

The Narratological Style and the Reader of Evelyn Waugh's Early Satires

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Abstract

The article deals with the role of the implied reader in Evelyn Waugh's novels. An attempt will be made to define who the implied reader is and what is his position and role in fictional realm. By analysing narrative strategies and techniques within a selection of Waugh's works, I attempt to discuss the changing relationship between author/narrator and the implied reader. I try to point that within Evelyn Waugh's writing one can observe a simultaneous evolution of the narrator voice and the role ascribed to the implied reader. What is more, I discuss the limits of interpretation. I try to present and analyse how both the author/narrator and the text can impose limitations on the implied reader allowing him to move freely, however, within a set frame. Intertextuality is one of the focal points of the article, as I try to propose that the use of specific intertextual references in several different novels enhances the reader's understanding of Waugh's fictional world. An attempt is made to prove that through analysis of different levels of understanding intertextual relation the reader takes on himself a role of creator. Furthermore, I draw attention to the places of indeterminacy. In this discussion I include both structures of indeterminacy proposed by Roman Ingarden i.e. blanks and negations, as both are needed not only to establish the interaction that takes place between text and the implied reader, but also to try to regulate such relation. An attempt will be made to explain how important filling the gaps within the text is and how completing the blanks affects the reader and the process of reading as such.

Keywords

Evelyn Waugh, Iser, implied reader, aesthetic response, blanks.

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Evelyn Waugh depicts the world of the twentieth century «as a place of anarchy and unreason where the good and innocent are victimized» (Neff 1). Even though he uses satire, the world he presents is one of a continual social and cultural decline, full of madness and death. Waugh's novels are not only interesting because of their subject matter, but they are also narratological masterpieces enabling endless analysis.

This article deals with the role of the implied reader in Evelyn Waugh's novels. By analysing narrative strategies and techniques within a selection of Waugh's works, I attempt to discuss the relationship between author/narrator and the reader. What is more, I discuss the limits of interpretation. I try to present and analyse how both the author/narrator and the text can impose limitations on the reader allowing him to move freely within a set frame. Furthermore, I draw attention to the places of indeterminacy. In this discussion I include both structures of indeterminacy proposed by Roman Ingarden, i.e. blanks and negations, as both are needed not only to establish the interac-

tion that takes place between text and the implied reader, but also to try to regulate such relation.

Since this topic is rather broad and certainly open for a further discussion, for the purpose of this brief paper I shall focus only on two of Evelyn Waugh's early satires i.e. *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*. Even though these selected novels might seem to differ both stylistically and structurally, they both share Waugh's minimalistic approach to literary expression, tone, language and important characteristic of narration. The narratological consistency visible not only in the above-mentioned novels but throughout Waugh's oeuvre suggests that it might be possible to discuss them as a single discourse and also to examine how all texts resemble one another within the said discourse.

While analysing Waugh's early satires, David Lodge said:

He [Waugh] retains always a classical detachment, lucidity and poise. This is the source of Evelyn Waugh's distinctive tone, and of his most characteristic comic effects, it is also what troubles the critics who have accused him of being cruel, snobbish, nihilistic (5).

It is exactly this detachment and a rather neutral voice of Waugh's narrators that seems to be the focal point of recent criticism on his early works. The predominant narration of Waugh's early satires falls into two possible types i.e. an authorial narrative situation and figural narration. In an authorial narrative situation, which Genette named heterodiegetic, the narrator is detached from the story world, or as in Waugh's case, attempts to stay untouched from the turmoil, vulgarity and stupidity of the world he portrays. Heterodiegetic seems to be a term that suits Waugh's narrator far better than a third person narrator, as apart from being able to say everything, enact omniscience, he still appears to be a part of the presented world, since he never remains indifferent. Not rarely, Waugh's narrator lacks any sympathy towards characters he describes and stays unmoved by the hassle they produce. The voice in Waugh's early satires is ironic, meticulous, one that enjoys highlighting faults, stupidity and decay of the presented world. Waugh's narrators do not allow themselves to feel any sentiment, as empathy appears to be one thing they certainly can resist, keeping in mind their 'dandyish nature'. Brian Wickers commented on that notion in his work *Story Shaped World*:

