

Brenda in 'a handful of dust' essay



In this excerpt, which takes place after Tony has left for the Amazon, Waugh continues to allow his reader to come to their own conclusions about the characteristics and behaviour of Brenda by examining what she does and what she says rather than through the narrator or author's own viewpoint.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of irony, (of plot, character and dramatic) here as elsewhere in the novel leads his readers to form an opinion of Brenda, the adulterous wife who happens to sleep in a bedroom named Guinevere, which may very well have been what the author intended. As Brenda dances with Jock, discussing her Mr. Beaver and her absent husband, we are left in no doubt that this is a woman who is used to and enjoys the good life, likes to be in control of both herself and others and who is selfish and self-serving in the extreme. Indeed, it is ironic that Brenda is discussing her life with Jock as we learnt from Mrs. Beaver at the start of the novel that " everyone thought that she would marry Jock Grant Menzies" and Jock himself seems to have always had a high opinion of the " grand girl" and " devoted wife" (irony).

It appears that his opinion does not alter despite his knowledge of Brenda's adultery and rather unfeeling reaction to the news he himself delivered on the death of her son as we learn at the end of the novel that Brenda goes on to marry him. Perhaps this also helps to emphasise that the immorality of Brenda's affair is not viewed with any great dismay by the society circles in which Brenda and Jock move in. Her sister and the rest of the London set, like Jock, have already showed an acceptance of the affair, inviting the adulterous couple to their soirees and homes. However, we learn that Brenda's attendance at such sparkling occasions with guests such as Lady Anchorage, is likely to be coming to an end due to her impending divorced

status and lack of finance and this change of attitude may have already begun as she comments on the difficulty she had in getting Beaver invited to the party that night. Could this be the reason for her eventual marriage to Jock? After all " it didn't take her long to get hitched up again".

This would come as no surprise as Brenda throughout the novel seems more concerned about her personal pleasure than the hurt she is causing others. It may be that the affair with the unattractive and unpopular Mr. Beaver was her means of escape from the tedious domesticity of her life with Tony.

Throughout the affair she doesn't give much thought to her husband or son as she sets about making a new life for herself, getting Tony to agree to the flat in London by using the excuse of the fake economics course and leaving her family for long periods of time alone when she is away in London enjoying the high life. It is ironic that she should say that she " shouldn't like to think of him being unhappy" when it is she that is the cause of her husband's despair and eventual dire predicament with Mr.

Todd. But this is indicative of the innocence that she displays, like a badly behaved child that doesn't understand the wrongness of her conduct while wanting all its wishes fulfilled. Does she really think that it is Tony who has behaved in a " monstrous way" and not herself or is she playing the ' wronged woman'? In this scene as in the rest of the novel it is Brenda who is in control and leading the affair. It is she who invites Beaver to take her out and who initially refuses his attentions in the taxi and then spurs him into action later. She continually " feed(s) him a bit of high-life every week or so" as she is under no misapprehension that her attraction for Beaver is the social prominence he gains by his association with Lady Beaver who belongs

to the world of parties and balls. Despite her awareness of his shortcomings and unresponsiveness (his failure to get in touch after the party and thoughtless letter after Brenda's generous gift of a ring) she is willing to use anything in her power to continue the affair.

Brenda's love of "making people learn things" is seen throughout as Beaver is treated as "an undergraduate having his first walk out" and Tony is "taught not to make surprise visits". In the same way she manipulates her husband into accepting her absences, feeding him a little bit of her company on her return to Hetton and keeping him in ignorance." She had decided to devote the weekend wholly to him; it would be the last for some time". Her lack of moral scruples are shown further in her unsuccessful attempt to get Tony interested in another woman, Princess Abdul Akbar and her acceptance of the statement penned by her lawyer placing the blame for the breakdown of the marriage on her husband's fictitious affair and drunkenness, which she had already ruthlessly exploited by allowing Tony to feel guilty and subsequently accept her absences with good grace." He's put himself in the wrong now, that he won't dare to feel resentful, let alone say anything, whatever I do" When she urges Tony not to brood after she leaves, saying "Don't make me feel a beast", she comes close to acknowledging her guilt but dismisses it at the same time showing that her moral sensitivity is only skin deep and her vague scruples are soon silenced by her selfishness.

Are we to really believe that Brenda is now worried about the safety of her husband when her radical plans to change Hetton using the avaricious Mrs. Beaver, her claim of a large financial settlement which would have led to the sale of Tony's beloved house and her careless penciled note to Tony reveal a

disinterest in the feelings and well-being of her husband? We have come to doubt the honesty of Brenda's emotions with regard to her family. The estrangement from her husband came about long before the revelation of her affair as we see in the spontaneous reaction of relief when she learns that it is her son who has died and not Beaver. She does not seem over affected by the tragedy, the repetition of " poor little boy" showing a relative poverty of emotion in contrast to the genuine grief of Tony.

She rejects Tony's efforts to console her and makes no effort to comfort him and then chooses this time to return to her party set before revealing her affair cruelly in a letter to her bereaved husband. She appears more genuinely upset later in the novel during a visit to Tony's solicitor having been abandoned by Beaver and now in dire financial straits, she weeps when she learns that she is to receive no legacy, the estate having been left to Tony's relatives. Some might say a just reward for her actions. However the final irony of the novel is that Brenda is not really punished despite being the guilty party.

Her loneliness after Beaver and her smart friends desert her is only temporary as she appears at the end as the wife of Jock, the attractive and well-liked member of parliament. This is in glaring contrast to the disastrous fate of the innocent Tony. It appears that the " parties" are not " all over" for Lady Brenda and the reader is left to ponder the injustice of an errant wife unpunished and a cuckolded husband suffering. Or is Waugh just reminding us, as he himself knew, that " such is life"!