COMIC VISION OF LIFE IN EVELYN WAUGH

EXPLORATION AND ASSESSMENT

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CHAPTER-I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

This is a study undertaken to explore how the comic vision of life in Evelyn Waugh is shaped and structured by the attitude to change and progress. Of all literary terms, the term 'comic' is perhaps the most protean. So a definition of the term, in the context of its application to Waugh, becomes essential. But before it may be done, it is essential to understand the attitude out of which it is born. Accordingly, I have paid attention first to laying bare the meaning of change and progress in Evelyn Waugh.

The onward march of time leaves behind it a trail of change. Whether this change is progressive in character or not has been a topic of much debate among historians. Two irreconciliable approaches are, however, discernible: one, progressive and the other, cyclical. The first, traceable to theories of 'enlightenment', runs through the thought both of Humanist and Romantic historiography. The second, advanced by cyclical historiographers like Toynbee, John Dewy and Oswald Spengler, disputes the overwhelming faith in the inevitable progress of mankind. It regards change as cyclical and hence, the idea of progress, a delusion in the long run. Himself a former student of history at Oxford, Waugh inclines to the latter belief.

He maintains:

> Progress, as it has been understood since the eighteenth century, has proved a disappointment. For every gain there has been a compensating, or even preponderating loss. Former 'progressives' suspect that they have gained all that is attainable and are in danger of losing it, while others believe that for a century the 'spirit of the age' has been moving in a wrong direction.1

While Waugh shares with the latter a contempt for the false claims of progress, he differs from them in two major respects. Change, according to the cyclical historiographers, travels along a spiral-shaped path which, in spite of obliterating all chances of betterment, does not prevent one from touching a new point at the end of one revolution. Waugh's notion of change rules out even that possibility. He believes that the circuitous course of change brings one back to one's original position at the end of one revolution. The second major point of difference lies in their points of view. While the cyclical historiographers view change from the secular angle, Waugh views it from the religious as well as the secular angle. The realisation of progress depends on the individual concerned. If he seeks to achieve it through secular change, then he shall be caught in the futility of circuitous change. But if he wishes to do so through religious change, then he shall move along a linear path that ends at the transcendental hub of the wheel of life.

The end of such a spiritual odyssey promises hope and regeneration. It is this idea of progress that is central to Waugh's attitude to change and progress. That is why Waugh writes:

> I believe that man is, by nature, an exile and will never be self-sufficient or complete on this earth; that his chances of happiness and virtue, here, remain more or less constant through the centuries and, generally speaking, are not much affected by the political and economic conditions in which he lives; that the balance of good and ill tends to return to a norm.[2]

As Waugh's comic vision of life grows out of both these attitudes to change, it is useful to understand the word 'comic' in the context of both. The comic vision of life that emerges out of the secular attitude to change is of the nature of absurdity for the man who is deluded into achieving progress through secular change is caught in the demonic circle of meaninglessness and futility. The 'comic' here connotes absurdity which has been defined by Eugene Ionesco thus:

> Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose, ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.[3]

However, in order to understand the comic nature of the persons deluded by the apparently progressive nature of secular change, we also need to define the word 'comic', after the manner of Plato in Philebus, as:

> ... a vice which gets its name from a certain habit of mind, and is that particular form of this vice which exhibits the contrary of the state of soul spoken of in the inscription at Delphi.[4]

Put more precisely, it may be said that comic characters suffer from a 'foolish false conceit of themselves'.[5] By considering himself far more progressive than he really is, the comic character attracts our ridicule. Yet our ridicule is never allowed to touch the borderland of condemnation as the comic writer also makes us sympathise with the ignorance of the comic character. This saves characters in a comedy from becoming the butt of satiric ridicule. Plato plays up the significance of sympathy in 'comic catharsis' when he distinguishes between those suitable for 'the singular blending of pleasure with pain' and those who are not.[6] In a somewhat similar manner, Northrop Frye maintains that the comic catharsis 'raises sympathy and ridicule'[7]. It may, therefore, be said that comedy, unlike satire, elicits the sympathy of the reader for the person ridiculed. Reacting to Bergson's suggestion that the comic is unfeeling, Eric Bentley too observes:

> Precisely that anti-emotional attitude which Bergson attributes to the comic in general belongs... to farce in particular. Farce, not comedy, is 'unfeeling'. Conversely, the bitterness and sadness that so readily come to the surface constitute our first, best evidence that in comedy feeling is not only present but abundant.[8]

In marked contrast with the comic vision that emerges from a secular attitude to change is the comic vision that is forged by the religious attitude to change, Gone is the ennui and futility of an absurd world. In its place is encountered hope and meaningfulness in the resurrection of a life bogged down earlier by the secular world of change. No wonder then that the superior vision of life realised here also has a sublimating effect on the meaning of the word 'comic'. In view of this development in Waugh, I have redefined the word 'comic' here on the lines of Northrop Frye and Eric Bentley. The former observes:

> The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero.[9]

This is precisely the pattern that emerges in those of Waugh's novels, which unfold his ultimate comic vision of life. That such a view of comedy is often ignored by critics who argue, on the lines of Aristotle, that comedy deals with low action performed by low characters, should not deter us from endowing the comic with grandeur and splendour. Eric Bentley has rightly observed:

> Yet, if comedy begins in the kitchen and the bedroom, it can walk out under the stars. It can attain to grandeur. If this is not generally admitted, it is only because any comedy that has grandeur is immediately stamped as Not a Comedy.[10]

Like Frye, he too maintains:

> The comic dramatist's starting point is misery; the joy at his destination is a superb and thrilling transcendence.[11]

In the comic vision of this kind, the comic character, by transcending the limitations that render him ridiculous, attains sublimity and splendour both in his conduct and personality. The word 'comic', thus, undergoes a semantic volte-face in its application to characters here. It no longer signifies foolish conceit. Instead, it connotes freedom from ignorance and admission to the wonderland of truth and meaningfulness. Eric Bentley has, therefore, rightly remarked:

> Now the art of comedy is an undeceiving, an emancipation from error, an unmasking, an art, if you will, of denouement or untying.[12]

Evelyn Waugh represents the post-modernist tradition in modern British fiction. In marked contrast with the avant- garde movement, it emphasised solving "the problems of 'structuring' history in literature... in rather a different way - for instance, by allowing the concern with crisis and change to become part of the matter of literature, rather than as a feature of its experimental form".[13] Ronald Firbank stood for Waugh as a shining example of this change in fictional style.

In an essay on Firbank, Waugh explains how the former solved the problem of representation in ficntion. He remarks:

> Other solutions are offered of the same problem (representation in fiction), but in them the author has been forced into a subjective attitude to his material; Firbank remained objective and emphasized the fact which his contemporaries were neglecting that the novel should be directed for entertainment.[14]

Taking a cue from his literary ideal, Waugh preferred to retain the classical attitude of objectivity towards his work for the sake of entertaining his readers rather than confusing them in a labyrinthine subjective attitude. His concern with communicating his personal vision, however, was not allowed to get impaired thereby. The recurrent use of symbolic images and a highly stylized plot convey the author's comic vision of life amply.

