

A Description of Greene's Search for Faith

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Abstract – Like many of Greene's characters, Greene lived in a state of psychological and emotional extremity. He was forever marked by an experience of psychoanalysis as a teenager and contemplated suicide as a young man. Haunted by a sense of sin and a constant anxiety, Greene's nearly incessant world travel. Like the author himself, the characters often took to make deals with God that will leave them free to pursue their own passion. We find that in each of his novel, corruption is the path to salvation or at least to recovery to the soul. Characters become involved with the dirt and sweat of existence and in doing so find that it can be made holy. The hard drinking, adulterous priest in *The Power and The Glory* is a prime example of this sinner-who-might-be-a-saint: He is neither noble nor particularly faithful, but in administering the sacraments at the risk of his own life, he becomes a flawed instrument of divine grace.

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INTRODUCTION

As a writer Graham Greene is closer in spirit to the Frenchman Mauriac and Bernanos than to his predominantly agnostic English contemporaries. In one of his essays on the French novelist Francois Maruiac, he complains that recent British fiction has neglected man's tie with God and religious sense is lost. But praising Maruiac, Greene says that "his first importance to the English reader is that he belongs to the company of great traditional novelists: he is a writer for whom the visible world has not ceased to exist, whose characters have the solicity and importance of man with soul to save or lose."ⁱ

These words can be applied to Greene as well, because all his protagonists are "men with souls to save or lose."ⁱⁱ If we closely see we find that Greene often chooses to portray the weak, the defeated, and the failures. They all are sinners in the worldly sense, but perhaps through their very weakness and sense of failure, they reveal especial love for God which makes them the heroes of Greene's novels. Greene told Toynbee in an interview, "To tell the truth, I find it very difficult to believe in sin....."ⁱⁱⁱ I write novels about what interests me and I can't write about anything else. And one of the things that interest me most is discovering the humanity in the apparently in human character."^{iv} It is clear that throughout their life, Greene's heroes are engaged in one kind of crime or the other. They become the victim of their own obsessions as well as of the world and ultimately are driven to suicide for the search of solace and peace in the next world. In *The Heart of the Matter* Scobie is detected by Wilson and finally he is made to

feel guilty of his neglect of his duty and this becomes one of the causes of Scobie's doing suicide. Side by side Scobie is also haunted by his own conscience for the breach of his duty and disloyalty to his wife. In the same way in *The Power and The Glory* Whisky Priest is pursued by the Lieutenant and by his own consciousness of his sins as well. Francis Wyndham describes the predicament of Greene hero well when he opines:

It is symbolized the pursuit of man's soul, his inner self by God; he was hunted down in his search for peace that often was found only in death. Later.....God was the pursuer from whom there could be no escape, even when despair dictated a way out that looked from the Catholic point of view, like damnation. Caught between pain and pain, tormented by pity, afraid of damnation Greene's characters are often the victims of their own forgettable love for God.^v

No doubt that all the vices and crimes committed by Greene's heroes are invariably thrust upon them by external forces because in such circumstances the Greene hero tries to live up to his ideas. Thus Greene's interest is in Scobie of *The Heart of the Matter*, the Whisky Priest of *The Power and The Glory* to lay bare the innermost recesses of the so-called sinners. Green has deep sympathy for the exiled or outcasts of our conventional society. Almost all of his heroes are rebels against the social norms. He has never portrayed the sinless person.

While paying a tribute to Walter de La Mare, Greene writes: "Every creative writer worth our consideration..... is a victim: a man given over to

an obsession.”^{vi} And Greene's works, especially his trilogy, show his own obsession that is religious obsession. Greene strongly felt the loss of what he called a religious sensibility in the modern novel, the notion that powers of good and evil do exist and are at war in the world and in the human soul. While he was in many ways a deeply flawed individual, Greene did leave us this particular gift: He restored a measure of that lost sensibility through characters whose struggle between flesh and spirit is, in the end, so much like our own. For him the ideas of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are much more important than the ideas of ‘niceness’ and ‘decency’ or even ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. He has presented this very view through the actions of his characters. Greene's fiction is built on the juxtaposition of despair and belief, evil and faith. Revolt against evil seems to be the central thread in his humanist make-up and this quality is imparted by him to his heroes as well. For Greene's characters ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ is a matter of social decorum, or of some traditional code accepted without thinking. Greene himself was obsessed with evil right from his early childhood. His reading to Maorie Bown's *The Viper of Milan* during his adolescence supplied him “once and for all with a subject, because he realized that evil was more real than goodness.”^{vii} Greene believes that goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find house there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey.”^{viii} Hence Greene's heroes bear an ample testimony of this black and grey” concept. All Greene's Catholic protagonists are sinners.

