

Decline and Fall Study Guide

Decline and Fall by Evelyn Waugh

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Plot Summary

Decline and Fall by Evelyn Waugh is his first novel, published in 1928. It is a fictional work in the social satire genre set in England and Wales in the 1920s. It explores the societal conventions of the time surrounding education, values, marriage, the divisions in social classes, honor, racism, human behavior, and the helplessness of man before the uncontrollable and often inevitable aspects of life.

The plot follows the life and times of the hapless Paul Pennyfeather, a student at Oxford University. He gets caught in the shenanigans of the Bollinger Club and is unable to escape the repercussions of his inadvertent “misdemeanors.” He ends up getting “sent down” –bringing his academic career to a summary halt.

His guardian withdraws his allowance, and denies him shelter under his roof, forcing Paul to accept employment as a schoolteacher at the Llanabba Castle School in North Wales. He settles in with his colleagues, the school routine, and his students, until Dr. Fagan, the headmaster, puts him in charge of a school sports event, causing him some stress and trouble.

During this time he also meets the Honorable Mrs. Margot Beste-Chetwynde, who becomes the object of his affections. Paul accepts an offer to tutor her son, Peter Beste-Chetwynde, over the holidays. Due to his affection for Margot, he refuses an offer of marriage to Dr. Fagan’s eldest daughter. Part 1 ends with the supposed death of Captain Grimes, a fellow teacher, and Paul’s departure from Llanabba Castle.

Paul arrives at King’s Thursday, Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde’s home. In this surreal surrounding, Paul falls hopelessly in love with his hostess. She tempts him to stay by offering him a job helping her with her business interests in South America. He proposes marriage, and they gain the approval of her son, Peter, to move forward with their wedding plans.

Next, the character of Grimes is resurrected and, through a circuitous route, ends up at King’s Thursday looking for a job. In the meantime, Paul gets even more enamored of his future wife by watching Margot, the businesswoman, in action. Three days before their wedding Margot informs him that he needs to travel to Marseilles to sort out some business matters. He goes, and after negotiations with bureaucratic offices and an exchange of money, Paul returns to London on the morning of his wedding. After proposing a toast to “Fortune, a much-maligned lady,” Paul is accosted by officials from Scotland Yard with a warrant for his arrest. Part 2 comes to a close.

Part 3 is an account of Paul’s arrest, trial, and conviction leading to his incarceration in Blackstone Gaol. He receives a visit from Peter who tells him of Margot’s distress at his predicament, assuring him that, short of going to prison herself, she will do all she can to help him—even marrying Maltravers, who has offered Paul’s release if she does so. Paul tells Peter that he would prefer that she wait for him until he is released. He finds solitary confinement refreshing, free from the tumult of daily life, able to mindlessly



follow directions. He asks for an extension in solitary, but instead, the prison governor embarks on an experiment for his rehabilitation. The most significant result of these reforms is the murder of Mr. Prendergast by a fellow prisoner.

Paul's transfer to Egdon Heath, a long-term prison, results in his catching up with Grimes again. He starts receiving inexplicable luxuries while confined to the prison. A letter from Margot is followed by her visit, in which she reveals her sinking optimism, her ostracism from society, having to wind down her business, and her sudden decision to marry Maltravers.

Prison life is enlivened by the escape of Grimes, who rides off into the fog on the warder's horse, never to be found, presumed dead in the bog. Paul's release from Egdon Heath comes in the form of instructions from Maltravers to send him to a nursing home for an appendectomy. He ends up at Cliff Place, a nursing home run by Dr. Fagan. He is made to sign a will and meets Dr. Fagan, Alastair Trumpington, and an inebriated surgeon who falsifies Paul's death certificate. A celebratory dinner later, Paul is seen off to Corfu on Margot's yacht, "to decide on things."

A chance meeting with Otto Silenus leads to a discussion on life and the nature of people.

Paul decides to head back to Oxford to study theology in disguise. Back at Scone College, Paul reverts to his previous routine, recognized by no one, pretending to be a distant cousin to his old notorious namesake. The book ends where it began, on a night of a meeting of the Bollinger Club. There, Peter Beste-Chetwynde, now Earl of Pastmaster, is a student at Scone and a member of the Club. He drinks himself to death, telling Paul that he should never have gotten caught up with his family.



Prelude

Summary

The prelude is set in the quadrangle of Scone College, on the night of the meeting of the raucous Bollinger Club. Paul Pennyfeather, a theology student, inadvertently gets entangled in the festivities, loses his trousers, and is considered to have indulged in “indecent behavior.” His commoner status makes it easy for Oxford to expel him and he leaves the college in shame.

Analysis

The prelude sets the tone for the work, bringing out the main themes the work explores.

The inequality of the classes, the powerlessness of the common man, the farce of educational institutions, and the randomness of events is illuminated through Waugh's characteristic, black humor and absurdism, humorously lampooning British society in the 1920s.

The continuous tension and the sense of unease are both hilarious and a serious underscoring of all that was abhorrent to him, but above all Waugh wished to convey his message through humor. As he wrote in the Author's note in the first publication: “Please bear in mind throughout that IT IS MEANT TO BE FUNNY.”

Vocabulary

contentious, epileptic, debutantes, kaleidoscope, ecclesiastical, plebiscites, druidical, quadrangle, flagrant, reprehensible, fortitude



Part 1: Chapters 1-4

Summary

In Chapter 1, Paul faces his guardian, who punishes Paul for his behavior and disgraceful dismissal from Oxford by discontinuing Paul's allowance and refusing him a home under his roof. Paul is now forced out on his own to seek out a means of livelihood. Despite his lack of credentials and his disgrace, he is appointed as a junior teacher by Dr. Fagan, the principal of the sub-standard Llanabba Castle School in North Wales.

In Chapter 2, Paul arrives at the school, and encounters several of the work's other characters. These include Captain Grimes, an unlikely schoolmaster, Mr. Prendergast, a former minister, and the irreverent school-boys. One of these is Peter Beste-Chetwynde, who figures in his subsequent adventures. Paul also meets Mr. Fagan's daughters, Florence and Diana, and Mr. Philbrick, a butler with a surprising amount of attitude.

The reader learns more about Captain Grimes in Chapter 3. This character is unattractive in appearance, unsavory in character and has a mysterious past. He also has a propensity to "fall into the soup" every so often, and is only at the school because he has no other prospects, not being naturally gifted as a schoolmaster. He dislikes everything about his life, even the elder Miss Fagan, to whom he has become engaged as protection from her father, who is not aware of this liaison. He befriends Paul because he feels the need for a friend. He reveals his past, cataloguing his escapades, his narrow eluding of the law, and how he got his artificial leg in a tram accident.

The reader is introduced to Mr. Prendergast in Chapter 4. He is a troubled individual. Like the others, he needs Paul as a friend and confidant. Unsolicited, he too gives Paul a detailed account of his past—how he came to his current life and the ever-present theological doubts that plague him. The biggest of these is his inability to understand the purpose of God's creation of the world. He dates his unsatisfactory life from the time he left the ministry.