Waugh's contribution to the literature of dandyism consist in his development, not of the dandyish character, but of the dandyish narrator. It comes out in the special tone of the early novels, and particularly in the narrator's studied neutrality towards actions and attitudes which by ordinary decent standards, cry out to be judged. This refusal to judge, coming as it does from a recognition that the only standards available from the bourgeois world, by which to make a judgement, are themselves irredeemably corrupt, gives the early novels their scandalous and outrageous, but also their valuably invigorating character. (155)

These 'dandyish' characteristics, the slightly impertinent unwillingness to judge, however, are only a means to an end. Avoiding direct comments, creating a certain blank between the outrageous behaviour and the reader, actually proves to be far more powerful, as the lack of a scornful or really, any sort of comment from the narrator can reinforce the reader's feeling.

Waugh's narrators, as Frick also suggests, in general keep their distance and, at least seemingly, objectivity by the lack of techniques and rhetorical devices that «would call attention to the self-conscious artistry of his [Waugh's] narration» (4). Narrators do not

take part in the event; they are only mere observers and commentators of the presented world. Quite naturally one might assume that, since they do not play any active role in the narrative, they are not given a personality of their own. This is, however, not the case in Waugh's novels. In order to remain neutral, narrators focus mainly on reporting events and snippets of conversations. However, keeping in mind that the main principle on which Waugh structures his narration is omission and extreme brevity, one realizes that the decision behind the cuts and blanks constitute narrators' personality.

In general, commentaries from Waugh's narrators fall into three main categories: background information, character analysis and summary of action. In case of Waugh these commentaries are either completely absent or minimalistic, yet precise and that is what the narrator's objectivity is built on. However, the absolute lack of intrusive, "authorial" comment is impossible as even the omission might imply an indirect commentary on the narrator's behalf. His objective is to create the illusion of detachment and neutrality - to appear to merely report the events when in reality he is in control of them. This gives rise to what McCarthy calls 'director-narrator', a notion where the narrator takes the «stance with regard to the spectacle they report never leaving the vantage point of their detachment to empathize with their subject» (121). It does not mean that they lack emotion, far from it. Even the most minimalistic comments are an enthusiastic attempt to highlight, in case of early satires, severe vulgarity and stupidity of their subject. George McCarthy states: «There is never anything censorious or approving in his voice. His amused disinterestedness suspends all judgement. With his unvarying tone of sophisticated tolerance, he never expresses an emotion stronger than mild wonderment» (123). It certainly comes as a shock to the reader, and amusement to the narrator, when in Chapter 6 of *Vile Bodies*, the latter reports that right young people start «popping all together...like a litter of pigs, and... squealing up the steps» (71). The very same dichotomy of language might be seen in the serious descriptions of rather trivial things- good example being a diet of Tony and Brenda in *A Handful of Dust*: «it gave an interest to their meals and saved them from the two uncivilized extremes of which solitary dinners are in danger- absorbing gluttony or an irregular regime of scrambled eggs and a raw beef sandwiches» (26).

In general the language used by Waugh's characters seems to be devoid of meaning. They almost never say what they really mean. Usually they utter what they are expected to. People try to exchange courtesies even if they are in opposition to their real attitude to one another. For example, when Beaver comes to Hetton, both he and Tony are unhappy with his visit. Nevertheless, they hide their true feelings and act according to social expectations. What is more, many a time characters say words conventionally related to traditional standards to describe unimportant situations. The word «hell», which commonly has a negative connotation, being associated with despicable acts or behaviour, is used in the novel to express merely boredom, irritation, tiredness, or an unwelcome guest. Minor inconveniences are described as «monstrous», «too horrible» or «extremely sad». The language is as corrupted as the society. Even in church, words no longer convey any meaning, as the Reverend Tendril uses the same sermons for years. What he preaches is emptied of any content and it does not affect the congregation, since his words were not designed for them, but for British people in colonial India during the reign of Queen Victoria.

