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“This Ghastly Age”: The Tragic Fall In Waugh’s *Brideshead*
Revisited As A Response To Modernity

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Abstract

I have examined Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* by reading it as a tragedy and looking at the motif of the tragic fall of the Marchmain family as a response to the challenges of modernity. Most academic works on *Brideshead Revisited* are religious readings that focus on the role of Catholicism in the narrative. I argue that the novel portrays modernity and as such, calls for the necessity of being able to change with the times. Approaching the narrative as a tragedy highlights this interpretation and allows for an exploration of the characters' attitudes to modernity through their tragic fall.

I have investigated the role and implications of tragedy in modern secular times and applied it to *Brideshead Revisited*, focusing on the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and employing Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's understanding of tragic action to explain the effect of the tragic fall on the spectator or reader. The Marchmains can be seen as Aristotelian tragic heroes that experience a fall due to their mistaken views that are founded on tradition and thus distance them from the modern world. The fall of the Marchmains and the looming disintegration of their social stratum are indicative of broader social change in interwar. For Charles Ryder, the narrator of *Brideshead Revisited*, the Marchmains' tragic fall serves as a tool that allows him to see life from a different perspective and reconcile nostalgia and modernity. *Brideshead Revisited* is therefore not only a Catholic novel, but also a detailed image of interwar England, the shifts in its social structure, and the importance of accepting change.

Keywords: Waugh; *Brideshead Revisited*; modernity; tragedy;

The years between the two world wars were years of modernity, new technology, science, individualism and secularisation. The old hierarchical order began to crumble and the middle class took the reins as the ideal of the self-made man replaced the notion of bowing to one's betters. Lady Julia, a member of the doomed aristocratic Marchmain family, expresses her fear of the modern world when she says: "Sometimes . . . I feel the past and the future pressing so hard that there's no room for the present at all," (Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* 325) and thus captures the zeitgeist of the interwar era. The First World War changed English society and pushed it towards a new, modern world, bringing together people from across the social divide. Coming to terms with modernity and change is a pervasive theme in *Brideshead Revisited*, the story of the Marchmains, an Anglo-Catholic aristocratic family that is struggling to survive in the increasingly secularised interwar world.

Charles Ryder, the narrator, sees the embodiment of the future in his lieutenant Hooper, a modest and simple young man "to whom one could not confidently entrust the simplest duty" (24) and does not trust progress to bring anything but negative change. After the armistice, England was struck with hunger and poverty, but it was also a place of opportunities for ambitious workers. Many aristocratic families like the Marchmains were forced to sell their estates because they could no longer afford the upkeep and because their tenants, who used to farm the land, had either died in the war or later decided to move to industrialised areas. However, the Marchmains refuse to accept the fact that the age of the aristocracy is coming to an end, making way for a Young England, and hold on to tradition, represented by their Catholic faith. Their values and worldview seem to not only hinder them as they strive to maintain their position in society, but also keep the members of the family in a constant state of unhappiness and confusion in their personal lives.

Despite its strong link to modernity, *Brideshead Revisited* is largely considered a Catholic novel that requires the reader to approach it from a religious point of view rather than examining its attitudes to progress and change. Waugh, who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1930, fifteen years before *Brideshead Revisited* was published, stated that "you can only leave God out by making your characters pure abstractions" ("Fan-fare" 250), thus rejecting the possibility of secular interpretations and suggesting that God is the driving force behind the narrative that makes the characters come to life. Critics have stayed true to Waugh's claim about the

importance of religion, making the theme of religion the focal point of the scholarship on *Brideshead Revisited*; Laura Mooneyham discusses the multiple conversions of Charles Ryder, Rosemary Johnson writes about the presence of God in the narrative, and Donat O'Donnell criticises the influence that Waugh's religious and political beliefs have had on his work. The novel is most often read as a story of religious conversion set against a backdrop of Britain in changing times, yet modernity and its impact on the narrative, although discussed, are not examined in detail. I propose a reading of *Brideshead Revisited* that highlights the role of modernity in the novel and thus provides a new insight into the narrative and its characters – a reading through the lens of the theory of tragedy.

