

How does Catholicism influence relationships in *Brideshead Revisited*?

Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh

In its preface, Evelyn Waugh describes the underlying theme of *Brideshead Revisited* to be “the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters”¹. Catholicism dominates the book: its plot, characters and relationships. Each character’s religious stance is laid bare from the outset and it is this that initially and ultimately defines them. God is an overarching inevitability in *Brideshead*, with each character enduring their own struggle with religion. In the novel we encounter varying degrees of faith, from Charles’ assured agnosticism to the conflicting beliefs of Sebastian and Julia, to the committed Catholicism that Lady Marchmain practises. Every character eventually turns to God, they find a comfort in him, but this comes with an inexorable sacrifice – love. A higher, greater love is sought in God by the characters; one that cannot be found in human relationships. So the most affectionate bonds within the book – Sebastian and Charles, Julia and Charles – are confronted and overshadowed by Catholicism.

The novel is narrated throughout by Charles Ryder and follows his journey from youthful atheist to “homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless”² convert. On befriending Sebastian Flyte whilst studying at Oxford, Charles is introduced to the Flyte family and his entanglement with this intricate and troubled household directs the plot. He develops a love for Sebastian, and later for Sebastian’s sister Julia; he is befriended and then abandoned by their mother, Lady Marchmain. Charles is immersed in a world riddled with religion. He seeks intimacy and finds it in Sebastian and Julia, but their commitment shifts from him to God, in the end. A perfect love is offered by God, and the human love and happiness Charles, Julia and Sebastian find in each other is overshadowed and forfeited as a result. Lady Marchmain has inculcated traditional Catholic values in her children and as a product of this upbringing, Sebastian and then Julia sacrifice their rich relationship with Charles, to be closer to God. Every figure of faith in *Brideshead* suffers. Love is lost and replaced by a lonely yearning for God. Religious guilt taints the freedom, tenderness and happiness shared by Charles with Sebastian and his sister.

Sebastian is introduced to us as a charismatic, charming and beautiful youth, full of joy. Charles develops an impractical love for him and the two share what is referred to as a “romantic friendship”³ by Cara, Lord Marchmain’s mistress. Living a life of hedonism and debauchery, they spend halcyon days together, living freely, doing as they please. Yet these days are only enjoyed when Sebastian is free, liberated from the shackles of religion and the pressures of Lady Marchmain. Charles talks of “Arcadian days”⁴ at Oxford and idyllic summers spent alone with Sebastian at Brideshead, polishing off bottles of Château Peyraguey (said to be “heaven with strawberries”⁵) and enjoying “naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins”⁶. However, their love lacks direction, it lacks a future beyond a “romantic friendship”. Sebastian’s faith prevents him from expressing, what is most probably, homosexuality. He cannot have a perfect or lasting

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, (Penguin, 1962), Preface.

² p330

³ p98

⁴ p288

⁵ p25

⁶ p46

love with Charles and so he turns to alcohol. Lady Marching heightens Sebastian's feelings of guilt and shame for his drinking, distances him from Charles and wears away at Sebastian's happiness.

Charles speaks of their time together as "very near heaven"⁷, yet it is doomed all the same. Lady Marchmain spies on Sebastian, paving his way to alcoholism – an escapism from the pressure and humiliation targeted at his indulgent lifestyle. Merriment and autonomy are replaced by morose and listless confinement, as Sebastian lives his remaining days at Oxford in the shadows, under his mother's imposing eye (symbolic of Catholicism's imposition of control and restraint). He lives miserably under her mercy: "when he was gay now it was usually because he was drunk"⁸. He finds respite from religion in his alcoholism: it is now the only route to happiness for him. As pressure grows (further restrictions, scrutiny, and forced visits to church) his alcoholism worsens and his rapport with Charles suffers, becoming one of unrequited, parasitic dependence.

