

Hollow Voices, Fragile Bonds: Telephone and the Contingency of Modern Love in *Vile Bodies*

Mengge Zhao

School of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine

Author Note

The author declares no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mengge Zhao, School of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510006, China. Email:15665609956@163.com

Abstract

In *Vile Bodies*, Evelyn Waugh uses telephone dialogue as a consciously chosen narrative device that dramatizes the emotional atrophy unleashed when traditional order gives way to modern anarchy. This study explores how Waugh, through the medium of the telephone, uncovers the fragility of the love bond across three interrelated dimensions. First, with its instantaneous connection and abrupt termination, the telephone is itself an emblem of fluid modernity, exposing how the collapse of traditional identity anchors leaves individuals adrift, and incapable of forming authentic bonds in a transient age. Second, the telephone functions as a formal analogue to fortune itself, both delivering and registering the fragility of intimacy, and mirroring a world in which agency is supplanted by contingency. Third, the telegraphic telephone exchanges between the protagonists unravel the atrophy of emotional language, compressing feeling into monosyllabic utterances that suspend meaning between speech and silence while performing social disguise. Reading the novel across these dimensions, this study demonstrates that *Vile Bodies* internalizes the dissolution of order to produce a formal diagnosis of the affective alienation pervading the modern condition. Waugh's formal conservatism is, in this respect, more radical than his reputation as a satirist allows.

Keywords: Evelyn Waugh, telephone, emotional atrophy, identity, modernity

Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* opens with a scene that might seem merely comic. The protagonist Adam Symes, returning from France, watches helplessly as a customs officer confiscates the manuscript on which his entire livelihood depends and consigns it to the flames.

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“That’s just downright dirt, and we burn that straight away, see” (Waugh, 2000, p. 9). Adam’s response to this catastrophe is telling, as he offers almost no resistance. The episode passes, and the narrative moves on, as if nothing of consequence has occurred. This peculiar affectlessness, which is the gap between the gravity of an event and the triviality of its emotional registration will prove to be the novel’s signature mode. Nowhere is it more strikingly rendered than in the conversations that take place over its most distinctive technological presence: the telephone.

In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh’s innovations with telephone talk are quite experimental, and Waugh himself seems to take pride in this formal innovation: “I think I can claim that this was the first English novel in which dialogue on the telephone plays a large part”¹. The claim is not just that of a technician pleased with a clever device, but the recognition of a writer who had discovered a form perfectly suited to the age he sought to depict. By making the telephone the primary medium through which his central lovers, Adam Symes and Nina Blount, conduct their relationship, Waugh does more than update the novel’s furniture; he transforms its very architecture of feeling.

Critical scholarship on *Vile Bodies* has largely focused on its stylistic novelty and satirical function (Stannard, 1986; Hopkins, 1997). More recently, scholars have examined the novel’s sociological dimensions, reading *it* as a document of interwar social transformation (DeCoste, 2016; Greene, 2021). More pertinent to the present study, Thomas has analyzed the pragmatic structure of the telephone conversations in *Vile Bodies*, showing how Waugh exploits the constraints of the medium to generate both comic misunderstanding and underlying

¹ See author preface to Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*: “I think I can claim that this was the first English novel in which dialogue on the telephone plays a large part.”

relational tension (1997, p.112). Similarly, Milthorpe has read the novel's affective austerity as a formal symptom of modernity's discontents (2016, p.78). While these studies have illuminated the stylistic and sociological dimensions of Waugh's novel, they have rarely treated the telephone in depth as a narrative device that actively reflects and shapes social ties as they are undermined by liquid modernity.

This study therefore argues that Waugh's experimentation with the telephone in *Vile Bodies* constitutes a precise formal diagnosis of modernity's erosion of traditional values and social bonds, where stability, sincerity, and ritual give way to anarchy and sheer chance. The telephone, as the quintessential symbol of modern communication, becomes the medium through which these transformations are registered. The sections that follow trace this argument across three interrelated dimensions: the telephone as emblem of social fragility, as structural correlative of contingency, and as agent of emotional atrophy.