I will explore the novel as a contemporary tragedy by looking at its tragic elements and analysing the significance and the implications of the tragic fall of the Marchmain family as a consequence of change in interwar Britain. As their world disintegrates, the Marchmains experience a struggle that seems to be a direct consequence of their mistaken views and understanding of the world. Whether or not tragedy can exist in a contemporary society has been widely debated¹ (Kaufmann 361-419, Williams 67), and the question seems parallel to the highly problematic position of the Marchmains, who might also be unable to survive modern times. Reading the novel as a tragedy is a fresh approach that moves away from conventional readings and effectively opens up the possibility of viewing *Brideshead Revisited* as a story about the impact of modernity on society.

I have based my research on Aristotle's *Poetics* and the definitions it introduces because it is considered one the founding work of the theory of tragedy (Kaufmann 34). *Brideshead Revisited* illustrates the advance of modernity, which is why I have specifically chosen to compare it to classical Greek tragedy, a genre that has a long tradition. Such a comparison highlights the juxtaposition between tradition and modernity and exposes the unconventional elements of *Brideshead Revisited* read as a contemporary tragedy, which helps answer the question of how a tragedy plays out in "the age of Hooper" (*Brideshead* 434) and how the fate of the Marchmains illuminates the effect of modernity on interwar England. This can be explored even further by establishing the cause of the tragic fall and whether tragedy itself can be considered an anachronism that is decidedly out of place in modern secular society.

¹ Kaufmann dedicates an entire chapter of *Tragedy and Philosophy* to the problem of tragedy in modern times.

Aristotle defines tragedy as “a mimesis of an action that is elevated, complete, and of magnitude” (47) and enables catharsis, a purging of negative emotions “through pity and fear” (47). He points out that a tragic plot “should be so structured that, even without seeing it performed, the person who hears the events that occur experiences horror and pity at what comes about” (Aristotle 73-75), which indicates that a tragedy does not necessarily have to be performed, making a case for reading a novel as a tragedy. The events in a complex tragic plot lead to a reversal and consequent recognition (Aristotle 65) that allows for catharsis. The fall of the tragic hero is therefore a crucial element of tragedy and tragic action cannot reach its full potential if a fall is not endured (Leech 28, 36). The catharsis in *Brideshead Revisited*, usually read as a religious conversion, can also be interpreted as a different kind of conversion - the realisation that it is vital to change with the times and accept progress.

The Marchmains are an old, well-established English family, “barons since Agincourt” (*Brideshead* 417). Their pedigree makes them ideal tragic heroes, as Aristotle considers tragedy to be an imitation of events and people above the common level (71, 81), which is why the typical Greek tragic hero is usually of noble descent. Aristotle also maintains that the most tragic are “the sufferings [that] occur within relationships, such as brother and brother, son and father, mother and son, son and mother” (75). Many of the grievances in *Brideshead Revisited* are directly linked to the imbalance within the family. The Marchmains are flawed, but this does not counter Aristotle’s definition of the tragic hero who “is someone not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error” (71). The fortunes of the characters in *Brideshead Revisited* undoubtedly change for the worse although it could be argued that some of them were miserable to begin with. As Sebastian explains to Charles, “he’s [Brideshead] miserable, she’s [Cordelia] bird-happy; ... I am happy, I rather think Julia isn’t; mummy is popularly believed to be a saint and papa is excommunicated – and I wouldn’t know which of them was happy” (*Brideshead* 110). By the end of the novel, Lady Marchmain and Lord Marchmain are dead, Sebastian is an alcoholic, Cordelia a “plain and pious spinster” (359), Julia starting a lonely life with her newly-found religion, and Charles “homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless” (400). Brideshead Castle, like its owners, disintegrates, standing “desolate” (*ibid.*), the work of the builders who constructed it “all brought to nothing” (*ibid.*). The fate of the

characters in *Brideshead Revisited* is thus reflected in the condition of Brideshead Castle, a once magnificent building that is doomed to crumble under the pressure of modernity.