Sebastian's Catholicism intensifies the pressure on him to sacrifice his happiness, and to suffer instead. His early prayer, "O God, make me good, but not yet"⁹ (a paraphrase of St. Augustine's words – a figure who, once touched by the grace of God, found salvation and renounced his libertine ways) shows an awareness of his 'sinning' in the eyes of the Church, but an unwillingness to concede his great joy, happiness and love, for lonely suffering in pursuit of God's love. Sebastian has, over time, been convinced that what he is doing – living a hedonistic life without God – is wrong. The Church has manufactured embarrassment within him. Everyone representative of Catholicism has a strengthened hold on Sebastian, instilling an unhappiness which brings shame, leaving him with a relentless need to escape – through alcohol. He cannot pursue romantic love – it is condemned by both his social and religious environments – and ultimately has to instead strive for a love with God. Sebastian has always had an attachment to the Church, believing his faith to be a "lovely idea"¹⁰, but his Catholicism grows to become a dominating and defining force. Charles, on the other hand, is assured in his agnosticism but is nonetheless pushed and pulled by religion. He is pitied by characters in the book for his lack of faith. Cordelia, the youngest Flyte, on uncovering Charles' agnosticism tells him: "I'll pray for you"¹¹. Lady Marchmain manipulates and coerces situations, forcing intimate conversations with Charles in attempts to "suborn"¹² and turn him into a proponent for the Church's attack upon Sebastian's way of life.

Cara develops her "romantic friendship" description of Sebastian and Charles' shared love and happiness: "it is a kind of love that comes to children before they know its meaning"¹³. This is a nod to the inescapable disillusionment and short-lived romanticism of their human relationship, as well as the love these characters will come to strive for in God. Their bond is eventually reduced to nothing more than a familiar tie. Charles' remaining warmth for the Sebastian of

⁷ p77

⁸ p125

⁹ p84

¹⁰ p84

¹¹ p90

¹² p133

¹³ p98

former days remains, but Catholicism has ruined any love he and Sebastian shared. The contentment of earlier times diminishes until it is lost all together. Charles is banished by Lady Marchmain, following his aid in Sebastian's plea for alcohol: a drink of escapism, no longer of casual enjoyment. Charles gives money to Sebastian, knowing that it will be spent on alcohol, in an attempt to help a dear friend he understands and cares for. Yet this is deemed "callously wicked" and "wantonly cruel"¹⁴ by Sebastian's hard-hearted but well-intentioned mother, who believes herself to be benevolent throughout the novel, despite her destructive actions.

Impeded and ruined by the force of religion, Sebastian and Charles' loving friendship fragments and each character is left isolated and pained. Charles considers himself "the loneliest man in Oxford"¹⁵. Feeling "forlorn and regretful"¹⁶, he reflects: "leaving a part of myself behind...and search for it hopelessly"¹⁷. This is the first sign of a turn to God in Charles: he acknowledges that he will never be able to have a perfect, lasting love with another human and spends "ten dry years"¹⁸ alone and listless before he finds anything close to the comfort that God may offer him. Inevitably, Sebastian seeks to escape, fleeing abroad from his mother and the feeling of persecution from his religion, and even abandons her on her death bed. Sebastian struggles for the rest of his days as a lowly under-porter, after begging himself entry into a monastery in Tunis – a lonely, loveless and empty shadow of his former self. He is symbolically employed as a slave to his religion but solace and comfort are found in his dedication to the church, its community and its vows. His alcoholism is accepted and Sebastian is helped in his pain, through the goodness and charity of the Catholic community. Nonetheless, he has sacrificed the great love and enjoyment he had with Charles, for a secluded life of suffering to be with God. He is touched by the grace of God and finds a salvation in his faith as a holy drunkard – blessed and content, but lacking the dignity, power of will and unblemished happiness of earlier days with Charles. Yet as his younger self voiced: in religion, "happiness doesn't seem to have much to do with it, and that's all I want..."¹⁹

Charles has "ten dead years"²⁰ after Sebastian, in an unpassionate marriage, held to a shallow, superficial adulterer. Julia finds herself in a similar circumstance, before she encounters Charles. Julia's initial love for Rex proves to be hollow and based upon the naïve criteria she set herself for finding a husband. Even so, the Church challenges her early love for Rex. Rex is forced to convert to Catholicism in order to marry her, but whilst willing and subservient in his conversion, he perceptibly lacks sincerity and so this process is prolonged and remains incomplete until a week before their marriage. Rex's love is held at the mercy of the Church and regardless of his portrayal as a strong-willed presence throughout the book, he has to jump through ecclesiastical hoops for Julia. This difficult conversion is ultimately pointless: Rex