1. Telephone and the Fragility of Social Bonds

The rupture that modernity introduces into social life is unprecedented. As Giddens argues: "The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion" (1991, p.4). This rupture erodes these institutional frameworks, family, community and religion, that once prescribed the forms of love and guaranteed their endurance. In the pre-modern world, courtship followed established rituals; marriage was sealed by public ceremony; the bond between lovers formed part of a larger moral and social order that transcended individual whim. However, the arrival of modernity dismantles this architecture, as *Vile Bodies* announces the fact on its opening page. When Adam's memoir is consigned to the flames by a customs officer, the scene is not merely

a comic inconvenience: it is the novel's first image of a meaningful cultural past being stripped away, and Adam's almost complete failure to resist or grieve signals that the institutions which once guaranteed the endurance of personal investment, whether it is in writing, in labour, and in love, have already lost their force.

Modernity's promise of individual autonomy, rooted in Enlightenment ideals of reason, has given rise to a profoundly contradictory construction of subjectivity. The modern subject does not achieve a stable identity. Instead, negative forces, such as technological paranoia, war trauma, and the collapse of traditional anchors fracture the self. As Ulrich Beck argues, modernity's dissolution of fixed categories forces subjects into a perpetual state of reflexive self-construction, in which identity is no longer inherited but actively assembled through personal choices and narratives (Beck, 1992, p. 128). Adam and Nina exemplify this condition acutely: without stable social position, settled vocation, or inherited purpose, they must improvise a self from moment to moment. The telephone participates in this improvisation in a particularly revealing way. Each call delivers a new version of who they are — engaged, unengaged, solvent, ruined — and each version dissolves with the next ring, leaving no residue of continuity or commitment.

This condition of rootlessness is precisely what makes intimate relationships newly central and precarious. Charles Taylor observes that in the culture of authenticity, "relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation" (1994, p. 36). Love, as one of the most intimate bonds, thus carries the individual's anticipation for security and belonging, not simply as a fulfillment of ordinary needs, but serves as "the crucibles of inwardly generated identity" (Taylor, 1994, p. 36). Where traditional identity anchors have

collapsed, love becomes the forge in which identity is meant to be shaped and confirmed. Yet this elevation of intimate relationships coincides with their increasing fragility. Zygmunt Bauman identifies “the uncanny frailty of human bonds” as a defining condition of liquid modernity, one that inspires insecurity and a conflicted desire to “tighten the bonds yet keep them loose” (2003, p. 10). The result is a cruel paradox: the very relationships charged with grounding identity are themselves groundless. When love fails, as it repeatedly does in *Vile Bodies*, it does not merely break a romantic bond; it unravels the self that has been staked upon it. If Adam and Nina cannot hold their relationship together, it is partly because they cannot hold themselves together.

Waugh’s conservatism, with its deep suspicion of modernity, recognized in this technological shift a symptom of something larger. The telephone’s immediacy and ease of termination precisely mirror what Bauman calls the melting of solids (Bauman, 2000, pp.3–5): the dissolution of long-term bonds into short-term connections, the transformation of durable commitments into negotiable contracts. As Raymond Williams observes in his study of television, each new communications technology arrives with a dual character. It extends human capacity while simultaneously altering the forms of human connection in ways that are not always fully understood (Williams, 1974, p.10). The telephone embodies this duality. It promises to collapse distance, and bring the absent voice into the present moment, yet this very promise contains its very opposite—a new vulnerability, the vulnerability of the instant. A connection that can be made in a moment can also be severed in a moment. As Schegloff observes, “once the business of a call is over the contact is immediately severed by hanging up, whereas in face-to-face conversation participants may continue to be physically co-present”

(1967, p. 49). For what the telephone compresses, no matter it is time, presence, emotional elaboration, it also reveals the extent to which modern relationships, and by extension modern selves, have fallen prey to forces outside individual control in a world where anarchy holds sway. Waugh's genius lies in recognizing that the medium itself, not just the content it transmits, carries the ideological weight of the age it serves.

Adam's own experience of the telephone reveals it as an instrument not of connection but of fragmentation. In *Vile Bodies*, Adam does not shape his fate; he is acted upon by it. Each phone call arrives without warning, news of money won, then money lost, each altering the course of his relationship without his agency. His voice reaches Nina, but his intentions remain opaque; her words reach him, but her feelings remain hidden. Thus, in Waugh's hands, the telephone does no more than transmit their relationship; instead, it fragments it, reducing what might have been a continuous narrative to a series of isolated, ambiguous exchanges. What Adam experiences is not a relationship sustained through mutual effort and sincerity but a succession of external blows. Lacking the capacity to initiate or sustain, he can only respond, and each response is overtaken by the next before it can take root. The telephone, as Waugh deploys it, becomes a trap. His characters reach for connection through the only medium available to them, only to find that the medium itself, as Waugh writes it, ensures their failure. This ironic condition, and the gap between the promise of connection and the reality of isolation provide the foundation for the chapters that follow.

