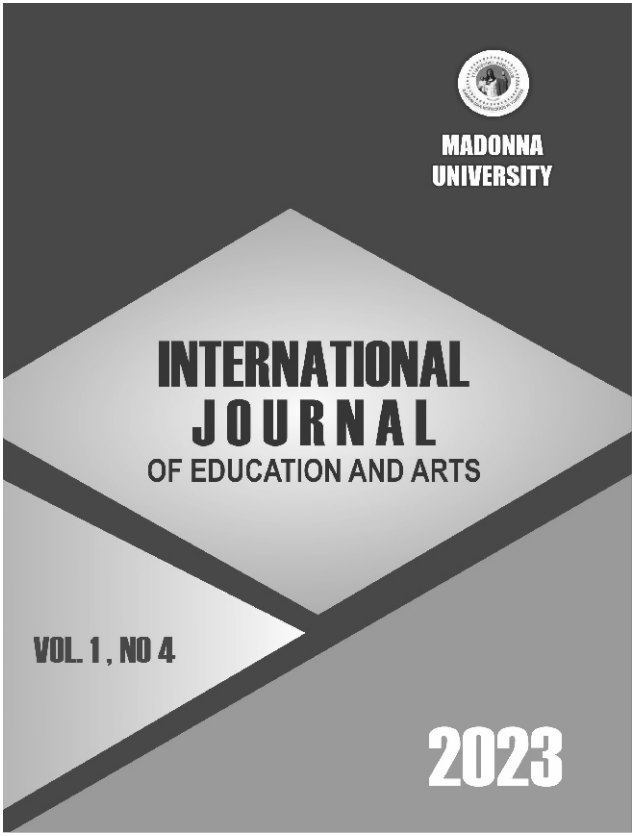
MADONNA
UNIVERSITY
INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL
OF EDUCATION AND ARTS
VOL. 1 , NO 4
2023

International Journal of Education and Arts Vol.1 , N0 4 Nov. 2023

Hedonism And The Fallacy Of *Joie De Vivre:*

A Study Of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*

SIEFRED KHAN NCHIFOR
University of Buea, Cameroon
British Literature
(+237) 674410314 / (+237) 699732864
nchifor23@yahoo.com

Abstract

One of the social scourges that have and is plaguing society is war and its protracted aftermath is trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder does not haunt only actors in a war but, equally, other members of society. Amongst the multi-faceted manifestations of trauma is the quest for self-gratification which people seek in a bid to assuage the pangs of trauma and triumph over depression and anxieties. However, through Evelyn Waugh's Vile Bodies, this paper seeks to demonstrate that despite the voracious desire for pleasure that cuts across demographics as a panacea to war anxieties, people do not obtain fulfillment given that hedonism provides only short-term happiness. Lack of fulfilment in the quest for pleasure challenges

the notion of joie de vivre especially as self-indulgence, also, renders people reckless, reduces awareness of danger and mars concern for their wellbeing thereby exposing them to death. Hence, help out of trauma could be sought from mental health professionals. Freud's ideas on how the first part of the tripartite psyche—the Id operates on the pleasure principle, Carl Jung's discourse on the collective unconscious, and the new historicist—Greenblatt's argument that a text reflects the atmosphere within which it was produced guide the analysis in this paper.

Keywords: Trauma, Hedonism, Joie de vivre, 20th century English society

Introduction

Joie de vivre lifestyle is often adopted by people who suffer from trauma and anguish. They indulge in pleasurable activities of all forms in a bid to assuage the pangs of trauma and triumph over low-spiritedness that result from depression. Kierkegaard (1986) on the aesthetic stage towards mankind's search for self-fulfillment holds that people pursue pleasure as a solution to boredom and anxieties. The aesthetic life is defined by the craving for pleasure which one could attain only by maximising those pleasures (par. 2). People in the English society resorted to hedonism as a way to mitigate psychic strain, allay the phobia of war and maximise the ephemeral life they assumed to have. Carter (1997) opines that English citizen perceived the modernist era as a “thing, knocked to pieces, leaky, red-hot, threatening to blow-up different from what their parents received way

back in the eighteen nineties; nicely painted, smoothly running, practically fool proof" (p. 1). Owing to the fact that the people "lived in an atmosphere of 'tomorrow we die', they naturally drank and were merry" (p. 1). Thus, the craving for pleasure that cuts across demographics was a means to surmount the anxieties and uncertainties of the modern society. Waugh's *Vile Bodies* mirrors this period and illustrates that English citizens were epicureans as well as promiscuous. Nonetheless, these activities failed to quell their angst, provided only temporary happiness, marred awareness of danger and, hence, exposed them to death.

