his evolving character and sense of disillusion. He, like Nick in *Gatsby*, has undergone a transformation, and his disappointment with the world in which he finds himself is jarring, but is conveyed lyrically:

His youth seemed never so vanished as now in the contrast between the utter loneliness of this visit and that riotous, joyful party of four years before. Things that had been the merest commonplaces of his life then, deep sleep, the sense of beauty around him, all desire, had flown away and the gaps they left were filled only with the great listlessness of his disillusion. (214)

Images of beauty and lush imagery convey a sense of narrative intimacy, and Amory's impressions of that moment in time vividly illustrate his own privileged, if unrealistic, perceptions. The italicized passage that closes the section of the book titled "The End of All Things" is a mournful panegyric to Amory's last night at Princeton:

*The last light fades and drifts across the land – the low, long land, the sunny land of spires; the ghosts of evening tune again their lyres and wander singing in a plaintive band down the long corridors of trees; pale fires echo the night from tower top to tower: Oh, sleep that dreams, and dream that never tires, press from the petals of the lotus flower something of this to keep, the essence of an hour. (138)*

As much a lovely standalone prose poem as a chapter coda, the generous intimacy of Fitzgerald's lyricism in this passage is palpable. We are enfolded within the narrator's rapturous distillation

of what it means to leave an enchanted place and period of one's life. The sensuous image of a sunset on a college campus engenders a reverie that transmits something universal and ineffable about time's passing. We sit awash for one brief moment in the tranquility that the imminent Great War will shatter, and an implicit closeness is shared between reader and narrator. This idea – that the reader is the narrator's confidante – is the underlying narrative premise of *Gatsby*, the foreground that grants Nick Carraway the freedom to tell his story. Mirroring this structure is Nick's relationship with Gatsby, his role as repository for Gatsby's lacquered memories and inarticulate desire to recreate the past. Nick divulges the unifying secret of these abstract longings in a recollection of what Gatsby shares with him:

...One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees – he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. (117)

The power of this intimate passage (alluding to the earliest days of Gatsby's relationship with Daisy Buchanan) stems from its status as a twice-shared memory, first between Nick (the character) and Gatsby, secondly between Nick (the narrator) and the reader. This irrecoverable moment is the fulcrum of Gatsby's existence, the instant at which his faith in possibility overtook the reality principle as the dominant logic of his life. As Nick subsequently shares with us, by

kissing Daisy in the moonlight that night in Louisville, Gatsby “forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath” (117). The lavish trappings of his West Egg existence are a mad attempt to somehow woo Daisy once more and, with her, regain the vanished time and vast possibility immanent in the memory he relates to Nick. Fitzgerald’s poetic recreation of Gatsby’s most cherished memory – so central to understanding his desperate motivation – is an inclusive act of narrative intimacy that defines the novel’s style.

Way writes that Fitzgerald “shows, in certain scenes, the complex attitude to the American rich which is so characteristic of his best work...he is already interested in the history of manners: this is reflected not only in the detail of the novel...but in its structure” (50). This is a trademark of Fitzgerald in all of his early novels, and one detail that makes them so compelling. Even in *The Beautiful and Damned* (Fitzgerald’s experiment in naturalistic writing), his narrative technique is rhapsodic and creates a poetic effect, creating more intimate portraits, however unlikable the characters remain: “Your life on earth will be, as always, the interval between two significant glances in a mundane mirror” (20). Such sentences are the trademark of Fitzgerald’s style and provide intimate glimpses into his characters’ thoughts.

Complex and descriptive, Fitzgerald’s narrative voice in all three novels is distinctly effective in conveying the empty and shallow sense of modern society, albeit in an entirely different approach from Waugh. He works in intimacy, not distance; his irony can be found but is not overt, and he prefers the confidentiality produced by the first person narrative mode. These first person narrators encompass a range of tones, from the romantic, imaginative tone evoking lyrical prose: “The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life” (*Gatsby* 25), to skepticism which evokes doubts about the sincerity of other characters “And with

this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces and I wondered if there wasn't something a little sinister about him after all" (*Gatsby* 69). These differences in tone account for the depth of character produced by Fitzgerald's consistent narrative engagement and rhapsodic prose. Fitzgerald's use of irony is not as sophisticated as Waugh's, and does not achieve, or aim to achieve, the same effect.

*The Great Gatsby's* use of first person narrative demonstrates occasional attempts at irony, particularly in Nick's perceptions – of himself as “one of the few honest people I have ever known”(64). But, Fitzgerald's use of images in his narrative descriptions provides a richer texture than his attempts at irony. Nick's descriptions are imbued with colors, textures, sounds. The fabric of the images is woven entirely out of rich and varied materials, providing depth and removing any sense of narrative distance. His prejudices and class-biases prove convincing in that Nick himself becomes real and trustworthy for the most part, unlike the third-person narrators of the Waughian world. The novel's narrative structure unfolds with bits of information that are woven into a poetic tapestry which engages and creates the sense that the world of the characters is annihilating and tragic:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. (187)

This appraisal of Tom and Daisy can be easily accepted as honest, from Nick as an honest narrator, even if his perceptions are more dubious in other cases. The fact that he attempts to put the reader at ease regarding his honesty is a telling example, and the personal nature of his

relationships to the other characters make it difficult for him to truly provide an objective point of view.

Though Fitzgerald's narrative voice in *The Great Gatsby* is engaging, full of intimate, poetic flourishes of confession and social commentary, we are not to place unquestioning trust in the narrator. Nick Carraway possesses a highly romantic view of Gatsby. The contradiction between his version of events and his claims to be the only forthright and honest character in the novel, gives rise to questions regarding Gatsby's ultimate greatness and Nick's reliability. Caren Town proposes that, "[w]ords may lack the power to express objective truth, but Nick believes in their power authentically to embody emotion in metaphor and in his power therefore to be true to his story, an account of strictly emotional truth" (497).

