

## **Purgation in Evelyn Waugh's *The Scarlet Woman***

**Isra' Hashim Taher, Ph.D.**

### **Abstract**

*The Scarlet Woman*, Waugh's only screenplay and one of the least popular among his works, says more than it really does. Despite its crudeness in terms of plot, acting, and directing, it conveys a serious message. On a limited scale, *The Scarlet Woman* might be regarded as Waugh's version of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Written when he was at Oxford, it shows symptoms of subconscious rejection of the wild life he led without God. Five years before his conversion to Catholicism, Waugh seems to have been waiting for purgation. This is his design in *The Scarlet Woman*.

As a satirist and comic writer, Waugh believes in the hygienic cultural power of comedy that won't be effective if it comes from a stray soul like his at the time. The aim of this paper is to briefly reveal Waugh's "gigantic" design by following threads scattered all over the melodrama. The paper shows how early the idea of cleansing lingered in Waugh's mind and how strong the urge was to step out of his inferno.

### **Evelyn Waugh's *The Scarlet Woman***

Giving a piece of advice for a friend about the importance of cinema, Waugh, in 1921, wrote:

Try and bring home thoughts by actions and incidents.

Don't make everything said. This is the inestimable value

of the Cinema to novelists...Make things happen...Don't

bring characters on simply to draw their characters and make

them talk. Fit them into a design.<sup>(1)</sup>

Three years later, Waugh followed his own advice in *The Scarlet Woman*. *The Scarlet Woman*, Evelyn Waugh's only screenplay, was originally designed to ridicule the "intellectual and religious orthodoxy" of F.F.(Sligger) Urquhart, Dean of Balliol College, Oxford.<sup>(2)</sup> Waugh and his friend Terence Greenidge bought a small camera and produced a short film. The story was a fantasy of the attempts of the Dean of Balliol to convert the King to Roman Catholicism.<sup>(3)</sup> According to Martin Stannard, *The Scarlet Woman* was an "undergraduate project" for the "Hypocrites' Club" which remained incomplete for over a year. Evelyn wrote the story, acted it, and contributed to the film's capital, together with a number of close friends.<sup>(4)</sup>

*The Scarlet Woman* explains his love of cinema and the disagreement with university authority represented by Sligger. However, Waugh's "project" could be more than an event to pass time and amuse friends or even to poke fun at Sligger. Waugh had a very wild and hideous life at Oxford. Drinking, homosexuality, irresponsibility, defiance of authority, and even agnosticism characterized his stay there. There, he came face to face with his Seven Deadly Sins and unconsciously considered purgation. *The Scarlet Woman* carries the signs of this early unconscious urge to repent. It shows Waugh waiting to get out of inferno. This is the unsaid he talks about. This is his design.

At Oxford, Waugh was not totally indifferent. "Indifference was never more than a pose"<sup>(5)</sup> Though he became agnostic, he showed strong religious temperament. In his memoir, *The Seven Ages* (1974), Christopher Hollis, a friend of Waugh, mentioned something about Waugh's religious inclination. He remembered when he converted to Catholicism, Waugh was the only one who opposed this decision. He would spend hours arguing religious beliefs, if only, to dismiss them.<sup>(6)</sup>

Despite its negative depiction of the Pope and the Church, *The Scarlet Woman* got the approval of the Catholic Church. Christopher Sykes reported that Father C.C. Martindale heard of the film and asked Waugh to arrange a screening. Father Martindale:

laughed till his tears flowed, then issued, under his

signature on the official form the imprimatur or

official license of the Roman Catholic Church that  
the work might be shown anywhere as it contained  
no matter dangerous to the faithful, or likely to lead  
them into error.<sup>(7)</sup>

As its subtitle suggests (*Ecclesiastical Melodrama*), *The Scarlet Woman* paved the way for Waugh's later Catholic fiction which celebrated the Church and Catholicism. But, at an early stage like that of *The Scarlet Woman*, Waugh criticized rather than celebrated the Church. Like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, Waugh in *The Scarlet Woman* did not make the Church his only target; it was one among many. Like Dante, Waugh was concerned with redemption. But while Dante expressed his desire openly and extensively, Waugh implied it briefly through the pages of *The Scarlet Woman*.