Self-gratification as a Collective Drug

Hedonism is "characterized by openness to pleasurable experiences …the pursuit of sensory pleasures such as drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking tobacco, eating sweets and abundant sex" (Veenhoven, 2016, pp. 437-438). Such activities are often pursued as a panacea to worries. Waugh's *Vile Bodies* presents English citizens of the modernist era whose desire for pleasure was occasioned by the need to subdue the pangs of war. Waugh's characters seek pleasure, particularly, in parties and orgies. Most of them are youths whom Waugh refers to as 'the Bright Young People'. Therefore, not all of the characters are directly affected by war.

However, those who grow in a war environment like 'the Bright Young People' pursue pleasure even more than their parents. In a bid to understand how people who do not experience war suffer from it and, consequently, adopt a self-indulgent lifestyle, it is

realised that wars “affect entire generations of individuals, and there is quite extensive evidence that generational attitudinal changes persist long after the original stimulus is gone” (Gurr, 1980, p. 405). This point seems to have been understood in the English society. From a new historicists' perspective, the socio-economic, cultural, political and religious realities of an era during which a text was produced helps to better understand it. After the Great War (when Waugh was still a young man), most speeches or sermons made to them at school were based on the theme that they were future men and women of the society; that they were those to succeed to the leadership of a broken and shaken world and that the cure was in their hands. They were called upon to not indulge in porous practices. (Gallagher, 1984, p. 12). Nonetheless, the young people's response to these 'glowing expectations' came in the form of subversive and hedonistic behaviour” (Kolek, 1985, p. 36). They did not spare any opportunity to eat largely and drink to stupor.

The adjective 'bright' in the appellation 'the Bright People' suggests the people's fascination with the exigencies of life. The fact that they seek pleasure in England as well as in Scotland and France demonstrates that hedonistic behaviour characterised the whole of Europe. The prodigious consumption of food and wine 'provoked' the creation of extra recreation sites. For example, beer-houses gave way to open-setting drinking and night clubs sprouted (Waugh, 2013, p. 142). Waugh further notes that children, unlike before, were not stigmatised as far as alcoholic consumption was concerned (p. 142). In *Vile Bodies*, the youths' large appetite for food and wine,

oftentimes exercised in the presence of their parents, epitomises the above view. The Bright People cherish binge drinking about which Mandelbaum (1995) intimates that it is "important for the whole social order…drinking is defined and limited in accordance with fundamental motifs of the culture…drinking in a particular group tells us about their entire culture and society (p. 281). Binge drinking that cut across age groups and which usually results in drunkenness, and followed by other misdemeanours illustrates the excessive drinking culture of English society of the first half of the 20th century.

Also, massive attendance and the successiveness of orgies and parties attest the Bright People's love for self-gratification. Adam refers to the parties as; "endless dinners, in which one could alternate flavour with flavour from sunset to dawn without satiety" (p. 27). The statement demonstrates the frequency of occasions wherein they are exposed to food and wine, but most especially that such a routine lifestyle fails to satisfy them. Their craving for them remains unappeasable. During a party hosted by Metroland, it is noted that:

> *cars and taxis drove up in close succession…The Bright People came popping all together, out of someone's electric brougham like a litter of pigs, and ran squealing up the steps. Some 'gate-crashers' who had made the mistake of coming in Victorian fancy dress was detected and repulsed. They hurried home to change for a second assault. (p. 41)*

Waugh's use of the simile 'like a litter of pigs' to describe the way the people stream into the party shows their interest in it. Lack of an official invitation, rain or distance to go change and conform to the

dress code does not deter them.