F. Scott Fitzgerald's style is richly symbolic. He uses symbols to complexly illustrate the major themes of his early novels. His layers of symbolism create worlds of meaning within the basic text that are enriched by his rhapsodic narrative and engaging descriptions. He is more direct in his approach to using symbolism to depict moral groundlessness than Waugh, and more masterful at using these subtle symbols to imbue his novels with the sense of moral rootlessness with literary subtlety and engaging motifs.

For Fitzgerald, cars are extensions of moral agency, glittering symbols embodying American recklessness and aspirational mobility. The act of driving, for some of his characters, represents loss of control and descent into ultimate carelessness. Automobiles are inextricably linked to the idea of consumerism in his early novels, and with good reason. The car has evolved as a status symbol throughout American history, and its novelty in the early twentieth century made it the natural choice to represent morally careless behavior amongst the wealthy.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald connects cars as objects to a person's social status and wealth. The sole car in Wilson's garage is "the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (25). Personifying Wilson's weak character, the car cowers in its failed, wrecked condition, out of favor with the world. In contrast, Gatsby's car has a "three-noted horn" (63) and "it was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length..." (64). The rich description is sensual and alive, exuding wealth and pulsing with phallic extravagance and hope. The opulence embodied by Gatsby's car symbolizes his self-creation – his artificial identity. He needs the object to ground his sense of himself, and who he has become. The car, and the constructed sense of identity it symbolizes, becomes an agent of destruction, resulting in Gatsby's own eventual demise.

Almost universally, cars are symbols of destruction in Fitzgerald's early novels, but he employs them more subtly to link wealth and the destruction of social morality in modern society. In *This Side of Paradise*, Isabelle states that she only dates men that are "terrible speeds" (76). Notably, Dick Humbird, Amory's idealized friend, is killed in a car crash when he "was driving and he wouldn't give up the wheel, [though they] told him he'd been drinking too much" (96). The car wrecks in both *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby* play an important function in the creation of moral clarity – the wreckage of selfish choices and the consequences of careless people. More than "accidents," they are intentional pivot points. Myrtle's accidental death at the hands of careless Daisy is unbearable for Nick in the end. It transforms his view of the people he has surrounded himself with and enables him to clearly see the consequences for humanity in the face of eroding moral codes. The accidents represent, in a broader sense, the recklessness and irresponsibility of the society upon which Fitzgerald hoped to impactfully comment. Materialism is clearly symbolized with the possession of automobiles, but the people

at the wheel are ultimately proven irresponsible and dangerous. Symbolically, their choices and resulting actions are fatal. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick and Jordan discuss her carelessness behind the wheel:

‘You’re a rotten driver... Either you ought to be more careful or you oughtn’t to drive at all.’

‘I am careful.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘Well, other people are,’ she said lightly. (63)

Jordan’s flippant attitude about driving can easily be applied to the moral attitude of irresponsibility that Fitzgerald perceived in modern society. Why be careful or take personal responsibility? That should be someone else’s job.

The green light on Gatsby’s dock is an oft-cited symbol of hope for Gatsby himself, and for Nick as well, but ultimately, the light comes to represent failed hope for the future. As the novel begins, Nick notices the light: “I glanced seaward and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and faraway” (22). Hope for the future, hope for the morality of the people around him, and hope for himself are all possible, but the fact that the light is “dim” foreshadows the unlikeliness of a hopeful outcome. After all is said and done, though, Nick tells us in the end that, “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us” (189). He remained hopeful in the face of the decline of modern society, and whether the light symbolized Daisy or the future or an idealized version of both for him, perhaps that constant hope is in part what made him “great” in Nick’s estimation.

As in Waugh’s early novels, Eliot’s “waste land” of modernity features prominently in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. A symbol of the moral and social decay of society is the “valley

of ashes” which is located half-way between prosperous West Egg and New York. In this waste land of ash heaps, everything is falling apart and “ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens” (23). Fittingly, the valley of ashes is where Tom conducts his affair with Myrtle. In stark contrast to the sumptuous wealth of New York and the glittering extravagance of Gatsby’s parties, the valley of ashes is a symbol of lost hope, waste, barren dreams, and poverty.

Fitzgerald augments the wasted symbolism of the valley of ashes with the additional overlay of the vision motif. A billboard (another modern symbol of consumer culture) featuring the giant eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg keeps watch over the unsavory activities of the characters in the valley. “They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose” (23). This disembodied symbol of a watchful deity passes silent judgment on the empty moral character of the burnt out inhabitants and activities of the valley. “[H]is eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain brood on over the solemn dumping ground” (23). Additionally, the “owl-eyed man” makes appearances at fleeting, yet significant moments in the story, highlighting the wise and watchful gaze of judgment as it is passed on Gatsby and his peers.

Alcohol as a symbol of waste and oblivion flows throughout *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. Youth and beauty are paramount to any moral substance throughout both novels, and the characters drink to dull the sense of emptiness which permeates not only their own shallow lives, but the broader implications of fallen society. Amory Blaine drinks uncontrollably to “shield himself from the stabs of memory” (226). When drinking becomes outlawed by prohibition, Amory’s options become limited and his alcoholic binges give way to actual character development: “the advent of prohibition...put a sudden stop to the submerging of Amory’s sorrows” (226). His disillusion with the way he expected his life to unfold must be



faced, though his perceived disappointments and his sense of failure are symbolic of the loss of the fog of alcohol and the reality which lies in the future for all of modern society. If somewhat lacking in interesting plot, *The Beautiful and Damned* is a poignant and haunting portrait - Fitzgerald's personally ardent meditation on marriage and social conventions vividly portraying a world that has lost its freshness, and the hopelessness of the future.

