

Frocks and Feminism in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*

by

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Abstract

Many scholars have interpreted Evelyn Waugh's satires of social culture in the 1920s and '30s as entirely conservative works. But despite his alleged support for Victorian values, his writings suggest that he was sympathetic to women and, to some degree, feminist causes. This sympathy is evident in his depiction of the evening gown in his novels *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930). Unlike other modern styles, the evening gown in the early twentieth century preserved and promoted dated notions of femininity common to the Victorian period. I examine Waugh's novels alongside cultural artifacts of the same era, such as evening gown sketches and fashion articles. In pairing literary and cultural studies, I argue that Waugh, rather than advocating for these outdated styles, portrays modern women as victims of Victorian femininity. My research thus contributes to the field of modernist cultural studies by exploring Waugh's complex attitudes towards women's fashion—and, in so doing, reframing his legacy with regard to women and feminism.

In Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*, Mr. Outrage, the Prime Minister, offers the following assessment of the younger generation:

I don't understand them, and I don't want to. They had a chance after the war that no generation has ever had. There was a whole civilization to be saved and remade—and all they seem to do is to play the fool. Mind you, I'm all in favour of them having a fling. I dare say that Victorian ideas were a bit strait-laced . . . it's only human nature to run a bit loose when one's young. But there's something wanton about these young people today.
(183)

As his speech indicates, a generational conflict has erupted between the young and the old. Although his name suggests otherwise, Mr. Outrage is not terribly worked up over the sexual antics of the Bright Young Things. Indeed, his confusion over their foolishness indicates he is not outraged, but ambivalent. While he feels the younger generation's wantonness should be reprimanded, he acknowledges that the Victorian values of the previous generation were also problematic and unrealistic.

This essay argues that, like Mr. Outrage, Waugh's attitude towards modern youth oscillates between censure and support in his novels *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930). Waugh's satire frequently targets the younger generation's overt sexuality and exhibitionism. Such a pattern might suggest Waugh was a strong supporter of Victorian values, tradition, and discipline, which is an argument that has been taken up by multiple scholars.¹

¹ Naomi Milthorpe, for example, reads *Decline and Fall* as a conservative text, arguing that Waugh views the type of unrestrained freedom embodied by characters like Margot as “destructive and sterile” (31). Marius Hentea also reads Waugh as conservative, suggesting that *Vile Bodies* features the “[c]lass conservatism and snobbery” typical of Mayfair novels during this time (94).

Indeed, Waugh's conservatism, some think, extends to anti-feminism.² However, according to Jonathan Greenberg, modernist satire is not unidirectional, but instead performs a "double movement": "[O]n the one hand, the satirist speaks for a community, exaggerating and ridiculing his target in order to urge reform; on the other, he is a renegade who enjoys the subversion of traditional values" (7). This tendency in satire means readers should not assume Waugh is *entirely* antagonistic towards the younger generation; as Greenberg's comments suggests, the satirist may gain voyeuristic pleasure in sketching the older generation's reactions to the younger generation's sexual antics. In fact, there are moments in both *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* where he opposes the older generation's Victorian ideals. His objections to Victorianism are most pronounced in the modern attitudes of his female characters—attitudes their aristocratic elders stifle by dictating what they can wear.

Waugh's complex attitude towards what we would now term modern feminism is evident in his depiction of the evening gown in *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. In both of these texts, young men and women rebel against the values of their Victorian predecessors. For women, this rebellion is typically sartorial. Ilya Parkins explains how, during the early twentieth century, "the ephemeral character of fashion issued a material challenge to conceptions of feminine identity and, as such, threatened the social control of women, and their legibility as feminine" (36). Consequently, in *Vile Bodies*, characters like Agatha Runcible push the boundaries of conventional femininity by wearing trousers, much to the older generation's dismay. Despite this behavioral pattern in Waugh's female characters, surprisingly few scholars have closely examined the role fashion plays in Waugh's novels. Much of the existing scholarship on fashion

² While feminist scholarship on Waugh is minimal, Elizabeth MacLeod Walls argues that modernist writers like Waugh "collaborated indirectly with Victorian notions of art, society, and especially feminism . . . to support the generally conservative rhetoric of the movement" (232).

and modernism focuses on the Bloomsbury Group and works written by women.³ While Celia Marshik briefly includes Waugh in her study of fancy dress, she excludes him from her work on evening gowns. My research on Waugh and the evening gown fills a void within the field of modernist cultural studies by exploring how he employs this garment in his novels to criticize the Victorian values of the older generation.

