

Reading Guide

The Literary Catholic

Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh (1945)



CENTER FOR
CATHOLIC STUDIES
Sacred Heart University
College of Arts and Sciences



Overview

Brideshead Revisited is a novel by Evelyn Waugh that explores themes of faith, love, and loss against the backdrop of the declining English aristocracy between the World Wars. An agnostic, Charles Ryder narrates his complex relationship with the aristocratic and Catholic Flyte family between the early 1920s and the eve of World War II. The novel is divided into two books, "Et in Arcadia Ego" and "A Twitch Upon the Thread," framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. The Prologue is set in 1943. It depicts a middle-aged and dissolute Charles Ryder, a World War II Captain who discovers, to his surprise, that his platoon has been stationed at Brideshead Castle as they await deployment. The setting spurs his memories of Brideshead, beginning in Book I with his youthful relationship with the eccentric and troubled Sebastian at Oxford and moving to his adult years in Book II and his romantic relationship with Julia, which ends after Lord Marchmain's death.

Major Themes

- **Divine grace and reconciliation.** As Evelyn Waugh claimed to his publisher, "The novel deals with what is theologically termed the 'operation of grace,' the unmerited and unilateral act of love by which God continually calls souls to Himself."
- **Conversion.** The novel depicts a series of conversions as each central character is called back to the Catholic faith. The ending in the Epilogue intimates that Charles' hostility toward the faith dissolves, and he converts or is on the verge of converting.
- **The struggle between faith and secular life.** The novel is subtitled The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder. Most of the novel depicts aristocratic decadence and the vulgarity of modern secularity but does so in a way that challenges the reader to recognize God's grace at work, even in such a profane world.
- **Love and Relationships.** There is much critical debate concerning the nature of Charles and Sebastian's relationship, whether it is "platonic" or "romantic." The depictions of familial relationships are complex. Although Julia wants to marry Charles, she knows her relationship with him is a sin. Charles and his father mutually dislike each other. Although Charles sees Brideshead as a home he never had as a child; the Flyte family are not the most loving people, driving each other apart, like Sebastian following in his father's footsteps to get as far from his mother as possible.
- **Decline of the Aristocracy:** The novel has been praised and criticized for its nostalgic view of an aristocratic past in England. World War II ended the aristocratic society that Waugh depicts (and satirizes) in his novels. Waugh seems to associate the decline of aristocracy with a decline of civilization, while Catholicism remains the last barrier against barbarism. Vatican II horrified Waugh, although he died before he could experience a post-conciliar world.
- **Identity and Self-Discovery.** The novel is written in the modernist tradition of a bildungsroman, a story about a character's growth from youth to adulthood. It is a unique Catholic novel because the narrator is a secular humanist who thinks the Flyte family's Catholicism is ludicrous and destructive. In other words, we see the story through the lens of unbelief, but we recognize a genuine faith at work powerful enough that Charles ultimately converts. Despite their difficulties, like Sebastian's suffering, the characters find their way back to their faith.

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Characters

Charles Ryder: The narrator and protagonist, whose life is deeply influenced by his connections with the Flyte family.

Sebastian Flyte: A charming but troubled young man who becomes Charles's close friend.

Julia Flyte: Sebastian's sister who has a significant romantic relationship with Charles.

Brideshead (Briley) Flyte: The eldest son is a devout Catholic who is well-meaning but whose doctrinaire attitude makes him socially awkward to a fault.

Cordelia Flyte: The youngest child is precocious and desires to become a nun.

Lady Marchmain: The devoutly Catholic matriarch of the Flyte family. Sometimes, Waugh thinks of her as "God" in the novel, although he is ambivalent about it.

Lord Marchmain: The father lives in exile in Venice with his mistress.

Cara: Lord Marchmain's mistress lives with him in Venice.

Rex Mottram: Julia's husband, a brash Canadian businessman whose failed attempt to become a Catholic to satisfy Julia's need for a Catholic wedding, is excellent comedy.