Waugh's novels are far less overtly symbolic. *Vile Bodies* also includes a car accident that can be attributed to nothing short of purely preventable consequences of a careless character's actions, his style relies more heavily upon allusion and abstraction than direct symbologies. His use of allusive irony, the titles of his novels, and suggestive naming are all techniques contributing to a style in which allusions foreground the symbolism of decay in Waugh's society. Rolo explains, "Crazy accidents; cannibalism; cadavers. They are merely *outré* symbols of the theme, often explicitly stated, which underlies all of Waugh's work - that our twentieth-century civilization is a decaying corpse" (82). The events, characters, titles themselves, however obviously displayed, are outward manifestations of the ominous theme that runs throughout the comical veneer of the stories. Underneath is something more sinister, and far more telling for the state of modern society. Waugh possessed a great disdain for modernity; even modern conveniences, for him, were symbolic of a fallen society.

His article goes on to reveal that at the time Rolo interviewed him, Waugh himself had affirmed with pride that he is "two hundred years" behind the times, he found politics underwhelmingly irrelevant, and he refused to learn to drive a car. (Here the car reemerges as a potential symbolic agent of destruction.) He dips his pen in an inkwell, and he prefers to communicate even with his neighbors by written message rather than using the telephone. References to modern inventions and technological entertainments are handled and mentioned

with disdain. The cinematic sequences and dialogue conducted via telephone further cleverly enhance the sense of disdain for modern advancements within the structure of the text. In these notable ways, the text is additionally innovative.

Waugh uses suggestive naming throughout his early novels, loosely recycling characters and employing ironic allusions in certain of the more peculiar names. The effect of this technique is that naming becomes a device to render characters hollow and flat rather than fully unique – the name becomes a deadpan, a throwaway. And the names are never overtly comical; they hint at the joke but never specify exactly how the suggestion suits the character, which adds to the sense of an inside joke that the character himself isn't in on. By recycling characters in a general sense (i.e., with just enough consistency to re-present the same character across different works, but with minor allowances for varying biographical details), Waugh plays games with notions of fictive identity and integrity, ultimately reducing the idea of “character” to an interchangeable abstraction. Miles Malpractice, Lady Circumference, Lord Tangent, Mrs. Ape, Otto Silenus – these names suggest the playfulness of chaos and absurdity, and cannot be taken seriously as moral agents or human beings. Even when the name is nonsensical rather than suggestive or allusive (Chokey, Sir Humphrey Maltravers, Paul Pennyfeather), it obliquely hints at the ridiculous nature of the character's predicament. Then there are the mildly dirty names - Fanny Throbbing and Kitty Blackwater, Viola Chasm – whose actions are not explicitly sexual, but the dialogue with which they are involved is full of innuendo:

“Fanny, surely that is Agatha Runcible, poor Viola Chasm's daughter?”

“I wonder Viola allows her to go about like that. If she were my daughter...”

“*Your* daughter, Fanny...”

“Kitty, that was not kind.” (26).

Waugh uses comic inventiveness to expose the moral rot of society, and he highlights the abandonment of tradition and lack of appreciation for anything substantial in modern life. The use of the telephone for structuring his dialogue in *Vile Bodies* symbolizes his disdain for modern conveniences. A study of human society moving toward wasteland and utter devastation has little consequence for many of his characters, but damning implications for society of the twentieth century and leaves much to be desired in the emptiness of the twenty-first.

The titles of Waugh's novels are themselves interesting studies in allusion. *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, and *A Handful of Dust* are all transparent references to moral decline and decay, though they also serve an intertextual purpose, alluding to other literary works that deepen the context of Waugh's social commentary. The titles of these early novels carry the weighty implications of society's willing veneration of "vile" bodies (and vapid minds), its indifferent acceptance of the precipitous decline and fall of rarefied civilization, and its vain reaching for crumbling ideals, all precursors to the inevitable outcome – figurative handfuls of dust. Selfish and shallow, Waugh's characters are not evil, but they are ignorant of the solid values Waugh sees as declining, and they portend society's eventual collapse.

Take for example Margot Beste-Chetwynde's choice of a modern remodel for her ancestral inherited house in *Decline and Fall*. The estate, King's Thursday, is a beloved symbol of her late husband's heritage, and represents tradition and morality in the novel, and she has decided to have it completely demolished and rebuilt. Upon seeing it for the first time she says, "It's worse than I thought, far worse" (155). She hires a modern performance artist-architect with a depressingly philosophical attitude, who takes a modern approach to the rebuild: "Something clean and square...all ill comes from man" (159). The new home is ridiculous and ugly, and the

message is that the old, traditional, dignified building was cleared with carelessness and replaced with fashionable modern facade.