As Waugh's texts make clear, the freedom to fashion a new feminine identity is not possible for young aristocratic women.⁴ Due to their social positions, Margot Beste-Chetwynde in *Decline and Fall* and Miss Mouse and Lady Ursula in *Vile Bodies* must shed their modern attitudes and wear evening gowns, a garment that, despite significant stylistic changes between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continued to promote dated notions of femininity in the 1920s and '30s reminiscent of the Victorian Angel in the House⁵—namely, that women should be chaste and should remain in the domestic sphere. Rather than advocating for this outdated style of dress, Waugh instead portrays these women as victims of Victorian femininity, using the evening gown to illustrate women's oppression during the early twentieth century. Marshik asserts that many modernist writers like Virginia Woolf “choose to depict [evening gowns] in a negative, threatening, and even animate manner” (27). As my readings show, Waugh also portrays the evening gown in an adverse way. In both of these novels, the evening gown conflicts with the feminist aspirations of his characters by restricting their bodily autonomy. As a result of

³ Jane Garrity's research on fashion and modernism focuses on the Bloomsbury Group. While Vike Martina Plock studies fashion and modernism in middlebrow novelist Rosamund Lehmann's works, her research, like Marshik's, only examines works written by women.

⁴ Judith Butler's work examines the relationship between gender, performance, and punishment more in depth, arguing that being a woman is “to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility” (522).

⁵ Marshik discusses this in more detail in *At The Mercy of Their Clothes*, explaining how the evening gown, compared to other garments, “emerged as, if not ahistorical, stubbornly resistant to radical change . . . as a sartorial genre, it seemed less reflective of most modern women's lives than . . . the sportswear that was increasingly popular for daytime attire” (33).

this conflict, the garment triggers anxiety in its wearer, and can even make her physically ill. The evening gown also affects his characters temporally by forcing them to embody antiquated feminine ideals, forestalling their evolution into modern women.⁶ In order to capture how the evening gown contradicts the modern attitudes of its wearers, I pair each of Waugh's texts with fashion articles about evening gowns from the same era. Both the images as well as the language within these articles accentuate the evening gown's strait-laced features and encourage readers to live a traditionally feminine lifestyle. My research thus reframes Waugh's depictions of women, suggesting that he was sympathetic to feminist causes and was aware of the cultural challenges they faced during this time period.

“The most beautiful and the most free”: Margot Beste-Chetwynde in *Decline and Fall*

Published in 1928, *Decline and Fall* details the misadventures of Paul Pennyfeather, whose stint as a public school teacher introduces him to the mother of one of his students, Mrs. Margot Beste-Chetwynde. A wealthy and sexually liberated widow, Margot's management of South American brothels eventually leads to Paul's imprisonment. Although Waugh describes her as “the very embodiment of the Feminist movement” (200), Margot surprises those around her by opting to marry Paul (and later Maltravers) in a traditional wedding ceremony while wearing a conservative wedding frock. The older members of the aristocracy, as Waugh makes clear, are at the root of Margot's decision to marry; marriage, and the evening gown that comes with it, helps portray her as a traditional woman, thereby allowing her to maintain her high social standing. By forcing her into an evening gown, a garment that literally and figuratively limits her

⁶ Parkins explores the relationship between fashion and temporality more in depth, describing how “garments as material things have a singular power to evoke memory, to bring the past into the present. In this way dress and fashion . . . have the capacity to destabilize the carefully guarded boundary between past, present and future that defines modernity” (39).

freedom, Waugh attacks Victorian methods of social control that were still affecting women in the twentieth century.