¹⁴ p163

¹⁵ p140

¹⁶ p61

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¹⁸ p241

¹⁹ p87

²⁰ p243

doesn't have faith, he does not grow from his conversion and he is left an ignorant, selfish and insincere convert, deserted by Julia. Julia's beauty dominates the aristocratic scene and despite distancing herself from her faith, Catholicism acts as a "faint shadow on her that unfitted her from the highest honours"²¹. Her social career and marital potentials have been restricted, long before she settles with Rex. All these impediments, and yet she is considered a "half-heathen"²²; she cannot escape her faith. In her marriage to Rex, "she shut her mind against her religion"²³ but her love and hope for their future together is replaced with disappointment. Julia is left unfulfilled and unhappy, longing for a greater love – a love that Charles later tries to offer her, but a love she comes to believe (following her father's deathbed conversion) to be attainable only with God.

Charles and Julia meet aboard a ship travelling turbulent waters, returning to England, following their separate trips abroad. They are drawn together and share a great understanding of one another. A conquering love is formed between them, untroubled by the violent and restrictive storms at sea, unaffected by the presence of Charles' wife or Rex. Harboured still a regret and longing for him, Charles calls Sebastian "the forerunner"²⁴ to his vivid love with Julia: a term later reintroduced to describe Julia's role in Charles' conversion to God. Religion inescapably pervades their relationship. Despite her beautiful love with Charles – the peace, pleasure and unity she enjoys – Julia talks of the burden of her Catholicism, even in the formative stages with Charles. Julia considers her religion as "part of oneself", overshadowing her life – "I can't get all that sort of thing out of my mind...Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell"²⁵. She carries the same guilt and dread with her happiness that ruined Sebastian, expecting punishment and suffering to come for her enjoyment. But her love with Charles appears strong: their divorces are settled amicably and happiness remains even with "all mankind, and God, too...in a conspiracy against us"²⁶.

Waugh uses Bridey, Cordelia and even Lord Marchmain to impose the Catholic Church upon Julia and develop her conflicted, guilty feelings. Bridey insults Julia's overlapping involvement with Charles and Rex, yet we sympathise with her. Her love for Charles is genuine and affectionate; her love for Rex troubled and disappointing. In comparison with the measured practicality and selfishness behind Bridey's engagement, Julia's love triumphs: pure and devoted but deemed immoral and sinful by her religion and family. Bridey's "trite phrase"²⁷ (he condemns Julia to be "living in sin"²⁸) unearths the extent of Julia's religious self-doubt. An incessant inner conflict troubles her for the remaining months with Charles. During the day she dispels her feelings, "preconditioning from childhood; feelings of guilt from the nonsense...taught in the nursery"²⁹ but then murmurs prayer and pious rhymes at night.

²¹ p174

²² p86

²³ p182

²⁴ p245

²⁵ p247

²⁶ p263

²⁷ p273

²⁸ p272

²⁹ p276

Cordelia is the youngest of the Flyte family and in innocent piety describes Charles and Julia as a matter of “thwarted passion”³⁰. Charles and Julia have the most fulfilling relationship in *Brideshead*, and have overcome hindrances and impediments that would ruin other couples, but Cordelia highlights the underdeveloped and restricted nature of their love. Her comment is an honest insight into the reality: their love may be caring and heartfelt but it fails to flourish under the shadow of religion. Julia struggles with emptiness in her human love – a consequence of her entanglement with Catholicism. She possesses a magical sadness, an aura which communicates: “Surely I was made for some other purpose than this?”³¹ Her Catholicism means that she can never give her all to Charles, and so their love is restrained by faith. We see Julia tussle with religion, and her situation is sympathetic, given that she and Charles have overcome the considerable challenges of divorce and social pressure. Julia has neglected religion all her life, as best as she could, but it adversely dominates and commands, at a time when she has found happiness.