In a world where all the 'great' words are worn out by trivial things, the real tragedies are met with inappropriate comments or silence. When John Andrew dies, Tony seems to be lost for words. He is unable to express his grief since there are no adequate words

left. Brenda, who is supposed to be a mourning mother, says only «Poor little boy», as if John Andrew were not hers. She sums up the situation, quite rightly, by saying that there is «Nothing to say» (HD 122). The only thing Tony keeps repeating is that he is «muddled», but what is actually “muddled” is society and the language. There is always imbalance between the tone and the incident being described. Waugh's narration is concerned with the unemotional understatements with language and tone completely inappropriate to situations. A good example is a short scene in which one learns about Adam's father death in *Vile Bodies* in a rather peculiar, yet very matter of fact conversation: «how's your father?» says Lottie, «Not dead, is he?» «Yes, I'm afraid he is», Adam replies. (Chapter 1),

The language used by the narrator avoids any phrases that might emotionally involve the reader. His tone and manner of narration are supposed to further create the distance not only between the narrator and his subject but also between the reader and the text. In none of the early satires one can find an in-depth analysis of the character, any insight into their inner life.

Narrator remains in the position of mere observer and reporter letting the dialogues and events be the only source of information. He is somehow both in and on the edge of what is happening. In such a way, the reader seems to be given certain liberty of making his own judgements by not being influenced by the 'authorial' commentary. However, this is rather deceptive, as the narrator orchestrates what is and what is not presented, and thus continues to influence the reader in an indirect way while creating the impression of non-influence.

When it comes to the 'orchestrating', Waugh highlights the director-like nature of his narrator even through the very structure of the text. *Vile Bodies*, often being referred to as his first very modernistic novel, is mainly a sequence of fragmented dialogues and rapidly changing scenes somehow tied together by an observant and unflappable narrator. Such cinematic cutting back and forth between places and characters was later on exploited, however to a far lesser extent, in *A Handful of Dust*, especially in the final sequence happening both in London and in the Brazilian jungle.

Director-narrator as a notion is particularly interesting from the perspective of Roman Ingarden's places of indeterminacy as well as Iser's reader response theory.

Wolfgang Iser defines reading as a basic interaction between text and reader, where, traditionally, text serves the role of the guide. Quite obviously, the reader can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate his views of it are. For this specific communication to be successful, the reader's activity must be controlled in some way by the text. Still, control cannot be understood as a tangible entity occurring independently of the process of communication. Although exercised by the text, it is not the text itself, which is especially important in case of limited narrational involvement when comment brevity does not facilitate creation of framework of reference.

What seems to be far more important in a discussion of Waugh's minimalistic narrative technique is the opposition between what is said and what is not said. The gap arising out of implications is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with his own projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said directly. Interestingly, it is the allusion or implication that gives shape and weight to the meaning. Generally, in fiction, as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, the said expands, to take greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound. What is concealed spurs the reader into the action but this action is also controlled by what is revealed «the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light» (Iser, *Prospecting* 23). This might

be slightly problematic when it comes to passages of extreme brevity as it may lead to ascribing profound significance to each and every word, as there are so few, which then may result in extreme confusion on the part of the reader. Consequently, the asymmetry between the text and the reader stimulates a constitutive activity on the part of the reader, this is given a specific structure by the blanks and negations arising out of the text, and this structure controls the process of interaction.