In order to illustrate how the evening gown contradicts Margot's feminist aspirations, I first show how Waugh uses her attire at the beginning of the novel to distinguish her as a new, modern woman. Margot's first appearance in the novel is accompanied by natural and animalistic imagery: "After him, like the first breath of spring in the Champs-Élysées, came Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde—two lizard-skin feet, silk legs, chinchilla body, a tight little black hat, pinned with platinum and diamonds and the high invariable voice that may be heard in any Ritz Hotel from New York to Budapest" (99). Spring typically connotes change and rebirth; likewise, Margot is new and evolved. She foreshadows the changes in femininity to come. As the sentence progresses, however, Waugh gives the impression that Margot's newness is also grotesque. Indeed, his phrasing suggests that Margot *is* what she is wearing, and that she depends on her clothing to convey a unique identity. Her lizard-skin shoes are really reptilian feet, while her fur coat is actually the body of a chinchilla. Even Margot's silk legs—likely the product of silkworms—have an animalistic quality to them. This discordant assemblage of body parts transforms Margot into a monstrous new species, a grotesque hybrid of woman and animal whose illegible identity could dismantle the current social order. Although it may seem like Waugh is ridiculing modern women's attempts to challenge feminine boundaries through their clothing, Greenberg points out that satire, "in its 'subversive' impulse . . . creates or promotes the very grotesquerie it purports to eradicate" (11). While Waugh is wary of modern women like Margot, he also finds humor in her efforts to overthrow tradition. In other words, by painting her in a grotesque manner, Waugh both encourages and dissuades female readers to subvert Victorian conceptions of femininity.

In addition to portraying her as a grotesque being, Waugh's description of Margot also implies she is not traditionally feminine. Other than the jewels on her hat, Margot's attire lacks ornamentation, a typical feature in feminine clothing. The simplicity of her attire is reflected in Waugh's account of it; while he describes the texture of her apparel (scaly, smooth, furry), he makes no mention of its color, pattern, or style. This lack of detail is especially jarring when juxtaposed with his vivid description of Flossie Fagan's frock earlier in the chapter: "[She] wore a violet frock of knitted wool . . . It was the color of indelible ink on blotting paper, and was ornamented at the waist with flowers of emerald green and pink" (79). Compared to Margot's simple ensemble, Flossie's frock, which features bright colors like purple and pink as well as floral details, is much more feminine. Flossie later comments to Philbrick how strange it is "that a woman with as much money as Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde should wear such *dull* clothes" (108). Her emphasis on the word "dull" suggests Margot's attire is not only somber, but is uninteresting as well. Flossie's comment also emphasizes that Margot exists outside of the Victorian gender binary—she does not feel the need to obey traditional feminine ideals when it comes to her style of dress.

Margot's outfit not only challenges feminine boundaries, but it also breaks fashion rules of the time period. According to a fashion article in a 1928 issue of *The Sketch*,⁷ Margot's fur coat is much too formal for the occasion: "Although tailored tweeds are still smart for wearing with sports clothes, for formal occasions you meet ring velvet or chiffon velvet, richly trimmed with fur" (Howard 257). Whereas Lady Circumference attends Llanabba's Annual School Sports event wearing "a tweed coat and skirt and jaunty Tyrolean hat" (89), Margot disobeys fashion laws and wears fur. This characteristic of Margot's is reflected in her feminist way of living.

⁷ First published in 1893, *The Sketch* was an illustrated journal intended for "cultivated people" ("The Sketch").

While visiting King's Thursday, Maltravers discusses Margot's controversial lifestyle with Paul: "Damned awkward position to be in—a rich woman without a husband! Bound to get herself talked about. What Margot ought to do is marry—someone who would stabilize her position, someone . . . with a position in public life" (179). Being older and unmarried, as Maltravers suggests, makes Margot seem like a loose woman; like her lizard-chinchilla ensemble, she is animalistic, carnal, and uncivilized. These characteristics make her a threat to the social order. Since marriage would require her to be more domestic, a quality highly valued in the Victorian era, tying the knot would strip Margot of her threatening reputation.

Although Waugh initially portrays her as the quintessential modern woman, it becomes clear later on that Margot's feminine emancipation is an illusion. During a conversation with Silenus, Paul describes Margot as "[t]he most beautiful [woman] and the most free. She almost seems like the creature of a different species" (174). Paul's description of Margot as a unique creature seems to be a reference to the lizard-chinchilla outfit she wore when they first met, indicating that Margot's clothing heavily influences Paul's perception of her as a liberated woman. Moreover, his likening of her to a new species implies Margot is more evolved than her female counterparts. Paul fails to realize, however, that Margot is not completely free; even though she seems different, Margot, like all women, is limited in the way she can express her femininity. Silenus' comical response to Paul's naiveté further emphasizes this limitation:

If you compare her with other women of her age you will see that the particulars in which she differs from them are infinitesimal compared with the points of similarity. A few millimeters here and a few millimeters there, such variations are inevitable in the human reproductive system; but in all her essential functions—her digestion, for example—she conforms to type. (174-5).