The tragic plot portrays “a change not to prosperity from adversity, but on the contrary from prosperity to adversity, caused not by depravity but by a great error of a character” (Aristotle 71). This error of character, *hamartia*, is usually not a flaw in the sense of the tragic hero lacking in virtue or goodness – since character is secondary to action (53) – but rather an error of judgement, a mistake, that influences the tragic hero and sets tragic action in motion. The characters in a tragedy should fulfil four criteria: goodness, likeness, appropriateness, and consistency (79). The Marchmains are not necessarily bad people although their beliefs sometimes make them appear intentionally malicious; Lady Marchmain ignores Sebastian’s drinking and instils a sense of Catholic guilt into her children, Julia marries Rex Mottram and has an affair, Sebastian’s siblings refuse to help him and are relieved when they find out he had left the country, and Julia and Cordelia insist on asking Father Mackay to visit the dying Lord Marchmain despite his initial refusal to see a Catholic priest. However, these seemingly cruel actions are a result of the Marchmains’ *hamartia*, the tragic error that brings about their fall and is rooted in their rejection of modernity and progress. The Marchmains can therefore still be considered good people that happen to be gravely mistaken about who they are and about their role in society because the world has changed whereas they are still the same. Despite being close to the top of the social ladder and holding views that have little to do with the real world, the Marchmains are neither too good nor too corrupt and therefore very human, fulfilling the criterion of likeness. The question of appropriateness is problematic; the Marchmains are true to their social standing but their world has changed so much that what their role in society entails is uncertain. However, if they represent the English aristocracy in decline, they do seem true to their type and therefore appropriate. Their strong convictions can be understood as consistent as the Marchmains’ behaviour and beliefs are consistent and do not change until they reach the moment of recognition, “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Aristotle 65).

Although the members of the Marchmain family experience very diverse personal falls – from Sebastian’s fall into alcoholism to Lady Marchmain’s failure to protect her children - and differ considerably as regards personality, I am going to focus on the fall of the family as a whole rather than the individual falls. Analysing

the fate of each individual in depth would inevitably mean delving into the Marchmains' complex and dysfunctional family dynamics, thus examining the relations within the family rather than the Marchmains' interaction with society at large and their encounters with modernity as observed by Charles. Sebastian's friend Anthony Blanche considers the Marchmains "quite, quite gruesome" (*Brideshead* 70) and Sebastian – although a member of the family himself – views them as a homogenous unit, trying to prevent Charles from meeting them and telling him that they are all "madly charming" (52). Despite their differences in temperament and character, the Marchmains represent English Catholic aristocrats, a very specific group with a firmly fixed place in society, elevated by their status and at the same time marginalised by their faith. This is demonstrated when Julia experiences her first season in London and starts looking for a suitable husband. She knows that she will not be able to reach as high as her Anglican peers and that she will have to settle for less: "Perhaps in a family of three or four boys, a Catholic might get the youngest without opposition" (216). There are not many upper class Catholic families like the Marchmains (217), and Julia feels that "her religion st[ands] as a barrier between her and her natural goal" (216). People like the Marchmains are certainly outcasts in the eyes of Charles' cousin Jasper who warns Charles to "beware of the Anglo-Catholics – they're all sodomites with unpleasant accents" (40). Their religion thus sets the Marchmain family apart from the rest of the British aristocracy, casting them as representatives of a specific sphere in society.

The Marchmains' religious beliefs seem to emphasise their mistakes and render them more visible. As Lady Marchmain tells Charles, "the poor have always been the favourites of God and his saints" (153), thus implying that people of her social standing have to try even harder to be in God's favour. By being so out of touch with the reality of the human condition, Lady Marchmain comes very close to becoming a "pure abstraction", casting herself a martyr in spite of being a privileged aristocrat. If God is indeed "left out" (Waugh, "Fan-fare" 250), Lady Marchmain's simplistic opinion of the lower classes seems deluded, which shows that her religion – that is, in fact, an extremely distorted version of Catholicism – serves as a scaffold that supports her out-dated views. Lady Marchmain's opinion can therefore be viewed as ignorant and her ideas of what life should be like are ultimately a misconception rooted in the wide gap between the aristocracy and the underprivileged.