It is important to note, however, that the telephone's role here is not mechanically deterministic. Waugh chooses to write his telephone dialogues in a particular way—sparse, clipped, stripped of elaboration. The medium offers formal affordances that Waugh

deliberately exploits. In his hands, telephone becomes an instrument of exposure that lays bare the emotional impoverishment and fragility of social bonds beneath the promise of technological progress. It is his narrative decisions, not the technology itself, that convert those structural features into instruments of emotional exposure. The fragility that emerges in these exchanges is thus a product of Waugh's craft as much as of his characters' situation. In this way, the following section turns to the second dimension of the telephone's function: its role as a structural analogue for the reign of chance.

2. Dissolution of Order: Love under the Reign of Chance

If the telephone exposes the instability of identity at the level of interpersonal connection, it also participates in a broader narrative logic in which relationships are increasingly shaped by contingency rather than intention. This logic is formalized in the novel's structure. To depict a vista of fast living and few enduring values, Waugh makes his artistic choice by adhering to principle of incoherence and coincidence. He does not attend much to the novel's structural solidity. In fact, the novel's famous narrative incoherence, its episodic structure, abrupt transitions, and refusal of causal logic, are not formal flaws, but the formal correlative of an anarchic world in which the telephone and fortune conspire to dissolve continuity. It reduces experience to a series of disconnected moments linked only by the arbitrary rhythm of the ringtone.

In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh demonstrates the overthrow of many types of order, the most predominant of which is the reversal of the love bond, which exhibits the fragmentation and arbitrariness of modern relationship. Love, once conceived as a stable emotional anchor, now fluctuates with financial fortune and sheer chance, stripped of its traditional rituals and

certainties. What Waugh captures, then, is not purely an irony of a particular social set, but a deeper ontological condition. In a world without transcendent order, even the most intimate human bonds become subject to the whims of fortune.

More than a mere plot device, the telephone's technological structure, connection without presence, communication without reciprocity, thus becomes the novel's governing metaphor for the transient experience of modernity itself. In *Vile Bodies*, telephone mediates the most consequential moments of Adam and Nina's relationship. The protagonists announce their engagement, cancel it, renegotiate it, and finally dissolve it, all over the telephone. Each call arrives as a sudden interruption, which cuts emotion short and reduces complex human interactions to disembodied voices. Yet to see the telephone simply as an instrument of loss would be to miss the profound irony of Waugh's design. For the medium's structure, one voice speaking into emptiness, the other responding from an unseen location, captures precisely the sense that one's fate is determined by forces that can only be recorded, never engaged. The telephone becomes, in effect, a technological correlative for a world in which agency has been supplanted by contingency.

What emerges in *Vile Bodies* is a vision of modern subjectivity defined less by autonomous choice than by passive exposure to external forces. This logic governs not only the novel's characters but its plot structure as well, which is often propelled by an abrupt and arbitrary logic, with crucial decisions taken whimsically and much greater concern expressed over irrelevancies. Nowhere is this more evident than in the capricious trajectory of Adam and Nina's engagement. Their relationship turns not on decisions made or feelings felt, but on a series of events governed mostly by chance, which is the direct consequence of the loss of

traditional order. When there is no overarching structure, such as divine providence, moral code and social discipline to guarantee the sound operation of a society, chaos and sheer chance come to rule.

Nina's apparent indifference when Adam first reports that the engagement may have to be called off is a case in point. It seems to be typical that Waugh's protagonists respond trivially to the abrupt catastrophes that threaten their well-being. For Terry Eagleton, this lack of emotion signals Waugh's endorsement of a modern society that abuses its members (1970, p. 35). Yet the absence of emotional response suggests not endorsement but a deeper pathology, which underlines the numbing of affect that occurs when individuals internalize the logic of a world they cannot control.

The choice of telephone talk is also convenient for social disguise, which implies the detachment at the heart of their relations. Nina pretends to have someone else answer the telephone, not only out of snobbery but also to signal the insincerity between them.