Although he acknowledges evolution slightly alters femininity over time (skirt lengths are shortened, necklines become lower), in his opinion, women can never completely change. Silenus attributes this inability to biology; femininity, like the digestive system, is intrinsic and predetermined. Despite their attempts to differentiate themselves, women inevitably end up conforming to a traditional feminine standard in both their dress and their lifestyle. While Waugh is clearly poking fun at his pretentiousness and essentialist attitude towards women here, Silenus' discussion of conformity foreshadows Margot's later transformation from a modern woman into a traditional one.

Margot's own conformity becomes visible when she decides to marry Paul. On the morning of their almost-wedding, Margot discusses her wedding frock with Paul over the phone: "I'm at home having luncheon in my bedroom and feeling, my dear, I can't tell you how virginal, really and truly completely debutante. I hope you'll like my frock. It's Boulanger, darling" (215). As their brief conversation makes clear, Margot's frock awakens a dated femininity. It not only reminds her of her virginal, debutante days, but it also brings to mind an antiquated feminine ideal that emphasizes chastity and modesty—the kind of femininity valued by her aristocratic counterparts. By wearing such a garment, Margot removes herself from the modern and places herself in the traditional past. However, the string of qualifiers before "debutante" gives the impression that Margot is hesitant to commit herself to a traditionally feminine lifestyle. This hesitation may be related to this lifestyle's constricting nature.

Despite her liberated sense of style, Margot selects a wedding frock that literally and figuratively restricts her freedom. According to Blanche Elliott, a fashion columnist for *The*

*Bystander*⁸ in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Louise Boulanger's designs (styled Louiseboulanger) featured silhouettes "thin to the point of emaciation" as well as "lengthened skirt[s] and . . . extreme tightness over the hips, making it seemingly more comfortable to stand than to sit" ("New Dress Epoch" 568). A sketch of one of Louiseboulanger's designs (see fig. 1) has the model standing with her back towards the audience in order to draw attention to the gown's train. While the fullness of both the skirt and train give the impression of movement, the bodice conveys the opposite. Indeed, the model in the sketch is hunched over, almost as if the gown is weighing her down, the tight bodice and full train making it difficult for her to stand up straight. Given these design features, Margot's frock likely makes it difficult for her move around freely, potentially explaining why Waugh chose Louiseboulanger specifically to be the designer of Margot's wedding frock.



Fig. 1. "A Glorious Extravagance Marks the Evening Frock," *The Bystander*, Sep. 1929, p. 608

⁸ Launched in 1903, *The Bystander* was an illustrated magazine published in London for an upper class audience, and featured topics ranging from society gossip to fashion ("About the Bystander"; "The Bystander").

Just as significant as the design features of Louiseboulanger's frocks are the magazine articles that advertise them. Although the articles were written for an audience consisting mostly of modern young women, the language framing Louiseboulanger's designs advocates a return to a more traditional style of femininity. For instance, one article suggests that evening gowns like Louiseboulanger's "challenge the stereotyped idea that emancipated woman will have none of them; that she will never give up the 'liberty' of the short frock. Modern woman has proved herself curiously like the ancient species, and the world will probably cease to go round when the feminine portion of it no longer desires to adorn herself or try to be beautiful" ("Evening Frock" 608). Here, the writer suggests that women are homogenous, and that modern women like Margot will eventually return to a traditionally feminine look because it is in their nature. Meanwhile, the writer's usage of scare quotes around "liberty" hints that the freedom of the short frock is illusory; although it lacks some of the literal constraints noteworthy in the evening gown, the social constraints are still present. Another article featuring a Louiseboulanger design discusses the connection between feminine dress and behavior, claiming, "It may be that manners maketh the man, but quite certainly dress maketh the manners. That is why, with the coming of the curl, it is no longer fashionable to be hoydenish and masculine. Many women are giving up smoking and finding cocktails 'do not agree with them'" ("Dress and the Woman" 18). Like the curl, Louiseboulanger's frocks tame the modern women who wear them, including Margot.

