

The Bright Young People in Evelyn Waugh's Vile Bodies and Anthony Powell's Afternoon Men

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the meaningless, empty lives of the "Bright Young People" as depicted in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and Powell's *Afternoon Men*. Both novels are vivid reflections of the purposeless, empty life of this generation between the two World Wars. The Bright Young People, in both novels drift from one place to another, wasting their energies in transient pursuits such as parties, gossip, drinking and motor races. Their lack of purpose and direction drives them to fill the vacuum of their life searching for fun, hysteria and excitement in their most extreme forms.

Keywords –Bright Young People, futility, gossip, parties, meaningless

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I. INTRODUCTION

Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, and Anthony Powell's *Afternoon Men* are two satirical novels that mirror the decline of social institutions in England after the First World War. In these novels, the young are in constant rebellion against social traditions and lead a life that is devoid of any meaning or purpose. Men and women seem to care little for marriage as an institution and lead a promiscuous sexual life; their main pursuits are travelling, partying and gossip mongering.

II. ANALYSIS

Vile Bodies by Evelyn Waugh and *Afternoon Men* by Anthony Powell are two novels that deal with the psychological and social aftermath of the First World War, as T. S. Eliot described it in his poem "The Waste Land". English society between the two wars was characterized by decay, purposelessness and loss of faith and moral scruples. Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell successfully did in prose what T. S. Eliot had done in poetry; they vividly presented an image of futility and spiritual death and emptiness, in their case through the Bright Young People and their hectic activities, restlessness and deviations from moral restraints. Yet this should not mislead us into thinking that the Bright Young People are totally answerable for their behavior, for there are many external factors that affect their behavior.

The Bright Young People in *Vile Bodies* are in an interminable pursuit of fun and excitement. They disperse their energies on minor and trivial pursuits such as gossip, parties and motor races. They never come to question their meaningless life and are just drifting with troubled stream that carries them to their fatal ends. Their primary concerns are going to parties, visiting night clubs and gate-crashing other people's parties. For example, immediately after the scandalous reception that she has been given at the customs office, Miss Runcible thinks of nothing but parties "Miss Runcible took his arm (Adam's) and led him back to the station and told him all about a lovely party that was going to happen that night" [1] [p.27].

The Bright Young People never seem to get fed up with the search for pleasure and fun. They spend their time in night clubs and if they are told to leave at midnight, they feel desperate and wanting to carry on their merry making; they cannot abide those fatal words, "well I think it is time for me to get to bed" [1] [p.56]. They never rest until they have exhausted every form or kind of party. For example, when Lady Metroland organizes a party,

The Bright Young People came popping all together, out of some one's electric brougham like a litter of pegs, and ran squeaking up the steps. Some 'gate-crashers' who had made the mistake of coming in Victorian fancy dress were detected and repulsed. They hurried home to change for a second assault. No one wanted to miss Mrs. Ape's debut [1] [p.93].

Just for the sake of fun and out of complete thoughtlessness, Miss Brown invites her friends to have a night party at her parents' house at three o'clock in the morning. It is this party which stains the reputation of her father and ultimately causes his downfall from his post as a Prime Minister.

In fact, there is nothing exhilarating about these parties: people go to them just for the sake of gossip, food and excessive drinking. Adam, the protagonist in *Vile Bodies* and to some extent the mouthpiece of the writer, bitterly expresses his disappointment and disapproval of these parties "...these dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris – all that succession and repetition of massed humanity...those vile bodies" [1] [p.123].

In their search for excitement and hysteria, the Bright Young People sometimes go through horrible conditions: when they decide to go and watch in the motor race, they go from one hotel to another in a vain search for a room where to spend the night. When they eventually find one, they spend a horrible night:

Darling (Miss Runcible) said "there is no looking glass in my room and no bath anywhere, and I trod on some one cold and soft asleep in the passage and I have been awake all night killing bugs with drops of face lotion and everything smells and I feel so low I could die [1] [p.156].

It is perhaps partly in reaction to this that she goes to extreme lengths in pursuit of excitement deciding to drive in the motor race, which leads to her death.

Similarly, in *Afternoon Men*, Anthony Powell depicts the same young people, working desperately hard to amuse themselves. Fotheringham puts it nicely "we see a vista of ill-ventilated public houses...Amillion barmaids all saying the same thing" [2] [p.57]. Parties and people going to them are recurring ideas in the novel. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, most of the characters, especially Mr. Scheigan are enraptured by the idea of going to a party "Why cannot we all have some fun? I want to throw a party somewhere. Harriet here wants to throw a party. Atwater wants to throw a party. We all want to throw a party. And yet we go on sitting in this goddamned hole talking business" [2] [p.17]. Atwater is the only character who feels qualms about attending it "I think I should be wiser not to come" [2] [p.18]. This party that they all seem to make much of is later depicted by the writer in negative terms: people are packed like sardines in a small flat in such a way that it is difficult to move "It was a nice flat with very up-to-date electric light fittings, but at the same time it was not already beginning to be in rather a mess" [2] [p.19]. A glass of beer is upset over Pringle's legs; two girls have fainted and Mr. Scheigan whom we have seen earlier, talking with zeal about the party now lies on the floor with people treading over his head "Mr. Scheigan began to get up from the floor, people treading on his face had aroused him at last" [2] [p.28].