"May I speak to Miss Blount, please?"

"I'll just see if she's in," said Miss Blount's voice.

"Who's speaking, please?" (Waugh, 2000, p.34)

In this brief exchange, Waugh encapsulates a central irony of modern courtship. As intimacy is mediated by performance, the most personal transactions unfold through the most impersonal channels.

Another turning point arrives when Adam wins one thousand pounds by flipping coins with the stranger, only to entrust the money to the drunken Major, who vanishes before it can be recovered. Such being the case, not only does the thousand pounds become irrecoverable,

but also their marital plans collapse once again. The pattern is relentless, since every attempt to stabilize the relationship through money is immediately undone by fortune's next turn. The Major himself functions as a figure of pure contingency, appearing and vanishing at crucial moments as if to personify fortune itself. As Johnson observes, "Adam and Nina's relationship cannot be construed as love, for their desires are empty, and they are absolutely and complacently dependent upon the impetus or obstruction provided by others" (Johnson, 1996, p. 10). Adam does not act upon fortune but awaits its next call; he does not shape his destiny but accepts it, always a beat too late, always on terms not his own. His one thousand pounds arrive as if from nowhere, and depart with equal abruptness, entrusted to a drunken Major who vanishes like a voice cut off mid-sentence. As Korchinsky notes in a different context, "social connections at all levels prove to be weakened" (2020, p.101). When no external framework guarantees meaning or justice, human life becomes a lottery. The individuals, deprived of the anchors that once secured existence, are exposed to the arbitrary play of forces.

If sheer chance provides the mechanism through which this value is distributed, materialism provides the new metric of value. Materialism, as an emergent social discourse in the gilded age, exerts discursive violence that distorts and destabilizes social relationships. It barbarously transforms love into a transaction, kinship into a calculation, and identity into the sum of one's possessions. Not only does the emotional bond between lovers appear to be fragile and delicate, but so too does the kinship among families. The scene with Colonel Blount brings this logic to its satirical peak.

As financial concerns threaten their already fragile relationship, Nina arranges for Adam to pay a visit to her father Colonel Blount, hoping to secure some money

for their marriage. Adam arrives with a mixture of hope and desperation, believing that a direct appeal to familial authority might stabilize a relationship that fortune has repeatedly unsettled. The scene initially seems to promise relief. The Colonel displays the affability of the idle rich, offers Adam a cheque book with a casual magnanimity that suggests money is of little consequence. Adam's reaction is one of genuine elation. For a moment, it appears that the material obstacle to their marriage has dissolved, that the arbitrary tyranny of fortune has been overruled by the orderly transmission of family wealth. Yet this elation is immediately revealed to be the object of cruel irony. When Adam later examines the cheque book, he finds that Colonel Blount has signed every cheque with "Charlie Chaplin".

Waugh's irony towards modern anarchy reaches its peak in this gesture, which performs a kind of symbolic emasculation. Adam, who came seeking the legitimacy of patriarchal approval, receives instead a joke that aligns him not with the father but with the clown—Charlie Chaplin, the silent film comedian, the figure of the powerless everyman whose dignity is perpetually subject to humiliation. The Colonel's gesture thus exemplifies discursive violence at its most potent. It does not physically harm Adam but strips him of dignity, mocks his need, and reinscribes the power hierarchy that leaves him dependent on the whims of those who control material resources. In a world in which conventional ethics has given way to the barbarous materialism, even the act of asking for parental help becomes an occasion for degradation.

Lacking money, Nina has to marry Ginger Littlejohn. The marriage, like so much else in the novel, is not a choice but a concession to circumstance. The prospect of solving the stalemate is raised again when the drunken Major abruptly appears and informs Adam that

he has won a large sum of money on horse racing, then he vanishes in the crowd once again. The repetition of this pattern — gain, loss, gain, is not solely episodic, it is the novel's formal enactment of a chaotic world in which stability is perpetually deferred and closure perpetually withheld.

Throughout the novel, whenever Adam envisions marital romance with Nina, capricious misfortune intervenes, a pattern that epitomizes the anomic disintegration of social order under the reign of contingency. The randomness and anarchy are of central importance in Waugh's portrait of an essentially hollow modern world, in which individuals are exposed to the naked operation of contingency. As civilization gives way to turmoil and anarchy, Waugh presents a modern world governed by intangible destiny. *Vile Bodies* thus exhibits the modern world as alienated and mechanized, in which the individuals are stripped of a stabilized cultural past and overwhelmed by ceaseless change.