Analysis

Paul Pennyfeather is a shadowy character, someone who does not participate, but exists on the periphery, and to whom things happen. He is helplessly blown about by the winds of circumstance. He suffers numerous losses, is exploited by all, and passively submits without protest, anger or fear. With the derailing of his life, his steadfastness, purpose and striving have vanished, and now he is at the mercy of the elements, his surroundings, and the people he has met at the school. These nefarious characters are either misfits in society or unashamed rogues, so that in a way his new environment is a continuation of what he suffered at the hands of the Bollinger Club.



Vocabulary

scholastic, subsidiary, testimonials, modulations, elocution, predecessor, boudoir, feudal, heraldic, mediaeval, impregnability, encampment, rococo, perceptible, court-martial, apparatus, sacristy, privet, rectory, chintz, congregation, insuperable, consecration, incarnation, incense



Part 1: Chapters 5-6

Summary

In Chapter 5, Dr. Fagan marches into assembly, then perfunctorily and randomly conducts a bible reading and the Lord's prayer. His main purpose is to list a litany of infractions committed by the boys, ranging from unauthorized use of the school telephone, to the smoking of low-quality cigars in the boiler room. Later in the chapter, Paul exerts determined authority and bribery in controlling his class, and is later informed that he has become popular as a result.

In Chapter 6, Paul settles in, having arrived at a mutually satisfactory understanding with his class, and enjoys the company of his peers. However, his concept of honor and "the durability of ideals" are tested when he receives a letter from a college friend, Arthur Potts. Potts conveys an offer of £20 compensation from Alastair Trumpington, the man to blame for his humiliation. Paul is uncertain about whether or not he should accept. Finally, Grimes takes matters into his own hands, accepting in Paul's name, thus saving him from having to make a decision about which he was ambivalent.

Analysis

In these chapters, the reader begins to feel a sense of cautious well being, as Paul seems to be somewhat in charge of his life again. His victory over his class, his newfound equilibrium with Prendergast and Grimes, and his feeling of contentment give the subtle impression that the overhanging shadows seem to be retreating at last.

His humanity shows in his mental debate about Trumpington's offer of money. In this debate, his sense of honor is at war with his sense of entitlement. He first seems to want to make the decision to refuse but is then greatly relieved that the matter is decided unilaterally by Grimes. Here, Paul is able to enjoy the spoils of this conflict without getting his own hands dirty, and he maintains a passive clinging to honor. Though he plans to celebrate the upcoming windfall, there lurks a sense of this being the lull before the storm.

Vocabulary

baronial, harmony, singular, primitive, promptings, humanity, billowing, reprehensible, tacit, reprisals, exertion, treatise, appendix, psychoanalysis, perceptions, fastidiousness, exquisite, debauch, deplorable, bourgeoisie, perquisites, aristocrat, coordination



Part 1: Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7, the sense of security of the last chapters is shattered abruptly by Dr. Fagan's last-minute announcement of the Annual School Sports and then the simultaneous visits of Lady Circumference and Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. Fagan puts Paul in charge of the sports event, and requires that everyone of a distinguished nature be invited. Fagan assigns duties to the staff and his daughters. His imagination and excitement cause him to demand the organization of an elaborate function.

Paul approaches Philbrick to devise impromptu sports equipment. This proximity prompts Philbrick, like the others, to bare his soul to Paul. Despite his attempts at organizing the sporting event, the heats races are foiled as the boys run off but do not return. Along with Grimes, Paul and the other teachers fake the results on paper before sending them off to the printers.

Analysis

In this chapter, Waugh lets loose the full strength of his sense of the ridiculous, skewering the pretensions of his characters, the efforts of maintaining appearances, and the extravagant fawning to the aristocratic classes. The annual sports day is suddenly resurrected by Fagan to impress his distinguished guests. Lost in his visions of grandeur, he demands a function showcasing his supposed status.

The ironies are rampant. Paul is in charge of a sporting event, though he is distinctly unathletic. His hapless lieutenant and erstwhile man of God, Prendergast, cannot execute any task given. Diana, the mean housekeeper, only takes pleasure in cutting costs and starving the workers. The boys are forced to participate against their will and the dishonorable intention is to ensure that the sons of the most illustrious guests are rewarded, regardless of athletic abilities. The heats that never happen and the falsified results are a direct hit at a very British emphasis on sportsmanship. Waugh's ferocious mockery of English institutions and traditions, of which sports is at the forefront, is a telling commentary.

Vocabulary

preliminary, stimulus, loathsome, cordial, gratified, metropolis, benignly, invariably, evident, marquee, bouquet, redolent, hospitality, extravagance, coincide, austerity, induce



Part 1: Chapters 8-10

Summary

In Chapter 8, the day of the sports competition dawns. Fine weather seems a good omen, and everyone salutes the occasion by donning his or her characteristic and grotesque best. As Prendergast states, "Dr. Fagan encourages a certain amount of display on these occasions." Dr. Fagan is amazed at his exhilaration, despite the fact that all of his past sponsored social events have been attended by disasters. He feels that this time Paul will bring luck to Llanabba.

Lord and Lady Circumference arrive and the festivities get under way. Llanabba's unavoidable disasters strike again. Lord Tangent, the Circumferences' son, is accidentally shot in the foot. The races are run without much enthusiasm, and Mr. Prendergast gets drunk, becoming increasingly talkative and starting arguments. The arrival of the Clutterbucks causes tension with the Circumferences, due to a long and ongoing class warfare between the two families.

At the end of Chapter 8, the announcement of tea coincides with the arrival of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. However, her arrival only makes the other guests uncomfortable, as she brings an uninvited guest, Chokey, a dignified and well-dressed black man.

Chapter 9 continues the description of the sporting events. The tensions between the Circumferences and Clutterbucks remain. The guests are aligned into two camps, while Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde and Chokey stand apart. There are whispered conversations all around about Chokey and blacks in general, repeating stories they have heard about the habits and supposedly uncontrollable passions of the black race. These rumblings are interspersed by the lady's gushing delight (yet confession of encroaching boredom to Lady Circumference), in her protégé, and Chokey's own assertions about the artistry, musicality, literary tastes, and soulfulness of his people.

In Chapter 10, the reader learns that once again Llanabba has lived up to its reputation of disastrous celebrations. Dr. Fagan, his daughters, Paul and Grimes discuss what has happened. They describe Mr. Prendergast's contentious debates and Philbrick's intent on arguing with him on equal terms despite their class differences. Then they discuss Lady Circumference's hostile style of speech, full of innuendo and confusing references, followed by a discussion of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's relationship to her Negro companion. The cost of the event is also reviewed.

Paul, who has developed an instant fascination with Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde, is rather down-hearted as he contemplates her relationship with Chokey. He and Grimes look for consolation at Mrs. Roberts'. There, through Grimes' questioning, Paul's feelings become clearer, and he ponders Mrs. Beste-Chetynde's invitation to call upon her when he is in London.



Analysis

Dr. Fagan's ambitious attempt at a display of grandeur, is full of irony and ridicule. The day, begun so auspiciously with the sun shining, gradually starts a slow, awful, downward, spiral, taking the doctor's optimistic hopes and spirits with it.