However, a prominent stream of literary criticism has tended to condemn Waugh for his supposed lack of values owing to its inability to see through his objective style. Waugh is treated as a splendid entertainer but devoid of any significant attitude to life that can earn him a place among the literary greats. This attitude is discernible in both, the reviewers and the critics. Among the reviewers, Gerald Gould[15], Arnold Bennett[16] and

and Desmond Shawe-Taylor[17] are appreciative of Waugh's brilliant sense of humour but not of the equally profound philosophical point of view that informs it. Similarly, Eric Linklater and Ernest Oldmeadow not only fail to understand Waugh's comic vision of life but also castigate him for reasons that are not supported by facts in the novels. The former accuses Waugh of being 'so abominably subversive as to mock the idea of progress'[18] and the latter contends that his novels are 'a disgrace to anobody professing the Catholic name.'[19] John Brophy[20] is candid enough to confess his inability to locate the moral centre of Waugh's comic vision. In considering 'Europe a more effective background... than the other continents' in Waugh, Derek Verschoyle[21] disregards Waugh's preoccupation with the exploration of the idea of change and progress that shapes his comic vision of life. Though Waugh's early novels received rave reviews from Rose Macaulay, yet they too are myopic in getting at the significance of Waugh's comic novels. She is of the opinion that Waugh is one of those gifted writers who 'step aside, turn an oblique glance on the world they know, reject it, and, half deliberate, half instinctive, compose one of their own making, a world within a world, in which they can move and invent with greater felicity, sureness and ease'.[22] Her praise does more harm than good.

By dissociating Waugh from the world of reality, she deprives the comic vision manifest in his novels of any sound metaphysical basis. Her dissatisfaction with the Catholic novels, where Waugh reveals the philosophical basis of his comic vision of life, is understandable in the context of her desire that 'he should speedily retrace his steps' to the 'baroque circus tent' of his imagination.[23]

A survey of recent criticism reveals that Waugh's art of objective narration continues to act as an impenetrable Kafkaesque castle for a good number of critics also. Louis O. Coxe opines:

> A high moral purpose, working in the fury and mire of human veins, and low shifts men stoop to: this is the double theme of classical comedy and satire, and it is just here, I believe, that Mr Waugh fails, for all his real virtues of wit and style.[24]

Even though Gilbert Highet accepts Waugh's works as examples of successful satire, he does not attribute any definable set of values to them. He argues quite unacceptably that both virtue and vice are ridiculed in Waugh. He opines:

> The main point of this is the double-edged satire that the good are dull and stupid, and that the beautiful and rich are corrupt and ruthless: the world is not governed by moral principles, or even by orderly reason, but by chance and the power of the absurd.[25]

Highet overlooks:the absurdity found in Waugh's comic universe owes not to a lack of principles as such but to man's decision to abjure them and lead a secular life of self-aggrandisement. By suggesting that Waugh writes "at once social chronicle and fantasy in a spirit of comic delight that absolves him from consistent moral presentation,"[26] Malcolm Bradbury takes up a familiar stand. Though A.E. Dyson grants success to Waugh in 'the fineness of his style', yet he deprives his works of any morally coherent comic vision when he argues:

> Much of his success depends on the fineness of his style; 'fine style' thought of in the old fashioned way, as felicity of utterance, wit, charm, rather than as a vital union of form and moral content. His bons mots deserve to be repeated exactly. Take away the verbal precision, and you crash down too violently on the meaning.[27]

Martin Green mistakenly opines that Waugh is 'both for and against everyone, or rather no one'.[28] By arguing thus, he muddles up the moral issues in Waugh's comic vision of life. Though James F. Carens recognises the positive aspect of the works beginning with Brideshead, he does not do so in the case of the earlier novels. He argues:

> The early novels remain generally negative and destructive; and, consequently, Waugh is criticized for lacking a high moral purpose and writing satire without a moral centre.[29]

Graham Martin's analysis suffers from the same malady that has plagued the preceding ones. He fails to see 'any alternative position in whose terms the attack (on modern civilization) can be understood'.[30] Therefore, he contends:

> Except in a kind of brilliant faking, Waugh never goes beyond the external accuracy of observation which served him in the satires.[31]

His indictment is, perhaps, one of the best examples of how one of Waugh's artistic strengths, his objective style, has been turned into an artistic weakness. These critics ignore that language and the form of a fictional work can be made to reveal the author's personal vision of life even without direct authorial intrusions. That Waugh could do so speaks of his firm and commendable grasp over the technicalities of his trade.

While the impenetrable objectivity of Waugh's fictional style has led some critics to the point of denying the presence of 'an implied author' in his works, his much too vocal public personality has led others to superimposing the views of Waugh, the man on Waugh, the 'implied author'. Waugh's personal life style and stray remarks clearly reveal a predilection for the antiquated rather than the modern. His biography by Sykes records how he preferred to stay in imposing gothic houses rather

than in a modern one. But Waugh was not unaware of this shortcoming in his own self. In A Little Learning , he mentions how he fell a victim early in his life, to the Englishman's confusion of the antiquated with the sublime.[32] But critics have preferred to ignore the significance of this introspective condemnation and Waugh is supposed to play up the importance of old English values as enshrined in the obsolescent institution of chivalry. He is, thus, misunderstood to represent in modern English literature, a reactionary trend to the valuelessness of modern times. As Martin J. Stannard has rightly observed, 'In an age of egalitarianism, Waugh has often seemed a redundant elitist'.[33]

Prominent among the reviewers who have followed this line of critical approach are Donat O'Donnell, J.B. Priestley, David Pryce-Jones, V.S. Prichett, Gore Vidal and Simon Raven. Donat O'Donnellargues that

> The main emotional constituent of Mr. Waugh's religion - using the term in a wide sense- is a deep English romanticism.[34]

Similarly, J.B. Priestley notices in Waugh an attempt to bolster redundant aristocratic values apart from those enjoined by Roman Catholicism. He opines that he 'is an author pretending to be a Catholic landed gentleman'.[35] David Pryce-Jones stresses that 'it is the old order that matters to Evelyn Waugh'[36] and that he tries 'to enlist (in his works) our sympathy for the old order, our sorrow

at the financial and moral collapse of the aristocracy ...'[37]. In a way, V.S. Prichett accepts the idea of class-snobbery in Waugh, when he tries to play down its significance.

> To object to his snobbery is as futile as objecting to cricket, for every summer the damn gamme comes round again whether you like it or not.[38]

Gore Vidal argues that Waugh indulges in 'romantic day dreams which are not only quite as unpleasant as the things he satirises, but tend in their silliness to undermine his authority as critic.'[39] Though Simon Raven recognises the significance of Roman Catholicism as a symbol of order and goodness in Waugh, yet he too imputes aristocratic values to him.[40] Waugh was justifiably stung by these reviews and he lost no time in making known his displeasure to one of the reviewers, David Pryce-Jones, who later came to regret having written the review, 'especially the infantile leftism in it'.[41] The pitfalls of biographical criticism are written large on most of these reviews. A cardinal principle of literary criticism is violated. The man with whom the works are associated is substituted for the artist who created them. Consequently, his works are condemned for what they themselves reject.