3. Language of Distance: Telephone Dialogue and Emotional Atrophy

If the previous section examines how the telephone embodies this fragility at the level of social bonds, it is at the level of language itself, and the texture of the dialogues, that its most radical formal consequences are felt. While contingency governs the structure of events in the novel, it also reshapes the language through which those events are experienced. Where agency has given way to contingency, the very language of intimacy cannot remain unscathed. This section turns from the structural logic of chance to the texture of talk itself, examining the telephone dialogues between Adam and Nina to trace the contours of emotional atrophy.

Unlike his modernist contemporaries Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, who pioneer stream-of-consciousness techniques to explore psychological depths, Waugh consciously

avoids interior monologue as a means of character revelation; instead, in *Vile Bodies*, Waugh continues his former exterior features with an emphasis on conversation and dialogue. As Glencross points out, “His youthful experiments in dialogue are avant-garde” (2022, p. 28). This emphasis on the interplay of voices, rather than the exploration of a single interior consciousness, finds its most concentrated expression in the novel’s telephone conversations, where meaning emerges not from what any character thinks but from the gaps, overlaps, and silences between what they say.

Adam and Nina’s oral communication, with its code-like pace, signifies an alienation and emotional impotency in day-to-day existence. Waugh could have depicted their dialogue in a face-to-face way, but instead he chooses the telephone as the major mode for communication, especially for the key events that determine their relationship. This choice is not incidental but structural. The telephone’s formal constraints, including its compression of time, and its reduction of presence to voice, become the very conditions under which the novel’s emotional landscape is shaped.

While in Waugh’s debut, *Decline and Fall*, multiple characters speak out discrepant and even mutually contradictory truths about themselves and the Waughian world, the telephone exchanges in *Vile Bodies* showcase Waugh’s treatment of the emotional impotency of modern individuals. “It is so successful in its pursuit of affectlessness that the novel often reads as lacking in feeling, even to its author” (Milthorpe, 2016, p.78). The truncated, telegraphic exchanges that characterize Adam and Nina’s telephone conversations are not a stylistic tic but a formal response to Waugh’s exploitation of the medium’s constraints. When Adam tells Nina he has lost the money they need to marry, the exchange is reduced to its barest elements.

“You haven’t got any money?”

“No.”

“We aren’t going to be married today?”

“No.”

“I see.” (Waugh, 2000, p. 152)

There is no room here for elaboration, for the working through of disappointment, or for the shared silence that might allow feeling to register. The medium compresses time, and in doing so it compresses emotion. What might have been a prolonged conversation in person, with space for anger, sorrow and reconciliation, becomes a series of question—and—answer exchanges that leave both participants and reader uncertain whether feeling has been suppressed or hardly ever existed. The telegram-style telephone talk between the lovers enacts the atrophy of emotional language under modernity, just as Adam’s suppressed grief over the loss of his manuscript in the opening pages is rendered through brutal comic deflection. By this means, Waugh exploits the telephone’s structural minimalism to convert the potential space of intimacy into a sequence of monosyllabic data points.

Throughout the novel, Adam and Nina seem to solely rely on the telephone to announce or call off their engagement, a serious event that presumably deserves much more formality. Moreover, it is as if they have become used to living without emotion. When an intrusion of feeling occurs, they restrain it. The telephone, as a modern technological invention, is convenient for hasty arrangements or emergencies, yet it endangers the enduring quality valued in a sincere relationship. Adam and Nina’s dependence on the phone suggests the casualness and instability of love bonds that were once intimate and unbreakable in the pre-modern world.

Their ambiguous and empty telephone talks illustrate Waugh's playfulness with voices, suggesting the reversal of love order in a barbarous age.