*A Handful of Dust* is an obvious allusion to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and certain features of his prophetic modernist poem re-emerge in Waugh's novel. Waugh's novels comprise a form of humor that is trenchant and ironic, but the stark terror implicit in the quote from Eliot's work – "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" – dominates the ending of Waugh's eponymous work. Where Eliot's waste land represents the degradation of fertility myths into culturally bankrupt practices like fortune-telling, Waugh recycles this idea with amusing vulgarity: the fortune teller in *A Handful of Dust* reads the soles of her clients' feet. "'She is very thorough,' said Polly, 'and it tickles rather'...Mrs. Northcote laid the foot on her knee and gazed at it with great solemnity...Brenda wriggled her toes luxuriously and settled down to listen" (159). *A Handful of Dust* produces an aptly modern pastiche of the Arthurian story-cycle. Waugh's novel ends with his hero, Tony, seeking his mythical city like a knight in search of the holy grail, and finding nothing but his personal version of a mad hell on earth. Waugh summarizes his exhaustion and disillusion with the whole modern world thusly: "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" (209). The world is fallen, empty, barren at the end of the novel, just as in Eliot's vision of modernity, and it is terrifying. Waugh expresses a genuine fear for modern society's prospects, a fear his gallows humor throughout the novel does little to truly obscure. There is tragic awareness in his comic vision, a sober glimpse into the irrevocably rotted core of modern life.

Of course, apart from the allusion to Eliot, the title is a self-contained and self-sufficient reference to grasping at nothing – the desolation, waste, and decline of the modern world. This is

also echoed in the symbolic Hetton Abbey, Tony Last's ancestral home, described in guidebooks as "formerly one of the notable house of the country, was entirely rebuilt in 1864 in the Gothic style and is now devoid of interest" (13). The building is what Tony cherishes most, and its fall into disrepair represents the loss of tradition and morality which eventually befall his broken family as well. In the end, his expensive divorce costs him his beloved crumbling estate.

The characters themselves in the form of the unified grouping the "Bright Young People" in *Vile Bodies* also function as conspicuous symbols. They represent an obvious collapse in traditional values, their attitudes and actions are flippant, and they all pursue careless, irresponsible lifestyles and their vapid and self-centered existences effect no sense of morality or obligation to upholding values at all, traditional or otherwise. Here, in *Vile Bodies* too, an allusion to the Arthurian story-cycle is echoed, with Adam's quest for the drunk Major's fortune remaining forever just out of reach, until the ending, at which point obtaining the object of his quest is rendered pointless because the world has come to an end.

The title *Decline and Fall* owes attribution to Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as well as to Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. As man in Western society evolved away from moral foundation and slides ever more rapidly into social and moral decay, he will ultimately fall individually within the fallen civilization. Directly, Waugh's title refers to the decline and fall of a naïve young man who is a victim of circumstance and is an unsuspecting pawn. But the social commentary of the novel provides a much richer subtext, providing the foreboding moral message of decaying society.

As disparate as Waugh and Fitzgerald are in their methods of approach, both authors are prophesying social decay in their works. With their early novels, the two men create decadent worlds peopled by hollow men and women who seem to evade the clutch of consequence. The

novels all follow a similar trajectory, dramatizing the fatal flaw in (and ultimate collapse of) the social geometry that has protected the characters from apprehensions of reality. The stories seem less serious on the surface, some filled with glittering imagery and other with humorous facade. The ominous consequences, though, lie just beneath the surface. All of the novels have endings that fracture the diegetic world in one way or another – psychologically, existentially, homicidally, or apocalyptically – and these representations of breakage are equally representations of modernity. Both Fitzgerald’s and Waugh’s early novels arrived in the wake of the “Great War,” history’s first dalliance with the mechanized rationalization of brutish, nihilistic violence on a global scale. Here, the concept of modernity signifies – among other things – a rupture in the social fabric of the early twentieth century effected by rapid technological and industrial development, new modes of scientific and philosophical perception, the widespread bureaucratization of everyday life, and the logic of capitalism and free markets, and all of these new, modern perceptions are, in the view of these authors in particular, leading to moral erosion depicted in the novels by tragedy and apocalypse.

Perhaps predictably, Fitzgerald and Waugh approach their endings differently, both with dramatic effect. Fitzgerald’s characters ultimately come to some sort of understanding of themselves and of the world, and their realizations (however shallow or fleeting) are tragic epiphanies. His are endings that extend the growth or understanding within the character, and they evoke a sense of hopelessness for the individual and for the future, advancing themes of moral decay. With regard to the ending of *Gatsby* in particular, the fates of the characters most exposed to the capricious forces of organized capital (including Myrtle Wilson, George Wilson, and the self-made Gatsby) suffer the most, while the representatives of the moneyed elite (Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan, and Jordan Baker) sail obliviously into the (one assumes)

catastrophic future. Nick Carraway's privileged position as the seat of narrative consciousness is one of ironic freedom; his poetic reveries about a once virginal America at the novel's end only serve to situate the fallacies of social possibility within the larger matrix of American self-delusion. Fitzgerald's endings reinforce themes of modern waste, shattering the brittle facade of rhapsodic delusion. Once stripped away, there is little upon which to hang hope for the future. In his work on social fiction, Brian Way postulates that, "Fitzgerald's concern with the quality of American civilization places him in a clearly defined literary tradition. A similar awareness makes his feelings of moral failure and self-disgust the more bitter and unrelieved" (30). The foundational American irony - that its national enterprise was built on unspeakable violence and inhuman oppression - haunts Fitzgerald's early novels as the fiction that makes other American fictions possible. His main characters find themselves adrift in their own lives, floating symbols of a fragmented modern landscape. Timeless manifestations of hopelessness - existential realizations, careless accidents, alcoholism, loss of youth and beauty, murder, and suicide - reinforce the hopelessness that Fitzgerald sees in the modern world.