The imposition of Catholicism presents itself in its final form, unexpectedly, in the death of Lord Marchmain – a man quietly but explicitly against the Church – to drive Julia’s abandonment of Charles and turn to God. After converting to Catholicism to marry Lady Marchmain, Lord Marchmain is refused a divorce by her and so he remains married to her in a purgatory of his own, escaping to Venice (“the one town in Italy where no one ever has gone to church”³²), where he ferments in anger and recluses into “a volcano of hate”³³. Lord Marchmain returns to the hallowed halls of *Brideshead* in his final days to die, and after living his life, beyond Lady Marchmain, with few religious pressures, he is once again faced with its influences. As he weakens physically and mentally, those closest to him (Julia included) urge him to meet with a priest before his death. Sebastian has already demonstrated the love, salvation and grace to be found in God and we are aware of the comfort and contentment that Lord Marchmain and his loved ones will derive from him making his peace with a priest. Lord Marchmain refuses the priest on the first attempt but succumbs on the priest’s second visit. He makes the sign of the cross in his final moments, reminding Charles of words from his childhood: “the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom”³⁴. This biblical phrase describes the fundamental change and revelatory collapse of religious boundaries that Jesus’ crucifixion brought: God’s love became accessible to everyone. Similarly, Lord Marchmain’s death allows Julia to make her own reconciliation with God. He dies a forgiven man, finding comfort for himself and those around him in a difficult time. In his death, Julia kneels at the foot of his bed – a holy position – praying for his pardon. This heartrending circumstance has brought her to religion; she welcomes the love and relief offered through faith. Before a sign is made, Charles directs his love and compassion for Julia and makes his own agnostic prayer for Lord Marchmain to acknowledge God. He has been firm in defending Lord Marchmain’s defiance of religion, but puts Julia’s

³⁰ p295

³¹ p295

³² p55

³³ p100

³⁴ p322

happiness first, conceding his love for her in this selfless act. Charles' love motivates kindness and a personal faith within him: a faith that he later directs towards God.

Charles and Julia share parting words. A love – strong and frank – undone by religion. Human love is replaced with suffering for a perfect love with God. There is a strange paradox to it all: Julia experiences her “heart...breaking”³⁵ but she is choosing to endure this suffering to be with God. Her guilt surfaces in a final outpour: “the worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from his mercy”³⁶. A life with Charles would mean a life of love and happiness, but nonetheless, a life without God. Religion has disturbed Julia and any love she harbours, no matter how strong or beautiful, for Charles. Julia believes that God has given her the opportunity for salvation; she wants God's grace and pity, and understands no option other than to give Charles up. Love is sacrificed for hope of a greater relationship with God: “If I give up this one thing I want so much, however bad I am, he won't quite despair of me in the end”³⁷. Cordelia's words now ring true, “No one is ever holy without suffering”³⁸; religion doesn't bring happiness. Charles and Julia live isolated and loveless days, distant from happiness with another human. Julia is inspired by her father's turn to God in death and quashes her love for Charles – a love so powerful that it had overcome every other challenge – in the hope of finding perfect love in God.

The two prominent loves in the book are eclipsed by religion. Charles' love with both Sebastian and Julia is soured to the point that it is impracticable. Religion brings technical impediments: a stance against divorce and homosexuality, a disapproval of inter-denominational marriage. But it is the ingrained, institutionalised baggage of guilt, intrinsic in its teachings, that primarily ruins love in *Brideshead*. Sebastian and Julia abandon Charles, as they are ashamed of their happiness and ultimately adopt lonely lives, suffering, serving God. Human love is dwarfed by the hope for a greater, perfect love with God.

In spite of their own experiences, those lacking faith within the novel (Charles and Lord Marchmain) eventually turn to God themselves. Waugh punishes these secular characters whilst their backs are turned to God: Charles loses love and livelihood, and suffers a decade of dull years; Lord Marchmain's character is punished with inescapable fear, anger and hatred. Lord Marchmain has evaded religion all his life, but he comes to take comfort in acknowledging God and asks forgiveness for his sins, on his death bed. Charles has religion to blame for unhappiness, despair and pain in his life but by the end of the novel he finds himself involved in war and seeking reprieve, through God. In the final pages of the book, he kneels in the Chapel of Brideshead, where his battalion are now stationed and says “a prayer, an ancient, newly-learned form of words”³⁹ and takes hope from a burning sanctuary lamp. These characters may have lost happiness, love and satisfaction at the hands of religion, but they gain comfort and solace from this same source, in their darkest hours. We have sympathy for Waugh's characters: they all give

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³⁷ p324

³⁸ p294

³⁹ p330

up human love in search of salvation with God and, while they find comfort, they face a lonely and loveless struggle. Each character in *Brideshead* turns to religion and although it may thwart their love and happiness, it allows them to cope with the pain around them, be it alcoholism, death or war.

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