The argument that *joie de vivre* mode of life is a fallacy is seen as the Bright People fall sick following the consumption of food and wine. This notwithstanding, Adam, for example, believes in the healing power of champagne. He drinks more, yet it rather makes him feel worse. This is due to the fact that; "excessive pleasure drives one mad just as much as pain" (Socrates quoted in Goulamari, 2015, p. 9). In this way, it is realised that the quest for pleasure does not only falls short from being a solution to anguish but could also exacerbate it. Adam externalises his abhorrence for the parties thus:

> *Oh...what a lot of parties!...Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris—all that succession and repetition of massed humanity...Those vile bodies... (p. 54)*

The excerpt is Adam's endeavour to recapitulate the parties that he has attended in different places and under varied conditions. That he refers to the parties as 'dull dances', 'comic dances', and 'disgusting

dances' demonstrates his dislike for them. This concurs with Azhar's (2013) observation that people "seek romance, pleasure or intellectual pursuits as a means to satisfy themselves…. these activities are not ultimately satisfying. Then man becomes bored with himself and his activities. This boredom turns to despair" (p. 36). Although bored and conscious of the harm that the "savage parties" (p. 54) cost him, Adam does not renounce them. This situation could be interpreted through the Freudian principles on the functioning of the human psyche wherein Adam's ego re-awakens his moral conscience to the fact the parties are preposterous yet, his Id's insatiable impulse for pleasure makes him to persist in them.

Moreover, the Bright People are low-spirited and exhausted on a sea-voyage from France where they attend parties. Nonetheless, on aboard the ship where a storm threatens to wreck their ship, they are engrossed in pleasurable activities. For example, Kitty and Fanny munch dry biscuits while others gulp third Irish whisky. Their unconcern for the threat posed by the storm and penchant for drinking could be seen in the following dialogue:

'I wonder, do you think the champagne...?'

'Kitty.'

'Yes, Fanny, dear.'

'Kitty, I think, in fact, I am sure I have some sal volatile... Kitty, I thought that perhaps as

you are nearer... it would really hardly be safe for me to try and descend... I might

break a leg.

'Not after champagne, Fanny, do you think?'

'But I need it. Of course, dear, if it's too much trouble?'

'Nothing is too much trouble, darling, you know that. But now I come to think of it, I remember, quite clearly, for a fact, that you did not pack the sal volatile.'

'Oh, Kitty, oh, Kitty, please... you would be sorry for this if I died...oh.'

'But I saw the sal volatile on your dressing-table after your luggage had gone down, dear.'

'I remember thinking, I must take that down to Fanny, and then, dear, I got confused over the tips, so you see'... (p. 4)

It is not only Kitty and Fanny who disregard the threat. At the same time, some other women "ate dry captain's biscuits from paper bags" (p. 3). There is another group "in the smoking-room drinking his third Irish whisky" (p. 5). When "up went the ship, up, up, up, paused and then plunged down with a sidelong slither" (p. 5) as it is tossed by waves, they each "caught at a glass and saved it" (p. 5). This behaviour shows that they cherish drinking in such a way that they are ready to die while drinking.

This attitude reveals that their love for food and drinks conquers the threat of drowning. Yet, they are described as; "the miserable little collection of men seated about the room" (p. 7). The adjective 'miserable' points to the downcast nature of the Bright People and, thus, challenges *joie de vivre* philosophy that "true happiness entails identifying one's values, cultivating them, and

living in accordance with them" (Siebelt, 2018, p. 100).

Apart from epicureanism, sexuality was a major feature of English citizens in the modernist society. Waugh's *Vile Bodies* shows that leisure sites were breeding grounds for debauchery. Talking about the correlation between amusement sites and sexual perversity in the Modern English society, Schlagdenhauffen (2020) avers that; "from the Roaring Twenties...nearly every town had music halls, dance halls, bars and discreet cafés that were also meeting places for men who liked men and women who liked women" (p. 1). The Bright People's innumerable orgies; some hosted in brothels illustrate the centrality of sexuality in their lives. In this society, it was:

> *almost impossible to get away from the subject of sex…it was over in polite and impolite salons…there were books about it. There were plays about it. There was even a silence about it…old standard were…called blind; convention (standard) have been dispensed with; obligations were scoffed at; and "and liberate the libido"…become the national motto. (Fortson, Letter to the Atlanta constitution. National humanities: The Twenties in Contemporary Commentar, p. 6)*

Fortson's metaphorical description of sex as a 'national motto' demonstrates the pervasive practise of sex in the society. This is evident when "there were two people making love to each other near him on the terrace, reclining on cushions" (p. 4) at time a Bright People are streaming into a party.