It is vital to note that Lady Marchmain lives in times of modernity in a world where religion and religious codes of conduct are questioned and more often than not, dismissed. For many people, the cruelty of the First World War confirmed Nietzsche's claim that God is dead, which pushed modern thinking towards the rejection of religion and the tendency to consider the nihilist idea of the transvaluation of all values (Wilson 26). The old and the traditional were often seen as corrupt and therefore had to be destroyed to make way for the new. Lady Marchmain's Catholic values would, then, be viewed as regressive, hollow, and representative of the "sickness" that centuries of Christian tradition had plunged Europe into (Wilson 26). However, the Marchmains do not see their religion and its impact on their lives as indicative of how sorely change is needed, despite occasionally acknowledging that their beliefs are an obstacle rather than an asset. Whereas Cordelia and Brideshead are deeply religious, Julia and Sebastian consider themselves "half-heathen" (*Brideshead* 110) and have trouble following the Catholic creed; Sebastian spends a summer with Charles indulging in "naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins" (61), claims that he is "very, very much wicked" than Charles (107) and likes to quote St. Augustine's wayward prayer: "O God, make me good, but not yet" (*ibid.*). Julia, much like her brother, tells Charles that she has "always been bad" and will probably "be bad again, punished again" (393). O'Donnell makes a point when he accuses *Brideshead Revisited* of "breathing a loving patience with mortal sin among the aristocracy and an unchristian petulance towards the minor foibles of the middle class" (405). The Marchmains' high status helps them maintain their distance from the world beyond their class and allows them to go against the grain without being judged too harshly. This means they cannot realise that their views are mistaken and finally see the need to acknowledge modernity and adapt to modern times as the only way to survive.

When Charles first visits Brideshead Castle in the late 1920s, the consequences the war had on the estate, although faint, are clear and constantly present. Charles talks of painting the walls of the office and mentions that it "had once been used for estate business, but was now derelict, holding only some garden games and a tub of dead aloes" (*Brideshead* 103). The estate that used to require serious management is now in trouble, which is confirmed later in the narrative when it becomes clear that the Marchmains are in financial difficulties that eventually lead to Lord Marchmain selling their London house in order to save the family estate and

income. Charles laments the fate of tradition and bitterly remarks that the country was to be governed by the likes of Hooper, the modern middle-class Englishman who is not romantic (22) and does not wish to return to pre-war England:

These men must die to make a world for Hooper; they were the aborigines, vermin by right of law, to be shot off at leisure so that things might be safe for the travelling salesman, with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet hand-shake, his grinning dentures. I wondered, as the train carried me farther and farther from Lady Marchmain, whether perhaps there was not on her, too, the same blaze, marking her and hers for destruction by other ways than war. (167)

Lady Marchmain, a “starry and delicate” noblewoman (166), the idealised representative of the upper class, is marked for destruction, to be disposed of and replaced by the travelling salesman who sounds anything but charming with his “fat wet hand-shake” and his “grinning dentures”, a very clear picture of the impending fall of the aristocracy. Because the Marchmains do not change, they are to be “shot off at leisure” like vermin (167), and they probably are considered vermin by the lower classes because they do not work, are deep in debt, yet refuse to live within their means and instead continue enjoying a life of luxury. Their fall does not necessarily inspire pity and fear because those not belonging to the upper class might welcome the decline of the aristocracy and consider it long overdue, or simply not care about the fall of a family that is so distanced from the modern world. This renders the Marchmains’ role as Aristotelian tragic heroes problematic as they carry the burden of anachronism, the mark of belonging to a social class that has outstayed its welcome in modern society yet still enjoys a number of privileges it is not entitled to.

In an interwar world that was becoming increasingly secularised, having strong religious beliefs was a bold nod to old traditions. Charles finds the constant presence of religion in the everyday life of the Marchmains puzzling and asks Cordelia: “Does your family always talk about religion all the time?” ‘Not all the time. It’s a subject that just comes up naturally, doesn’t it?’ ‘Does it? It never has with me before’ (*Brideshead* 115). The reason the Marchmains are holding on to their beliefs is the strong bond between tradition and religion. This is implied in Charles’ description of the Marchmains’ family history:

The family history was typical of the Catholic squires of England; from Elizabeth’s reign till Victoria’s they lived sequestered lives, among their tenantry and kinsmen, sending their sons to school abroad, often marrying there, inter-marrying, if not, with a score of families like

themselves, debarred from all preferment, and learning, in those lost generations, lessons which could still be read in the lives of the last three men of the house. (166)

Their Catholic faith is what helps the Marchmains maintain their small cloistered world. They carry on living exactly as they have lived for centuries, even though they are surrounded by modernity. Unable to change with the times and adapt to the fast-paced modern world, they remain caught between centuries of Catholic aristocratic tradition on one side and the evolving secular society on the other.