The mess-up with the sports equipment leaves nothing but races to be run. Philbrick's attempt to dress above his station means that he has to be passed off as the boxing and swimming coach. The disaster of the day is continued with the shooting of Tangent's foot, which continues to dog him to his death. This overhanging premonition leaves the Circumferences unmoved, as they chastise their son for his failings. This harsh level of detachment is juxtaposed against the Clutterbucks' unquestioning pride in the achievements of their own son. This is an illustration of the no-love-lost, stereotypical syndrome of the aristocrat, versus the "vulgar" display of family feeling among the lower classes. The show is topped by the arrival of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde with her controversial companion. The shock-value of such an entrance instigates rumbles and waves of resentment. The author creates a scathing commentary on the uninformed, prejudiced thinking of some, and the ultra-liberal, superficial attitudes of the other strata of society.

Sideshowes emerge, highlighting the inanities and trivialities of societal gatherings on which much importance is placed. The gaieties are brought to an abrupt end as tempers rise, emotions escalate and everyone makes an early and abrupt departure, leaving the Fagans holding the expensive fireworks that were to be the grand finale of the day, but which turn out to be disappointing instead. A compelling aspect of the scene is Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's effect on Paul; this one defining moment foreshadows coming events.

Vocabulary

sprightliness, indelible, adornment, celluloid, camphor, abominate, fiasco, fabricate, slavered, obsequious, galvanize, monograph, erroneous, aboriginal, dissolution, temperance, rhetorical, etymological, commandeering, vivacious, apparatus, servitude, bonhomie, vortex, acrimoniously



Part 1: Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, Mr. Philbrick's many personas come to view. A conversation between Prendergast, Paul and Grimes reveals the different versions of Philbrick's life and times, and the reasons he has given each of them for his being at Llanabba. The three are left wondering which version of the man they know is the real Philbrick.

Analysis

In this chapter, the reader sees another example of Waugh's unquenchable black humor, his prolific imagination and his love of the theater of the absurd. The many facets of the colorful Philbrick convince us there is more to come, as is proved in the following chapters. He appears and disappears, tells stories and stories are told of him. He makes grand gestures, and then withdraws them with good reasons. He is menacing and yet harmlessly ridiculous. He is a source of endless interest and stature and we look forward to his further exploits.

Vocabulary

melancholy, eccentric, reparation, evaporated, simultaneously, superiority, architecture, governess, irregularity, baccarat, haggard, heirloom, livid, declining, ventilator, reeked, frizzling



Part 1: Chapter 12

Summary

In Chapter 12, Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde writes to her son Peter, proposing to employ Paul over the Easter holidays to improve Peter's spellings "which are just too shattering," so that he has a good chance to gain admission to Oxford.

This storyline takes a back seat to the dilemma of Capt. Grimes, who is once again in trouble, and has to pull out the ace card of his engagement to Flossie to forestall dire repercussions. Dr. Fagan attempts to derail the engagement; Paul is summoned to Dr. Fagan's office, where Fagan offers his daughter's hand in marriage to Paul instead, along with a handsome partnership in the school. With his future prospects with Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde in mind, Paul respectfully declines, and is sent to convey Dr. Fagan's reluctant blessings to Grimes with the message that the wedding should take place within the week.

The despondent Captain demands a treat at the Metropole Hotel as his wedding present, and he, Paul and Prendergast encounter Philbrick, who talks of buying the hotel and is very much at home. He is challenged by the three to verify which version of his stories about himself is true. He admits that none of them is, but one day they would be told the whole truth about him.

Grimes makes a spectacle of himself in his misery at the prospect of being entrapped by marriage. He decries the uselessness of the institution and the human emotions that make one enter it time and time again. After this catharsis and some antics that upset the other patrons, Grimes declares his misery as being past, and he is ready to enjoy the rest of the evening.

Analysis

The tempo of the story picks up with Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's letter to her son. As soon as this plot twist is introduced, a second movement is introduced—that of Capt. Grimes' impending nuptials. Ironically, Paul, with all his lack of credentials and the aura of disgrace, is the preferred son-in-law of Dr. Fagan. This demonstrates that Paul has made an impact on Dr. Fagan, despite his failure at pulling off the sporting event successfully. The evening at the Metropole Hotel serves as a turning point for Grimes emotionally. The long diatribe on marriage and the frailty of human emotions, seem to be Waugh's voice on the subjects, though in the end, Grimes accepts the fact that he will be entering the institution after all. He declares that "the black cloud has lifted," and he moves on to a more positive attitude.

Vocabulary

despondently, abstractedly, inclination, eminence, genial, binge, solemnization, declivity, retribution, manifestation, procreation, lament



Part 1: Chapter 13

Summary

In Chapter 13, the marriage of Captain Grimes and Miss Florence Fagan occurs in a rather haphazard way, and Dr. Fagan does not attend. No proper arrangements have been made for their accommodation, and the Captain is left suspended half below and half above stairs. He confesses a need to escape, not because of Flossie, who has “hardly been any trouble at all,” but because of her snobbish father, who does not let him forget how far he has come up the social ladder—or how far Flossie has fallen down it. He gets increasingly depressed.

Two policemen arrive in search of Philbrick to arrest him for “false pretenses and impersonation,” but the butler just makes his escape. Shortly after, a local lad comes up to the house carrying a small pile of Grimes’s clothes with a note for the doctor indicating he has committed suicide. Flossie, whose colorful garments have always been more important to her than anything else, refuses to wear black.

Analysis

The pace quickens with the occurrence of important events and spins the lives of the characters into unexpected directions as Part 1 comes to an end. The marriage of Capt. Grimes to Miss Flossie is a catalyst to his final disappearance, revealing that he was not as accepting of the institution of marriage as he professed to be. The flight of Philbrick takes place just ahead of the policemen coming for his arrest, so that one of their own is now a wanted fugitive. In this chapter the author tightens the tale, pulling together disparate threads, and creating the platform that will lead to further extensions of plot, story lines and character development in Part 2.

Vocabulary

bigamous, amputated, diffidence, conceited, supercilious, adulterated, impersonation, curtailment, resolution, variation, subscribed, velveteen, lychgate, meager, baize, genuine, self-assertive, retribution, unnerved, perish



Part 2: Chapter 1

Summary

In Chapter 1 of Part 2, the reader learns that King's Thursday has been the seat of the Earls of Pastmaster since the reign of Bloody Mary, and has been untouched by renovation, improvement or modern conveniences due to lack of funds and general lethargy. Recognized as the finest piece of domestic Tudor in England, it is a landmark and talking point in which the whole of Hampshire County takes pride. When the current earl, Bobby Pastmaster, is compelled to sell, Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde, flush with money from her illicit enterprises, buys him out and immediately sets about rebuilding. Professor Otto Friedrich Silenus, a German architect of bizarre tastes and design, creates a monstrosity, composed of a very strange design and materials.

Analysis

In Chapter 1, the author takes aim at yet another traditional vanity of the British aristocracy—the excessive pride in their ancestral home, even when the home is falling apart and in a state no one would choose to live in otherwise. Waugh creates a German, traditionally an enemy of the British, to effect the changes to the home. As a result, the architect's thinking is diametrically opposed to the British point of view. He chooses materials and designs opposite to the traditional British architecture, creating an eyesore and damaging the neighborhood's ability to take pride and pleasure in King's Thursday.