Like Adam in *Vile Bodies*, Atwater who, to some extent, represents Powell's point of view, expresses his disgust when leaving the party "He was filled with a feeling of intense irresponsibility towards all human creatures. That evening he did not wish to talk to anyone any more. He wanted to go home to bed" [2] [p.30]. A change of a more sensational sort seems to mark the manners and morals of the Bright Young People. Love, as Fotheringham says in *Afternoon Men*, has come to mean nothing and has reverted to the most immoral forms of lust. Therefore, it is not surprising to notice that in both novels only one relationship culminates in marriage, namely the relationship between Nina and Ginger.

In both novels, we see many extra-marital relationships between characters. Young men and women break away from moral conventions and inhibitions and act according to their impulses. For example, in *Afternoon Men*, Harriet Twining is involved with many men, but does not actually think of marrying any of them,

But when it came to the point, she never married anyone, because either she got tired of the men after she had been about with him for a time or else the man said he could not stand the face, or that he simply had no more money to spend [2] [p.9].

Barlow, who is a painter, is also involved with Sophy, Miriam, Julia and proposes marriage to all of them but he never keeps his promise throughout the whole novel. Yet the reader notices that both Adam in *Vile Bodies* and Atwater in *Afternoon Men* are constantly in love with Nina and Susan respectively. They both try to achieve the stability necessary for marriage but cannot for financial reasons. Adam's marriage with Nina cannot take place because he has lost his autobiography on which his future life depends and also because he loses his job as a gossip writer: "Now we can't get married" said Nina [2] [p.151]. Atwater cannot achieve spiritual fulfillment by marrying Susan not because she does not reciprocate his love but the real reason is that he is financially uncomfortable: his job in the museum is not lucrative and precarious, and Susan's dream has always been to go to America "I tell you I hate being in love. I don't want to be in love" [2] [p.115]. Thus when Verelest appears on the scene, she takes a fancy for him and goes with him to America.

The Bright young people's rejection of marriage can be accounted for in the light of their social circumstances. Many people could not afford to marry because they were victims of the slump. Unemployment was rife and many resorted to precarious jobs such as painting, gossip writing and so forth. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in both novels.

The Bright Young People, as we clearly witness in both novels, are characterized by their loss of moral values; their religious sense, if they have any, is also replaced by selfishness and anarchy. In *Afternoon Men*, for example, Baarlow sadistically and sarcastically enjoys the sight of Mr Schreigan lying on the floor "Nonsense, I

like seeing him there. He gives the room a lived-in feeling" [2] [p.27]. Later he almost drives Pringle to suicide by seducing Harriet who is Pringle's fiancée. Atwater blames him for this misbehavior; yet he himself cannot resist the temptation of going to bed with Harriet. Instead of going to look for Pringle after his disappearance, Harriet, Barlow, Mrs. Race and Atwater all indulge in their meal first "when we've had food we shall be more equal to coping with the situation. I feel confident of that" Mrs. Race said [2] [p.163].

Similarly, in *Vile Bodies*, the Bright young people do not line up to any moral standard. For example, Nine gladly deceives her father into thinking that Adam is her husband. Instead of going to look for Miss. Runcible after she has disappeared, they again all wonder where to get some food. When they visit her in the nursing room, they shamelessly indulge in cocktails "well", said the matron, appearing suddenly, "whoever heard of cocktails and a gramophone in a concussion case" [1] [p.188]. Therefore, it is not surprising that Adam is the only one of them who attends her funeral.

As we have earlier seen, Adam and Atwater are the only members of the Bright Young People who feel misgivings about the life they are leading, but they helpless to act as individuals and to opt for a better mode of life. The society that they exist in is corrupt at all levels, and those on whom it is incumbent to reform or change society, namely politicians, intellectuals etc., are either detached from the reality or corrupt. Both Powell and Waugh succeed in giving us a vivid picture of the spiritual, social and psychological injuries that the First World War inflicted upon the younger generation that followed it.

III. CONCLUSION

Finally, it is worth mentioning that both Anthony Powell and Evelyn Waugh, in their different ways of writing, were able to do in prose what T.S Eliot did in his famous masterpiece the *Wasteland*. For example, there is clear parallel between the sterility described in both the examined novels, and which is manifest in the absence of serious marital relationships, and the two lines from *Game of Chess*, the title of one section of the *Wasteland*: "I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face/ it's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said" (lines 158-59).

REFERENCES

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- [2]. P. Anthony, *Afternoon men* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1931)

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