Celia Mulcaster: Boy Mulcaster's sister, whom Charles marries and eventually divorces to pursue his relationship with Julia.

Anthony Blanche: An aesthete at Oxford, a friend of Charles and Sebastian. In the novel, he serves an almost oracular role, warning Charles about the Flyte family and their deadly "charm."

Discussion Questions

Grace, Reconciliation, and Conversion:

- The title of Book II, "The Twitch upon the Thread," is an allusion to one of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories in which the detective describes catching the criminal in terms analogous to God's grace in the world: "I caught him with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread." How does Book II reveal this "twitch upon the thread" that brings the characters back to God and the Church?
- Critics are divided over the climax of the novel. Lord Marchmain returns to Brideshead to die after many decades in exile, and the family finally allows a priest to give him Last Rites. Despite his apparent hatred toward Lady Marchmain's Catholicism, Lord Marchmain makes the sign of the cross. Does the scene work? How do you feel about Charles' attitude toward Catholicism when Julia and the rest of the family debate allowing the priest to perform the sacrament? Why does Julia call off her upcoming marriage to Charles?
- In what ways do the characters experience redemption, if at all? As many readers and critics point out, Catholicism does not bring any joy to people in the novel. If anything, it drives characters apart, and the suggestion is it will drive Sebastian to death. Waugh, however, thought that the notion that Catholicism must be depicted as making people happy was ludicrous and posed the wrong question. How can we sort out this paradox in the novel? What would be the right question?

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Discussion Questions (continued)

Love and Relationships:

- There is much debate concerning the nature of Charles and Sebastian's relationship. It is not simply a friendship, as they're evidently infatuated with each other. The Flyte family recognizes Sebastian "loves" Charles. Charles tells Julia that Sebastian was "the forerunner" to his love for her, but it somehow doesn't ring true. Book II is devoted to Julia, but Charles continues to lament Sebastian. How do you describe the relationship between Charles and Sebastian? Is their relationship "platonic" while his relationship with Julia is "romantic"? Why do both relationships come to inevitable failure?
- Why does Sebastian try to keep Charles away from interactions with his family to the point of paranoia and despair? Further, why is Sebastian driven to flee from his family and, eventually, Charles, too, seeking escape from alcohol and leaving England altogether? In other words, why is Sebastian such a tortured alcoholic?

Decline of the Aristocracy:

- How does Waugh depict the decline of the English aristocracy? What are the key symbols of this decline? For instance, how does Hooper represent all that is reprehensible, according to Charles (and Waugh), concerning the passing of an older era and the beginning of a vulgar one? Do you agree with certain critics who accuse Waugh of snobbery, such as George Orwell, who argued that, for Waugh, the novel's main protagonist is egalitarianism?

Symbols and Motifs:

- What is the significance of Brideshead Castle in the novel?
- How do art and architecture play a role in the story and its themes? What do you make of Charles' profession, an artist who paints renderings of estates before they are torn down to make way for apartments and shopping plazas, i.e., a profession recording an old world before it's torn down for the new?

Key Passages for Close Reading

- Reflect on how the prologue and epilogue frame the main narrative. Notice how Hooper represents a new generation of the "common people" that Charles and, by association, Waugh ridicules. Notice the evident disregard the soldiers have for Brideshead Castle. Examine the ending in the Epilogue when Charles visits the Chapel at Brideshead.
- Evelyn Waugh claimed that the most crucial passage in the novel is the last conversation Charles has with Cordelia concerning Sebastian's painful religious odyssey, pp. 303 – 310. How might Cordelia's story account for Sebastian's troubled life?
- Ronald Knox is deeply moved by Julia's monologue concerning sin after her brother, Bridey, tells her he cannot condone her relationship with Charles, pp. 287-88.
- Examine key moments in which Charles reflects on Catholicism, particularly his ambivalence and hostility towards faith that come to a head at the end of the novel. Look particularly at the climactic scene leading up to Lord Marchmain's death.
- Discuss the relationship between Julia and Rex and its significance within the novel. Rex Mottram is a source of great humor and satire.