Vocabulary

inertia, portico, façade, battlement, sanitation, unscathed, hereditary, aromatic, prosaic, ordained, innovation, consternation, antiquarian, bourgeois, pulverizing, inextricable, elimination, dynamos, obscure, antiquated, evolution, maladjusted, mechanism, inflexible, rhythmically



Part 2: Chapter 2

Summary

While traveling through London en route to King's Thursday, Paul meets Arthur Potts, an old peer from Oxford, for dinner. In urban surroundings, far from the wilds of Wales, Paul feels like a real person again. He enjoys the dinner that he can order for himself in creditable French, the company of a likeminded peer, and the topics ranging from politics to culture. In this chapter, Paul is the portrait of a man in charge of his life. The two men exchange information about their lives, their future and the events that have transpired so far.

Analysis

In this setting, Paul Pennyfeather briefly emerges from the shadows of his life at Llanabba. He feels he is back to his old self, discussing important political and cultural issues of the day with his equal, who has also abandoned education in pursuit of important matters with a job in the League of Nations. The reader begins to see a glimpse of the man Paul could have become—urbane, confident, sophisticated and capable—but for the tragedy of that one night at the Bollinger Club.

Vocabulary

castellations, preposterous, oblivion, lurid, narrative, decorum, utilitarian, sham, materialized, discretion, detachment, creditable, acquit, unenlightened, disembodied



Part 2: Chapter 3

Summary

Paul and Peter Beste-Chetwynde arrive at King's Thursday on a beautiful English spring day. It is a day so beautiful that Paul begins to believe in the endurance of nature in the midst of "a world that has lost its reason." The oddness of the house is hated even by its own architect, but the structure strikes awed wonder in the new arrivals.

Paul has just enough time to glimpse his hostess before she takes off to bed and is not seen again for three days, leaving her son to show Paul around and ply him with drinks. She stays out of sight all through a weekend house party, which features a cast of odd characters, all at ease with each other and totally given up to decadent pleasures, quite unaffected by the non-appearance of their hostess.

The one odd note is struck by Sir Humphrey Maltravers, Minister of Transportation, who has arrived with the sole purpose of pursuing Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's hand in marriage. He is defiant and unhappy in her absence, unwilling to join the others. It is left to Paul to converse with him and offer him company.

Again Paul finds himself at the receiving end of a soliloquy, this time from Maltravers. He shares with Paul the story of his humble beginnings, his rough childhood, how he pulled himself up by his bootstraps, his education at Scone, his hopes and fears, and his philosophy on life. Paul, supposing himself a habitually sympathetic man, listens patiently. It emerges that Humphrey Maltravers is quite weary of his struggles and now desires only wealth and a luxurious, indolent life in Monte Carlo.

Maltravers is not popular, is suspected of cheating at card games, and departs without a glimpse of his hostess, who only appears at the close of the house party from her drug-induced rest, "fresh and exquisite as a seventeenth-century lyric."

Paul now moves "in a golden mist," bathed in the sweetness of Margot's treatment. She suggests that he not return to Llanaba, but work for her in her business interests. This prompts Paul to propose marriage to her. Displaying a certain coyness, she agrees only after getting Peter's agreement.

Analysis

The house, in its vulgar, odd, over-the-top newness, is a scathing commentary by the author on the prevailing obsessiveness of the upper classes on the longevity of their heritage; a willful determination to live in the past and revere it, no matter how shabby or inconvenient.

The residents and guests are caricatures of stereotypes in high society, each almost insane in their own way, totally absorbed in themselves and their own doings. Loyal to



none but themselves, they act out their daily inane existences in an absurd comedy of manners, that is, however, very serious for them.

Maltravers is the stereotype of a lower-class man made good, having achieved a standing in society equal to the other party guests by his own efforts. Yet, he is self-conscious about his roots, unable to meet the aristocracy on equal terms while he must live and work in their strata. Never fully trusted or accepted, and finally weary, he wants nothing but to live the rest of his days in peace at the expense of someone else. His monopolization of Paul's company suggests that he will play a major role in Paul's future.

Paul's engagement to Margot comes about seemingly spontaneously; he gains his heart's desire a little too easily. The reader may have some suspicion that this is in fact a machination by her for her own purposes, which will be revealed as the story progresses.

Vocabulary

radiance, interdependence, cadence, transported, iridescent, colonnade, balustrade, infinitesimal, variations, obtrusive, vitiated, beneficent, discordant, disconsolate, preternatural, meditative, privation, superannuation, fastidious, labyrinthine, overhauled



Part 2: Chapters 4-5

Summary

In Chapter 5, a poorly-disguised Grimes re-emerges at King's Thursday, to the great surprise of Paul and Peter. After a meeting with Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde, he tells them of his adventures and his near destruction, until he met up with a former colleague from Ireland. The friend directed him to Margot with a prospect of employment. He is vague as to the nature of this job, but has accepted it, something to do with a syndicate of entertainment enterprises in Latin America.

Grimes congratulates Paul on his upcoming nuptials and leaves. Grimes' departure is followed by the arrival of Potts, who seems disappointed at having missed him, as he has been following something related to Grimes as part of his job at the League.

In Chapter 5, Paul and Margot travel to London so she can make arrangements for the wedding and conclude urgent business. He watches her and is totally awed by her consummate business skills. She notices but is undeterred by a Potts-like person watching her from across the street, who actually "picks up" the last of her interviewees. The two run into Philbrick, who warns them to look out for the League, which is becoming active.

Analysis

With the resurrection of Grimes in Chapter 4, the event demonstrates one of Waugh's narrative and structural tactics, which is to bring characters in and out of the story more than once, whether only in name or in direct action. Other examples include Potts, and Philbrick. The fact that characters seem lost—such as by death in Grimes' case or by deed as in Potts' case—but then return to the story gives a sort of cyclical nature to the narrative. This is suggestive of the title of the piece, with which Waugh seems to be saying that life is a cyclical series of ups and downs, gains and losses, and even death and rebirth.

The sleepy air of rural Hampshire changes to busy London in Chapter 5. Different aspects of the action gain momentum, the wedding preparations on the one hand, and the sordid Latin American business on the other. Paul's innocent fascination with all that is happening is evident, as is his inability to see beyond the façade, with the backstage workings of fate and the League. Tension is building in the story, propelling the reader—the only one aware of looming disaster—onwards.

Vocabulary

vegetation, formidable, ingredients, pneumatic, quartered, syndicate, impertinent, luminous, conservatory, pyramidal, barbaric, concomitants, enraptured, embodiment, installments, emblazoned, cockaded, bolstered, landalette, ingeniously



Part 2: Chapter 6

Summary

The wedding plans cause people to either lavishly congratulate the happy couple, vying for invitations or a part in the ceremonies, or castigating them for the strange pairing and unsuitable union. It is viewed as a royal event, with spectators lining the streets and the church front. Three days before the wedding, however, Margot informs Paul of difficulties her new recruits are facing in boarding their ship at Marseilles. She needs Paul to travel out there to deal with the situation.

