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With this thought, we hereby present to you

***LawPublicus*** The Legal Portal

***The Strife of Tony***  
***Last Subjected to***  
***the Societal and***  
***Cultural Issues in***  
***Evelyn Waugh's***  
***'A Handful of***  
***Dust'***

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# **The Strife of Tony Last Subjected to the Societal and Cultural Issues in Evelyn Waugh's "A Handful of Dust"**

By: Ananya K N

## **ABSTRACT**

*"A Handful of Dust" by Evelyn Waugh 1934 novel, talks about the author's strife pertained to the central character Tony Last within the novel's extent among the community during the 1900s. Evelyn Waugh in this critic displays a gloomy scenario of the modernist community then and it's crowd with the focus of disclosing the "human selfishness and self-delusion (Ward, 2008)". In a broad way, the author channels his disparagement which headed the numerous facets of communal life prevalent in those types. The bare plot of A Handful of Dust does not seem to promise a symbolic vision. Without intending to do so, Tony invites John Beaver to a weekend at his country seat; the result is that Lady Brenda runs off to London to be with Beaver. After their son John dies in a riding accident, Brenda Last determines to divorce Tony. Life at Hetton having been temporarily poisoned for him and with the intention of sustaining among the radical socialists, Tony takes up a pursuit of discovering his individuality but fails in his attempts to do so. Correlated with the point of the author Evelyn 's own tragedies, the novel dwells upon certain parallelism that Waugh suffered from in his life. As a way to develop a broad review of the society, he puts himself in the shoes of the protagonist Tony Last in order to break through their battle with the outside world around them. Therefore, by the nature of his personal fiascos and socio-cultural manipulation, the novel is concerned with the struggle of Tony Last who is surrounded by those walls of personal, communal, and radical hardships. (Bartu, 2019). The author of this paper aims to elaborate the journey of the individual through Tony Last's pursuit among the societal and individual spheres by also focusing on Waugh's analysis of the modernist era.*

[Keywords: Tony Last, Communal fellowship, Traditional mentality over Personal issues]

## **INTRODUCTION**

### *→ Plot of the novel:*

The novel “A Handful of Dust” exhibits the chronicles faced during the genesis of the Great depression when the whole world was still recovering from the massive blow of the First World War. It was the time where the elite people in England didn’t feel the repercussions of the depression as heavily as the impoverished class; it was the time when financial capabilities had become a priority for being part of the elite unlike in the 1920s where caste was the presidency. (UKEssays, 1970) Tony and Brenda Last are portrayed as a sumptuous couple. They had been married for seven happy years and have been given an amazing gift: A charming little boy. Tony, who has acquired a large country estate, is an old school, a man who believes that with appropriate care, you can preserve the personality of dynasties and of individuals. Brenda is the first to become bored by the balance of their relationship. She is so witty and living in the moment kind of a person that she longs for diversity and freedom, which she confuses with freedom. She finds it in the person of John Beaver. So, we see Tony trying to show a reliable attitude surviving through his means, while John Beaver tries to manage his routine by always being free for dinners, weekend parties and have a jolly time. All of which in the end results in Tony being dead to the world and Hetton Abbey passed on. (Waugh, 1934)

### *→ Scope of cultural and social aspect in the novel*

Evelyn Waugh’s “A Handful of Dust” is indeed a thought-provoking novel. During the phase of critical social parody and malicious family melodrama, it focuses on the issue of social decorum among the superior strata of the privileged. However, most of the part in the novel wonderfully illustrates the crucial callousness and spitefulness that humans are able to do. Understanding that His leading character Tony Last whom the author sees himself in, experiences personal tragedies along with the distortion faced by culture and the social order, the author describes the pivotal aspect of his work of fiction as follows: “A Handful of Dust, my favourite hitherto, dealt entirely with behaviour. It was humanist and contained all I had to say about humanism (McDonnell, 1988)” Waugh presupposes a