The Catholic tradition is the reason Julia decides to leave Charles after her father's death. She feels that sacrificing their relationship is the only way that she can return to God and be redeemed. She is not the only Marchmain who suffers in order to be closer to God. Sebastian, already battling alcoholism, is sent abroad in the company of Mr. Samgrass, only to run away and eventually settle down as a religious drunk in a Moroccan convent. When Cordelia talks to Charles about Sebastian, she tells him: "One can have no idea what the suffering may be, to be maimed as he is – no dignity, no power of will. No one is ever holy without suffering" (*Brideshead* 358). It is not only Sebastian and Julia who sacrifice themselves during the course of *Brideshead Revisited*. Cordelia, once a lively, bright child, becomes a "thwarted" spinster (359), having grown accustomed to "gross suffering" (349) while working abroad as a nurse. She, too, is suffering to become holy. The Marchmains seem to think that there is virtue in suffering and it seems likely that they see a similarity between their tragedy and the story of Christ. Leech draws a parallel between the suffering of king Lear and the suffering of Christ: "In a sense, the king [Lear] has suffered and died for us. The analogy with the idea of Christ's sacrifice is strong" (51). The same could be said about the characters in *Brideshead Revisited* and it would help explain why the Marchmains suffer and sacrifice themselves. But what could be so grave a sin to require sacrifice of them all? In *The World as Will And Representation*, Schopenhauer suggests that "the true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight, that it is not his own individual sins that the hero atones for, but original sin, i.e. the crime of existence itself" (331). The thought that it is existence itself one atones for, not one's individual sins, shifts the perspective on the Marchmains' sacrifice. Julia decides not to marry Charles because she believes that would be "set[ting] up a rival good to God's" would be "unforgivable" (*Brideshead* 393) and "that if [she] give[s] up this one thing [she] want[s] so much, however bad [she is], he

won't quite despair of [her] in the end" (ibid.). If Julia is inherently guilty of existing, her individual sins do not matter at all and all her efforts to atone are pointless as Schopenhauer's theory does not allow for redemption. It is important to note that the Marchmains' idea of redemption cannot be viewed as the Christian equivalent of catharsis. Whereas catharsis involves recognition, suffering, and change, redemption is based on atoning for one's sins, asking God for forgiveness and being redeemed. It is self-awareness and a profound knowledge of past mistakes that lead to catharsis, combined with the tragic hero's capacity to change. Unlike catharsis, redemption requires trust in God and hope for forgiveness. Therefore, catharsis seems to function on a more personal level and can be achieved through knowledge and consequent change, rather than through atonement and hope.

As a Catholic, Julia decides to accept God's will because she "can't shut [herself] out from his mercy" (393), which is, from her point of view, what staying with Charles would mean. By giving up "this one thing [she] want[s] so much" (ibid.), Julia completely surrenders to God. This can be understood as parallel to Schopenhauer's idea of giving up the will-to-live, relinquishing one's individuality and thus freeing oneself from the constant struggle of living and trying to attain goals that only offer a temporary sense of satisfaction.

Schopenhauer considers the capacity to suffer to the point of giving up one's will-to-live as one of the most important traits in a tragic hero. The hero that falls and consequently gives up their will-to-live offers the spectator a rare opportunity to see life from a different perspective and experience the freedom of denying both the will-to-live and the will-to-die. In tragedy, the spectator encounters a very specific kind of knowledge, "a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence" (Schopenhauer 330). This knowledge enables the spectator to reach beyond the deceptive power of the Will; to surrender the will-to-live is to free oneself from egoism and see existence for what it really is. Tragedy thus shows the spectator that although this path is not open to everyone, there is an alternative to being a prisoner of the Will. Perhaps this is how Charles experiences Julia's resignation; he does not completely understand her choice but he anticipates it and respects it although he wishes Julia had not made this decision: "I don't want to make it easier for you ... I hope your heart may break; but I do understand" (393). Seeing Julia choose the path of resignation makes Charles re-evaluate his own choices and see life from a different perspective.