Feeling very much a man of the world engaged in international commerce, Paul encounters Potts on his journey to Europe. Then in Marseilles, he finds several of Margot's employees, who the reader realizes are prostitutes. However, Paul still does not realize the nature of Margot's business. He visits the offices and bureaus, and gets the needed clearance for the ship by paying large sums of money. He hears allusions to the League even here, but cannot fathom how or why they should have any effect on his business. He remarks on how intrusive and unhelpful they are, to the amusement of the officials. Potts turns up again on his return journey, and again Paul is unthinkingly unsurprised at how closely the League is dogging his footsteps.

Paul returns to London on his wedding day. Feeling very much on top of the world, he chats and eats with his best man, Alastair Trumpington, to whom he feels he owes a debt for how his life has turned out. Together they toast "fortune, a much-maligned lady." Paul is on the point of leaving for the church when he is accosted by an official from Scotland Yard, who states that he has a warrant out for Paul's arrest.

Analysis

In this chapter, the disaster the reader has been expecting finally strikes. The first sign of trouble appears with Margot's phone call requiring Paul to travel to Marseilles to rescue her damsels in distress. Showing Paul for the pawn that he is, not only does he unquestioningly do her bidding, but he feels grateful that he is at last able to do something to help Margot concretely.

His naiveté, innocence, and blind belief in his beloved and that he has turned the corner and can now live the life everyone envies all shines through. In Marseilles, he witnesses the dregs of humanity struggling to survive by depraved means. His dealings with the corrupt officials, the signals that that they are under observation by the League, and Potts' unexplained appearances mean nothing sinister to him. His lack of comprehension to the point of willful stupidity and his inability to connect the dots is amusing, startling and pitiable to the reader who can see the obvious result approaching.

His unforeseen arrest at the very moment that is going to change his life forever is one of the cruel ironies with which the book abounds; it is another dismal page in the book of Paul's fortunes.

Vocabulary

advancement, gallantry, enterprise, elevation, lamentation, eloquent, prodigality, profusion, luxuriance, cosmopolitan, sinister, orgiastic, polyglot, retrieve, misapprehension, prolixity, woebegone, elegiac, prehensile, bouquet



Part 3: Chapter 1

Summary

The arrest, arraignment and attendant side-shows including Margot absconding to Corfu—but making arrangements for gourmet meals to be delivered to Paul—are front-page news, but his actual conviction is “a lame conclusion.”

He initially pleads guilty to all charges, then retracts when he learns of the punishment this conviction would bring. Potts' role is revealed when he steadfastly testifies for the prosecution, for which he is commended by the judge. There is no defense offered for Paul, except past good behavior. Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde is kept out of the proceedings and the judge denounces Paul for callously planning to join his sullied name to that of this honorable member of society.

He has to endure a long diatribe on the judge's opinion of “human vampires who prey on the degradation of their species,” or effectively, White Slavers, which is the crime he is convicted of.

Before he is carted off to Blackstone Gaol, he receives a visit from Peter Beste-Chetwynde, who at his mother's behest has come to see to his well-being and comfort. He brings a message describing her distress at his plight. She has vowed to do anything in her powers to obtain his release, short of going to prison herself, even offering to accept Maltravers' blackmailing offer of marriage, upon which he promises to set Paul free from prison.

Paul, expecting no more than one year in prison, states that he prefers she wait for him rather than marry Sir Humphrey. Later he is told that his sentence is seven years.

Paul is taken to prison and meets Philbrick again, who befriends him with advice on how to carry on, and who gets an almost louse-free uniform for him. Paul is divested of his clothing, jewelry and accessories, causing him to feel oddly and agreeably freed of responsibility.

He is instructed on how to speak and behave in front of prison officials, thinking wonderingly that “they all seem so much less awe-inspiring” than he had expected. He receives a visit from the prison doctor, who deems him a “troublesome fellow,” fully capable of receiving the usual punishments. The schoolmaster marks him down as “memory defective,” and has no great expectations of him.

His next visitor is another familiar face—Prendergast, who has resigned from Llanabba to become a Modern Churchman, thinking to go back to his theological beginnings without having to commit wholeheartedly to the faith that has caused him such agony. His new profession makes him no happier as he finds that “criminals are just as bad as boys.”



He is dismayed to see Paul, pleads with him to treat him with respect and the appearance of submission before the prison officials. He explains that it is part of his job to extract discipline from all the prisoners, and finds it very hard to accomplish.

Lastly, Paul is summoned to meet Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery, the liberal and progressive governor of the prison, who aims to establish personal relationships with the men under his care. He treats the prison like a corporation, encouraging the inmates to take pride in their prison, their governor, and ponder on “thoughts for the day” supplied by him. He allows them to continue with their previous vocations where possible. He is preoccupied with statistical analysis to make his prison look better, and manufactures numbers to make his records look good. Paul is relegated to the Arts and Crafts Workshop after his initial solitary confinement, as the governor believes that “almost all crime is due to the repressed desire for aesthetic expression.”

Analysis

There is relief that the worst that could have happened has already occurred, and it is not as bad as it could have been. He sees the familiar faces of Philbrick and Prendergast. This again underscores the recurring theme of the cyclical nature of life, one’s past and its inescapability.

Contrary to the desired effects of solitary incarceration, Paul finds himself enjoying his confinement as “among the happiest of his life.” It is a true withdrawal from society that completely suits the shadowy substance of his character. He is content on his own, within the four walls of his cell, free from decision-making, oblivious to the passage of time, or the need for any action except what is ordered. He does not have to dress, gets meals delivered to him, mindlessly occupies his hands at stitching mail-bags and in between church and exercise he finds ample time for meditation and writing down his thoughts.

The complete retreat from life is like a rest cure, a rehabilitation free from all concerns; his own needs—physical, spiritual and mental—are met. He thinks upon and dismisses the trivial concerns of society. His mind freed up, he is able to contemplate and think on matters of importance to himself. This feels like the turning point in his life, where the only way is up.

Vocabulary

counsel, entreaties, prosecution, depravity, intemperate, degradation, penology, servitude, appliance, penitence, candidature, avocation, aesthetic, conscientious, progressive, innovations, reverie, blaspheming, concentric, meager



Part 3: Chapters 2-3

Summary

At the end of his initial period in solitary, he asks for an extension. This is such an unusual request that the governor questions him personally. Paul confesses that he finds it interesting to be in solitary. The governor, Sir Wilfred, prides himself on his forward-thinking approach to the treatment of prisoners and decides to further his experiments on Paul. He makes Paul the subject of an exclusive experiment, in opposition to the treatment prescribed by “Standing Orders.” By a series of progressive steps, he forces Paul to spend time with specially selected peers and talk on subjects that would improve their minds.

In Chapter 3, the experiments go several steps further in defiance of traditional methods. Paul enters another phase of his rehabilitation, but his companion in the experiments changes to a burly, snarling individual who has crossed the line into delusional insanity. Sir Wilfred is immune to all evidence of this situation and dismisses Paul’s fears. Upon questioning the man, Sir Wilfred comes to the conclusion that he is frustrated in being unable to follow his old profession of carpentry, and once given this opportunity would be on the road to recovery again.