Before turning to Waugh's stylistic peak in Chapter Eleven, it is worth noting that the novel's notorious emotional austerity also bears the imprint of Waugh's own affective biography. It does not replace formal analysis but serves as a contextual layer that clarifies its emotional stakes. The apathy of narrative tone can be traced back to Waugh's own "emotional catastrophe", as Wykes describes it, and more broadly to "a symptom of the disease of modernity to which, in his work, he would return again and again" (2016, p. 64). Wykes notes that the infidelity and betrayal during Waugh's first marriage constitutes "a trauma that left a mark on everything of any importance that he wrote thereafter" (2016, p. 64). This biographical context illuminates the profound ambivalence running through Waugh's treatment of intimacy: a simultaneous longing for romantic ideal and a fierce commitment to emotional reticence. Evelyn Nightingale's 1986 correspondence with biographer Martin Stannard illuminates the tension at the core of Waugh's affective world:

Waugh was, perhaps without realizing it, idealistically romantic about his marriage, but he followed (and did so even more later on) a code of emotional reticence that he saw as aristocratically unsentimental. His nature, as Alec said, was tender and emotional, but by self-nurture he became reticent and outwardly unaffectionate. (Stannard, 2013, p. 45)

This ambiguity, however, requires further qualification. It is crucial to distinguish between affective atrophy and affective reticence. Waugh's aristocratic ideal of unsentimentality does not signal an absence of feeling but its disciplined non-display. In face-

to-face interaction, such restraint remains legible through gesture and tone; over the telephone, however, these cues disappear. Reticence thus becomes indistinguishable from emptiness. Waugh exploits this collapse of distinction. His characters may feel deeply or not at all, but his formal use of the telephone renders both states formally equivalent. What appears as emotional impoverishment may, in fact, be a failure of legibility within Waugh's representation of telephonic communication. The biographical context must therefore be understood as one layer of a larger formal and social argument, not a self-sufficient explanation. The suppression of feeling in the telephone exchanges functions equally as a structural logic rooted in class, medium, and historical moment, which is why it manifests with such consistency across the novel.

What the printed page cannot capture, but what Waugh's formal choices compel the reader to imagine, is the silence that punctuates these exchanges. In face-to-face interaction, pauses are sustained by gesture, glance, or bodily presence; over the telephone, they are stripped of such supports and become radically indeterminate. A brief gap may signal hesitation, indifference, or disconnection, yet Waugh provides no cues to resolve this uncertainty. The dialogue is presented without narrative gloss or paralinguistic detail, leaving utterances suspended between possible meanings. As Schegloff observes, telephone talk lacks the "continuity of co-presence" (1967, p. 49), a condition Waugh intensifies by refusing any compensatory description. Each pause thus carries the latent possibility of termination. In this way, the telephone in *Vile Bodies* does not simply register emotional distance but, through Waugh's systematic omission, becomes the very means by which such distance is produced.

Waugh's stylistic innovation reaches its fullest expression in Chapter Eleven, composed

almost entirely of telephone dialogues between Adam and Nina. In Waugh's hands, dialogue no longer serves to reveal character but to conceal it, with each utterance reflecting not the speaker's inner state but an anticipation of the interlocutor's response. Furthermore, Waugh creates a structure in which meaning is perpetually deferred, with unresolvable issues circulating through implicit dialogue rather than being settled by authorial resolution. The telephone, seen in this light, becomes the very condition of the novel's dialogic structure, forcing voices into confrontation in a space where the narrator's interpretive authority recedes.

For the fourth time, Adam cruelly dashes Nina's hopes. He has prematurely reignited her marital expectations with his telegram claiming the Major's capture, yet only to disappoint her again:

Adam rang up Nina.

"Darling, I've been so happy about your telegram. Is it really true?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"The Major is bogus?"

"Yes."

"You haven't got any money?"

"No."

"We aren't going to be married today?"

"No."

"I see."

"Well?"

"I said, I see."

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all, Adam.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. Good-bye.” (Waugh, 2000, pp.151–152)

Waugh intentionally skips the initial stages of the conversation and withholds narrative commentary as much as possible. The narrator intervenes only twice in the scene, to orient the reader as to who is calling whom. As Thomas notes, “The characters’ utterances are presented as if unmediated, with only the quotation marks and the sequencing of the contributions to indicate any external influence” (1997, p. 108). The reader thus occupies a position analogous to that of the protagonists, who can only infer intonation from the sparse verbal exchange. Nina’s questions move from the general to the specific and increasingly urgent — from “Is it really true?” to “You haven’t got any money?” to “We aren’t going to be married today?” — revealing through their progression the accumulation of stakes that the conversation refuses to articulate. Adam’s monosyllabic responses perform a passivity that functions as social management: maintaining brevity maintains distance and forestalls confrontation. As Short points out, “the indirectness and ambivalence in conversation can be useful tools to see how much we can get away with while not disturbing the social fabric” (1995, p. 49). Without offering words of comfort or alternatives, Adam reasserts his passivity in front of Nina’s unrelenting queries.