In concept though not in the nature of sin, Waugh's version of purgation is based on that of Dante's in *The Divine Comedy*. In Dante's *Purgatory*, "the stain of sinfulness is cleansed, the penitent soul shedding off successfully all those imperfections which cling to it against its better will. Hell is concerned with the fruits, but Purgatory with the roots, of sin."<sup>(8)</sup> *The Scarlet Woman* marks the beginning of Waugh's spiritual journey towards God. Appropriately, the journey starts in hell where all his sins are punished.

While at Oxford, he contributed a series of black and white cartoons to the University magazine, *Isis*. They were "The Seven Deadly Sins" represented by inverted standards of the youngest generation. They were: 'The intolerable wickedness of him who drinks alone'; 'The horrid sacrilege of those that ill-treat books'; 'The wanton way of those who corrupt the very young' ; 'The hideous habit of marrying negroes'; 'That grim act parricide'; 'That dull, old sin, adultery'; 'The grave discourtesy of such a man as will beat his host's servant.' In considering cruelty to servants and interracial marriage as two of the Seven Deadly Sins, Waugh was trying to be cosmopolitan. Stannard asserted that there were no servants other than a maid and, earlier, a nanny in Waugh's house. Also, in the world where Waugh lived women did not marry negroes.<sup>(9)</sup> As for other sins, all were committed by Waugh in some periods of his life.

Although Waugh played just two roles in the melodrama (the Dean of Balliol and Lord Borrowington), however; each one of his characters represented one of his Seven Deadly Sins. Montefiasco's mother and the Pope stand for the first mortal sin of drinking. They share the bottle and ardent love. Before her son is sent to England to carry out the Pope's "gigantic attempt" to convert England into Catholicism, she befriends the bottle and at receiving the news of her son's death she resorts to the bottle, again, in consolation. The sin of ignorance is represented by Father Murphy who helps Montefiasco to carry the Catholic plot. Described by Waugh as "zany", Father Murphy represents ignorance of the ways of the world. This makes it easy for the villainous Dean to dupe him. He is persuaded by the Dean to steal the crown jewels to support the Catholic plot. It is only his love for Beatrice, the main female figure, which leads him to expose the Catholic plot and save her from death.

The sin of corrupting the young is incarnated in the Dean who has turned Montefiasco into a thief in the name of religion. He also has persuaded the Prince of Wales to betray his father and country in favor of the Catholic plot. The King represents the sin of parricide. He poisons his son, Prince of Wales, together with the Dean and the Cardinal at St. Bartholomew's feast, when he discovers his role in the Catholic plot. Beatrice stands for the sin of adultery, being a cabaret singer who moves from one man to another to pay her debts. At the beginning of the melodrama, she has an affair with the Prince and at the end she has another with old Lord Chamberlain.

In his "*The Scarlet Woman: An Appreciation*", John Howard Wilson suggests that *The Scarlet Woman* is autobiographical and anticipates some of the themes developed later in his fiction. He describes it as a "reflection of Waugh's thinking in the mid 1920s, an expression of opinion about everything from brother Alec to Evelyn Waugh's sexuality." <sup>(10)</sup> Therefore, the sin of adultery in Waugh's case could mean homosexuality. Wilson in this context refers to the incident when Waugh blamed Urquhart for stealing the affections of Richard Pares, one of Waugh's first friends at Oxford. In *The Scarlet Woman* Waugh himself played the part of Urquhart. In order to further the Pope's scheme, the Dean befriends the Prince of Wales, played by John Greenidge, Terence's brother. Such a connection suggests homosexuality. Waugh himself was homosexual and enjoyed exposing such tendencies in men. Peter Quennell remembered him shouting "The Dean of Balliol sleeps with men." <sup>(11)</sup>