A survey of the somewhat comprehensive criticism reveals the continuation of this tendency in a good number

of critiques on Waugh. It goes to Stephen Jay Greenblatt's credit that he should have focussed attention, perhaps for the first time, on the significance of wheel-imagery in understanding the comic vision of life in Evelyn Waugh. But it is precisely in doing so that he errs. Though there can be no two opinions about the primacy of the wheel-imagery noticed by him, his inference from it is unacceptable. He misconstrues the circular motion of the wheel to imply the meaninglessness of action or change merely in modern times. As a result, he too localises the moral centre of Waugh's comic vision of life in 'the value structures of the past'.[42] He ignores that the circular motion of the wheel symbolises in Waugh the futility of change or action at the temporal plane of existence. The superiority of the hub in the wheel of life is a constant reminder of this fact. Terry Eagleton regards Waugh's fiction as an example of upper-class novel and attributes to it the limited and fragmentary vision of such a novel. He also detects an ambivalent attitude towards the upper classes in Waugh's novels: 'the need to defend at certain crucial points, an upper-class world which is also satirised'.[43] Bernard Bergonzi, in his initial appraisal of Waugh, adopts a right stand. But his later evaluation suffers from an untenable emphasis on the aristocratic values of life. In his review of A Handful of Dust, he

had rightly maintained that

> ... in its treatment of the doomed Gothic hero - not yet a Catholic hero - it points forward to such ambitious later novels as Brideshead Revisited and, in particular, the Sword of Honour trilogy where Guy Crouchback, a more complex and developed version of Tony Last in the early novel ... realises the insufficiency of the gentlemanly ideal and is stripped of his romantic illusions.[44]

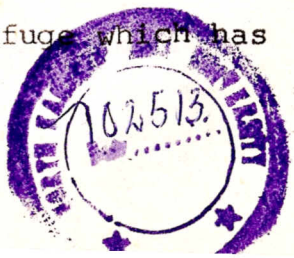
But in The Situation of the Novel (1979), Bergonzi seems to have changed his stand altogether. He argues here:

> The total pattern of Waugh's work reveals a consciousness that is indeed dedicated to looking backward, to reliving the past and trying to preserve its values, and which ultimately is unable to resist the pressures of modernity, although it never willingly surrenders to them.[45]

The thrust of the analysis by Jeffrey Heath is on showing how Waugh's own search for a refuge that promises order and harmony from the cramping confines of an irrational and chaotic world gets carried over into his novels.

> His search was so urgent that it inevitably carried over into his novels, where it became a major motif, and if we examine the refuges in Waugh's fiction we may discern a pattern which illuminates the core of his work and personality.[46]

Accordingly, he classifies his fiction into two segments: the one written before Brideshead and that written after it. While in the former, 'Waugh's protagonists typically find solitary refuges which are false', 'in the fiction of later date they discover the correct refuge which has



been adumbrated by the false ones; the Household of the Faith'.[47] The adoption of a biographical approach, however, tells upon his critical insights. Like Terry Eagleton, he discerns in Waugh an ambivalent attitude towards the objects of his comic ridicule. He opines:

> ... surely the truth is that Waugh disapproves of what delights him, and is fascinated by what he deplores. It is this ambivalence which provides the very germ and matrix of his art.[48]

S.M. Pandeya, in a more recent analysis, argues after Peter Green[49] that the romantic nostalgia for the ancien regime provides the moral centre to Waugh's comic vision of life. Pandeya[50] bases his argument on a passage in Decline and Fall that reads:

> 'English spring', thought Paul. 'In the dreaming ancestral beauty of the English country'. Surely, he thought, these great chest-nuts in the morning sun stood for something enduring and serene in a world that has lost its reason and would so stand when the chaos and confusion were forgotten?[51]

Its interpretation by David Lodge[52] aptly invalidates Pandeya's stand.

The preceding analysis of criticism on Waugh may foster the impression that criticism has run completely amuck in the case of Waugh. But it is not so. There has been a steady stream of literary criticism that has recognised Waugh's concern with playing up the Roman

Catholic values of life as against any secular values. Accordingly, the merits and demerits of Waugh's comic vision of life, as unfolded aesthetically, have been pointed out and his literary achievement has been assessed. Traces of it can be found even in the early reviews. John Bayley, F.J. Stopp, and Brigid Brophy best represent this section of reviewers. John Bayley emphasises the primacy of Roman Catholicism in Waugh.

> Both Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene are writers who use their Catholicism as a weapon and a probe; they explore vice and anarchy from a definite standpoint.[53]

But the point of his argument lies in his hope that 'Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene will not be taken too seriously and will not attract too many disciples'.[54] By calling his concern with the Roman Catholic values of life as partisan, he detracts attention from the aesthetic significance of Waugh's view-point. F.J. Stopp has, in a way, set criticism right on this point. He not only draws attention towards the Catholic standpoint of the novels but also warns against judging the artist's achievement, in transmuting this viewpoint into art, in a manner other than aesthetic. He rightly argues:

> Lord Marchmain's change of heart and Charles Ryder's conversion, Helena's heroic virtue and her discovery of the fragments of the True Cross... are all matters which are the appropriate subjects of aesthetic delineation. But they are not problems for solution, since the novel is not a spiritual case - history. It is enough for the novelist that such things are humanly possible; his task is limited to making them humanly and poetically probable.[55]

Brophy also has rightly noticed Waugh's concern with the rejection of the inadequate past and the acceptance of Roman Catholic values. She observes:

> Mr Waugh, after stating that Brideshead in contrast to the first novel by Waugh, was 'not meant to be funny' declared its 'general theme' to be 'romantic and eschatological': the really extraordinary thing is that precisely the same is true of the general theme of Waugh's novels.[56]

She, however, does not speak of the simultaneous rejection of the modern way of life in Waugh. It is essential to do so in case one is to understand the supremacy of Roman Catholic values of life over the temporal ones.

The problem with the reviews on Waugh is that they are either sketchy or inadequate.

Detailed attention to this concern in Waugh is more forthcoming in the critiques written by Stephen Spender, Christopher Hollis, A.A. De Vitis, David Lodge, and Richard Johnstone. Spender considers the emphasis on Roman Catholicism as self-defeating and an artistic blunder on the part of Waugh. He argues:

> It is when he identifies his prejudices with a moralizing religion that qualities anachronistic and absurd in his view of life - intolerance, bigotry and self-righteousness - work against his talent, and even tend to caricature the very ideas he is supposed to be supporting.[57]

Far from undermining his art, the Roman Catholic thrust of Waugh's fiction gives his comic vision of life depth and stability. Christopher Hollis, in contrast, recognises Waugh's development as a novelist alongside his pre-occupation with perfecting a literary form that could adequately convey his religious interest.[58] But he refrains from showing how this affects ultimately his comic vision of life for Waugh is essentially a comic writer. A.A. De Vitis takes a provincial view of comedy when he argues that Waugh succeeds only in the so-called early comic novels and not in the 'confines of the traditionally serious (Catholic) novel.'[59] He ignores the sublimity that Waugh's comic vision of life attains in the so-called traditionally serious novels. Also, he overlooks how language and fictional form are made to blend with this vision to achieve a unique aesthetic expression. David Lodge's analysis, though brief, is decidedly superior to that of most other critics in this group and also an improvement over Stephen Jay Greenblatt's work. Unlike the latter, he does not commit the mistake of associating the moral centre of Waugh's comic vision with the value structures of the past.