The very minimalistic commentary in Waugh's novel creates the impression of being, as R. Frick suggests, «dramatized or rendered rather than merely summarized» (4). Waugh's narrators provide the information through set of events, scenes and conversations, more often than not with rapidly changing point of view. Quite interestingly, one can never find any traditional discursive summary of presented issues, which might moralize or, simply, interpret the scene. In *A Handful of Dust*, both John Andrew's death and Tony's divorce for example, are presented through a series of dialogues separated in time and space and between different characters. The text, therefore, gives the impression of being slightly fragmented. Frick suggests that «Relying on scene rather than summary, the narrator forces the reader to fill in the gaps himself. Narrative ellipsis means that temporal or spatial links between scenes must often be supplied by the reader» (6). Filling the blanks falls in line with Ingarden's places of indeterminacy. According to Ingarden, every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation in terms of the text, however, this supplementation can never be completed. What is important is that Ingarden highlighted that it is not necessary for all the indeterminacies to be filled in and there are occasions when they should not be, as it may result in transforming high art into kitsch (*The Cognition*).

However, what needs to be born in mind is that in fact there are two basic structures of indeterminacy in the text - blanks and negations. These are essential conditions for communications for they set in motion the interaction that takes place between text and reader, and to some extent they also regulate it. Still, if the places of indeterminacy are sometimes to be filled in, sometimes to be left open and sometimes to be passed over completely, the question arises as to what criteria are to determine this process, especially in the case of texts such as Waugh's early satires where the gaps easily outnumber the given narrator's comment. In other words, Waugh's narration might seem to be giving the reader a lot of liberty in terms of interpretation. However, one needs to remember that this freedom remains limited through the framework imposed by the director-narrator, who manipulates the sequences of actions and allows the reader to move freely only within given frame.

Sartre stated that text always take place on the level of their reader's ability. If a text does not fulfil its traditionally expected functions but instead uses its techniques to transform expected functions into, so called, minus functions—which is deliberate omission in order to invoke their nonfulfillment in the conscious mind of the reader, anyone who is not familiar with these traditional functions will automatically miss the communicatory intention of this technique widely applied in modern fiction. He will experience a sense of disorientation and may react accordingly.

This can lead to a reader simply projecting his own experience, culture and background into understanding. On one hand it may be seen as giving the reader greater liberty, allowing him to be the entity that creates the meaning, especially if we assume that any word or text has meaning only when it is fitted into some larger context, and if the text does not provide the larger context it is left for the reader. Waugh himself believed

that one should: «give the relevant facts and let the reader make their own judgements» (Lane 146).

In most cases in Waugh's early satire the reader appears to have to face the mosaic of sequences, events and dialogues and work his way through it, rather than, as David Lodge also suggests, attempt to decipher a consistent message. Lodge claims that:

The anchor of the reader's response will in this [Waugh's] case be, not an abstractable set of positive values, but the intelligence and poise of the implied author as conveyed by his style and management of events. There is, in fact, behind Waugh's fictional world, a consistent point of view [...], but it is not one which the reader has to identify in order to enjoy the satirical comedy. (12)

The very idea of a «consistent point of view» is worth looking into. Waugh's early novels are never what they seem to be. Firstly, quite often, structurally they appear to be some random collections of characters and incidents. However, close analysis proves that the first impression is rather misleading, as the texts are solidly formulated, artfully structured and the randomness is merely ostensible. Waugh is extremely consistent. *Vile Bodies*, his second novel, is a social satire, ridiculing the lavish lifestyle of young, bright things. The characters are superficial, irresponsible and focused only on obtaining a trouble-free life. It seems light and ironic. Then, suddenly, the reader is faced with a significant change in tone and mood, which is usually ascribed to Waugh's personal drama. Therefore, one might argue that there is inconsequence in the form and development. However, keeping in mind that at that time Waugh was fascinated with modernists, especially with T. S. Eliot, whose disjointed cinematic style is resembled in *Vile Bodies*, the inconsequence is no longer apparent. The novel focuses on the decay of society and the more rotten it becomes the less light-hearted and unflappable the tone of narrative is. *Vile Bodies* takes its epigraph from *Through the Looking Glass*. What is more, many characters seem very childish and Alice-like in a sense of being lost and confused. Moreover, as it was mentioned, the novel in form and in the gloomy tone of the ending seems to be heavily inspired by Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In some way, therefore, *Vile Bodies* seems to be at the crossroads between those two texts. The sudden transition from one mood may be interpreted as yet another cinematic cutting.