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Further Exploration

Further Reading

- Christopher Hitchens. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/27/evelynwaugh.fiction>
- Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation*
- Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Later Years 1939 – 1966*
- Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*
- Ian Ker, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845 – 1961*
- William Myers, *Evelyn Waugh and the Problem of Evil*
- Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome*
- George McCartney, *Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition*
- Consider looking at the numerous books and articles by Joseph Pearce concerning the British Catholic converts and the numerous collections of Waugh's letters, diaries, and correspondences.

Historical Context: Research the historical context of interwar England and its influence on the novel. Consider the effects of World War I on the novel, such as Paul Fussel's examination of it in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Even though the novel does not take place during World War I, the devastation of that war haunts it.

Author's Perspective: Consider Evelyn Waugh's religious beliefs and experiences and how they might have influenced the narrative.

Adaptations: Watch the wonderful 1981 Granada Television adaptation starring Jeremy Irons, available on Amazon. The 2008 movie is not recommended.

The Literary Catholic Reading Guide for *Brideshead Revisited* was created and edited by Professor Peter M. Sinclair, PhD, Chair, Languages and Literature, Sacred Heart University, and The Guild of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Literary Catholic video series is produced in cooperation with Sacred Heart University Center for Catholic Studies, Michelle Loris, Ph.D., Psy.D., Director, the Sacred Heart University School of Communication, Media & the Arts, James Castonguay, Ph.D., Director, John Paul II Center for Evangelizing Communications, Diocese of Bridgeport, Marie T. Oates, Executive Director.

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Key Quotes and Passages in the Novel

Prologue: Brideshead Revisited

p. 10.* Charles muses about Hooper, contrasting him to a bygone era. “In the weeks that we were together Hooper became a symbol to me of Young England, so that whenever I read some public utterance proclaiming what Youth demanded in the Future and what the world owed to Youth, I would test these general statements by substituting “Hooper” and seeing if they still seemed as plausible. Thus in the dark hour before reveille I sometimes pondered: “Hooper Rallies,” “Hooper Hostels,” “International Hooper Co-operation,” and “the Religion of Hooper.” He was the acid text of all these alloys.”

Book I: In Et In Arcadia Ego

p. 29. Charles on first seeing Sebastian. “I knew Sebastian by sight long before I met him. That was unavoidable for, from his first week, he was the most conspicuous man of his year by reason of his beauty, which was arresting, and his eccentricities of behavior, which seemed to know no bounds. My first sight of him was in the door of Germer’s, and, on that occasion, I was struck less by his looks than by the fact that he was carrying a large teddy-bear. “(It is Sebastian’s Teddy-bear he names “Aloysious,” the name resonating with symbolic significance.)

p. 33. “He was entrancing, with that epicene beauty which in extreme youth sings aloud for love and withers at the first cool wind.”

p. 34. Anthony Blanche narrates T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” from the balcony of Sebastian’s dorm to the quad below, emphasizing the Tiresias sequence. Both the influence of this poem on Waugh and the suggestion that Anthony might be a kind of “Tiresias” figure in the novel.

p. 39. When Sebastian takes Charles to Brideshead for the first time to meet his nanny, and Charles is curious about the rest of the castle and the family, Sebastian replies, “I’m not going to have you get mixed up with my family. They’re so madly charming. All my life they’ve been taking things away from me. If they once got hold of you with their charm, they’d make you *their* friend not mine, and I won’t let them.”

pp. 46–57. Anthony Blanche warns Charles about the Flyte family’s “charm,” which Blanche thinks is toxic. We gain the backstory of the Flyte family secondhand through Blanche.

p. 86. Charles remembers when Sebastian and Charles are left alone to spend the summer together at Brideshead. “I felt a sense of liberation and peace such that I was to know years later when, after a night of unrest, the sirens sounded the ‘All Clear.’” Hence, World War I and World War II encroach upon everything in the novel.