Margot's motives for having a traditional wedding with a traditional evening frock become clear when she visits Paul in prison. She describes to Paul how their failed nuptials have affected her social life: "Do you know . . . it's an odd thing, but I do believe that after all these years I'm beginning to be regarded as no longer a respectable woman. I told you when I wrote,

didn't I, that Lady Circumference cut me the other day?" (269). Margot's modern appearance and lifestyle causes her to be ostracized by the aristocracy as a form of punishment for her feminine transgressions. Although "cut" is a colloquial way of describing being ignored, Margot's usage of this word gives the impression that she was physically wounded by Lady Circumference's behavior, inducing sympathy in the reader. When Paul suggests the brothel may have something to do with people's treatment of her, Margot replies, "I don't think that business has anything to do with the—the ostracism . . . I believe it's all because I'm beginning to grow old" (269-70). According to Margot, her illicit business is not the reason for her transformation into a social pariah, but her physical appearance. While she believes her age is the source of the problem, it is more likely that her aristocratic counterparts take issue with her nontraditional style. Marrying Paul in her Louiseboulanger frock could have prevented this ostracism, as this public act would cause the aristocracy to see her as a traditional and domestic woman. By illustrating Margot's complicated path to matrimony and the wardrobe this path entails, Waugh underscores the impossibility of achieving a feminist identity in the early twentieth century.

“How she longed to tear down her dazzling frock”: Miss Mouse and Lady Ursula in *Vile Bodies*

In 1930, two years after the publication of *Decline and Fall*, Waugh published *Vile Bodies*. Satirizing the partying lifestyle of the Bright Young Things, *Vile Bodies* chronicles this group's rebellion against the strait-laced values of the older generation. Although Waugh mainly focuses on the experiences of the Bright Young Things, he also includes vignettes of two young women who want to rebel but find it difficult, if not impossible, to do so. Like Margot, both Miss Mouse and Lady Ursula have modern attitudes towards issues like women's sexuality, marriage,

and motherhood, but their roles as daughters of aristocrats prevent them from expressing them. To convey this internal conflict, Waugh clothes both of these women in evening gowns. This garment forces them to embody traditionally feminine identities, which negatively affects them both physically and emotionally; while Miss Mouse displays symptoms of anxiety, Lady Ursula becomes physically ill. By portraying the evening gown in such a negative way, Waugh illustrates the challenges women faced while trying to embrace feminist identities during the twentieth century.

Even though the invitation instructs otherwise, Miss Mary Mouse attends Johnnie Hoop's Savage party⁹ wearing "a very enterprising frock by Chéruit" (64). At first blush it may seem like she chooses to don such formal attire in order to set herself apart from the other partygoers, as well as showcase her wealth and high social standing. In reality, her decision to wear a one-of-a-kind evening gown appears to be the result of familial pressure rather than her own volition. As the party scene plays out, it becomes clear that Miss Mouse longs to let loose and give in to her "savage" inclinations, which is something her frock forbids. Instead of making her look modern and unique, her evening gown ends up portraying her as mousy and aloof. Seen in this way, Miss Mouse's Chéruit frock, as well as the conservative values sewn into it, prevents her from living the lifestyle of a modern woman.

Despite the fact that she was a couturier during the early twentieth century, Madame Louise Chéruit's evening gowns were somewhat strait-laced. Similar to Louiseboulanger's designs, Chéruit's frocks also featured long skirts and close-fitting bodices. But Chéruit's evening gowns were also considered to be the ideal dress for debutante daughters during the early twentieth century. "In spite of the much-vaunted freedom and social independence of

⁹ For more information on fancy-dress parties, see Marshik's *At the Mercy of Their Clothes*.

