

Evelyn waugh's brideshead revisited: literary review

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Although a whole novel reveals more meaning than a short extract from it, examining an extract can still be useful in studying a text as it is easier to look at it more closely. *Brideshead Revisited* published in 1945 is a novel narrated by a character named Charles who tells the story of his part in the life of a doomed Catholic family in the English Aristocracy. In this essay, I will be studying an extract from Chapter 1 of the novel that tells the story of a flashback to a day in Charles time as a student at Oxford when hundreds of women had arrived to join in on the festivities of Eights week, a rowing regatta. This extract demonstrates an objectified view on women and the disruption caused when they are given priority in a male-dominated society. Through its context and through a feminist lens, we can see how techniques are used to convey a biased, unfavorable view on women due to them being given privileges over men.

Almost the entirety of this extract is a flashback to 1923, the days when the narrator (Charles) was a young student at Oxford university. Only 3 years prior to this, women in Oxford became eligible for admission as full members of the university and were given full rights to complete their degrees. This was a major change for Oxford, and the men may have had some difficulty adjusting to it, just as they are adjusting to Eights week becoming a co-ed event in this extract. It is suggested that the streets of Oxford see more men than women through the way that the women are treated as royalty yet also somewhat bait for the college men. With this history of Oxford in mind, it is suggested that it is because the university was obviously so male-dominated in this time and the colleges weren't co-ed that the presence of women makes the men in the extract uncomfortable. Sebastian describes Oxford as

becoming 'most peculiar suddenly' and Charles and his Scout disapprove over the disruption that their presence had caused, describing it as the 'grossest disturbance'. It is also implied that the men in the extract believe themselves to be more intelligent and civilized than the hundreds of women that are visiting for the week through the way Charles describes the women to be 'twittering and fluttering' and that they're 'herded in droves' and 'pushed in punts' rather than being left to themselves. If a reader has the knowledge of this part in the history of Oxford, they'll better understand how the introduction of women in a male-dominated society caused discomfort to the men of the college, who believed that they should still be given priority due to being more intelligent and sophisticated than the female guests.

When applying a feminist lens to this extract of *Brideshead Revisited*, a reader can see how techniques are employed that objectify women in a text that emphasizes the individuality of men over women. To begin with, the story is told by a male narrator, whose closest friends seem to be men. By writing as a male narrator, it is easy to represent women as being all the same rather than individuals with different personalities and quirks. Rather than singling out ladies to talk about, their presence is instead described through phrases such as 'a rabble of womankind' and 'pullulating with women' whilst the male characters are given more depth through dialogue and individual description. It is implied that women are made happy with things such as cucumber sandwiches and balls and that it is through these things that they are lured to the college, 'some hundreds strong'. This representation of the women being shallow paints a picture of them that is unfavorable yet accepted by the male characters who have the view that the

college should be ' boys only' as that is what they're comfortable with. This idea established by Charles description and his Scouts complaints is reinforced when Sebastian enters and compares the presence of the women to ' a circus', going on to jokingly suggest that it is dangerous and Charles should escape from it with him. Not only are the women objectified through such dialogue and description, they are also described to be ' invaders', and the inconvenience of their temporary presence is despised by the men, who believe eight's week was much better off before the war when it was celebrated by ' wine in the evening' and ' one or two gentlemen to luncheon'. Through this constant unfavorable depiction of women, it is shown that the men of Oxford view themselves as higher and more important than females, who should not be ' twittering and fluttering' around in their territory.

There is a strong sense of nostalgia in this extract, conveyed through imagery and dialogue. Charles' flashback to over 20 years before the time he is writing in reveals, through imagery, that he is nostalgic over these early days at Oxford. Meanwhile his servant Lunt longs for the time before the war and criticizes the changes that it brought. This way of looking to the past reveals that perhaps these male characters do not accustom well to change, which reinforces the notion that they despise the temporary change of their home losing its male-dominance. Charles' even goes as far to compare the Oxford of his present day to Lyonesse, a city in Arthurian Legend that once glorious yet is now lost after sinking in to the sea. The way that Charles describes Oxford with female pronouns in his imagery portraying the Oxford of 1923 (' her autumnal winds, her grey springtime, and the rare glory of her

summer days') is in direct contrast to the critical way he describes the women who are visiting Oxford. This suggests that Charles associates Oxford to be feminine because of its beauty and therefore admires it, yet cannot view the real women the same way because he believes they lack in intelligence and they have needs and wants that cause inconvenience for him. The description of Lunt's nostalgia almost directly criticizes how the society around him had changed to accommodate women. He clearly feels very strongly about how then men are asked to eat away from the college if they 'haven't got ladies' for only a few days when stating so to Charles 'despondently' and going on to say 'if you ask me, sir, it's all on account of the war. It couldn't have happened but for that'. Here Lunt is blaming the war for the changes for the Eights week festivities to include women so much more than it did before. However, the society in the extract had changed, and like Charles says, 'things could never be the same as they had been in 1914', when women were given less rights in Oxford. A feminist lens reveals through Charles' description of the past and the way Lunt does not like the change of women being given more priority, women are despised by the men in the extract because they feel more comfortable in a male-dominated society.

With some knowledge of the history of Oxford concerning women and through a feminist lens, this extract from *Brideshead Revisited* reveals sexist reasons behind why the women are talked about so unfavorably and why their presence makes the men uncomfortable. It is because of the sudden introduction of females in a male dominated area that they are viewed as 'invaders' by the characters in the extract, yet they are also objectified in

how they are described and regarded to have shallow interests and to be more or less the same.

Even though the depiction of women seems quite disrespectful, it is done in a humorous manner and can perhaps relate to situations in today's society where men and women try to reserve things to be boys, or girls only as a healthy sort of rivalry between genders.