*This Side of Paradise*, the story of Amory Blaine's passage into manhood, mirrors Fitzgerald's own experience of humanity in a failing modern society. Fitzgerald wrestles with the problem of abandoned moral responsibility within modern society, and this plays out in the lives of characters who lack moral substance or the capacity for thinking beyond their own selfish and egotistical expectations. For the primary character, Amory Blaine, this produces a terribly cynical worldview and loss of innocence that calcifies while he is still a young man. He is lazy, self-indulgent, entitled, arrogant, and careless. Mid-way through the novel, he says, "I was perhaps an egotist in youth, but I soon found it made me morbid to think too much about myself" (107). This is reflexively ironic, as only an incurable egotist would reveal such self-satisfaction

with his own self-assessment. Only by surviving some dramatic heartbreak after his pedestrian love affairs does he come to the conclusion that life is a series of empty encounters, ultimately meaningless, and wrought with pain. In the end, the narrator observes, “Its very momentum might drag him down to ruin - the passing of the emotional wave that made it possible might leave the one who made it high and dry forever on an island of despair...Sacrifice by its very nature was arrogant and impersonal; sacrifice should be eternally supercilious”(216). Amory perceives himself as a martyr. He sees life as emotionally draining because his lack of depth and moral development prove unfulfilling and disappointing. Throughout the story, the narrator shows glimpses of his disappointment with himself: “Where now he realized only his own inconsequence, effort would make him aware of his own impotency and insufficiency” (50); “If we could only learn to look on evil as evil, whether it’s clothed in filth or monotony or magnificence” (137), but his disappointment is not fully realized until the ending:

There was no God in his heart, he knew; his ideas were still in riot; there was ever the pain of memory; the regret for his lost youth-yet the waters of disillusion had left a deposit on his soul, responsibility and a love of life, the faint stirring of old ambitions and unrealized dreams...And he could not tell why the struggle was worthwhile, why he had determined to use to the utmost himself and his heritage from the personalities he had passed...He stretched out his arms to the crystalline, radiant sky.

“I know myself,” he cried, “but that is all.” (248)

This is juvenile and melodramatic to an astonishing degree, as Amory ultimately declares that his generation has “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (247), and yet a searing truth that Fitzgerald’s generation *had* lost faith – in God and in man, in any



sense of moral good or responsibility – is what emerges, and there is something inherently melodramatic in that recognition.

*The Beautiful and Damned* struggles to overcome some of the sophomore mistakes Fitzgerald was heavily criticized for after his first novel. Arguably, he achieves a more serious and mature tone, but the ending and what it imports are strikingly familiar. Henry Seidel Canby's early review of the novel concludes, "This novel is another picture of a society upset by modernism" (152). Fitzgerald was torn between his attraction to the modern lifestyle and his sense of loyalty to the moral tradition of the past, and this is the central conflict of the novel. Way concludes that "Fitzgerald believed that life – especially social life – could be intensely enjoyable; at the same time he was temperamentally a conservative, with a deep affection for the American past and with no wish to destroy the moral traditional at the heart of the culture...the pleasure seeking impulse...acquired the character of a destructive force" (63). Indeed, here, as in *This Side of Paradise*, the characters are driven by short-term desires and fleeting impulses toward money, youth, beauty – all superficial and all, ultimately, destructive.

Anthony and Gloria Patch's depressing life revolves around Anthony's hopes to inherit his grandfather's vast fortune and Gloria's withering identity as a great beauty. It is a story of character deterioration and decline. Their days are filled socializing, drinking, and worrying about growing old, and when they do begin to lose the bloom of youth, their lives essentially collapse. Again in this second novel, Fitzgerald's characters come to melodramatic conclusions about themselves, conclusions which betoken the moral bankruptcy of modern society. "It was a self-absorption with no comfort, a demand for expression with no outlet, a sense of time rushing by, ceaselessly and wastefully - assuaged only by that conviction that there was nothing to waste, because all efforts and attainments were equally valueless" (83). This description of Anthony

could be applied to modern society with damning implications. Of *The Beautiful and Damned*, William Troy writes that it “is not so much a study in failure as in the atmosphere of failure – that is to say – of a world in which no moral decision can be made because there are no values in terms of which they may be measured” (225). In a valueless society, morality has no relative referent, so Troy sees the characters themselves not as failures, but rather doomed to the failure all around them. Loss of innocence and the process of aging prove particularly unpalatable if one has not developed a life’s purpose through meaningful experience. There follows an overwhelming sense of hopelessness in innocence lost: “Then I grew up, and the beauty of succulent illusions fell away from me” (213). In his essay on the novel, Curnutt asserts that, “*The Beautiful and Damned* depicts wasted youth as a lifestyle adopted by dilettantes and bacchantes as well as romantic egoists. Nevertheless, the book elaborates upon Fitzgerald’s belief that, given the temporal fixity of youth, its only practical value is the brief pleasure offered by its consumption” (296). To contrast *The Beautiful and Damned* with *This Side of Paradise*, he continues, “Fitzgerald’s debut novel can be classified as a coming-of-age story in the sense that it attributes youth’s problems to the uncertainty of the *paysage moralise* into adulthood. But coming of age evokes something far more ominous in *The Beautiful and Damned*” (297). In “Crisis in American Identity”, Stavola explains that the main character “recognizes the ultimate power of time and death, he remains a staunch Romantic irrevocably committed to the attainment of his ideal world of leisure. It is clear that Anthony has an immature grasp of human and social values. He lacks self-knowledge. His fate is one of substantial deterioration” (112).