cynical perspective in the script through the plain epitome of the author's twisted opinion of humaneness, which symbolizes human fondness and reverence. Waugh here explicitly communicates the vital manifestations of the modernist community through the low quality of the complex chain of relationships amidst trendsetters in the city, London. In a broader sense, it is feasible to comment that in "A Handful of Dust" Waugh bonds with traditions and customs compulsively. (Bartu, 2019) Coincidentally, Waugh's discontentment with the new culture, traditions, and conventions is evidently being detected in the novel in the form of Tony Last. Hence, this discontentment represented an innovative approach to the novel which is so persistent that it even had a vital part in coming up with the name of this paper. The author of this paper aims at analyzing and obtaining the rationale of the societal and cultural facets and constructing a foundation with respect to the same.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research paper is qualitative in nature. The various authoritative texts and judicial pronouncements have been analysed and juxtaposed in order to establish a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter in question. Due credit has been given to sources used in the course of this paper and have been analysed in the literature review as well.

→ Objectives:

- In order to establish a link between the author and his works
- To explore the radical and cultural issues that have been cited in "A Handful of Dust"
- In order to develop a framework against the changing of conventional ideologies during the 1930s.

→ Sources of Data:

The sources that have facilitated this research are secondary types of data like articles, journals, reviews and books. Certain databases like JSTOR and Hein Online have been referred to gain a broader scope in understanding and comprehending the novel "A Handful of Dust".

→ Scope of Study:

The scope of this paper extends till Waugh's writings and these ideologies when it comes to society, class and morality. It also covers aspects of adultery and how it was perceived by Waugh himself which he expresses as Tony Last in his novel.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Various articles have been focused on in order to explore the various facets of the novel to write this research paper.

Starting with (Kha, 2018) which talks about the legal aspect when it came to the reasons for divorce in the case of Tony Last and Brenda.

(Flanery, 2009) provides insights on Waugh's previous works as well as *Handful of dust* and the aspects it covers. *A Handful of Dust* not just deals with "normal individuals," yet in addition unmistakably places itself inside an all the more clearly genuine literary tradition than Waugh's past work may have recommended to readers at the time. It has epistemological essence in its writing which brings us back to the cultural and societal aspects with respect to Waugh's novels.

(Greenberg, 2003); It openly inquires in understanding radicalism. For Waugh's attitudes toward both radicalism and contemporaneity which all the more generally are similarly provoked.

(Bartu, 2019) which specifically talks about the protagonist Tony Last and his depiction in the novel when it comes to the societal and the cultural aspects that have been elaborated in "*A Handful of Dust*".

(Cunningham, 1993) is an article from a journal that has contributed to this paper regarding the anagogic and humanist dimension of Waugh's writings in this novel particularly.

(Bergonzi, 1964) the document contains several book reviews on the novel "*A Handful of Dust*" by renowned people which has helped the author of this paper to look into the opinions of various people to gain a clearer picture.

(Joost, 1976) titled "*A Handful of Dust: A Novel of Manners*" which broadens the scope and engages in explaining the parts of the various characters and how it affected the whole plot of

the novel. Waugh imbibes a different type of culture in his writings which were similar to the modernism structures present in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

(Edwards, 1976) this article goes beyond the novel and explores the various sources employed which led to the genesis of “A Handful of Dust”. These sources, when looked into, traced back to the time of First and Second world wars where the Richer class did not feel that much of an impact due to the Great Depression that was scattered dreadfully in the European parts of the World. the rich exploited and ruined their lives by indulging themselves to the level of Greed, Lust, spite, Envy and Deception.

(Home, 1993) and (Cretney, 2005) deal with how Waugh’s novel facilitated itself to help the field of law and understand the functioning of Family and Divorce law in England during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This piece of literature facilitated in opening up different aspects of the novel and how it was linked to the Communal Fellowship that were prevalent among the elite.

## **ANALYSIS**

The book A Handful of Dust written by Waugh is intrinsically linked with “The Man who liked Dickens”, a short story that exhibits a situation related to Chapter Six of the novel” Du Cote de Chez Todd” in which Tony Last is imprisoned by Mr. Todd who forces him to read Dickens.

This shows that Waugh was inspired by many such instances that were prevalent during the 1930s when the society was thriving for change and radicalism. In order to be certain, in Waugh’s writings the satiric and the modern often look a lot alike; while the author may claim to satirize a decadent radicalism, the problematic mechanism of his satire encourages the very modern decadence he discredits. A Handful of Dust brings to the front this pressure between Waugh's certainly reformatory, conservative drive and his incendiary and altogether current standpoint.