The man is a Bible-mad, violent lunatic who is particularly hostile to the chaplain Prendergast, who he says “is no Christian.” Instead, he only sees messages of violence in the Bible. All he can talk about are his killing dreams, his visions and his desire to be of service to the Lord in this capacity. He avows that “[killing] is my mission.” Soon there is a mysterious pandemonium in the prison, but the prisoners are kept in ignorance until finally a whispered word gets out that there has been a murder.

There is an inkling of who the victim might be when they file into church, find the chaplain missing, and the service being conducted by the governor. Through a parody of a hymn it is learnt that Prendergast has been murdered by the homicidal “Lord’s elect,” whose tools had been restored to him.

Analysis

In Chapter 2, Waugh provides the reader with another humorous satire on the systems inherent in society, and those with ambition and pride who try to improve it. The treatment devised for Paul and his unappreciative companion is very progressive, but fails as there is no way to impose it; the two are left to their own devices and conversation. Waugh’s use of the ironical revelation of the murder through the parody of a gentle hymn is another satirical element. The lack of repercussions on the governor for this disastrous action, especially as it is hinted that the incident was allowed to happen to teach the governor a lesson, drives home the message—don’t mess with the system. The reader can interpret this chapter as a statement of the author’s belief in the



uselessness of an individual's attempt to affect change for the good in English society in the face of long custom, habit and deeply entrenched institutional traditions.

Vocabulary

narcissistic, epoch, verdict, tenure, intrepid, introvert, eccentric, misanthropic, precedent, loitering, reclamation, phase, convulsively, figuratively, tribulation, substantiated, mystical, homicide, portends, accumulation, remonstrated, abomination, insubordination, sinister, massacre



Part 3: Chapter 4

Summary

As a long term prisoner, Paul's days at Blackstone have to end, and he is transferred to the Convict Settlement at Egdon Heath. He sees a newspaper with a picture of Margot and Peter, announcing their return from Corfu, and the news that Bobby Pastmaster has died and Peter has succeeded to the title.

This reminder sets him thinking once again of the events resulting directly from his association with the Beste-Chetwyndes. He feels that despite his conviction, there could have been no other outcome, that Margot could simply not have been imprisoned for her deeds. Instead, it had to be him, and he thinks with resentment about the code of honor that forced him to chivalrously accept the blame and helped Margot escape the consequences of her nefarious activities.

On arrival at Egdon Heath Paul is unsurprised to be reunited with his old friend Grimes, once again "in the soup" for bigamy, and already plotting to escape. Paul soon starts receiving small mysterious luxuries in prison, such as edible delicacies and expensive books to allay his discomfort. One day he receives a visit from a shy, changed Margot, who has become sensitive about her looks, her treatment at society's hands, and her business (which she is winding down), and about her future. She suddenly prepares to depart, announcing that she has just then decided to marry Maltravers, for many different reasons. Paul bids her good-bye with no other emotion than a feeling of pain at his lack of emotion during this meeting and parting.

Analysis

These contacts between Margot and Paul—first through the newspaper, then the arrival of small luxuries in his prison cell, by her letter and lastly her personal visit—draw their relationship to a close. She has come to see if there could possibly be anything further between them, though even to assuage her guilt she cannot bring herself to renew the engagement. This is partly because of his unattractive prison appearance, and partly because she has lost her business and Paul could not restore her lifestyle. It is also because she needs a powerful alliance that will bring her back up in society's eyes, which Maltravers could do for her, and because she feels old. This visit confirms her belief that anything between them is not possible and her union with Maltravers is inevitable. In spite of her selfishness and total self-absorption, one of her motives in marrying Maltravers is to help Paul out of his situation.

Most telling is Paul's realization of how little seeing her and hearing her decision affects him. The reader has to wonder what the point of his accepting the blame was all for. However, perhaps by allowing him to take the blame for her, he saw the person that she



really was. By entering prison, he escaped marriage to her and all of the negative experiences it would have entailed.

Vocabulary

infractions, illusionary, precept, cogency, dubious, philanthropic, preposterous, industrious, alabaster, meteorite, ostracized, protégée



Part 3: Chapter 5

Summary

We see again the ingenious ability of Grimes to escape whatever restraints are placed on him. Having stated his determination to depart when it all became too much for him, one day he announces that he has had enough. He takes advantage of the thick fog during their work on the quarry, gets his hands on the warder's horse, bids a brief adieu to Paul, and rides off towards the bog. The warders are not too perturbed, as no prisoner has ever managed to permanently escape, though many have tried. However, Grimes does not return, no body is recovered, and his hat floating on the most treacherous part of the bog is the only evidence of where he could have ended up.

Although mourned by the rest, Paul is convinced that Grimes is not dead, but has merely escaped his shackles again. He realizes that there is something supernatural about this ability of Grimes to escape and resurrect himself and he concludes, "Grimes is one of the Immortals."

Analysis

Presenting Grimes as one of the Immortals despite his outwardly repulsive appearance, ungodly activities, and coarse mien is one of Waugh's brilliant metaphors. He constantly pokes an unkind finger at the world's habit of judging by outward looks, and thus missing the essential worth of a person or an object. The immortality of true worth is explicit in his personification of Grimes. At the same time, Grimes is a symbol of hope for Paul and for the reader. Grimes, despite his shortcomings and the seemingly impossible situations that he gets into, always finds a way to escape.

Vocabulary

languishes, repression, enveloping, pretext, integuments, pestilence, quarry, misfortune, clime, impenetrable, rearing, agility, solitary, inhabitants, pertinently, immortal, reconcile



Part 3: Chapter 6

Summary

Paul's days in prison, where he can passively exist from day to day, end without warning. One day he is hauled before the prison governor, who informs him that Home Secretary Maltravers has ordered him to be released to a nursing home to have his appendix taken out. Paul's protests that he has had the procedure done a long time ago fall on deaf ears, the higher orders superseding anything he might have to say.

The clothing and accessories that were taken away from him upon his arrest are returned, he is allowed to shave, and with nothing to show for his imprisonment except a cropped head, he comes out looking like "any civilized, normal man." Immediately, the attitude of the warders changes to one of deference. A warder escorts him by train to Cliff House, which he learns is a sanatorium owned by Dr. Fagan.

He is met by Dr. Fagan, Alastair Trumpington, and a drunken doctor who is confused as to whom he operated on—a young man, a little girl, or a woman. He is convinced by Alastair that the patient died, but that he is not to blame for the patient's death. The doctor signs the death certificate thus "terminating the legal life of Paul Pennyfeather."

Taking time to celebrate a deed well done, they repair to the dining-room, where Dr. Fagan delivers himself of another grand soliloquy on life. Alastair delivers Paul to Margot's yacht to transport him to her villa in Corfu, then sets off to King's Thursday to deliver his report on the day's doings.

Analysis

A seemingly random twist of fate frees Paul Pennyfeather from prison, just as so many months ago one had delivered him into it. A confused series of events occur that no one bothers to explain to him, but eventually all is made clear. Paul understands, as Dr. Fagan states in his monologue, there is nothing random about what happens to one in life. It is the result of plans being made, compromises effected, hands shaken over a deal, cooperation and reward, and the ultimate meting out of some form of justice and freedom.