He recognises that Waugh's Christian anti-humanism leaves no room for the acceptance of any secular value system.[60] But the thrust of his critique is on Waugh's success in the artistic portrayal of the 'myth of decline'. Such an approach tends to overlook the sublimity of Waugh's comic vision as unfolded in the novels that show the achievement of progress through religious change. David Lodge's analysis focusses attention only on the degradation that creeps into human society when it tries to achieve progress through secular change. It, therefore, takes a partial view of the vision that emerges from Waugh's works. Though Richard Johnstone has rightly perceived the significance of Roman Catholic values of life in Waugh's comic outlook on life, yet he is concerned more with trying to show Waugh's lack of intellectual conviction in it than in trying to show how it grows out of his work artistically. He argues:

> The order imposed here by Waugh's Catholicism is, like Upward's Marxism, no more logically convincing than any of the other means of ordering existence that are dismissed in Journey to the Border or in A Handful of Dust. The power of the belief springs not from any inherent compelling logic, but from the individual's overwhelming will to believe.[61]

By asking for logical necessity in a work of art, he overlooks the fact that a work of art is not a logical treatise but an aesthetic expression of the author's vision of life.

In order that a true estimate of Waugh's artistic capabilities and achievements may be made, it is of paramount importance that his comic vision of life be understood not only from the Roman Catholic point of view but also in terms of his singular attitude to change and progress. I, therefore, intend to show, in the following pages of this thesis, how Waugh's comic vision of life grows effortlessly and, above all, with artistic facility, out of his singular approach to the concept of change and progress. In trying to substantiate that, I would also like to underline the fact that Waugh's genius is quintessentially comic and not satiric, as many critics have tended to suggest.

The world that confronted Waugh was not only caught up in the cyclone of change but was also obsessed by it. The sense of change felt by man in the twentieth century has been unparalleled by that in any other age. The world has presented so changing a face that it has been difficult to reconcile with the long and continuous string of changes. Malcolm Bradbury has rightly summed up the modern situation thus:

> Living <u>now</u> is not at all like living <u>then</u>. We live in a world of persistent change, where the past is dead and the present is dying; our pressing imperatives are drawn from a temporal location somewhere between the present and the future. Our problems are persistently novel; and precedent and the past are unpromising guides. And so to be modern is not only to live now, but to live now in a certain way.[62]

What Bradbury emphasises while defining 'modernity' is the act of living now in a persistently changing environment. Jung sees eye to eye with Bradbury on this point. He opines in a somewhat similar strain:

> ... the modern man is a newly formed human being: a modern problem is a question which has just arisen and whose answer lies in the future; the exemplary modern man is moving towards a fuller consciousness of the present and finds that the ways of life which correspond to earlier levels of consciousness pall on him.[63]

Behind this unprecedented pace of change lie, however, the hopes and aspirations of the humanist and enlightenment historiographers who by their secular utterances have helped man humanise history to the point of seeking fulfilment within its bounds. The urbanisation and democratisation that the English and other European societies have undergone in the wake of industrialisation have particularly proved their point right. Progress can be achieved on earth through means totally within man's reach. Man only needs to quicken the pace of change by ushering the world into a technological era.

It is at this very moment of celebration of man's progress through secular change that a strong anti-progressive view of history was shaping itself in the unsettling revelations of Freud's psychological theories and those of the new generation of physicists. Freud

belittled the significance of reason in human conduct when he drew attention to the tendency of mind to rationalize the desires that press for satisfaction. Suddenly, reason lost the pre-eminence it was granted by the enlightenment theorists and it was reduced to the rank of a handmaid of the powerful irrational unconscious mind. The savage in man stood revealed and man could no longer turn a blind eye to this overwhelming reality. If the reason of man could not be trusted, then how could the notion of secular progress be accepted? The civilised man, by being vulnerable to the same irrational drives of the unconscious mind as the barbarian is, presented a picture of helplessness and stagnation. The advances in physics compounded this feeling of uncertainity and anti-progressiveness. The concern of science with 'models of reality' rather than reality itself came to be recognised. This introduced a note of subjectivity in the hitherto objective science. The knowledge that science uncovered relative truths and not the absolute one added to the intellectual confusion. Man began to realise the amorphous nature of a relativistic world. Both science and reason proved inadequate guides to a progress that could be lasting and true. The modern age has thus concretised the fears and apprehensions of the cyclical historiographers in a way that no other age has done.

That Waugh was not insensitive to this obsession of the age with change is obvious from what he has to say about the nature of its occurance in rural England:

> The process is notorious and inevitable. Expostulation is futile, lament tedious. This is part of the grim cyclorama of spoliation which surrounded all English experience in this century...[64]

In coming to terms with it, however, he chooses a path which resembles neither that of the progressives nor that of the anti-progressive cyclical historiographers. Even though it is individualistic, yet it is not outside the tradition of Roman Catholic Church. Waugh is one with the cyclical historiographers in rejecting the claim of linear secular change. In his opinion, the quest for progress through secular change is a sheer mirage. Yet he takes a step ahead of the pessimistic outlook of these theorists. He sees a ray of hope for humanity in the religious transformation of man's outlook and conduct. According to him, man can hope to progress if he gives up the secular outlook and moors himself in the water of eternity. It is this dual approach to the phenomena of change and progress that informs his profound comic vision of life. It speaks highly of Waugh that he should have been able to outline this metaphysic right in his first major novel, Decline and Fall (1928).

The image of the revolving wheel that Waugh invokes here is central to an understanding of the metaphysical basis of his comic vision of life. Its significance is persistently felt in its recurrent use, obvious or concealed, throughout the entire length of Waugh's fictional work. The wheel is metaphorically compared to life. At this point, however, a distinction is made between the commonly held notion of life and the one suggested here. This difference is clarified with the help of the placement of the whell in a circular room with seats for spectators. Life can mean, as it is popularly thought, an objective observation of the action performed by others, and it can also signify participation in the change effected by the action of life. The people who sit and watch the revolving wheel from the distance of the gallery, live life in the former way. But those who jump on the revolving wheel live it in the latter way. Waugh opines:

> People don't see that when they say "life" they mean two different things. They can simply mean existence, with its physiological implications of growth and organic change. They can't escape that even by death, but because that's inevitable they think the other idea of life is too - the scrambling and excitement and bumps and the effort to get to the middle, and when we do get to the middle, it's just as if we never started. It's so odd.[65]

The wheel, therefore, represents change in contrast with the gallery which does not, as change implies movement in time and space. Therefore, the people who choose to sit and observe from the stands are called 'static' characters. A static person may also refrain from participating in the action of life by getting fixated with some outdated values of life. A classic example of such a character in Waugh is Tony Last. Comic fun arises when a static character strays into the world of change represented by the wheel. He finds himself an unequal match for the people who are not static and is rescued only when he realises that he is unfit for the world he has strayed into.