modern youth,” Elliott explains, “there still remains a decided convention in clothes for la jeune fille [or the unmarried young woman]” (“La Jeune Fille” 292). The fact that there was a set standard in clothing suggests that the modern notion of autonomy did not apply to young aristocratic women like Miss Mouse. Indeed, Elliott refers to a sketch of one of Chéruit’s designs as “a frock very suitable for the debutante’s mamma” (292), giving the impression that twentieth-century mothers were very concerned about their daughters’ modesty. A close examination of the sketch (see fig. 2) reveals why Chéruit’s evening gowns had the maternal stamp of approval. Although the gown clings to the model’s thin frame and exposes her arms and décolletage, Chéruit’s design has a modest quality to it. The neckline is high enough that it does not reveal any cleavage, while the asymmetrical skirt extends to just below the knee. Compared to the model in the Louiseboulanger sketch, the model here looks bored, as if she would rather be somewhere else. Moreover, the hand on her hip suggests defiance, hinting there may be some tension between mother and daughter. Regardless of the sociocultural changes that were occurring during the twentieth century, these details all suggest that the mothers of young aristocratic women expected their daughters to be modest and virginal.



Fig. 2. “Dress for La Jeune Fille,” *The Bystander*, Nov. 1929, p. 292

In addition to their conservative qualities, Chéruit's evening gowns featured many eye-catching details that helped debutantes draw the attention of potential suitors. Marshik explains how the evening gown, "[t]hrough emphasizing a woman's body and producing her status as an object . . . facilitated British courtship rituals, which required young women to wear the gown when 'coming out'" (31). Similar to a piece of artwork, the gown, as well as the body inside it, asks to be gazed at and appreciated, thereby objectifying its wearer. One way of emphasizing the body was through ornamentation. For example, the close-fitting bodice of the Chéruit frock pictured above is adorned with bright-colored sequins. Like a moth to a flame, the added touch of sparkle on the bodice draws the eye towards it, capturing the attention of onlookers. Seen in this way, the gown, rather than the woman wearing it, is in control of the courtship process. Since the gown is doing the work for her, the wearer can be passive and aloof, qualities that are visibly apparent in Miss Mouse at the Savage Party.

From the moment he first introduces her, Waugh implies that there is a connection between Miss Mouse's evening gown and her mousy demeanor. Although brief, his introduction of her seems to reveal many things about her character: "Miss Mouse (in a very enterprising frock by Cheruit) sat on a chair with her eyes popping out of her head. She never *could* get used to so much excitement, never" (64). By addressing her outfit parenthetically, Waugh hints that Miss Mouse's Chéruit frock will help the reader make sense of her shocked expression. Like her namesake, Miss Mouse appears shy and timid. Despite its innovative qualities, her evening gown, which covers significantly more surface area than Agatha Runcible's Hawaiian costume, seems appropriate for her personality. Indeed, Agatha acts as a foil to Miss Mouse; while Miss Runcible has no qualms about exposing her body in fancy dress, Miss Mouse seems morally opposed to such exposure. Marshik argues that "[f]ancy dress serves to expose the

correspondence between the appearance and the personae of the Bright Young Things in Waugh's fiction: they and their costumes are shameless . . . and substance-less . . . Such representations of fancy dress suggest that there is nothing more—no hidden depths—to Waugh's characters" (117). Although Marshik's assessment of Waugh's characters as shallow may apply to characters like Agatha, it does not mesh well with Miss Mouse. By dressing her in an evening gown and juxtaposing her with Agatha, Waugh suggests that Miss Mouse *does* have hidden depths. In other words, her conservative Chéruit frock is not an accurate reflection of who she is.

Although her evening gown suggests otherwise, Miss Mouse longs to expose herself, thereby ridding herself of her mousy demeanor. Later in the scene, Waugh reveals that Miss Mouse "had gone through that [party] invitation word by word in papa's library some days ago and knew all about it" (65), demonstrating that she feels a fascination, if not admiration, for the Bright Young Things. Indeed, a quick glimpse inside Miss Mouse's mind discloses that "[s]he almost wished in this new mood of exaltation that she had come to the party in fancy dress" (65). The word "almost" suggests that Miss Mouse is hesitant to admit this, as if doing so would produce negative consequences. While it may seem like her desire to participate in fancy dress is nothing more than a whim, in reality, it is much more intense. Waugh describes how Miss Mouse's evening gown stifles her:

The real aristocracy, the younger members of those two or three great brewing families which rule London . . . had come on from a dance and stood in a little group by themselves, aloof, amused but not amusing. Pit-a-pat went the heart of Miss Mouse. How she longed to tear down her dazzling frock to her hips and dance like a Bacchante before them all. One day she would surprise them all, thought Miss Mouse. (66)