Discovering an alternative perspective does not, however, necessarily mean that there is any hope of catharsis in *Brideshead Revisited*. Catharsis, a resolution in the form of “pleasurable relief” (Leech 59), enables the spectator to purge of negative emotions and is a common element of tragedy. There is little hope for Waugh’s characters and when we meet Charles a few years after his final break with the Marchmain family, it is clear that his conversion to Catholicism has not given him a peace of mind. He feels “stiff and weary in the evenings”, regularly drinks “three glasses of gin before dinner” (*Brideshead* 18) and is haunted by his past. It is not until he sees the small red flame of an old lamp in the chapel that some closure is offered but the faint promise of God’s grace does not guarantee purification and can hardly be compared to the kind of catharsis Nietzsche has in mind when he talks of “the tremendous power of tragedy to excite the life of a nation, to purify and to purge” (100). Hope in *Brideshead Revisited* is evasive - even the small red flame, the only offer of a renewed and meaningful life, is lit in a “beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design” (*Brideshead* 401). The thought that this shabby object could signal tragic relief borders on comical, and yet Charles sees it as “the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; . . . It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones” (ibid.). Moreover, upon seeing the little red flame, Charles experiences a transformation and looks “unusually cheerful” (ibid.). The idea of an object of “deplorable design” representing the hope of catharsis can easily be interpreted as a reflection on modernity as Charles has to come to terms with the world of Hooper, a world that is certainly not one of beauty in Charles’ eyes. Whether he is truly cheerful and at peace in the closing paragraph of the novel remains subject to debate, just like the question of the other characters’ catharses. We are told what becomes of Waugh’s tragic characters, but we do not know whether they are still suffering or not. Their fate is uncertain because they live in the modern world that is full of uncertainty and all they can do is accept that and move on with the times.

The role of tragedy in the modern world, especially in a society that is still bearing the scars of war, is unclear. The First World War left England devastated and had an irreversible impact on the people of England, leaving very few families completely untouched. Profound statements might not be Hooper’s forte but when he says: “It’s all on the account of the war” (35), he unknowingly sums up the atmosphere of *Brideshead Revisited*. Kaufmann claims that tragedy is not needed

when there is already enough suffering in real life (xviii) and the tragic fall of an aristocratic family truly does seem relatively insignificant amongst memories of thousands of war tragedies. The war was also catalyst for change that was already on its way and opened the doors to modernity. Steiner addresses the problem of tragedy in modern times:

... it is difficult to imagine a renaissance of high tragic theatre in a positivist climate of consciousness, in a mass-market society, more and more of whose thinking members regard the question of the existence of God, let alone of demonic agents intervening in mundane affairs, an archaic nonsense. (543)

The Marchmains' tragedy could also be regarded as "archaic nonsense", an anachronism in the face of modernity. The new world is fast-paced and does not offer any room for nostalgia and sentimentality. People who are the driving force of contemporary society – like Julia's husband Rex Mottram – have neither the time nor the inclination to concern themselves with questions of religion and tradition. When Rex is preparing to convert to Catholicism, he does not care about the philosophical and moral issues that are tied in with his conversion, all he wants to do is "sign on the dotted line" (228). Julia later tells Charles that Rex was "unnaturally developed" and "something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce" (237). The wide gap between the values of the Marchmains and the values of the changing English society is constantly present in *Brideshead Revisited* and is highlighted by characters like Hooper and Rex. Williams explores how tragedy and society are intertwined and claims that tragic action emphasises the contradictions between values and the current social and political system (67). He suggests that, "in the transition from a feudal to a liberal world, such contradictions are common and are lived out as tragedy" (68). Tragedy can therefore be considered a common occurrence in changing times and the tragic fall of the Marchmains the only possible outcome of the conflict between two different value systems.