The philosophical basis of Waugh's comic vision of life, however, goes deeper than that. The wheel of life has two prominent parts: the revolving portion and the stable hub. It is the former which represents change and not the latter as only the former displays a movement both in time and space and not the latter. In other words, the revolving portion of the wheel represents temporal reality with its obvious relativism and the stable hub represents eternal reality with its much too evident transcendental absolutism. In Roman Catholicism, the faith of Waugh's own deliberate volition, the Church is the temporal representation of eternal reality in in the way the hub is. Thus the revolving portion of the

wheel signifies the secular world of change and the hub, the Roman Catholic Church. In the story 'Out of Depth', Rip Van Winkle wakes up after five hundred years of slumber and discovers to his utter surprise that the entire world has changed beyond measure. In this changed world, however, Rip sees one sign of permanence: the Roman Catholic Church. Only it has not undergone any change. The service in Latin continues and the Sacrament is administered without any change. Again in Edmund Campion, the Jesuit priest expresses similar views in a striking manner.

> 'Make the best of Rome', he (Edmund Campion) wrote later to Gregory Martin, 'Do you see the dead corpse of that Imperial City? What can be glorious in life, if such wealth and beauty has come to nothing? But who has stood firm in these wretched changes - what survives? The relics of the Saints and the chair of the Fisherman.'[66]

Suffice it to say then that the Roman Catholic Church stood for Waugh as an eternal reminder of an immutable reality. Keeping out of the Church means, therefore, losing the eternal perspective of Roman Catholicism and gaining, instead, a secular outlook on life, which is fostered by the revolving wheel of life.

Consequently, a person who steps on the wheel of life is confronted with two options. He may either choose to go along with the circular motion of the wheel or else direct his efforts towards the hub of the wheel by cutting

through the circular motion of the revolving wheel. The desire to go along with the motion of the wheel implies readiness to participate in secular change for human betterment and progress. This is what the progressive thinkers have been emphasising and this is what science has been trying to achieve with its cocksure positivism. However, as the graph of this change indicates such efforts are foredoomed to failure. Progress involves not merely a movement in time and space, as change does, but a considerably perceptible shift in the position of the individual or the society undergoing change that is amenable to value judgement. This, however, is precisely what the circular motion of the wheel does not impart to the secular efforts of man. The wheel of life with its circular motion brings the subject, undergoing change, back to its original position once it completes one revolution. Moreover, no position on the circle of the wheel can be adjudged better than another. Eugene Ionesco's definition of absurdity aptly defines the nature of secular change. Cut off from the transcendental source of his existence, man gropes in the dark when he undertakes to achieve progress through secular change. His fate is as absurd as that of Sisiphus. The fact that the participant in this change, called 'dynamic' character by Waugh, refuses to see the absurdity of his actions in the beginning renders him comic. The shattering of the illusion makes his end grim and gives the comic vision unfolded here,

a dark tinge. That is why, Waugh has also been called, many times, a writer of black humour. The incipient tragedy within the comic situation obtaining here precludes the censure of the individual. It demands, instead, our sympathy for the person ridiculed. A suitable example of such a 'dynamic' character in Waugh is the Emperor Seth of Azania in Black Mischief. The novels that unfold the comic vision of absurdity have been grouped under the appellation of 'lesser comedies' by me. In choosing and using this term for these novels, I have been guided by the quality of vision revealed here.

The rejection of the circular motion of the wheel of life for the linear motion directed towards the stable hub of the wheel of life implies a desire to achieve progress not in terms of secular change but through religious change. This is precisely what Roman Catholicism aims at: deflecting men from the 'wasteland' of sin towards the rejuvenating world of prelapsarian reality. As the graph of this change indicates, such an effort is bound to meet with success. The linear course of this change is very much amenable to value judgement. Besides, as the person, undergoing this change, approaches the hub, he has to face less and still less the destabilising impact of the circular motion of the revolving wheel. This means his progress becomes perceptible in the degree of stability he has

achieved on the linear course of religious change. The final moment of triumph comes when he reaches the hub of the wheel for no sooner does he reach there than he is liberated from the shackles of the secular world of change. Upon reaching here once, he attains the bliss of immutable transcendental reality. In Waugh, such an act is conveyed through a conversion to Roman Catholicism and a staunch adherence to its doctrine. The best example of such a character in Waugh is Helena. I have called the characters willing to undergo this change, 'spiritual elites' for their superiority owes to their superior attitude to life. Some of these characters, however, do not realise this in the beginning. It is then that they become butts of comic ridicule. But no sooner do they reject the path of secular change and embark on that of religious change than they cease to be so. Yet they continue to remain essentially comic characters, for the act of emerging out of ignorance into the light of knowledge is also a part of comedy, as Eric Bentley has also emphasised. The comic vision that is unfolded here is of the nature of resurrection and epiphany. This makes the comic outlook presented here at once Christian and universal in appeal. The sense of joy and transcendence of misery at the end of the comic hero's journey is the hallmark of greater comedies. Accordingly, I have termed the novels which play up this sublime

comic vision, 'greater comedies'. These comedies speak of the artistic maturity and insight that Waugh achieved in his literary career and shall, therefore, remain the foundation of any evaluation of Waugh as an important twentieth century writer.

In trying to gauge the extent of Waugh's ability in conveying his comic vision of life successfully, I have been guided more by aesthetic considerations than any other, in my critical approach. Primacy has, therefore, been given to the 'implied author' in the works rather than the man with whom the works are otherwise associated. This has necessitated a distinction between Waugh as an author and Waugh as a man. The task of doing so is made easier in Waugh as he himself inclined to this literary approach. The words of Pinfold - Waugh in The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold are revealing in this regard.

> Mr. Pinfold gave nothing away. Not that he was secretive or grudging by nature; he had nothing to give these students. He regarded his books as objects which he had made, things quite external to himself to be used and judged by others.[67]

This, however, does not imply that useful sidelights offered by Waugh's life and utterances have been ignored. It only means that they have been considered for their supplementary value only and so far as they do not damage the argument contained within the works themselves. This has meant reliance on a close textual analysis of the works.

Such an approach is particularly rewarding as it concerns itself essentially with the neat and successful aesthetic expression of the comic vision of life in Evelyn Waugh.