Waugh's 'consistent point of view' is not limited to one text. It may be argued that, especially in his early satires, the reader deals with the same, however evolving, narrative voice. *A Handful of Dust*, Waugh's fourth novel, takes both its title and epigraph from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which already provides a link to *Vile Bodies*. Waugh's two satires, despite many structural differences, exploit the very same ideas. Both novels are pervaded by twins and doubles. However, whereas in *Vile Bodies* the reader is presented with a number of pairs of similar characters and motifs, *A Handful of Dust* is focused on pairing the opposites. When it comes to subject matter, *A Handful of Dust* deals with a bleaker vision of a decaying society, which is devoid of morality or any values whatsoever. The tone of narration seems to derive from the disappointed feeling from the last pages of *Vile Bodies* into a more apocalyptic vision of *The Waste Land*. All texts present the disintegration of human relationships and people's spiritual barrenness. Waugh's presentation of society in *A Handful of Dust* may seem humorous but it is in fact a rather bitter description of people preoccupied with themselves. They engage in loveless affairs and thoughtless entertainment, trying to suppress their emotional emptiness. However, their attempts to fill the inner void are doomed to fail since they look for consolation and fulfilment in all the wrong places.

The reader, therefore, is presented with the development of the very same issues. Narrator's comments, still brief and minimalistic, continue to change the tone from light-hearted pitifulness at the beginning of *Vile Bodies* into disheartening and resent at the end of *A Handful of Dust*.

Quite interestingly, by using the same intertextual allusions, Waugh was able to 'orchestrate' the text even further and therefore have a bigger impact on the reader. Both novels, just like *The Waste Land*, require from the reader the knowledge of a great range of literature. However, intertextual references in the novels are far from being nostalgic imitations of past literary models. In their works, Waugh and Eliot not only presented problems concerning modern society. They achieved something far more important and unique. They provide their readers with a solution to the problem they present in their writings. In *The Waste Land*, *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*, people are on the verge of total collapse. They are devoid of morality, values, and traditions. In order to save themselves they need to rebuild their culture. Eliot and Waugh, by employing vast intertextual references, force their readers to look for the most significant pieces of literature, helping them to regain their cultural heritage.

The literary allusions employed in the novels are not merely a result of the existence of 'the inescapable web of literary references' highlighted by theoreticians of intertextuality; rather, they are there by Waugh's conscious decision. This awareness enables him to maintain control over the text. He manages to direct the reception of his novel, from the very beginning, by the choice of the titles and epigraphs. Consequently, he is far from being 'a dead author'. It is Waugh, not the reader, who, in the first place, shapes the meaning of the text. This does not mean, however, that the role of the reader is diminished. Quite contrarily, his role is, in a way, glorified, as to understand a text that is full of conscious textual relations, the reader needs to be aware of literary tradition.

Waugh managed to create a conscious world that connects his oeuvre. This world to be truly understood requires a very competent reader. However, this competence cannot be limited to grasping the intertextual relations within separate novels. Waugh's reader is someone who freely moves around the framework of all stories, someone in constant discussion with the texts and narrators.

Waugh's narrative structure is endlessly fascinating and the very relationship between the reader and the narrator might provide for an entire study. What I attempted to suggest in this paper is that, even though his novels do have their limited framework created by the narration and its language and structure, they, very much in line with Iser's belief, allow the reader to explore the text very much on their own as reading is an active and evolving process.

For the purpose of this article only a brief discussion of the subject was presented, however, the nature of the relationship between reader /narrator in Waugh's early satire is open to continue.

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