* Page numbers are from the edition printed by Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Company, printing 15, 2024.

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pp. 94–95. During Charles' time alone with Sebastian at Brideshead, he becomes curious about Sebastian and his family's Catholicism: "Sebastian's faith was an enigma to me at that time, but not one that I felt particularly concerned to solve. I had no religion... Often, almost daily, since I had known Sebastian, some chance word in his conversation had reminded me that he was a Catholic, but I took it as a foible, like his Teddy-bear."

pp. 95–99. Charles' conversation with Sebastian about his Catholicism. Sebastian's various comments. In response to Charles telling the naughty Sebastian that his faith certainly hasn't made him "good," Sebastian alludes to Augustine: "Who was it used to pray, 'Oh, God, make me good, but not yet?'" Pertaining to the idea that his religion is nonsense: "Is it nonsense? I wish it were. It sometimes sounds terribly sensible to me." In response to Charles being aghast that Sebastian believes in things like Christmas, the nativity, the three kings, and the star. "Oh yes, I believe that. It's a lovely idea...That's how I believe." Sebastian explains to Charles where the family stands in relation to their Catholic faith: "So you see we're a mixed family religiously. Brideshead and Cordelia are both fervent Catholics; he's miserable, she's bird-happy; Julia and I are half-heathen; I am happy, I rather think Julia isn't; Mummy is popularly believed to be a saint and Papa is excommunicated—and I wouldn't know which of them was happy. Anyway, however you look at it, happiness doesn't seem to have much to do with it, and that's all I want...I wish I liked Catholics more... [Catholics] got an entirely different outlook on life; everything they think important is different from other people. They try to hide it as much as they can, but it comes out all the time. It's quite natural, really, that they should. But you see it's difficult for semi-heathens like Julia and me."

p. 120. Charles is reflecting on the beginning of their second year at Oxford. "With Sebastian it was different. His year of anarchy had filled a deep, interior need of his, the escape from reality, and as he found himself increasingly hemmed in, where he once felt himself free, he became at times listless and morose, even with me."

pp. 143. Lady Marchmain talks with Charles about Catholicism and her wealth. She tells Charles, "when I married I became very rich. It used to worry me, and I thought it wrong to have so many beautiful things when other had nothing. Now I realize that it is possible for the rich to sin by coveting the privileges of the poor. The poor have always been the favorites of God and His saints, but I believe that it is one of the special achievements of Grace to sanctify the whole of life, riches included...But of course...it's very unexpected for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but the gospel is simply a catalogue of unexpected things. It's not to be *expected* that an ox and an ass should worship at the crib. Animals are always doing the oddest things in the lives of the saints. It's all part of the poetry, the Alice-in-Wonderland side, of religion."

p. 154–155. Lady Marchmain to Charles in response to Sebastian's deepening alcoholism and his departure from Brideshead. "I've been through it all before with someone else whom I loved. Well, you must know what I mean – with his father. He used to be drunk in just that way. Someone told me he is not like that now. I pray God it's true and thank God for it with all my heart, if it is. But the *running away*—he ran away too, you know. It was as you said just now, he was ashamed of being unhappy. Both of them unhappy, ashamed and running away. It's too pitiful."

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p. 161-164. The conversation between Bridey and Charles as they are packing up Sebastian's belongings at Oxford when he's sent down, and Charles tells Bridey he fears Sebastian is a drunkard in the context of being "happy."