It is seen that parties are avenues wherein people contract sex-based relationships. This is the case of Adam and Nina whose penchant for sex gets Nina depressed as seen in the following excerpt:

> *"All this fuss about sleeping together. For physical pleasure I'd sooner go to my dentist any day."Adam said, "You'll enjoy it more next time."*
> *Nina said, "Next time," and told him that he took too much for granted.*
> *Adam said that that was a phrase which only prostitutes used. Then they started a real quarrel which lasted all through the film and all the way to Nina's flat and all the time she was cutting up a lemon and making a cocktail, until Adam said that if she didn't stop going on he would ravish her there and then on her own hearth-rug.*
> *Then Nina went on, provocatively. But by the time that Adam went to dress she had climbed down enough to admit that perhaps love was a thing one could grow to be fond of after a time, like smoking a pipe. Still she maintained that it made one feel very ill at first, and she doubted if it was worth it. (p. 40)*

Nina does not derive satisfaction from sex any longer. Although she is fed-up, she does not abstain from it. Talking about her undulating attitude towards sex, it is noted that; "the truth is that like so many people of their age and class, Adam and Nina are suffering from being sophisticated about sex before they were at all widely experienced"

(p. 40). Thus, in the modern English society, young people were immersed in sexuality, yet it did not quash the anxieties of a war environment.

Lack of happiness and satisfaction in the avalanche of pleasurable activities which illustrates that *joie de vivre* principle of life is an illusion stems from the fact that pleasure has a limit and an extra pursuit of it results to a contrary feeling. Jacques Lacan's treatise on *jouissance* sheds light on this as he asserts that *jouissance* is an urge which transgresses prohibitions on enjoyment and goes beyond Freud's pleasure principle. Beyond this bound, pleasure becomes a sort of 'painful principle'. He adds that *jouissance* "dictates a drive towards the attainment of the conditions in which pleasure would cease" (Dean, 2000, pp. 153-154). Dean, further, expounds that *jouissance* "may be understood as self-destructive as it overwhelms the ego or coherent self" (p. 164). This is the situation of Waugh's characters that fall sick or become more depressed after indulging in self-gratifying acts. In addition to this, some of them lose their lives.

Negligence and Death

The *joie de vivre* lifestyle that was adopted by English citizens of the modernist era resulted in pain as well as blinded them to dangers that lead to death. In other words, beyond affecting their health negatively, the pursuit of self-gratification enticed them to deadly deeds.

Waugh's characters pursue pleasure collectively and often converge on Lottie's Crump's bar. Their game of gambling is described as "a mysterious game played with dice which always ends with someone giving a bottle of wine to everyone in the room" (p. 16). Even though gambling itself is a form of pleasure, it is also a means to

achieve other forms of pleasure such as; drinking and eating. While celebrating, carelessly, after a win, a swinging chandelier cuts Flossie's forehead and her friends react by "bathing her forehead with champagne" (p. 24). The negligent treatment of Flossie's wound with champagne that culminates to her death exposes the people's flippant consideration of their lives.

Equally, the Bright People compromise their safety with pleasure. One of these activities in which carelessness leads to numerous deaths is car racing. The public's interest in the event is seen through Adam, Miss Runcible and Archie's long journey to the kick-off venue. The place is said to "where there had been three deaths the year before, and it was worse this year, because they'd been putting down wet tar. It was nothing more or less than a death trap" (p. 70). The record attests the perilousness of the competition which, nonetheless, does not frighten the participants in spite of the porosity of the road.

Technological upsurge in the 1920s and the 1930s was marked, inter alia, by a high production of speedy automobiles which people used for racing. Waugh refers to the racers as "speed Kings of all nationalities, unimposing men mostly with small moustaches and apprehensive eyes; they were reading the forecasts in the morning papers and eating what might (and in some cases did) prove to be their last meal on earth" (p. 70). The fact that the participants are of many nationalities indicates that the event pulls people from far and wide. When Waugh notes that some racers eat what may be their last meal, it suggests that deaths would be recorded in the race. When the race, eventually, commences; "the cars running all jammed together like

pigs being driven through a gate; one by one they shook themselves free and disappeared round the bend with a high shriek of acceleration" (p. 74). Also, it is recounted that they come in view:

> *flashing intermittently with dazzling speed and a shriek; one or two drew into their pits and the drivers leapt out, trembling like leaves, to tinker with the works. One had already come to grief-a large German whose tyre had burst; punctured...It had left the road and shot up a tree like a cat chased by a dog. (p. 75)*

The similes in the extracts illustrate the racer's maddening speed as well as their recklessness. The death of Captain Marino following a fatal accident is, thus, not surprising. According to Elias (1995), a careful steering of a car to prevent accidents could be likened to "steering the *self* through society" (p. 28). Elias' comparison suggests that the numerous cases of accidents and deaths resulting from reckless driving demonstrate the chaos that reigned in the modernist era.