The task of aesthetic analysis differs widely from that of a logical analysis. While the latter demands of the writer that he should explain the situations in his works, the former does not. Here, it would be pertinent to point out that the logic of a work of art is revealed in its skilful use of artistic devices and not in a logical disputation for a work of art is not a piece of argumentative prose but an aesthetic whole. The novel is placed uniquely in this regard. The novelist, as Iris Murdoch has observed, "has a blessed freedom from rationalism... he has always been... a describer rather than an explainer'.[68] This distinction is particularly useful in Waugh as he, like Ernest Hemingway, believes in using language suggestively and sparingly.

My analysis of his comic vision of life shall proceed thematically rather than chronologically. As the law of association in psychology has also shown, the sequence of man's thoughts scarcely reveals a chronological pattern. I have, therefore, divided my analysis of Waugh's major fiction into two chapters: chapter two and three. Such a division is rewarding as it enables the reader to have a glimpse of the myriad manifestations of one kind

of vision in different novels at one place and also in marking the shift in the artist's comic view of life. Accordingly, the second chapter of my thesis makes an attempt at understanding how Waugh uses his artistic skills in the lesser comedies for successfully conveying a vision of absurdity about a world that has steeped itself in the quest for progress through secular change. The novels studied here are: Decline and Fall (1928), Vile Bodies (1930), Black Mischief (1932), A Handful of Dust (1934), Scoop (1938), Put Out More Flags (1942), The Loved One (1948), and The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold (1957). An indepth individual analysis of each novel has been undertaken here to study the significance of each in the canon of Waugh's creative work.

The third chapter of my thesis deals with the novels which fall under the title, 'greater comedies'. These are: Brideshead Revisited (1945), Helena (1950), and The Sword of Honour Trilogy which includes three novels: Men at Arms (1952), Officers and Gentlemen (1955), and Unconditional Surrender (1961). An attempt has been made here to study how Waugh reveals his artistic maturity and genius in completely sublimating his comic vision of life by developing in each of these works a vision of hope and promise, based on Roman Catholicism.

As the names of the novels listed above may have also suggested, my study of Waugh's comic vision of life is limited in its scope to the eleven major novels of Evelyn Waugh; the three novels included in The Sword of Honour Trilogy being treated as one. In doing so, I have been guided by the feeling that the other minor works are more of the nature of long short stories rather than novels. Besides, the graph of Waugh's artistic achievement comes through more clearly in the major novels than in the minor fictional works.

My study of Waugh's comic vision of life is based on the Penguin editions of his novels, by and large. In choosing to do so, I have been guided by two considerations. One, they are easily available. But that alone would be insufficient for deciding to do so. Material easily available may not be truly reflective of an author's true artistic potential. Consequently, the entire argument so constructed may look like a house with a foundation of sand. My second consideration, however, takes care of it. The Penguin editions, apart from their easy availability, also mirror truly the real artistic intentions of Evelyn Waugh. Based on the British first editions, which continue to be the authoritative versions of almost all Waugh-novels, the Penguin editions make a departure in the case of Brideshead Revisited which is based on the new Uniform edition.

Here, it would be pertinent to point out that significant variations occur in the case of the new Uniform editions of Brideshead Revisited and The Sword of Honour Trilogy only. So far as the variations in the latter are concerned, they have been critically evaluated in the analysis of this novel.

CHAPTER-4

CONCLUSION

Of all literary reputations ever maligned by critics because of their close proximity to the author, Waugh's has perhaps suffered the most. It has been alleged that his novels are circumscribed in their scope by the effete upper-class Mayfair world of London. It has also been suggested that he is a minor author offering only a minor interest in the dated value of his works. To cap it all, it is alleged that his novels are light-weight comic works. My study of Waugh runs against this kind of argument. True, Waugh's works do centre around gentleman-characters. But they do not, at the same time, preclude from their artistic focus, the other sections of society. More than that, the profoundly philosophical attitude towards change and progress, that shapes Waugh's comic vision of life, lends the works a unique universal appeal and profoundity.

Although attempt have been made, in the past, to draw attention towards the comic bent of Waugh's genius, these have scarcely succeeded in plumbing the philosophical depth of his comic vision of life. Besides, most of these draw no line of distinction between satire and comedy. As

a result, they fail to comprehend the sublime comic view of life unfolded in the greater comedies of Waugh. They invariably end up with regarding Waugh as a satirist and his greater comedies, an aberration in his artistic career. It is in the context of these dismal attempts that my study of Waugh makes a humble attempt to attract attention towards the philosophical ideas that inform and enrich Waugh's comic vision of life.

I have contended that Waugh's singular attitude to change and progress moulds his comic vision of life. Secular change, due to its circular character, makes a mockery of all efforts aimed at progress. Man returns to his original state of existence, no matter how much he may try to get away from it. This comic vision of absurdity pervades all the lesser comedies of Waugh. Religious change, in sharp contrast, is linear in character. So, a man who thinks of surging ahead by effecting a religious change in himself succeeds in his endeavour and, in consequence, his life is meaningful. The sense of joy that accompanies this change is palpable in all the greater comedies.

The figure of speech that is central to an adequate comprehension of this comic stance is the symbolic image of the wheel of life. Waugh compares life to the motion of a wheel. While secular change is

represented by its circular motion, religious change is indicated by the linear motion of an imaginary person making for its stable hub. The circular motion of the wheel of life deprives man of the prospect of progress. He is, therefore, caught in the demonic circle of secular change. His only achievement is absurdity! The linear motion towards the hub of the wheel of life, in contrast, leads man from one stage of development to another. It is when he touches the hub that he experiences a thrilling transcendance. Though he lives on a temporal plane physically, yet he overcomes the limitations of his situation by poising himself in the eternal and immutable reality of the religious hub of the wheel of life. Being a Roman Catholic by volition, it invariably implies acceptance of the Roman Catholic view of life. The Roman Catholic Church, to Waugh, is the temporal reminder of an eternal truth. The realisation of its reality redeems man from the absurdity of a secular way of life.

But if the image of the wheel of life defines Waugh's comic vision of life adequately, it also endows it with an equally expressive form. While the absurdity of secular change is underlined by a circular plot in the lesser comedies, the purposefulness of religious change is conveyed by a linear plot in the greater comedies. In the lesser comedies, the comic fun

that arises is of a grim nature generally for while we laugh at the ignorance of people gullible enough to rely on secular change as a means to progress, we also sympathise with them when their illusions take the toll of their lives, physically or spiritually. The perpetual cyclical motion that the characters undergo on the revolving wheel of life defines both the comic vision of absurdity in the lesser comedies and their individual form. In Decline and Fall(1928), Waugh's first major novel, secular achievements are shown to be no more than an eye-wash. British society, despite its vigorous programme of modernisation, is shown to be seething with the corruption of moral values. Britain emerges no better than a remote barbaric society of Africa. The idea of secular progress epitomised in the modernity of Britain is ridiculed through Paul Pennyfeather, a static character, whose picaresque journey through Britain proves as futile as its history: Paul returns to the point from where he began his journey. By ending the novel with the same situation with which it began, Waugh endows it with a circular plot that immediately makes the reader recall the absurd cyclical motion of the wheel of life. Despite the comic vision of absurdity unfolded here, both at the thematic and structural level, the central character, Paul Pennyfeather is not a flat character. Waugh traces his development from the time when he was ignorant of his real identity to the time when he beams with self-knowledge.