Miss Mouse and her aristocratic companions are portrayed as outsiders looking in. Instead of drawing the attention of onlookers, Miss Mouse's dazzling Chéruit frock diverts it, making her look dull and prudish. Discontent with being a bystander, she begins to display signs of anxiety through the pit-a-pat of her heart. Although no one is physically preventing her from becoming an active participant, an invisible force holds her back, increasing her anxiety. As the next sentence makes clear, the force restraining her is not herself, but her evening gown. With its tight bodice and long skirt, her frock limits her mobility, explaining her impulse to suddenly remove it. The phrase "tear down" suggests that she does not just want to remove the gown, but to also dismantle the sociocultural values that designed it. Bacchanalia refers to any uninhibited or drunken revelry, implying that Miss Mouse longs to be free of all feminine expectations. Meanwhile, the image of her half-naked dancing is sexually suggestive. Without the gown, Miss Mouse is not only able to dance freely, but she can also fully embrace her sexuality. Thus, ridding herself of her Chéruit frock would free her from the previous generation's strait-laced femininity, altering the way the Bright Young Things see her as a result.

Like Miss Mouse, Lady Ursula, the eldest daughter of the Duchess of Stayle, is also trapped inside her evening gown. Similar to how Miss Mouse's Chéruit frock causes her to appear mousy and strait-laced, Lady Ursula's Victorian-style evening gown makes it seem like she values tradition and domesticity. In reality, her values are much more modern: "When she thought about marriage at all, which was rarely (for her chief interests were a girls' club in Canning Town and a younger brother at school), she thought what a pity it was that one had to be so ill to have children" (178). As her lack of interest in marriage and motherhood indicates, Lady Ursula holds feminist beliefs, something her evening gown fails to reflect. By clothing her in an

old-fashioned garment, Waugh criticizes the aristocracy's attempts to restrain women's feminist aspirations.

Waugh includes a lengthy description of Lady Ursula's evening gown in order to demonstrate how it contradicts her feminist beliefs. When Waugh first introduces the reader to Lady Ursula at the Anchorage party, his descriptions of her suggest that there is something strange about her attire: "She wore a frock such as only Duchesses can obtain for their elder daughters, a garment curiously puckered and puffed up and enriched with old lace at improbable places, from which her pale beauty emerged as though from a clumsily tied parcel" (177). One thing that is strange about Lady Ursula's evening gown is how poorly it fits her. Waugh likens her evening gown to a "clumsily tied parcel" to illustrate its loose appearance. Although it may seem like the gown's poor fit is merely the result of bad tailoring, it actually has more to do with the traditional values the evening gown represents. Waugh's note that it was "a frock such as only Duchesses can obtain" implies that Lady Ursula's mother selected it. This detail hints at a generational conflict between Lady Ursula and the Duchess; not only does the Duchess want her daughter to wear evening gowns popular during the Victorian era, but she also wants her to embrace a Victorian lifestyle. Since Lady Ursula has modern values, her Victorian-style evening gown fails to fit her properly.

Another thing that makes her gown strange is how old-fashioned it is. Lady Ursula's frock, like her family's title, is stale—it no longer fits well in the twentieth century. The word "puckered," which is synonymous with "wrinkle," helps emphasize its dated design, as well as the gown's old lace ornamentation. "Puckered" also suggests kissing, highlighting the evening gown's role in the courtship process. Meanwhile, the evening gown's puffiness—another sign it is out of style—conceals Lady Ursula's figure, preventing onlookers from discerning her true

shape. A gown fitting Waugh's description is featured in a fashion advice column (aptly titled "The Angel and the House") published in a 1906 issue of *The Tatler* (see fig. 3), meaning Lady Ursula's frock is over 20 years out of style. In addition to being dated, the frock in the illustration is incredibly busy; the ruffled sleeves, lace trimmings, and embroidered details on the bodice distract onlookers, making it difficult to properly "see" the woman wearing it. Similarly, Lady Ursula's frock and its antiquated ornamentation hides her modern values and instead disguises her as a traditional Victorian woman.