Despite the deaths already recorded in the competition, irrational zest entices Miss Runcible who, without any preparation and visibly drunk, replaces Captain Marino. She acknowledges his unpreparedness to Adam thus; "not absolutely safe…But I'll go quite slowly at first until I'm used to it. Just you see" (p. 77). Her admiration for the racers even though there are casualties in counting as the competition continues proves that the love for pleasure eclipses the danger that race poses to her life. When she takes off; "the car shot out

into the middle of the road, missed a collision by a foot, swung round and disappeared with a roar up the road" (p. 77). A few minutes after, a loud speaker announces:

> *Hullo, everybody...No. 13, the English Plunket-Bowse, driven by Miss Agatha, came into collision at Headlong Corner with No. 28, the Italian Omega car, driven by Captain Marino. No. 13 righted itself and continued on the course. No. 28 overturned and has retired from the race. (p. 78)*

At the end of the competition, many victims lie at the roadside comprising both the dead and those in critical conditions. In this way, Waugh satirises the Bright People's allure of velocity which costs them their lives.

Also, the frivolous treatment of Miss Runcible's precarious health situation further demonstrates that the longing for overindulgence mars concern for the people's safety. When Miss Runcible is bedridden in a hospital and her friends pay her a visit, a nurse cautions them against the risk of exciting her since she suffers from cerebral strain. Nonetheless, as demanded by Miss Runcible, ceded to by her friends and, ironically, joined, by the same nurse, a mini party is held in Miss Runcible's hospital room. The music played, and alcohol and cigarette consumed by all including Miss Runcible makes her to smile deliriously; "bowing her bandaged head to imaginary visitors" (p. 85). She hallucinates by addressing an imaginary driver whom she advises to driver faster but cautiously. Freudian psychoanalysis facilitates comprehension of Miss

Runcible's hallucination. According to Breuer (1985), Freud posits that shocking experiences are often hidden in people's sub-consciousness and influence their behaviour (p. 12). In this way, we understand that Miss Runcible delusions stem from her involvement in a car accident. Later on; her "temperature went rocketing up the chart in a way which aroused great interest throughout the nursing home" (p. 86) till she dies. In this dimension, Veenhoven (2016) lampoons hedonistic behaviour because it is accompanied by "irresponsible behaviour...superficiality and short-sightedness egoism (p. 437). In "Paradox of Hedonism", he opines that pleasure-seeking leads to unhappiness and "that a hedonistic lifestyle contributes to happiness only in the short run" (p. 438). Thus, it is not worth the while being hedonistic since it exacerbates rather than solves problems.

The festivity in the hospital that involves Miss Runcible, her friends and the nurse reveals the prevalent hedonistic and reckless behaviour in modernist society. The raison d'être for such common mode of life could be understood through the discourse of Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst, on 'the collective unconscious'. Jung argues that the human body has "certain universal features…it would then be reasonable to expect that the psyche, which is intimately related to the body, would also have common and universal features" (Walter, 1976, p. 11). In this light, the response of English citizens to the anxieties and uncertainties of their society was common due to the shared inherent human features that had a common stimulant. They were haunted by trauma and pessimism which engendered hedonism; a kind of opium.

Conclusion

The *joie de vivre* principle of life is often adopted as a means to attenuate trauma and depression. Still, hedonism usually fails to provide satisfaction and fulfilment, and thus leaves people more depressed**.** The modern English society was characterised by the pursuit of self-gratification as a panacea to the anxieties and uncertainties of the era. However, as demonstrated through Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, such a lifestyle rather got them more disconsolate. Equally, in some cases, people lost their lives in pursuit of pleasure since it marred concerned for their wellbeing. In this way, *joie the vivre* lifestyle that people adopt as a remedy for trauma is detrimental. Help should be sought from mental health professionals.

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