As regards drinking, Waugh was renowned for his parties and love of alcohol, being a member of the Hypocrites' Club, this "notorious foundation" which later became "the centre of Bohemian life", remained always a place where one got drunk. Corrupting the young: according to Sligger, Waugh was a threat to the creative and artistic talents of Oxford. He had already grown impatient with the shameful acts of the Hypocrites' Club and waited for an excuse to close it. He did ultimately close it and separated between Pares and Waugh when he chose Pares as one of the Balliol's representatives of reading parties that would go round the Continent. He thought that Pares' brilliant future was seriously damaged by such disreputable figures as Waugh.<sup>(12)</sup> Parricide was represented by the generation gap between father and son. At Oxford Waugh was caught between alliance to his father's traditional concept of Oxford and his interest in aestheticism of his talented friends.<sup>(13)</sup> But, unfortunately this conflict was not settled, for Waugh left Oxford without a degree. This was his sin of ignorance.

In Dante, the pains of purgation are a sort of remedy and not punishment. They clean the soul from the stains of sins. They are not terminated from without, but come to an end as soon as the cleansing is complete.<sup>(14)</sup> Purgation is a process of spiritual improvement effected either through endurance of sin and its effects, practice of opposite virtue or both.<sup>(15)</sup> Waugh makes his characters suffer the pains of hell through death. He sees that they have no hope to ascend. They are damned in hell. Only two of them are saved: father Murphy and Beatrice, though she is irredeemable. Murphy is saved by his love for Beatrice. It is exactly how Dante is saved by his love for Beatrice and how she brings light into his life and leads him all the way to paradise. Beatrice escapes the fate suffered by other characters. Although the play is a melodrama and melodramas usually end happily, however, the survival of Murphy and Beatrice is symbolic.

According to Dorothy Sayers, in her translation of *Purgatorio*, Dante's Beatrice could refer to one of four things: literally, she is the real Beatrice loved by Dante when he was young; morally, she could be the image of God; historically, she might represent the Church; and mystically, she stands for the soul's union with God.<sup>(16)</sup> Whereas Waugh's scarlet woman refers to both Beatrice and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>(17)</sup> In Dante's *Comedy*, it is the corrupt papacy which is being described as a harlot.<sup>(18)</sup> In Waugh's *Scarlet Woman*, it is his concept of Church and God which is being perverted. His Beatrice might refer to a

real person. In the film, Beatrice was played by Elsa Lanchester, a cabaret-queen in 1924.<sup>(19)</sup> The spiritual Beatrice (the epitome of God, Church, and the soul's union with God) he needs is not there yet. Robert Murray Davis notices that the Art Institute of Chicago has a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti called *Beata Beatrix* dated 1871-2. It depicts the death of Beatrice. Rossetti wrote that the painting is not "a representation of the incident of the death", but "an ideal of the subject symbolised by a trance or sudden spiritual transformation."<sup>(20)</sup> Waugh went through the same process. It was gradual rather than sudden.

At the gate of Mount Purgatory, the sinners should pass through the three steps of Penitence: Confession, Contrition, Satisfaction.<sup>(21)</sup> The *Scarlet Woman* shows these three steps. Confession: Waugh admits his sins by playing the Dean and Cardinal. Contrition: he regrets his sins by putting an end to all his sins as represented by various characters and keeps Beatrice as a source of inspiration that will let him ascend to purgation. Satisfaction: it is all about being ready to move to the next step, and when one feels he has truly repented his sins and got his share of suffering and waiting. This should come from within. It has to do with inner impulse. This would take some time. Stating the reasons behind his conversion, Waugh said: "six years of that world sufficed to show me that life there or any other place was unintelligible without God."<sup>(22)</sup>

"*Asperges me*", concludes Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*, which is based on Psalm 51, verse 7: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."<sup>(23)</sup> This was the psalm Waugh was singing in *The Scarlet Woman*. It was necessary to go through this process. It was slow and gradual. "Make things happen", this was Waugh's second half of advice to his friend. It did happen to Waugh himself. After his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he wrote great Catholic fiction like *Edmund Campion*, *Brideshead Revisited*, and *Helena*, a pure Beatrice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George McCartney, *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.99.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1939* Vol.1 (London: Flamingo, 1993), p.94.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Davie, ed., *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), p.169.