*The Great Gatsby* has garnered much more critical acclaim than the two earlier works, and scholars have speculated abundantly upon the multitude of potential meanings to be found or invented from the ending of Fitzgerald’s most celebrated novel. Stavola’s view is that Gatsby

suffers as a result of his struggle with outside reality: “When an individual like Gatsby strives on Earth for an ideal world of youth and beauty that is beyond time, he is both overwhelmed and damned” (131) and to give context to Fitzgerald’s aims, he adds, “Fitzgerald, unlike Gatsby, knew that man was always engaged in a struggle with time and decay” (131). “He (Gatsby) defeats himself internally because he lacks a firmly developed set of moral standards whereby to judge the limitations” (132). Marius Bewley notes, “The Great Gatsby is an exploration of the American Dream as it exists in a corrupt period, and it is an attempt to determine that concealed boundary that divides the reality from the illusions...In Gatsby’s America, the reality is undefined to itself. It is inarticulate and frustrated...the reality is a thing of the spirit, a promise rather than the possession of a vision, a faith in the half-glimpsed, but hardly understood, possibilities of life”(32). These “half-glimpsed” possibilities are, however, willfully unseen and unarticulated. If *Gatsby* is the representative fiction of American aspiration in the dawn of late capitalism, it represents a narrowly defined notion of America. The idea of the early twentieth century as a uniquely corrupt era is both quaint and absurd. The novel’s principal characters are part of a miniscule overclass - like Manhattan, a small island of glittering fiction - oblivious to the blood and tissue of history that underlies their entitlement. Perhaps Jay Gatsby’s dream of self-made belonging is best read as an allegory of American rapacity, with the tragedies wrought by his ambition serving to mirror the tragic circumstances of American development more generally.

In contrast, Seshachari believes Gatsby escapes moral judgment by getting mistaken for a killer and being murdered. She writes, “It is a tragedy of society, of its shallowness, of its false values, and of its blindness” (36). Other critics claim that the Buchanans essentially escape blame and guilt, or that the association with them represents society’s abandonment of morality.

Myrtle's death is an oft-cited example of the entitled rich literally and figuratively running over the less fortunate. The ending can be interpreted in a variety of equally plausible ways, but it is clear that Fitzgerald's ultimate aim was to portray a hopeless outlook for the future of American society. The tragedies at the end of the Fitzgerald novels are rooted in the weaknesses Fitzgerald gives his characters, but also in a more fundamental weakness in the American (modern cultural) belief in unlimited possibility. In *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, Brucoli describes it: "*The Great Gatsby* is about love and money, but its greater subject – the tragic nature of aspiration – links these two in ways that deepen in the broadest, profoundest way our sense of who we are" (82). The characters themselves suffer the consequences of moral decay in a variety of ways: from escape and eternal ignorance of moral boundaries in the case of the Buchanans, to fatally tragic in Myrtle's case, to self-created, to psychological, manifest in Nick's hopeless sense of where we are headed in the future. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189). The final line holds poignant truth. Nick's lost innocence is revealed in the beginning, retrospectively emerging at the end as well, echoing Amory's hopelessness in *This Side of Paradise*: "I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (6).

Waugh's endings are of an entirely different flavor, and they portend horror for society's future with an entirely different approach. The horror and consequences in these endings are uncommonly gruesome, altogether unexpected, and they are juxtaposed sharply with the largely lighthearted nature of the novels. Of Waugh's complete emotional removal from his characters, Dyson observes, "How often his leading characters have suffered a total destruction, inadvertently, in which he appears to find nothing objectionable" (72). In his essay "America and the Comic Vision", Malcolm Bradbury points out that, "...black comedy has become...one of

the pre-eminent forms for dealing with the dehumanisations of a disintegrating world” (173).

Indeed, Waugh’s choice of comedy as a vehicle for exposing the disintegration of society carries through to the literally bitter end.

In terms of grotesque consequences, *Decline and Fall* has a rather mild ending, though the main character has come full circle in a Sisyphean hell of his own. Paul Pennyfeather is expelled from Scone College for indecent behavior when he is absurdly depantsed by his rowdy and drunken classmates, and ends up the victim of circumstances in a series of unfortunate events thereafter. After having endured arrest for crimes of which he was completely unaware (and complicit in only by virtue of his naivety), he goes to prison, taking the fall for his corrupt fiancée’s prostitution and white slave-trafficking business. After eventually faking his own death and escaping from prison, Paul returns to Scone College, where the novel began, with Paul beginning again at the beginning. In the epilogue, Paul discusses his static nature as a spectator on the wheel of life with an old student (and the son of his former fiancée) who is now a college contemporary. The mad world has come full circle, progress is rendered impossible.

A side plot in *Decline and Fall* involving Waugh’s use of counterpoint – which allows him to escape chronology and provide subtle irony – ends tragically for a minor character, Lord Tangent, the youth who is shot in the foot by Prendergast (a drunken, careless schoolmaster), in the absurdly hilarious Sports Day sequence early in the novel. He is mentioned in passing a few times throughout the story to provide the information that he is not healing but becoming progressively more ill as a result of Prendergast’s recklessness and incompetence. “Clearly Tangent was not going to win; he was sitting on the grass crying because he had been wounded in the foot by Mr. Pendergrass’s bullet. ‘Am I going to die?’ said Tangent, his mouth full of cake” (80). Ultimately, he does die from the injury, a fact that isn’t given any grave attention. The

subtext of this minor plot point is that humanity's thoughtlessness and irresponsibility can prove tragic for innocent bystanders. For Waugh, this is a particularly effective technique for presenting a gruesome outcome without much dramatic attention, contrasting the horror of the event with the comically minor attention it draws from the characters or the story.

