

Greene's Hero: The Loss of the Religious Sense

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Abstract – In an essay Greene has lamented the loss of the religious sense in the English novel. “It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension,” he wrote. Greene is the leading exponent in English of the existentialist – psychological fiction which dominated European literature during the forties and afterwards. When Greene began his writing career, the period was marked by squalor, depression in moral, spiritual and religious values resulting from the First World War. The period can be well depicted in W.B. Yeats’s words when he sings sadly: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold/mere anarchy is loosened upon the world.” This disillusionment of the age resulted in a marked decline of the spiritual element, anxiety, apathy and agnosticism. Greene depicts in his works his modern mood of anxiety and boredom and man’s isolation in an alien universe. He protests against moral and spiritual degradation of man in our age. He repeatedly calls attention to the curious ‘malaise’ of modern man of considering the Church as old fashioned and out of date.

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INTRODUCTION

Like T.S. Eliot in ‘The Wasteland, he emphasizes the seediness, sterility and despair of modern man. He is full of indignation at the “advanced-societies” in which “men find it difficult not only to live up to their ideals but to have ideals at all.” The world created by Greene is consistently seedy, sordid violent and cruel. These qualities describe not an actual environment but an image of a spiritual condition, a world abandoned by God. Perhaps the best expression of this sense of the world occurs in the passage from Newman, which stands as an epigraph to The Lawless Roads. In it Newman describes the fearful, suffering condition of man and concludes:

What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer that either there is no creator or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from his presence. If there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.ⁱ

We might say that in Greene’s novels that calamity goes on, and that this is a continuing proof that men have been discarded from God’s sight. He shows awareness of “sickness into death” caused by the complexities of modern life. In this period man seems to have lost his way in the dark, and he does not find anything to cling to spirituality, faith, courage, fortitude, honesty and goodwill all are gone. Modern man has lost his subjectivity, and he is like a blind man in the dark world, in quest for his own identity. Greene himself suffered from boredom and anxiety in his teen

age and came to terms with his life by his own efforts, and his hero too is angst-ridden because he feels himself incapable of being at one with his deeper self, his identity is lost. He is one of those “men and women who lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so to transcend themselves, if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul.”ⁱⁱ

Like Greene himself, his heroes, like Scobie, Andrews and Pinkie seem to be sick with the disease of modern civilization and are in search of the meaning of life and in quest for their own identity in this meaningless life. All the heroes of Greene are hostile and believe that prosperity is not the only thing that satisfies and pleases a man. Sometimes a man, like Scobie and the Whisky-Priest is intensely, even passionately attracted towards suffering. They believe that suffering is as good for them as prosperity. All his heroes approve that man will be “happier with the enormous supernatural promise than with the petty social fulfillment, the tiny pension and machine-made furniture.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Priest and Scobie, both believe in man’s spiritual satisfaction through pain and suffering. Scobie appears to be a mouthpiece to all Greene’s heroes when he says that to be a human being one must, “drink the cup of suffering” (HM: 118). Bored and dissatisfied with the materialistic world, Greene’s heroes try to find solace in religion to avoid the feeling of despair and disgust but, there too they do not find any kind of satisfaction and remain restless all the time. They always feel spiritual emptiness and are tortured by the haunting sense in their minds. So Greene’s heroes do not

believe in the rules of the Church and Christianity but at the same time they think that by flouting the rules laid by Christianity, they are doing wrong and feel a kind of spiritual agony. They always live in a state of confusion and conflict, the conflict between 'Good' and 'evil' between 'faith' and 'God' and, therefore, are unable to find any absolute solution of the problem except committing suicide.

Thus we see that Greene's heroes, The Priest and Scobie attain spirituality without following the conventional rules of the Church. To all of them faith comes "shapelessly, without violence, cruelty, evil across the way."^{iv} One begins to believe in Heaven because one believes in Hell; for a while it is only Hell one can picture with a certain intimacy. Greene depicts hell with all-inclusiveness as Laurence Lerner puts it, "He depicts the world as Hell, since that is the first argument to faith: if there is hell, must there not be Heaven."^v Saints and damned persons, in Greene's case, betray disconcerting resemblance because to Greene.

The greatest saints are the people with more than a normal capacity for evil and the most vicious people only escaped sanctity with the greatest difficulty.^{vi}

Here we can say that this view of Green places him in the company of Christian existentialists like Marcel. His heroes are always in quest for their identity which is dominated by the actual experience and not by the accepted dogmas. Greene himself was in search of faith throughout his life and was a convert to Roman Catholicism. In his earlier life, he suffered from boredom and lack of purpose as we come to know from his autobiography *A Sort of Life*. That is why the efforts to know his true self and to gain faith are obviously reflected in his works. In all his novels, as we see, there is a long journey undertaken by the heroes to understand one's true self and find their real identity. And in the course of this journey, they have to face the conventional norms of society, but they revolt against all these accepted dogmas because these social, cultural and religious conditions are responsible for their despair and frustration. His characters reveal themselves not as good and devout believers, but as human beings, capable of falling prey to temptation but also having a desire to repent for their wrong deeds. Greene combines the traits of a liberal theologian and a humanist along with a psychoanalyst.