At the beginning of the novel, Paul Pennyfeather does not know that he is a static character unfit for participating in the process of secular change. But at the end, he is fully aware of this reality. Accordingly, he retraces his steps into the static environs of an academic institution like Oxford.

In Vile Bodies(1930), the focus becomes more concentrated as the central character, Adam Fenwick-Symes's repeated attempts to enable himself to marry Nina Blount describe a circular pattern. Marriage here does not have any religious significance as its materialisation depends solely on such secular factors as the monetary status of the individual. Episode after episode renders Adam comic in his misplaced confidence in secular change as a means to bettering his lot. The comic vision of absurdity unfolded here is underlined by the circular plot of the novel which makes no material alteration in Adam's lot. There is, however, a hint of large-scale devastation in the outbreak of the Second World War which Waugh sees as a direct consequence of the acceleration of the rate of secular change. The movement away from the Roman Catholic hub of the wheel of life represents, in Waugh, a drift towards a state of anarchy and chaos indicated by the high degree of instability at the outermost orbits of the wheel of life. Adam does not achieve the self-knowledge that his predecessor in Decline and Fall does. Nevertheless,

Waugh's second major novel is a strong indictment of the progressive historiographers' reliance on secular change as a means to progress.

By the time Waugh came to write Black Mischief (1932), he had already got proselytized to Roman Catholicism. His conversion is a landmark in his artistic growth. Till now, Waugh had only an intellectual conception of the kind of thing that could redeem man from the vicious and absurd circle of temporal change. The evidence is irrefutably there in Otto Silenus' discourse on the nature of life in Decline and Fall. Waugh saw in the hub of the wheel of life a temporal indicator of eternal reality. Despite its historical existence, the hub is beyond the reach of historical change. As a consequence, it is a reminder of eternal reality. With his conversion to Roman Catholic faith, the hub of the wheel of life came to stand for him for the immutable reality of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, Waugh surveys the temporal world steeped in historical change with renewed vigour and greater insight in the novels beginning with Black Mischief. Temporal change now signifies, in no uncertain terms, the quest for secular progress through secular change and the movement towards the hub of the wheel of life, man's willingness to conform to Divine Order and Harmony, which alone guarantees true progress.

In Black Mischief, Waugh shows the absurdity of

pursuing progress through the means of secular change on the large canvass of history. Azania is one of the barbaric states of Africa. Under the stewardship of two rulers, it makes an attempt to progress to the stage of civilisation through a string of secular changes. The vanity of the attempts gets reflected in their utter failure to civilise it. The ghastly end of Seth, the very epitome of this misconceived quest, points to the absurdity of seeking progress through secular change. With Seth's death, Azania returns to its original state of barbarity. The war, with which the novel opens, also concludes it. This endows the novel with a circular plot that fully conveys the thematic import of the novel.

In A Handful of Dust, the price that Tony Last, a static character, pays for persisting with his 'static' illusions is reading one by one, in a perpetual cyclical motion, the gothic novels of Dickens to a half-crazy hybrid, Mr. Todd. In his tryst with him, Tony clashes with the unabashed barbarity of savages unredeemed by religion and the worthless guile of secular Western civilisation. The absurd cyclical motion that his life is condemned to is not unlike that of Sisiphus. However, while Sisiphus mocks at his fate, Tony rues it. He is, therefore, a picture, at once, of fun and sympathy. The relationship between the formal circle and the thematic circle does not remain concealed even in this novel.

In Scoop, the emphasis of humanist and enlightenment historiography on secular change as a means to progress is ridiculed by the exposure of the extent of illogicity in the process of secular change. William Boot, a novice journalist, is catapulted into fame as a leading investigative newsreporter by a series of incidents that hardly show any causal sequence and the reader can scarcely repress his laughter over the gullibility of the secular world for being taken in by the apparently logical nature of secular change in William's career. The sense of absurdity that characterises Waugh's comic world of secular change is conveyed through a circular plot that first substitutes John Boot with William Boot and then, as if to make amends, substitutes William Boot with John Boot, most surreptitiously. This ensures William Boot's return to his original static world of Boot Magna. William Boot is unlike other static characters of Waugh in that he is aware of his personal limitations from the beginning. Thus, the comic vision of absurdity revealed in the circular journey of William Boot and the circular plot of the novel does not, in any way, affect Waugh's art of characterisation adversely.

In Put Out More Flags, Basil Seal flees from the fate of conscription in British army during World War II

to his sister's secluded place, Malfrey. Basil detests the order imposed by the discipline of military life. Being a 'dynamic' character, he has a predilection for chaos and anarchy. These conditions aid him in carrying out ruthless exploits with impunity. One of his first war-efforts is, therefore, the exploitation of the static characters of Malfrey. It is followed by his 'operation-persecution against the static Ambrose. The novel returns to its original situation when Basil Seal decides, at the end of the novel, to join the war so that he may enjoy killing Germans. The circular course of Basil's life offers no redemption or even the slightest improvement in his personality. His life, thus, indicates truly Waugh's comic vision of absurdity. The theme of the novel is corroborated by its form which is encased in the cycle of seasons.

In The Loved One, just as in Decline and Fall, an entire secularised society is brought under the focus of Waugh's serio-comic vision of absurdity. The absurdity of pursuing progress through secular change is driven home through the perversion and inversion of religious values of life in the secular institutions of developed America. The fragility of these products of secular human endeavour for progress becomes clear in their inability to serve as a life-buoy to the people who repose faith in them. When

the testing time arrives these false values desert man and he, perforce, is left in the arms of the barbaric past. Aimee Thenatogenos's death at the end of the novel amply testifies to the veracity of this fact. Unable to seek support from the false religion of Whispering Glades, Aimee turns to her barbaric ancestors for help and eventually, commits suicide. The return of the men and women of the secular civilisation of the West to the ways of their ancestors, in hours of crisis, shows the absurdity of man's quest for secular progress. Waugh's comic vision of absurdity makes us laugh at Aimee for her excessive and misplaced faith in the inverted values of Whispering Glades and feel sympathetic simultaneously over her gruesome end. Further, it is reinforced by a circular plot which begins with Dennis's arrival in America and ends with his departure to England, the place from where he came.

In The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, Waugh reveals the absurdity of the world of secular change-in Waugh's terminology, the dynamic world-through a circular plot that first throws the schizophrenic Pinfold into the dynamic world of his own hallucinations aboard the ship, S.S. Caliban, and then brings him back, at the end, to his native static world of Lychpole. As in Decline and Fall, the novel ends with the protagonist gaining an insight into

his real nature. Accordingly, he rejects the dynamic world and accepts the static world. It is a regressive step and not progressive one. Hence, the comic vision of absurdity revealed in the valuelessness of the dynamic world remains central to the meaning of this novel.