The ending of his second novel is notably darker. The tone of *Vile Bodies* shifts notably two-thirds of the way through the book. Attributed to his own personal state of mind and the emotionally difficult dissolution of his marriage during the writing of this section, Waugh contends that the entire book itself is ill-conceived and its execution poorly planned. Whatever the reason for the shift, the ending is entirely unexpected, and transforms the novel's significance from a work of lighthearted satire to a dire jeremiad of apocalyptic proportions. First, there is an uncommonly violent car accident built around bizarre circumstances. Agatha Runcible, notoriously careless and spoiled party-girl and central to the Bright Young Things, is partying with several other characters at an auto race, and drunkenly staggers into an unattended racecar. DJ Taylor's hilarious observation describes the scene well: "The car race, featuring our feckless, Champagne-sodden heroes as the world's crappiest pit crew, is a great piece of situational invention" (14). In typical Waugh fashion, the scene is written with wit and precise irony, but the outcome is horrific. She joins the race, blindly drunk (and untrained to drive racecars in any case) and predictably crashes off the course. During her convalescence, she hallucinates and dreams repeatedly about her contemporaries all racing round and round in a mad race until ultimately they crash and burn. Her hallucinations intensify, and, after a final party in her hospital room, at which no one seems concerned about her condition and all are more concerned with the social gathering and "fun-making", she dies. In *The Picturesque Prison*, Jeffrey Heath examines why the message of the novel endures: [It]"endure[s] because of [its] stylistic vivacity and comic

inventiveness, and because of the underlying seriousness which removes [it] from the world of ‘entertainments’ and places [it] firmly in the tradition of moralists. Waugh’s novels document an age and they contain a share of human truth” (xiv). Despite its absurd circumstances and hilarious situations, grave and tragic outcomes such as Agatha’s terrifying hallucinations and her eventual death are always waiting in the wings.

The final scene depicts Adam, the main character, on an apocalyptic battlefield of utter destruction. A nihilistic holocaust has destroyed the world he once knew. The hopelessness for humanity is described unflinchingly as “the biggest battlefield in the history of the world” (313) and a scene of “unrelieved desolation” (316). These sweeping and poignantly sad descriptions are outside the style of the rest of the novel, and impart a weight impossible to convey with images of careless frivolity. In the end, the desolation of modern man cannot be escaped. Taylor writes, “the book’s shift, about two-thirds in, from reasonably light satire into a darker, more dramatic mode, has a truly bleak ending which even evinces a hint of the dystopic sci-fi to emerge from Britain in decades still to come” (22). This tonal shift is highly effective in attracting the intended attention to the dire consequences of modern moral bankruptcy. Of the novel as a whole Taylor concludes, “Beneath the gossip and frivolity of its subject matter lay a sense of disquiet and impending tragedy” (26).

In his critical study of Waugh’s use of irony, Beaty illuminates the connection between *Vile Bodies*’ ending and Waugh’s worldview:

The last chapter of *Vile Bodies*, ironically entitled “Happy Ending”, represents the nadir of Waugh’s disillusionment with the society of his day. Adam surveys the ruin of a gigantic battlefield, the values of Western Civilization have suffered total collapse, and nothing in this modern wasteland has any significance or coherence...since the author

offers no remedy, even by implication, to rectify the tragic absurdity of the situation, the scene moves toward complete nihilism...with nothing to live for, Adam grows oblivious to all that is going on around him and merely falls asleep, becoming one more sacrificial victim in a world gone mad (66).

The ending is jarring, sad, and hopeless – it condemns us all to the modern world without the possibility of parole.

The ending of *A Handful of Dust* is just as bizarre in its bleakness. After the tragic death of his young son, Tony Last has been sued for divorce by his unfaithful wife, for an amount that will prohibit retaining his beloved Hetton, the crumbling estate of his ancestors and his home. Various critics have pointed out that Hetton may well represent the old order and tradition for Waugh, and that its loss is Tony's forceful and unwilling participation in modern society's fallen corruption. He embarks upon a journey to the Amazon, where he falls ill and is abandoned by his guide, and is then "rescued" by an old hermit who essentially imprisons him during his convalescence and forces him to read the complete works of Dickens, word for word, again and again. The absurdity of this scenario is hilarious, then sobering. Again, Waugh employs a Sisyphian theme of futile repetition, an inescapable and very personal hell that results from one's own complicit participation in simply being human in an age of madness. Beaty observes:

Tony's romanticism is not necessarily absurd for contributing to his defeat any more than society's predatory materialism is commendable merely for proving successful...what permits society to carry off reprehensible behavior with impunity is a dubious value system, in which the externals are all that matter...by showing the disorder wrought through living according to either instinct or hollow tradition, the novel demonstrates, by negative implication, the need for something higher than man-made ideals (110).



Here, Waugh's concern with society's prospects – in observing the decay of tradition, order, and even civilization itself – is clear in the ending of this novel as well.

Fitzgerald's and Waugh's early novels indulge in depictions of the casual social and moral standards of their day, but they clearly transmit a hopeless lamentation for humanity's future. Heath explains that Waugh's novels “dramatize, often in a mode of fantasy which cuts closer to the bone than realism can, the desolate world of routine betrayals and casual injustice...in the measured language of civilized outrage” (xiv). Minus the mode of fantasy and absurdity, Fitzgerald accomplishes much the same.

Taylor identifies the moral locus of Waugh's themes, but his evaluation can be equally applied to Fitzgerald's as well. The novels describe the uniqueness of the time produced in part by the historical circumstances. These authors describe:

a world coming to terms with the consequences of one world war while living in the shadow of another, whose entertainments, however outrageous, rarely disguised the deep vein of collective insecurity that ran beneath. The fundamental concerns of Bright Young novels turn out to be those of the movement itself: generational conflict; doubts about the value of human relationships; the resigned expectation of unpleasant things to come. The future, as conceived by...Waugh, is never a rosy blur but something sharp, hard and ominous (26).

The moral void which seems to govern the lives of Fitzgerald's flappers and Waugh's Bright Young People is but a flimsy overlay concealing deeply consequential outcomes.