Greene has never tried to portray his protagonists in terms of absolute goodness. The imperfect human material found in the shape of his sinner heroes has always been his major concern. But he does so to highlight that “the apparent Villain is in fact human, and deserves more compassion than the apparent hero.”^{ix} He accepts in an interview with Toynbee that “One of the things that interests me most is discovering the humanity in the apparently in human character.”^x And his inner heroes do carry this humanity in their character. Sin is intoxicatingly omnipresent for Greene's character. Even in infancy, they exhale the scent of sin and corruption. For Pinkie “hell lay about him in his infancy”^{xi} (BR: 69). All his heroes commit sin of one kind or another. Major Scobie (*The Heart of the Matter*) commits adultery. The Whiskey Priest (*The Power and The Glory*) commits fornication and Pinkie, and Rose commits suicide. No doubt that all the heroes of Greene are damned forever but Greene never portrays man as so mired in sin as to be beyond the power of redemption – chances of forgiveness from God are always there. They know it very well that they are criminals in the eyes of orthodox society as well as in the eyes of Church but they do not afraid of being damned. They are always in conflict – the conflict between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. There is always a “conflict not only between this world and the next world but between

sanctity and goodness also.”^{xii} In the eyes of orthodox people the sins which Greene's hero commit lead them to damnation. For example, Father Clay thinks in *Heart of the Matter* that suicide deprives is damned forever. Similarly the pious woman, whom the Whiskey Priest meets in prison, condemns him for what he is, The Whiskey Priest himself realizes that he is on the brink of damnation after indulging in the worst ever sins. On the other hand, there are liberal priests who hold out hope for sinners. No man's sins they think is so great that it may drag him in to hell.

In *The Living Room* Father Brown says that, “It was the biggest sinners who had the biggest sinners who had the biggest trust in mercy.”^{xiii} He further says, “I do not know anyone who is great enough for hell except Satan.”^{xiv} But it doesn't mean that Greene's heroes glorify sin. Kenneth Tynan moots the idea that, “sin holds within it the seeds of virtue”.^{xv} Herbert Haber also holds the same view when he says about Whiskey-Priest that he, “finds the path to the good, death, to martyrdom and sainthood, through an immersion into the petecostal flame of earthly sin.”^{xvi} Haber illustrates this point by adding in the same place that, “Through adultery Whiskey Priest finds in himself the capacity for love and through drunkenness he becomes humble to the course. It grapples with the sense of faith in the character. The on-going tension between the inherent sense of him on the one hand and faith on the other hand give rise to moral confusion point of ungratutitous self-effacement.”^{xvii} This doesn't suggest that there is a cause and effect relationship between sin and salvation. But it has been said that it is better to sin seventy times and repent each time than to sin once and never repent.

In fact, it is this realization of sin that brings man nearer to God. Since this realization leads to suffering which purifies man, each of the sinner characters of Greene realize their sins and hope against hope for redemption, Francis L. Kunkel opins: “Greene does not glorify sin, he glorify humility..... are close to despair but who somehow keep the faith.”^{xviii} One important feature of Greene's heroes who are sinners with germs of sainthood in them is that they have full faith in the mercy of God. Whiskey-Priest's faith in God remains unshaken till the end of the novel. When the Lieutenant asks him after arresting him if he believes in miracles, he replies; “It is not a case of miracle not happening – it is just a case of people calling them something else” (PG: 201). This shows Priest's deep faith in the mercy of God and it is his faith in God that perfects him in charity. In the same way Scobie has faith in God and his death shows his unshaken faith in the mercy of God. We find that on account of their faith in God, Greene's heroes suffer and it is their sufferings – sufferings not for their own sake but for other – that purifies their minds. Rose accepts damnation for herself only in the hope of improving and saving Pinkie. But it is her very pity involved in saving Pinkie that shows a ray of hope for her. Similarly, Whiskey-

Priest and Scobie suffer for others and they are very near becoming saints. Greene sympathizes not with the sin but with the sinners. That is the reason why green has deep sympathy for his heroes. Green highlights the weakness of man and the powers of God. If we take Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress as a prototype of Christian quest – the quest of the good man of virtue, for heavenly city of God – then Greene has indeed changed the procedure. Here, in Greene's works, the quest is undertaken by a sinner who stumbles along the way to the Heavenly city, almost forsaking God and embracing the devil in his crude inability to fulfill by himself what God requires to do. But inspite of his attraction towards the devilish ways to success Greene's hero recognizes his inherent sinfulness and seeks redemption and this very quality of Greene hero makes him one of its kinds. We see, in *The Power and The Glory* Whisky-Priest is deeply rooted in sins and in the end of the novel he achieves sainthood while committing the deadly sins of Christianity.

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