Fig. 3. "The Angel and the House," *The Tatler*, Jan. 1906, p. 70

Lady Ursula's evening gown and the false identity it gives her takes a toll on her physically, making it difficult for her to resist Edward Throbbing's advances. As Waugh continues to describe her physical appearance, he gives the impression that there is a connection between Lady Ursula's old-fashioned evening gown and her paleness: "Neither powder, rouge nor lipstick had played any part in her toilet and her colourless hair was worn long and bound across her forehead in a broad fillet" (177). Similar to how Miss Mouse's Chéruit frock gives her a mousy demeanor, Lady Ursula's old-fashioned evening gown causes her to look stale and

lifeless. Her lack of makeup in conjunction with her fair hair gives her a wan, ghostly appearance, almost as if her gown is like a parasite that is draining her of her health and youthfulness. Edward Throbbing's characterization of Lady Ursula further emphasizes her sickly appearance: "Now and then when he was with Ursula he felt a slight quickening of possessive impulse towards her fragility and distance" (178). The fragility that Edward finds himself attracted to suggests that Lady Ursula is visibly weak. Moreover, by pairing her fragility with her distant demeanor, Edward makes it seem as if she is too weak to reject his advances. In fact, not much is said of her response to Edward's attempt at conversation other than that she "was acquiescent if unenthusiastic" (178). Given her lack of interest in Edward and marriage in general, it is surprising that she makes no attempt to disengage herself. However, due to the weight of her gown and the traditional values it represents, Lady Ursula finds herself physically unable to do so.

The connection between Lady Ursula's evening gown and her apparent passivity at the Anchorage party becomes even clearer once she removes it. Before Lady Ursula informs her mother that she refused Edward's proposal earlier that evening, Waugh takes a moment to relate her appearance: "Lady Ursula wore a white cambric night-gown with a little yoke collar and long sleeves. Her hair hung in two plaits" (188). While to some readers this may seem like Waugh attempting to reemphasize her virginal, Victorian-esque demeanor, it is more likely that Waugh includes this information to call attention to the change in Lady Ursula's behavior. Like her nightgown and hair, her speech, which was nonexistent during the Anchorage party, is much more free in this scene. When the Duchess continues to ignore her daughter's feelings, Lady Ursula reveals how marrying Edward would ruin her: "But, Mamma, I don't want to...I couldn't...it would kill me!" (189). Not only does Lady Ursula's evening gown and everything it stands

for drain her of her youthfulness, but it also threatens to eliminate her chances at happiness. However, Lady Ursula's wardrobe change does not just liberate her voice; it also transforms her into a young girl. Throughout this exchange, the Duchess refers to her daughter as "my pet," "dear one," and "darling girl" (189)—never by her name. The Duchess' constant usage of terms of endearment when addressing her daughter reveals she does not see Lady Ursula as a grown woman but as a young girl who is incapable of making her own decisions, including what she should wear. By having the Duchess infantilize Lady Ursula in this scene as well as force her into a dated evening gown, Waugh satirizes controlling Victorian mothers in the twentieth century.

By characterizing the evening gown as an anti-modern garment that challenges the wearer's feminist aspirations, Waugh complicates our understanding of early twentieth-century satire as an inherently conservative genre. Rather, his inclusion of modern women that have negative experiences while wearing the evening gown in his novels unveils Waugh's own sympathy towards his female targets, and women's issues in general. Waugh's position as a satirist, then, is not clear-cut; like Margot Beste-Chetwynde, who lives outside a Victorian gender binary, Waugh does not fit neatly into a conservative or liberal camp. As my readings demonstrate, although Waugh takes issue with the younger generation's exhibitionism and wanton behavior, his novels suggest that he also finds the older generation's oppressive actions towards young women equally problematic.

In addition to complicating Waugh's position as a satirist, my argument also incorporates Waugh into existing conversations on fashion and modernism, which frequently neglect works written by men. Waugh, like female modernists, makes use of material culture, especially fashion, in order to critique social conditions for women during the early twentieth century. This

is clear from his incorporation of couturiers whose designs promoted a traditionally feminine lifestyle into his works, as well as his employment of the evening gown to illustrate women's oppression. Waugh's depiction of women's fashion thus not only makes him critical to our understanding of material culture in the early twentieth century, but it also reframes his legacy in regards to women and feminism.

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