Symbolically, both authors depict lives that are frivolous and full of gaiety, but ultimately, like all lives, must come to an end. As in the American admonition about “hard living,” consequences will catch up with the novels' characters. More disturbing, though, is the

realization that whole cultures can slide into moral collapse, that the aggregate consequence of bad moral actors is a morally capsized society. Regarding the behavior of Waugh's characters (but certainly applicable to Fitzgerald's as well), Rolo notes that "People behave with awesome inconsequence" (82). These images of carnage and decay collide with the sparking, glittering illusions of beauty and gaiety that permeate the novels. The inconsequential choices made by the characters in their carelessness bring mortal consequences to the novels' endings.

Evelyn Waugh and F. Scott Fitzgerald were preeminent social chroniclers of their time. Working during the same time period in history, they both accomplished acclaim and success with their earliest novels – enchanting literary social documents that captured an era and their authors' respective concerns for the future of society. The six novels considered in this study illuminate the formalized moral considerations of two literary contemporaries during the Jazz Age. In my comparative approach, I have explored similarities within both men's portrayals of a morally degraded society lacking traditional guidance or concern for the future. The modern youth of the early twentieth century (as seen in these six texts) care only for the moment –for the immediate gratification of selfish caprice – and their lives resound with hollowness. Each of the six novels discussed represents some facet of that impulse toward instantaneous self-gratification, and each provides a scathing social critique through differing and highly stylized consequences. The lasting effect of both authors' works, however, remains the same: in their literary depictions of "careless people," both Waugh and Fitzgerald encoded the toxic class anxieties of their era into myths of social betrayal.

The novels illuminate the gravity both Fitzgerald and Waugh succeed in conveying with their respective approaches and literary techniques. Their portrayals of manners in society are at once dazzling and scathing, and they highlight the absurdity that defined the social circles to

which both men were drawn. Both authors straddled the desiccated line between commitment to the traditional social order, with its concomitant (im)moral imperatives of stolid class distinctions and rigid socioeconomic hierarchies, and with headlong abandon into modern capitalism's competitive arena of impulse and avarice in the name of aspiration.

In many ways, the early novels of these two men provide some of the most unforgiving social criticism of early twentieth century Western culture. Waugh and Fitzgerald are both masters of social critique as literary art. While Fitzgerald emerges more symbolic and thematic and Waugh more satiric and ironic, these novels all attempt a criticism of illusions and ideals, and of the attitude toward existence found amongst the young and wealthy in America and Britain in the 1920s.

Both authors' characters display naivety, callousness, insensitivity, insincerity, flippancy – qualities which determine their destinies. Though in no way unique to the kind of fractured consciousness that evolved with modernity, these characteristics are best seen as adaptations by which the men and women of the novels parse the realities of modern life. They lack seriousness and are devoid of reflective judgment, using distancing techniques as defense mechanisms against assimilating social change. They are relatively unaware of (or unconcerned with) the conditions of possibility that have buoyed their privilege, a repression which expresses itself in terms of various violent returns in each of the novels. Their relationships and dreams fail, and the future is a precarious game of chance. What binds people to one another is not, it turns out, some eternal and indestructible moral code but, rather, a web of contingent self-interest. These characters represent, in short, the freighted arrival of modernity.

The authorial perspective of each writer, each man's willfully blind and embedded participation in the narratives themselves, is another distinguishing trait of the fragmented

modern consciousness. Taylor writes, “What gives [Waugh’s novels] their conviction is the sense of a world seen from within, whose chronicler is aware of his own proximity, and so bound up in the environment he surveys as sometimes to compromise whatever judgments are being made” (46). These authors are close to their subjects; they live in the same world as their characters, and they are able to depict them with such exquisite precision that even the caricatures are realistic and believable, effecting the sense that we know these people. Their novels highlight the authors’ complicity in the compromised moral fiction of “traditional society,” belying the anxiety both men felt with regard to the shifting sands of social cohesion.

Though Waugh and Fitzgerald both reveal their preoccupations with youth, wealth, beauty, carelessness, and entitlement; though there is a sparkling overlay of glamour on the surface of the novels; beneath that polished veneer is the unmistakable rot of consequence. And, as shown through the revelatory endings of both authors’ novels, the consequences are manifest implicitly and explicitly to varying degrees in the novels, and with richly diverse effects in the lives of the different characters. In Waugh’s endings, the consequences are vicious events – deaths, accidents, gruesome outcomes unexpectedly revealed – and the abrupt incursion of the endings is precisely what makes them so effective. Fitzgerald’s endings are not so jarring, but their unsettling reflective insistence requires another look at the moral core of society, at the tragic grandeur of what has been sacrificed in the name of progress.

Among the many needs it meets, and aside from the sheer joy it provides, literature embodies the “narrative voice” of a culture as no other art form can. When effective, it sears the consciousness of an entire social order, articulating truths or demands of a universal nature. With regard to Waugh and Fitzgerald, both authors produced significant literary documents of the culture’s collision with excess, of the complex and evolving relationships between social and

moral responsibilities in early twentieth century America and Britain. Both authors sought to express their shared disappointment (and disgust) at the ruthless and worshipful nature of class aspiration, and in that, both succeeded beyond doubt. We are drawn to literature to learn about the ineffable inner workings that make up all kinds of human life – the lives of others, our own lives, the lives we do not want, the lives we wish we had – and, with any luck, we leave a text with a stronger sense of who we are, alone and together. For both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Evelyn Waugh, the energy emitted by that collection of lives in conflict produced definitive portraits of an era that continually reemerges today, all around us.

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