Waugh’s thoughts about the concept of materialism during the 190s English society portrays indisputable outrage, which have consequences on those who are meant to deal with it than the others like Tony Last. When Evelyn Waugh resorts to sacrificing the heart of an innocent kid to just show his opinions, we realise what the society during those times believed in. He made it look like it happened as an accident when kicked by a horse, the small child John Andrew

Last who was killed, absolutely ignoring the actual society to blame. The society where the rich only wanted to get richer and neglect the other traits that make us deserving human beings.

Waugh converted into Catholicism four years before publishing his book ``A Handful of Dust'' and after a year of his first divorce with Evelyn Gardner. This led to a scandalous expression among the press. Nevertheless, Waugh expressed his opinions in an essay which spoke about his interpretations about civilizations, morality and societal issues that was the foundation of his novel ``A Handful of Dust'' where he condemns the superficial society that he lived in. And he chose to liberate himself from all the drama around him through converting himself to become a catholic which he even speaks of in the novel. Linking his gloominess with the society with the guild of the public, Waugh explores the contemporary public with his imagination through his writings.

The character of Mrs. Beaver is a character which basically talks about the hidden dirt present in our society on a microcosmic level. The attitude imbibed in her character, the lies, the betrayal, the thirst for wealth and popularity which prove itself for the doom of Tony Last who trusts such individuals. The characters of this novel are so busy in fulfilling their own ``appetite and inclinations'' that they have slowly grown into becoming society's parasites because ``they have blandly resigned themselves to live in a treacherous world without hope of recourse to any effective moral order''.(McCartney, 1987)

Coming to the legal aspect, Waugh explains the judicial procedure where a man fallen for infatuation, is swayed away to let himself get divorced as adultery as grounds which he never committed despised by his wife. Tony even stooped down to the level of creating false evidence of finding a night-club hostess who ``knew how to behave at a hotel'' when the court claimed a witness as evidence due to ``involving a man of very rigid morality and a certain difference'' on such pressing issues during those times. (Waugh, 1934)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readership, Authority, and Identity: Some Competing Texts of Evelyn Waugh's "A Handful of Dust";See at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24293818?seq=1>

## **A DEDUCTED OVERVIEW**

Practicing what he preaches, his thusly distributed work also works as a fictional background of his weariness and assessment on creating defilement in social and individual levels.

You have to step in the muck when it's not possible to jump through it. Waugh's fiction provides a useful analysis in the oxymora of satire and opens genuine questions in understanding communal fellowship that existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His attitudes when compared to modernism and modernity are correspondingly irked. George Mc Cartney has scripted" Waugh's response to the modern was marked by certain fruitful ambivalence.in his official pose he was curmudgeon who despised innovation, but the anarchic artist in him frequently delighted in its formal and thematic possibilities". Waugh engaged in ironies in this piece of literature from the faltering of his victories topped with the visible flaws particularly of the protagonist, Tony Last. He became the victim for almost all the scenarios that involved conflict of interest and failed to acquire his outlook in the community leading to horrified originality. However, after converting to Catholicism Waugh later again and again condemned the official modernist experimentation. His fiction during the early stages nevertheless moved for embodying a sense of modernity in the ostensible refutation of the traditional and ethical commitments.

Basically, this novel "A Handful of Dust" anticipates the failed pursuits of various people captured by immoral values. Waugh sought refuge in Catholicism after his failure, however Tony remains unsuccessful. Thus, in this book Tony's failure in both the endings is dreaded. For the finale, supposing a satiric and cynical tone the book explores the social, communal radical, scheming aspects with the basic characteristic of the contemporariness of the communal fellowship which go deep into the depths of the ruthless society and the individual.

Thus, in a nutshell, this novel speaks of the autobiographical essence of the author Evelyn Waugh depicts the circumstances when it comes to Dickens involving supernatural appeal to a major with powers that are uncanny. This is due to the factor of there being a sentimental pull of the book which can possess us as in childhood. In brief "A Handful of Dust " pushes the individual to the maximum threshold thereby unleashing a completely unplanned form which makes it more bibliographical than critical. Nevertheless, it beautifully illustrates what a human mind filled with viciousness and spitefulness can accomplish.

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