Considering their social status and the sociocultural context, Adam and Nina are upper-middle class, though not the core members of Waugh’s privileged Bright Young People. Under the heavy burden of materialism and the loosening of social bonds, both protagonists are not

accustomed to expressing themselves; instead, they deliberately restrain the flow of emotions to maintain social decency. Bakhtin observes that dialogism means implicit dialogue in which one person's speech-forms reflect consciousness of the actual or potential response of an interlocutor (1984, p. 197). In this exchange, each utterance seems designed not to elicit an answer but to foreclose one. Adam's monosyllabic replies—"I see," "Well"—function as placeholders that resist rather than invite elaboration. His refusal ("I don't believe it") in response to Nina's engagement announcement, which appears in the second exchange below, implies both rage and a sense of betrayal. Thus, while some critics believe that the protagonists are "devoid of emotion", their discursive interaction suggests instead that they actively inhibit intense emotion. Ironically, they display a mutual sensitivity to this inhibition, reaching an unspoken consensus on the propriety of apathy.

The first conversation in Chapter Eleven moves from a seemingly optimistic opening on Nina's side into a deadlock that neither party is able or willing to break. The telephone talk is then followed by Nina announcing her engagement to Ginger, and their utterances are as brief and vague as usual:

Later Nina rang up Adam.

"Darling, is that you? I've got something rather awful to tell you."

"Yes?"

"You'll be furious."

"Well?"

"I'm engaged to be married."

"Who to?"

“I hardly think I can tell you.”

“Who?”

“Adam, you won’t be beastly about it, will you?”

“Who is it?”

“Ginger.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, I am. That’s all there is to it.”

“You’re going to marry Ginger?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“Well?”

“I said, I see.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all, Nina.”

“When shall I see you?”

“I don’t want ever to see you again.”

“I see.”

“Well?”

“I said, I see.”

“Well, good-bye.”

“Good-bye... I’m sorry, Adam.” (Waugh, 2000, p. 151)

In *Vile Bodies*, the voice of the narrator has been purposely suppressed, creating the

impression that the telephone narrative is self-generating and almost mechanical. Although the narrator adopts a detached stance, the dialogical dimension of the novel involves not only the encounter of characters but also invites both author and reader to enter into a dialogical relation within the text. From the readers' perspective, the Bright Young People in the novel seem to take the misfortunes that befall them rather randomly. In Colleta's view, such a result is evidence of "relentless shallowness, which is inevitable in the bogus modern world that eliminates any possibility of true romance or heroic action" (2003, p. 91). All these seemingly affectless responses only intensify their far too impenetrable social disguise.

The invisible narrator's documentary style in introducing the telephone talk also suggests a nonchalant attitude, as if he is impatient with the caprice of their relations. In their telephone talk, Nina still addresses Adam as "Darling", and this inappropriate appellation forms an ethical ambiguity considering the news she is about to declare. Characters use the telephone talk to perform intimacy while remaining emotionally detached. As Lodge argues, "The telephone also lends itself to ironic effects of alienation and loss, poignantly reflecting the inability to express themselves or to forge relationships with others" (1990, p. 80). In Waugh's hands, this irony is not just poignant, it is diagnostic of the formal conditions under which modern intimacy fails. Without blaming or inquiring, Adam barely reveals any sentiment upon hearing that his fiancée is going to marry someone else. Instead, the implicit phrases like "I see", "well" repeatedly appear in the dialogue, causing semantic confusion. As Thomas points out, "Waugh seems to deliberately play on the ambiguity of the utterances to create a conversation which is a curious mix of collaboration and confrontation" (1997, p. 112). After confirming several times that Nina is going to marry Ginger, "I see" turns out to be Adam's

only response. Yet Nina attempts a querying “well”, an illocutionary sign anticipating more information, only for Adam to refute her demand by repeating the same “I see”. The result is a deliberate ambiguity, achieved through the blurring of voices and the withholding of authorial commentary, leaving open-ended possibilities for readers to weigh and reflect upon.