Though Paul gets his freedom, it is, as usual, through events where he is a passive object manipulated by others. But with his release, possibilities for his future open up. The decline into prison is now being replaced by the start of a rise into a new life, free from his old identity.

Vocabulary

periphrases, enterprise, appendicitis, duplicate, anesthetic, consciousness, terminated, sanatorium, solemnity, participants, vocation, cohesiveness, promiscuous



Part 3: Chapter 7

Summary

Paul spends months in Corfu relaxing and getting himself prepared to re-enter real life. He encounters penniless and homeless Otto Silenus and invites him to stay at Margot's villa. Having accepted that Margot is married to the "sensible Maltravers," Otto abandons his plan to marry her and decides to stay a long time so he can recuperate.

Otto then delivers (again uninvited) his views on life to Paul, who, as usual, listens politely. He describes life as the big wheel at Luna Park. Observers sit on chairs arranged circularly around the room, the big wheel in the center spins, and people, as dictated by their character, get on and off, clinging on for dear life at the edges, or trying to edge their way in closer to the center where it revolves slowly. The fallacy, he believes, is in thinking that one has no choice but to get onto the wheel; in fact the static-minded (like Paul) can choose to stay seated on the periphery forever, while the dynamic go in for the excitement of the wheel itself. He believes that "static and dynamic" should be the way the world is divided rather than by gender.

Soon Paul returns to Scone College, disguised under a big cavalry mustache and a story about being a distant cousin of the Paul Pennyfeather who had been at the center of all the scandal and mayhem so long ago. He restarts his life as a student and reacquaints himself with the college and many of the staff members, none of whom recognize him. He makes a new friend by the name of Stubbs, with whom he indulges in many of the activities he used to share with Potts. One day he sees Philbrick riding in a Rolls Royce, and Philbrick recognizes him. However, he settles into his environment once more, back where he started, apparently none the worse for his exploits and heading once more for his original goal of becoming a clergyman.

Analysis

This sojourn of Paul's in Corfu, although not behind bars, reflects strongly the sense of hiatus, repair, rest and recovery he experienced in Blackstone Gaol while in solitary confinement. The luxury of his surroundings does not matter to him as much as the opportunity to be alone, meditate, and divest himself of the necessity to involve himself with any aspect of life, as everything is taken care of. It is almost like being at a rehabilitation facility, throwing off the pain of his previous life, and a cleansing for the life to come. He has at last come to the conclusion that all his previous experiences have confirmed that the life he was living and preparing for before the fateful night of the Bollinger Club is the best life for him, to which he wants to return.

Otto Silenus's view of life as a wheel and people as either static or dynamic beings merely clarifies his understanding of himself and his desires. The metaphor reinforces the cyclical narrative, as Otto himself has once again returned to the story. In this



chapter the concepts and major themes of the novel are all completed: the “decline and fall” of Paul, the cyclical nature of human existence, the inevitability of events and the mysterious, seemingly random workings of fate, and society’s foolish pretensions and class divisions. There is a great sense of futility in man’s efforts to change anything. There is also, however, the hope and possibility of life turning out well, bringing one back to one’s desired situation, no matter how rough or circuitous the route.

Vocabulary

arcaded, parapet, physiological, implications, organic, static, dynamic, degenerate, illuminating, verandah, crude, souvenir, distinction, spiritually, generalizing, diffidence, resemblance, superciliously, opulent, lucid, exposition, heresies



Epilogue

Summary

Paul is once again a third year theology student. It is once again the night of the Bollinger Club meet and the raucous celebration echoes around the quad. His friend Stubbs departs and Peter Beste-Chetwynde enters, drunk. He looks for more liquor, asks Paul why he has been ignoring him, and brings him up to date on the doings of Margot. She is now Viscountess Metroland, safely and respectably married to Maltravers, and thus free to indulge her passions with her lover, Alastair Trumpington.

In the honesty brought on by drink, Peter goes round and round, talking about their past history together. He finally states that it was wrong for Paul to have been caught up with the family at all, and Paul agrees, expounding on the static and dynamic personality types. Peter agrees, departs, and Paul sits ruminating in his chair again.

Analysis

The circle finally closes, the decline and fall has been arrested, and the promise of the rise is on the horizon. Paul is comfortably ensconced in his familiar world of books, classes, theology and the League of Nations Committee. He is an observer of—but this time not a participant in—the Bollinger Club antics. Peter's arrival sparks an apology of sorts for his travails and in spite of his resentment of his mother's marriage to Maltravers, he acknowledges that the way things worked out is probably for the best all around.

Vocabulary

disordered, ordained, maligned, clergyman, ascetic, uneventful, suppress, maligned, tight, epilogue, cutting



Characters

Paul Pennyfeather

Paul Pennyfeather is the protagonist. A student at Oxford University, he is the passive object to whom things happen.

Sir Alastair Trumpington

Sir Alastair Trumpington is a fellow-student member of the Bollinger Club.

Dr. Augustus Fagan

Dr. Augustus Fagan is headmaster and owner of the Llanabba Castle School and employer of Paul.

Captain Edgar Grimes

Captain Edgar Grimes is an unlikely schoolmaster, on staff at Llanabba. At one point believed to be dead, he reappears throughout the work.

Mr. Prendergast

Mr. Prendergast is a former clergyman, who quit when he was beset by doubts. He is later murdered in the prison where Paul is being held.

Peter Beste-Chetwynde

Peter is an aristocratic student of Paul's who becomes Paul's means of introduction to his mother, Mrs. Margot Beste-Chetwynde.

Miss Florence Fagan

Florence "Flossie" Fagan, is Dr. Fagan's elder daughter, and is secretly engaged to Captain Grimes.

Philbrick

Philbrick is a butler at the school, but it soon becomes apparent that he is not what he seems.



Arthur Potts

Arthur Potts is a friend of Paul's from Oxford, who shadows the plot mysteriously.

Lady Circumference

Lady Circumference is a typical aristocrat and the mother of one of Paul's students.

Mrs. Clutterbuck

Mrs. Clutterbuck is a matron of the merchant class, whose wealth makes her consider herself an equal to the aristocrats.

Mrs. Margot Beste-Chetwynde

Margot is Paul's love interest. She is involved in nefarious business deals and is the catalyst for Paul's arrest and imprisonment.

Mr. Sebastien "Chokey" Chotmondley

Chokey is the Negro companion of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. He causes a stir amongst society when he appears with her at the sporting event.

Professor Otto Friedrich Silenus

Professor Otto Friedrich Silenus is a German architect who is employed to rebuild the ancestral home of the Beste-Chetwyndes.

Sir Humphrey Maltravers

Sir Humphrey Maltravers is a high government official who blackmails Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde into marrying him in order to secure Paul's release from prison.

Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery

Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery is the governor of Blackstone Gaol who considers himself a reformer.



Objects/Places

Scone College

Scone College is a fictional college at Oxford University, and is where the action starts and ends.

Bollinger Club

The Bollinger Club is an elitist club whose main activity is drinking and destruction.

Llanabba Castle

Llanabba Castle is the boys' school in North Wales owned by Dr. Fagan, where Pennyfeather finds employment.

Metropole Hotel

The Metropole Hotel is the once grand hotel where Captain Grimes' forthcoming nuptials are celebrated.