The tension between the old and the new could be viewed as a manifestation of crisis, a theme that is strongly present in literature inspired by the First World War. The imagery of a chaotic, collapsing society is mirrored in a collapsing genre (Trotter 77), which is most often the novel, but the idea itself could also be applied to tragedy. Looking at contemporary tragedy in the light of the literature of crisis solves the problem of putting the genre in context, allowing it to be anachronistic and absurd because it mirrors the crisis in society. Therefore, tragedy can still exist in modern

times but its role is different – it can no longer function as the Aristotelian tragedy, inspiring fear and pity, nor can its characters be the noble heroes of Greek theatre. Crisis results in disintegration and loss of meaning (Trotter 77), both in society and literature. As a direct consequence of crisis in society, the Marchmains' suffering does not inspire fear and pity, and is rendered insignificant and confusing, just like the concept of tragedy itself. As “the fabric of meaning wears thin in places, and meaninglessness shows through” (Trotter 77), modernity and tragedy can be reconciled, reflecting the state of modern society.

Charles refers to his dealings with the Marchmain family as “the fierce little human tragedy in which [he] played” (*Brideshead* 401). This indicates that he is well aware of the sheer theatricality of what had happened and that he looks upon it with a sense of irony and detachment. His attitude towards the tragic fall is transparent in his attempt to lighten the mood after Julia's dramatic breakdown at the fountain:

'It's like the setting of a comedy,' I said. 'Scene: a baroque fountain in a nobleman's grounds. Act one, sunset; act two, dusk; act three, moonlight. The characters keep assembling at the fountain for no very clear reason.'

'Comedy?'

'Drama. Tragedy. Farce. What you will.' (338)

Julia seems perturbed by the fact that Charles talks of her and her family's fall as if it were a play: “Oh, don't talk in that damned boulderish way. Why must you see everything secondhand? Why must this be a play?” (338). Although directly involved in the tragic happenings at Brideshead, Charles is able to distance himself from the “fierce little human tragedy”.

As an artist, “an eternal type, solid, purposeful, observant” (Waugh, *Brideshead* 69), Charles is the narrator, an observer who comments on the events he witnessed and was involved in. His detachment from the goings-on at Brideshead is twofold: firstly, he is an outsider because he is not one of the Marchmains and secondly, more than twenty years have passed since he first met Sebastian and his family, a barrier between his past and his present that Charles himself refers to as a “twenty years' distance” (161). Thus removed from the tragic fall at Brideshead Castle, Charles can assume the role of the chorus, commenting on what transpires and voicing his pity and sympathy for the fallen tragic heroes from the point of view “of ordinary but percipient men, awed, horrified, as an intermediary between the tragic figure and ourselves” (Leech 74). The bourgeois Charles is an ideal intermediary

between the aristocratic Marchmains and the reader. Considering how fond Charles is of tradition, it is no wonder that he fits Aristotle's classical definition of the chorus perfectly; he can "be treated as one of the actors . . . a part of the whole" (Aristotle 95), bridging the gap between the Marchmains and the outside world. To the modern reader, the Marchmains' fall might not seem tragic at all, whereas Charles knows the Marchmains and pities them, thus bringing them closer to the reader.

While Charles can certainly be considered the chorus, to leave his role in the Marchmains' tragedy at that would be to oversimplify the function of his character in *Brideshead Revisited* and to dismiss his aesthetic sensibilities. Charles is often overwhelmed by his surroundings and ascribes an aesthetic value to almost everything – he even likens Julia's feelings to Hunt's pre-Raphaelite painting (*Brideshead* 337) that depicts a kept woman with her lover in the moment she realises the error of her ways. By comparing Julia to the "fallen" young woman depicted in *The Awakening Conscience*, he reduces her to a trope. Julia thus becomes an iconographic element representing a fallen woman, an object that Charles observes from a distance without getting involved. When Julia remembers being compared to Hunt's painting, she asks Charles: "Why must my conscience be a Pre-Raphaelite picture?" (338), to which he replies: "It's a way I have" (*ibid.*). Not only is Julia Hunt's fallen woman, Charles talks of Sebastian as being "entrancing, with that epicene beauty which in extreme youth sings aloud for love and withers at the first cold wind" (45), viewing him as an embodiment of an abstraction rather than a human being. This impersonal approach is central to Charles' view of the Marchmains – he eventually attempts to conflate Sebastian and Julia by saying that Sebastian was the forerunner (300). This suggests that one aspect of Charles' interest in the Marchmains might have been purely aesthetic, that of a spectator watching a play.