The balance achieved in the lesser comedies between the vision and the form, however, does not sacrifice easy comprehension on the part of the reader. The temporal movement of the plot ensures the accessibility of the reader to its entertaining flavour. It speaks highly of Waugh's artistic genius that even when he conveys a vision of absurdity and chaos, he does not allow the form of his novels to lose their classical perfection. He has, therefore, rightly been called a post-modernist writer.

Contrasted with the comic vision of absurdity in the lesser comedies is the comic vision of regeneration in the greater comedies. The fulfilment of one's hopes and the meaningfulness of a life lived religiously lends a note of joy and jubilation to the greater comedies. The fact that Waugh gave expression to the supreme achievement of man, self-realisation and redemption from the ennui of an absurd and sinful world, shows how he transcended the comic vision of absurdity that circumscribes the entire literary output of the Theatre of the Absurd, and

existentialist writers. In Waugh, the greater comedies are a necessary sequel to the lesser comedies. Having shown the futility of secular change as a means to progress, Waugh, as a committed Christian writer, had to show the comic vision of life implicit in the religious transformation of the individual and the society. While the circular motion of the wheel of life helped him convey the first view, the linear motion towards the stable hub of the wheel helped him in conveying his ultimate and Christian comic vision of life.

Just as the lesser comedies reveal a balance between their form and meaning, so do the greater comedies. The structure of these comic novels coheres with the vision emerging out of them. Each of these novels possesses a linear plot which adequately indicates the logical development present in religious change. The central character begins his life with 'static' notions of life, confronts the dynamic world, discovers the inadequacy of his static attitude to life and the absurdity of the dynamic mode of existence. Eventually, he rejects both and makes for the Roman Catholic hub of life which he selects as the ultimate goal of his life. The achievement of this goal redeems him from the absurdity of secular change and uplifts him to a state of existence which is most superior and abiding. He realises, so to say, the bliss of the prelapsarian state

of existence. It is most often indicated by admission to Church and elevation to sainthood. The linear course of religious change, in consequence, lends the plots of these novels a linear character. Unlike the lesser comedies, the greater comedies do not end where they began.

Accordingly, in Brideshead Revisited, a novel that marks Waugh's transition from the lesser to the greater comedies, two kinds of plots co-exist. While the minor thematic movement concerning the absurdity of secular change is brought out in the circular plot that begins with Charles Ryder's reminiscent mood in war-time England and ends with his stepping out of the world of his memories, in a situation scarcely altered, the major thematic movement concerning the optimism and joy of progress achieved through religious change is brought out in the linear plot of memories, that begins with Ryder's staticity, reflected in his romanticism, and ends with Ryder's conversion to Roman Catholicism, after a turbulent and self-enlightening encounter with the dynamic world in which he rejects both his romantic attitude to life and the secular attitude to progress. But for its value in providing a framework, the circular plot of this novel fades before the thematic brilliance of the linear plot encased within it. The tone of colour and gaiety set in

this comic novel continues to reverberate in the other two greater comedies of Evelyn Waugh.

In Waugh's second 'greater comedy', Helena, there is a single plot that displays the progressive nature of religious change in the linear spiritual odyssey of Helena who, born and brought up in a dynamic world, overcomes her adolescent staticity in her close touch with the dynamic world of the Roman Empire through her marriage with Constantius Chlorus, rejects the valueless and absurd secular change with which both her husband and her son, apart from the Roman gentry in general, are obsessed, and elevates herself above the run-of-the-mill society through her acceptance of and adherence to the Roman Catholic values of life. This is, in my opinion, Waugh's best novel as it achieves unparalleled comic sublimity and grandeur both in its poetic description of the holy quest and in its abstruse conclusion of that quest: Helena achieves saintliness through a submission of her wild human will to the pacific Will of God in the act of discovering the True Cross. Helena's character offers the best example of a spiritual elite in the entire canon of Waugh's creative work.

Waugh's third greater comedy, The Sword of Honour Trilogy, is spread over three volumes, Men At Arms, Officers

and Gentlemen, and Unconditional Surrender, each published separately and at separate points of time. Like all other greater comedies, its narrative too runs along a plot which is linear in character. Guy Crouchback, the chief protagonist of this trilogy, is a victim of the dynamic world and is, therefore, living as an exile in Italy. The outbreak of World War II offers him an opportunity of reasserting his lost self-esteem under the pretext of protecting the honour of Christendom. His knight-errantry comes to a nought when he realises that the war is being fought for no such reason. Even he has been hoodwinking his own self by thinking so. Deep in the mind of every soldier, he included, is an irrational and barbaric desire to kill and be killed. Confronted with this knowledge, Guy Crouchback sloughs off both his static mental sheath and dynamic emotional covering. He realises the inadequacy of a static attitude to life and the inferiority and absurdity of the dynamic world's obsession with secular change. Acting upon his father, Old Mr.Gervase Crouchback's advice, he submits to the Will of God so much so that he is willing to undergo worldly humiliation for the sake of other-worldly honour. The adoption of Virginia's illegitimate child by Trimmer, ennobles Guy Crouchback, thereby holding out the sublimity inherent in Waugh's ultimate comic vision of life.

The comic vision of life unfolded in the greater

comedies is, however, never allowed to touch the borderland of didacticism. Waugh was no explainer of things. He was, as a novelist should be, a describer of events. Consequently, his narratives do without the causal sequence of the traditional nineteenth century novel. In order that his comic vision of life may emerge unobtrusively, Waugh made innovative use of English language and its literary techniques. It is quite obvious from the central role played by the image of the wheel, which Waugh likens to life, in the thematic and structural cohesion of his novels. It is not without reason that the greater comedies of Waugh have an aura of poetic charm about them. His post-modernist emphasis on objectivity does not, therefore, stand in the way of his artistic achievement. Instead, it aids him in gaining a universal appeal.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren describe a successful literary work of art as one in which 'the materials are completely assimilated into form'.[1] Understood as an invitation to the idea of a balance between subject and form, the statement resembles Waugh's own opinion on the matter. Waugh maintains:

> Properly understood style is not a seductive decoration added to a functional structure, it is of the essence of a work of art.[2]

The balanced inter-relationship between subject and form

achieved in Waugh's comic novels bears testimony to this assertion. And it is by virtue of this achievement that Waugh's major literary output is one luminous mass of order and aesthetic beauty.

We, thus, conclude that while there may be many useful approaches to the study of Waugh but the one approach that touches the heart of Waugh's creative works and uncovers his artistic genius is the study of his comic vision of life. It is only by placing the comic vision of life in Evelyn Waugh in the centre of our study of Waugh that we discover the common thematic concern running through the entire canon of Waugh literature; be it, the lesser or the greater comedies. The superior comic vision of life, unfolded in the greater comedies, as a way out of the absurdity of life, depicted in the lesser comedies, without seeming didactic at the same time, shows the heights of artistic perception achieved by Waugh. Again, the creative use of language and literary tools made for its artistic expression attract attention towards the artistic excellence achieved by Waugh. Waugh, thus, emerges as a major post-modernist novelist who felt and lent an abstruse artistic utterance to his perceptions and vision.