Book Two: Brideshead Deserted

pp. 193-194. Lady Marchmain expels Charles from Brideshead for the "cruelty" of giving Sebastian money, knowing that he'd use it for drinking.

p. 205. Charles concerning Julia: "On my side the interest was keener, for there was always the physical likeness between brother and sister, which, caught repeatedly in different poses, under different lights, each time pierced me anew; and, as Sebastian in his sharp decline seem daily to fade and crumble, so much the more did Juia stand out clear and firm."

p. 208-209. Julia's predicament being a debutante and a Catholic. "But wherever she turned, it seemed her religion stood as a barrier between her and her natural goal...If she apostatized now, having been brought up in the Church, she would go to hell, while the Protestant girls of her acquaintance, schooled in happy ignorance, could marry eldest sons, live at peace with their world, and get to heaven before her. There could be no eldest son for her, and younger sons were indelicate things, necessary, but not to be much spoken of. Younger sons had none of the privileges of obscurity; it was their plain duty to remain hidden until some disaster perchance promoted them to their brothers' places, and, since this was their function, it was desirable that they should keep themselves wholly suitable for succession...There were of course the Catholics themselves, but these came seldom into the little world Julia had made for herself...Of the dozen or so rich and noble Catholic families, none at that time had an heir of the right age."

p. 248. The last time Charles sees Sebastian, who is living an ascetic and alcoholic life caring for a German and clearly criminal misfit, Kurtz, Charles claims, Sebastian "added what, if I had paid more attention, should have given the key I lacked; at the time I heard and remembered it, without taking notice. 'You know, Charles,' he said, 'it's rather a pleasant change when all your life you've had people looking after you, to have someone to look after yourself. Only of course it has to be someone pretty hopeless to need looking after by me.'"

p. 254. Charles spends time with Cordelia the night before the Marchmain estate in London is shuttered to be converted into apartments, and she speaks to Charles on the issue of grace, telling him, "D'you know what Papa said when he became a Catholic? Mummy told me once. He said to her: 'You have brought back my family to the faith of their ancestors.' Pompous, you know. It takes people different ways. Anyhow, the family haven't been very constant, have they? There's him gone and Sebastian gone and Julia gone. But God won't let them go for long, you know. I wonder if you remember the story Mummy read us the evening Sebastian first got drunk—I mean the **bad** evening. 'Father Brown' said something like 'I caught him' (the thief) 'with the unseen hook and the invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.'"

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p. 255. In the same conversation above, Cordelia speaks of ‘vocation.’ “I hope I’ve got a vocation.” When Charles says he doesn’t know what that means, she tells him, “It means you can become a nun. If you haven’t a vocation it’s no good however much you want to be; and if you have a vocation, you can’t get away from it, however much you hate it. Bridey thinks he has a vocation and hasn’t. I used to think Sebastian had and hated it—but I don’t know now. Everything has changed so suddenly.”

Book III. A Twitch Upon the Thread

p. 260. Over a decade passes, and Charles has become a successful painter of architecture, particularly old British estates. The reader is forced to judge how to feel about Charles’ claim: “I loved buildings, that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation, while time curbed the artist’s pride and the Philistine’s vulgarity, and repaired the clumsiness of the dull workman.”

pp. 327-331. Julia’s monologue on sin after her older brother, Bridey, states to her in matter-of-fact terms that she is living in sin in her relationship with Charles. Ronald Knox claimed it moved him so much he wanted to use it in one of his broadcasts from Westminster.

pp. 334. Julia is angry at Charles’ attitude toward her concerns, wondering why he must treat things “secondhand,” and smacks his face with a twig to make her point.

pp. 347-355. Cordelia’s last conversation with Charles, when she tells him the story of Sebastian’s anguished return to the Church, ends with her prediction that he will most likely die of alcohol but do so while always striving to help the monks out in some way. Waugh claimed it was one of the most important passages in the novel.

pp. 374-381. The debates between Charles, Julia, and the rest of the family concerning whether to allow the priest to administer Lord Marchmain the final sacrament.

pp. 390. The climactic scene that divides readers and critics alike is when Lord Marchmain makes a sign of the cross after the priest delivers the sacrament

Epilogue: Bridehead Revisited

pp. 401-402. The final scene is in which Charles prays in the Chapel at Brideshead, where he discovers that the small flame continues to burn at the Tabernacle. The scene indicates that Charles, too, converts, or that conversion for him is imminent.