King's Thursday

King's Thursday is the ancestral home of the Beste-Chetwyndes.

Marseilles

Marseilles is the French port where Pennyfeather travels to help Margot's new recruits.

Blackstone Gaol

Blackstone Gaol is the first prison Pennyfeather is sent to.

Egdon Heath

Egdon Heath is the second prison Pennyfeather is sent to.



Cliff House

Cliff House is the sanatorium owned by Dr. Fagan, and is the scene for Pennyfeather's escape.

Corfu

Margot's villa in Corfu is where Pennyfeather is sent to recuperate.



Themes

British Society of the 1920s

Evelyn Waugh was a social critic. Employing black humor and absurdist mechanisms, he pinpointed, highlighted and parodied the inherent flaws, pretensions, false values and decadence of the aristocracy. He illustrated the class system by juxtaposing the inequities of the struggles of the lower classes against the upper. *Decline and Fall* skewers its targets in a satire that rips apart the curtains of pretension and lays all bare to be viewed and judged in harsh light.

British ideals of culture, education, sportsmanship, honor, chivalry and integrity all come under fire. Education is a sham, there is no pretense of justice, punishment is reserved for the lower classes. The “old boys’ network” will protect its members, regardless of their crimes. Those who try to affect good in society, like the governor of the prison, do so only to gain fame and admiration, not from a real concern.

Education

The English education system, from public school to university, comes under attack in this work.

Scone College does less to educate than allow decadent traditions to flourish with impunity. The dons and clergy remain on the fringes, with an expedient eye to their own interests. The students of low social standing and limited financial means are callously disregarded, whereas the aristocratic ones are fawned upon.

Llanabba Castle, a sub-standard educational institution, is owned by a venal headmaster whose only motivation is greed. He merely preserves the façade of a school, with unqualified, even criminal staff, a pretense at lessons and farcical extra-curricular activities.

Paul’s greatest education occurs when he is by himself, whether in solitary confinement or on Corfu. It is only when he is freed from the strictures of social convention that he learns the most about himself and life. Yet eventually he returns to the formal educational system, as he has learned that one cannot operate for long outside of society.

Prejudice

In this work, Waugh suggests that the British, famed for their democratic ideals and sense of fair play and justice, are actually a highly prejudicial group. The disdain of the upper classes for the lower, foreigners, and tradespeople shines through as examples

of this shortcoming. Racism appears in several places. First, the Welsh are depicted in feral, animalistic, sub-human terms.

The attitude to the Negro companion of Margot Beste-Chetwynde is typical, highlighted by Chokey's lament about how his race is perceived, which is reminiscent of Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice." Then, Paul is charged as a white slaver, making reference to the fact that, by abusing those of a lower class, the upper classes are engaging in a form of prejudice and mistreatment of others that is tantamount to slavery.



Style

Point of View

The narrative unfolds in the third person. Pennyfeather is front and center as the “object” to which life happens, incapable of exercising any control. Hence the third person is the most appropriate. The reader, although not omniscient, is able to see the ramifications of the action from this viewpoint. There are no soliloquies or monologues performed by Paul as might be expected from a more thinking person. However, he is the frequent recipient of such discourses from others who serve as the voice of the author.

Setting

The action occurs in various settings. It opens in the quadrangle of Scone College, with Pennyfeather’s humiliating assault. It moves to London, returning several times as our hero transits through the metropolis. A large section of the narrative occurs in Llanabba Castle in North Wales. Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde’s invitation takes Pennyfeather to the ancestral home of King’s Thursday in Hampshire. The journey that culminates in his arrest and conviction takes him to the seedy quarters of Marseilles in France. Then follows his incarceration in the prisons of Blackstone Gaol and Egdon Heath. His escape brings him to Cliff House, the sanatorium where the deceit is played out. His recuperation takes place in Margot’s villa in Corfu, before he returns to Scone College.

Language and Meaning

The author writes at and about the times he was living in, the 1920s era in Britain. Hence the language is reflective of the era. The descriptive passages use many words that are either considered too formal today or which have fallen into disuse. Some have taken on different meanings. The language of the upper classes is long-winded and flowery, while that of the lower is colloquial, employing cockney and slang. The sentences of the Welsh, presumably literal translations of their own dialects, are oddly structured, grammatically disorganized and hard to comprehend. The longer discourses and speeches are philosophical and formal. There are many instances of amusing drunken dialogue. The staccato dialogue between Pennyfeather and Grimes about his feelings for Margot uses monosyllabic or short, quick exchanges, and amusingly recalls the language of P.G. Wodehouse.

Structure

Decline and Fall is structured into three parts, each being further divided into titled chapters that describe in a nutshell the content to come. A prelude and an epilogue

provide the beginning and end of the cyclical movement of the story which ends where it began. There are six illustrations included that were sketched by the author.

Part 1 contains thirteen chapters. This section covers the plot from Pennyfeather's expulsion, his arrival at Llanabba, all that transpires here, until the first "death" of Captain Grimes. Part 2 contains six chapters and covers the period from Pennyfeather's arrival at King's Thursday, his engagement, wedding preparations, the reappearance of Grimes, the business of the Latin American entertainment company, the doomed trip to Marseilles, his return and arrest. Part 3, with seven chapters, is a depiction of Pennyfeather's time in prison, his manipulated release, his resurrection and rehabilitation in Greece, and his return to Scone College, the re-starting of his life.



Quotes

There's a blessed equity in the English [public-school] system ... one goes through years of perfect hell ... and after that the social system never lets one down.

-- Grimes (3, Part 1)

I couldn't understand why God had made the world at all.

-- Prendergrast (4, Part 1)

Lay interest in ecclesiastical matters is often a prelude to insanity.

-- The Vicar (8, Part 1)

The church has never countenanced lay opinion on spiritual matters.

-- Prendergrast (10, Part 1)

You folks all think the colored man hasn't got a soul ... beat him; put him in chains; load him with burdens.

-- Chokey (9, Part 1)

This book is really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather ... the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part of hero... (2, Part 2)

If you have been at all observant of people ... accidents which have happened ... you cannot help being struck with an amazing cohesiveness of events.

-- Fagan (6, Part 3)

People get ideas about a thing they call life. It sets them all wrong.

-- Silenus (7, Part 3)

There was something radically inapplicable about this whole code of ready-made honor.

-- Pennyfeather (4, Part 3)

I know of no more utterly boring and futile occupation than generalizing about life.

-- Silenus (7, Part 3)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the title “Decline and Fall.” Why is it significant?

Topic 2

Evaluate the justice meted out to members of the Bollinger Club and Pennyfeather.

Topic 3

Discuss the portrait of the education system in England in this work.

Topic 4

Why does Pennyfeather call Grimes “one of the immortals”?

Topic 5

Describe Waugh’s depiction of racism in the novel.

Topic 6

6. Give a character analysis of Dr. Fagan.

Topic 7

7. Describe Mr. Prendergast’s struggles with “Doubts.”

Topic 8

8. Detail Margot’s character development through the story.

Topic 9

9. Explain why Paul prefers solitary confinement in Blackstone Gaol.



Topic 10

10. Write an essay on the “wheel of life” motif as depicted by Otto Silenus.