<sup>4</sup>Stannard, pp.93-4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.89.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.79.

<sup>7</sup>John Howard Wilson, "The Scarlet Woman: An Appreciation" , *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*, Vol.33, No.2 (2002), <http://www.lhup.edu/jwilson3/newsletter.htm>, 13-12-2010.

<sup>8</sup>Dorothy Sayers, trans., *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri Cantica II: Purgatory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), p.15.

<sup>9</sup>Stannard, p.89.

<sup>10</sup>Wilson.

<sup>11</sup>Wilson.

<sup>12</sup>Stannard, pp.83-4.

<sup>13</sup>Wilson.

<sup>14</sup>Sayers, p.65.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp.311-12.

<sup>17</sup>Wilson.

<sup>18</sup>Sayers, p.330.

<sup>19</sup>Wilson.

<sup>20</sup>Cited in "Beata Beatrix", *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*, Vol.36, No.2 ( Autumn 2005),  
[http:// www. lhup. edu/ jwilson3/ newsletter. htm](http://www.lhup.edu/jwilson3/newsletter.htm), 13-12-2010

<sup>21</sup>Sayers, p.58.

<sup>22</sup>Malcolm Bradbury, *Evelyn Waugh* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p.16.

<sup>23</sup>Sayers, p.320.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Beata Beatrix". *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*, Vol.36, No.2  
( Autumn 2005), [http:// www. lhup. edu/ jwilson3/ newsletter. htm](http://www.lhup.edu/jwilson3/newsletter.htm), 13-12-2010.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *Evelyn Waugh*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964.

Davie, Michael. ed. *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* Harmondsworth:  
Penguin Books Ltd., 1986.

McCartney, George. *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the  
Modernist Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Sayers, Dorothy. trans. *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri Cantica II:  
Purgatory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955.

Stannard, Martin. *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1939* Vol.1  
London: Flamingo, 1993.



Waugh, Evelyn. The Scarlet Woman. Evelyn Waugh Newsletter. Vol.3,

No.2 (Autumn 1969), [http:// www. lhup. edu/ jwilson3/ newsletter, htm](http://www.lhup.edu/jwilson3/newsletter.htm), 13-12-2010.

Wilson, John Howard. "The Scarlet Woman: An Appreciation" . Evelyn

Waugh Newsletter and Studies, Vol.33, No.2 (2002), [http:// www. lhup. edu/ jwilson3/ newsletter, htm](http://www.lhup.edu/jwilson3/newsletter.htm), 13-12-2010.

### الأعراف في المرأة القرمزية لايفلين وو

د.إسراء هاشم طاهر

#### الخلاصة

يكشف المرأة القرمزية النص السينمائي الوحيد ل(افلين وو) وعمله الأقل شعبية أكثر مما يبدو عليه. فبالرغم من بساطة العمل من حيث الحكمة والتمثيل والإخراج فهو يحمل رسالة جديدة. على نطاق ضيق يمكن اعتبار المرأة القرمزية نسخة (وو) من كتاب الأعراف ل(دانتي) ولأن (وو) كتبه عندما كان في أكسفورد فانه يكشف أعراض الرفض اللاشعوري للحياة الصاخبة التي عاشها هناك بدون الله. يبدو أن (وو) كان بانتظار التطهير حتى قبل خمس سنوات من اعتناقه الكاثوليكية وهذا هو غرضه في المرأة القرمزية. ولكون (وو) كاتب هجاء وكاتب هزلي فانه يؤمن بالقوة الصحية و الثقافية للكوميديا التي سوف لن تكون مؤثرة إذا أتت من روح تائهة كروحه في ذلك الوقت. إن هدف هذا البحث هو الكشف عن مخطط (وو) العملاق عن طريق تتبع الخيوط المتناثرة في الميلودراما. يبين البحث كيف أن فكرة التطهير كانت منذ وقت مبكر في بال (وو) وكيف إن حاجته كانت ماسة للخروج من جحيمه الشخصي.