Waugh cultivates a deliberate vagueness between what is said and unsaid, establishing an interpretive space that actively invites the reader to participate. This narrative strategy fosters an ongoing conversation between text and context, one in which Waugh consistently lets the context comment on the speech acts of his characters. This dynamic is epitomized in Nina’s abrupt pivot from her pursuit of Adam to her urgency in marrying Ginger. The stark contrast between these actions is left largely unexplained, and her attempts to prolong conversations scarcely reveal any genuine emotional attachment, thus compelling the reader to actively decipher her motives.

When Adam refuses Nina’s request for assurance of a future appointment, Nina’s reply as “I see”, is an echo of Adam’s early apathy, converting his emotional withdrawal into a shared, hollow ritual. The similar phrases create in the reader a dizzying sense of circular conversation, without leading to any effective conclusion. There is a tendency in the telephone talk toward becoming more detached and meaningless, as if the speakers were engaged in a monologue without expressing any authentic emotion. Given their intimate relationship as lovers, the protagonists seem never to make things clear to each other. This emotional atrophy, delivered through telephone, serves as a microcosm of the unresolvable tensions that define their relationship. The absence of any coherent moral framework in their relationship mirrors the chaos of a barbarous age, one that surrenders to pure chance and material

calculation. Viewed in this light, the telephone's discourse in *Vile Bodies* registers the deeper atrophy of the social bonds that once gave love its shape and meaning.

4. Conclusion

The world that emerges in the pages of *Vile Bodies* is one in which traditional certainties have given way to modern anarchy defined by materialism, contingency, and chaos. The term "Roaring" becomes not celebration but diagnosis. It is the sound of civilization laughing itself to death. Within this disordered world, the Bright Young People drift in a state of perpetual flux, responding to catastrophe with a pervasive emotional blankness articulated through brittle, finely planed conversation. Where this order breaks down, Waugh, a self-proclaimed conservative, subtly articulates his suspicion of modern progress. For all its promises of connection, modernity hastens the erosion of the very foundations, as the family, ritual, and the established morality that once sustained precious human bonds. What Waugh captures in the brittle voices of his Bright Young People is the atrophy of love when it is stripped of ritual, sincerity, and institutional anchorage, left to drift in a world governed by contingency. Yet the novel's diagnosis is never merely lament. It demonstrates that what modernity has broken cannot be mended by sentiment or nostalgia, only by a clear-eyed reckoning with the formal conditions of hollow speech.

This study has argued that the telephone's significance in *Vile Bodies* operates across three interrelated dimensions. As an emblem of fluid modernity, it materializes the rootlessness that makes authentic self-formation and authentic intimacy mutually impossible. As a formal analogue to fortune, it embodies the contingency that supplants agency, exposing individuals to forces they can neither predict nor govern. As a discursive structure that Waugh exploits with

formal precision, it enforces the atrophy of emotional language until the suppression of feeling and the absence of feeling become formally indistinguishable. Across all these three dimensions, the telephone is not only a thematic presence but a formal argument. In a world reorganized around modern communication, the forms through which identity, love, and meaning were previously sustained can no longer be assumed to hold.

Reading *Vile Bodies* through telephone reveals that Waugh's formal conservatism exceeds the simplicity of the satirist label. His choice to route the most consequential transactions of intimate life through a medium defined by brevity, disconnection, and the ever-present possibility of termination, is not a gesture of retreat from the modern world but an act of formal diagnosis. The telephone does not merely reflect the conditions Waugh deplores; as Waugh writes it, it enacts them. This makes *Vile Bodies* an early and distinctively literary instance of what later theorists of media and communication would formalize. The insight, articulated in different registers by Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams, that communications technologies do not simply convey meanings but reshape the very conditions under which meaning, identity, and relationship are possible. Waugh arrives at this insight not through theory but through the discipline of novelistic form, through the precise management of dialogue, silence, and narrative omission. It is this formal achievement that distinguishes *Vile Bodies* from the social satires with which it is most often grouped. Whether the hollow voices of the telephone represent a permanent condition or a crisis whose resolution Waugh would seek across his later career — through his Catholic conversion, through *A Handful of Dust*, through the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, is a question that *Vile Bodies* poses with undiminished force. Future work might profitably examine how the formal strategies

developed here are transformed in the later fiction, and whether the telephone's diagnostic function is eventually displaced by other media and other modes of atrophy as Waugh's career, and the century, develop.

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