As a creative writer, he imparts to his work what R.W.B. Lewis calls, "a solid sense of this earthly life".^{vii} In his novels the human world appears in all its diversity which is full of crime, lust and unhappy love. Scobie and Whisky-Priest are both sinners. Yet Green does not forget the divine injunctions. His heroes get purified their soul by suffering and pain. And in this process, these characters show such instances of humanity that their lives are purified through the single human action. To illustrate the mercy of God, Greene relates the story of Charles Peguy, who could not bear

to see anyone demand and therefore, violated the laws of the Church. Scobie is one such hero who forsakes all norms because he cannot see anyone unhappy due to himself or for some other reason. He is nearest to Greene's heart, because he loves men as they are:

Anyone can love a pose or a pretty dress. To love, knowing the worst, is to make your love a shadow of that perfect act of love, the love of christ for mankind.^{viii}

According to Greene, religion is something that makes us to love and understand others and to show humanity to all human-beings. He believes that if there is hell there must be Heaven too. To him, religion is not just a set of values nor does one become a believer by adhering to them. Religion or faith is the inner-discriminate between good and bad. In *The Power and The Glory*, "The hero is less than bad; he is weak."^{ix} It is the Priest's belief in God and the Church which controls his life. He is weak in the flesh, a "Whisky-Priest" with a daughter. He is deeply afraid of pain. He is "aware of his own desperate inadequacy." But, as the only surviving priest not to come to terms with the secular power, he knows he can still give God to the people and absolve their sins. Although he is very different from martyrs whom we meet in edifying religious stories, he is yet one who inhesitatingly goes into the trap which must lead to his death, because he cannot refuse a dying man's confession and absolution. As with Pinkie, there is something of anonymity about him and Greene's concern is an much with his faith as with the man himself.

Whisky-Priest is an angst-ridden character, and the main cause of his anxiety is the feeling that he has fallen far short of the glory of Good. He fears that he can do nothing to redeem himself from the present state. In his present condition, that of an outcast and a sinner, the Priest is a parody contrast between what he was before and his present state. He is shaken by the sense of his own inadequacy and worthlessness to carry on the duty and the mission he has taken upon himself. In his early life Whisky – Priest was living on the aesthetic level of existence. He was just a vain formalistic priest. His hypocrisy selfishness, pride and lack of love shut out from him the understanding of both God and man. He was just "a play actor." In the savage scrutiny of his own being he knew that he was "proud, lustful, envious, cowardly and ungrateful," (PG: 95). He himself ate "good meals in comfortable quarters and slaked his own thirst rather than that of the lost souls."^x He never experienced a sense of companionship with the pious people who "Came kissing his black cotton glove." (PG: 128).

He reminds us of Conrad's Jim "whose only reward is in the perfect love of work."^{xi} During the perilous journey, he gains a better understanding of himself

and life. In the state of corruption, he learns to love the poor and unhappy and identifies himself with the common man – sinners and criminals. In the wretched prison cell has a feeling of communion with his fellow prisoners. He feels that he is just “one criminal among a herd of criminals” (PG: 128). He becomes aware that the world is like a prison, “overcrowded with lust and crime and unhappy love” (PG: 128). Through adultery he finds in himself a capacity for love. For the safety of his daughter, Brigitta, he prays to God: “Oh God, give me any kind of death without conditions, in a state of sin..... only save this child” (PG: 82). Before death, the Priest liberates himself from the haunting fear despair, and realizes the true meaning of love. When he is safe across the border in the neighbouring state, he is moved by a sense of duty. He is a priest and there is nothing he can do except go on. The English girl, Coral, who gives him shelter, asks him why he does not renounce his faith and he replies: “It’s impossible. There is no way. I’m a priest. It’s out of my power.” Again he is about to escape when he is called to the death-bed of an American gangster. He knows that it is an trick, that he will be betrayed by the half-caste who has followed him, waiting for such an occasion. The irony is that the gangster refuses to make his confession: his last thought before he dies is for the priest’s safety. But he is captured and afterwards shot.

As Greene wrote of his actual counter-part in *The Lawless Roads*: “He was little losing, poor man, but who can judge what terror and hardship and isolation have excused him in the eyes of God?”^{xii} The Priest dies in a state of mortal sin, but he does not fear of damnation. He feels only an immense disappointment that he is going to God “empty-handed, with nothing done at all” (PG: 210). Thus he realizes the meaning of God and love, and proceeds towards the supreme level of existence in fear and pain, and embraces his ultimately victory in death and thus ends his quest for his identity.

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