When Sebastian takes him to Brideshead to visit Nanny Hawkins, Charles is absolutely fascinated by the interior of Brideshead Castle: "the mellow afternoon sun flooded in, over the bare floor, the vast, twin fireplaces of sculptured marble, the coved ceiling frescoed with classic deities and heroes, the gilt mirrors and scagliola pilasters" (52). It is there, at Brideshead, that Charles first finds beauty (102), which steers him towards his career as a painter. His "conversion to the Baroque" (102) at Brideshead is a very powerful experience for Charles and he begins to associate the anachronistic aristocratic tradition of the Marchmains with aesthetic sensibilities that contemporary society, the world of Hooper and Rex, lacks. Charles "lives for beauty"

(310) and to him, Modern Art is “great bosh” (184) because it is inevitably bound to modernity, the one thing he detests.

Ironically, modernity is essential for Charles’ success as an architectural painter. Charles earns his living painting old buildings that are soon to be demolished or sold: “In such buildings England abounded, and, in the last decade of their grandeur, Englishmen seemed for the first time to become conscious of what before was taken for granted, and to salute their achievement at the moment of extinction” (266). The economic situation of the times left many painters out of pocket but also had a similar effect on the landed gentry and thus “served to enhance [his] success” (ibid.). Charles remarks that this was “itself a symptom of the decline” (ibid.), yet documenting the tragic fall of the aristocracy is what also enables him to develop as an artist and seems to be a leitmotif in his work and his life. As the narrator of *Brideshead Revisited*, he paints another picture of the tragic fall.

Just like he becomes infatuated with the beauty of Brideshead Castle, Charles is drawn to the aesthetics of the tragic fall. When he rushes to Brideshead after receiving a telegram saying that Sebastian is gravely injured, he talks of disappointment upon his arrival: “I thought you were dying,’ I said, conscious then, as I had been ever since I arrived, of the predominating emotion of vexation, rather than of relief, that I had been bilked of my expectations of a grand tragedy” (96). It is not difficult to imagine that Charles, who is incredibly responsive to the beautiful and the artistic, could be attracted to tragedy, the highest form of poetic art (Aristotle 137-141). He sees Julia’s sadness as “magical” (*Brideshead* 280) and concludes that it is “the completion of her beauty” because it “[speaks] straight to the heart” (ibid.).

This immense emotional impact is what makes tragedy unique and beautiful - it is the “taming of horror through art”, turning “thoughts of repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life” (Nietzsche 40). Tragedy is more than just the sheer poetic beauty of the tragic fall. It enables the spectator to assert their existence by witnessing the fall of the tragic hero, and this is exactly what Charles experiences. In order to establish himself as an individual in contemporary society, he must suffer with the Marchmains, only to emerge “looking unusually cheerful” (401) when the tragedy is finally and truly over.

Brideshead Revisited has much to offer when read from a broader, secular perspective. It is a contemporary tragedy that incorporates plenty of traditional elements of Greek theatre and adds a bitter streak of its own, introducing atypical

tragic heroes who experience a very different kind of tragic fall that is attuned to the uncertain backdrop of England between the two world wars. Waugh's characters are tragic heroes that do not necessarily inspire fear and pity in the reader. Their tragic fall emphasises the fact that there is no place for them in contemporary society unless they change and accept the modern world. With its unorthodox characters and tragic action, *Brideshead Revisited* is a modern tragedy that dramatises the struggles of contemporary society and the ultimate collapse of the old hierarchy.

As the Marchmains come face to face with their own decline and have hardly any hope of redemption, Charles ultimately finds his existence affirmed by their fall. A secular reading of *Brideshead Revisited*, combined with an awareness of the novel's religious interpretations, thus provides a unique insight into a turbulent era in the history of England. It illustrates the consequences and implications of change in a social context and presents an unconventional form of tragedy as a reflection of the Marchmains' fall. Thus, the tragic fall is both a concrete image of the fate of the aristocracy and a highly effective tool that helps the reader come to terms with the chaos of the changing world.

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