

The Sinner-Saint Syndrome in Graham Greene's Novels

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Graham Greene (1904-1991) emerged on the literary scene of England in the thirties with the publication of his first novel entitled *The Man Within* (1929), a historical romance, written perhaps under the influence of R.L.Stevenson, John Buchan and Marjorie Bowen, the little-known writer of *The Viper Milan*. He kept on writing for six decades thereafter, and in the process authored a large number of novels and 'entertainment', short stories, plays, travelogues, memories and general as well as critical essays. Greene was indeed a prolific writer, and perhaps he still continues to be Britain's 'main literary export' to the rest of the English-speaking world. It is really amazing that at a time when a considerable number of writers and other intellectuals of the West were learning towards Marxism on account of the Russian revolution of 1917, Greece embraced Roman Catholicism in 1926 at the age of twenty two. Nevertheless, he is a rebel Christian, and in this connection says: 'I am a Catholic with an intellectual, if not an emotional belief in Catholic dogma'. He speaks a good deal about sin and salvation, damnation and redemption in his fictional works; he does not paint his characters in mere black or white, for he is of the view that a saint may be an ex-sinner or that a sinner may be a saint in making.

Green's novels are so complex, and there is so much of ambiguity in them, that they may be viewed from several angles. In the first place, they may be considered in terms of the theme of pursuit in them, for in the world of his novels, a world contingent upon crime and violence, treachery and betrayal, sin and damnation, pursuit, whether physical, existential, or metaphysical, dose play a significant role. Secondly, they may be interpreted in view of the theme of lost childhood or innocence in theme, for a majority of green's major characters suffer, either physically or psychologically, during their childhood, lose their innocence, and go adrift in life. Thirdly, these novels may be considered from the existentialism point of view, for Greene is a votary of an individual's uniqueness or singularity, and believes ardently in the independence of human mind and man's freedom of choice. Imagery forms the very matrix of Greene's prose style, and this is so because, on his own admission, Greene was greatly influenced by the Seventeenth-century English Metaphysical poets. And lastly, Greene's novels may be discussed in the light of sinner-saint syndrome for, in a way, they are little theatres of the absurd, where the difference between good and evil, a saint and a sinner, between the hero and the villain, the tragic and the comic gets nearly obliterated. The present paper offers an interpretation of Greene's five major novels in the context of this sinner-saint syndrome.

II

The protagonist in *Brighton Rock* (1938), Patrick Brown, is seventeen -year old boy, and throughout the novel he is called only the Boy. However, it is this very boy who is a hardened criminal, a ruthless murderer, the leader of a gang, who kills Fred Hale and Spider, who tries to get his girlfriend and wife , Rose, eliminated to prevent her from deposing against him, and to whom 'the word "murder" conveyed no more...than the word "box", "collar", "giraffe".⁷ Pinkie is a picture of 'hideous and unnatural pride'(p.7), of 'infernal pride' (p.187), of 'hatred' (p.8) and 'vicious anger' (p.26); he is a ;cruel child' (p.120), ' a young dictator' (p. 110), a "hunter" (p.8), a boy without parents or any guardians, a boy with a 'face of starved intensity'(p.7), untamed, brutish

uncontrollable. He has no “sense of humor” (p.55), and it is very seldom that he smiles. He is a diabolical sinner, and the very image of evil. And as the police, led by Ida Arnold, close in on him, in order to escape arrest and punishment he takes vitriol and kills himself.

Nevertheless, there are certain qualities in him, which project his character differently. Pinkie Brown is an unusual kind of boy, ambitious, so very sure and confident of himself, a boy who has no taste for drinks, who does not smoke, who is ‘not used to lying’ (p.116), who has a horror of sex and marriage, and who, being a Roman Catholic, is painfully conscious of the flames of Hell and believes in Mercy, in the efficacy of remorse and contrition. Music moves him deeply. At one point in the short span of his life he desired to be a “priest” (p.166), and, as the novelist puts it, he might have ended up as a “saint” (p.249). This prospective saint-turned-sinner is a case in point. Pinkie, says the novelist, ‘trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy’ (p.69). He could have been a saintly kind of person, at least not as dangerous or sinful as he turns out to be, but he becomes a sinner chiefly because of his ‘dreary and dingy past’ (p.142), his shattering experience as a child and his lost innocence.

Brighton Rock may be repetitive in its ideas, but, As Raymond Williams comments, Brighton should be viewed as ‘a highly personalized landscape, to clarify an individual portrait, rather than a country within which the individuals are actually contained’.

III

The Power and the Glory (1940) has to be read along with *The Lawless Roads* (1939), for in respect of situation, theme, setting and characters the two books are similar to each other. Greene visited the southern Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas where religion had been banned, churches closed, and the priests had surrendered to the government, been killed, or managed to escape there from. And yet, in spite of all antagonism to religion and fierce persecution of the clergy, this land continues to remain a land of faith. This is exactly what, with necessary modifications, do we find in *The Power and the Glory*. Understandably enough, the two principal characters in this novel are the priest and the lieutenant, both being equally important in their own ways.

In *The power and the Glory* the anonymous priest is relentlessly pursued by the lieutenant, a police officer of exemplary determination. The priest could have escaped to a place of safety on two occasions, but he does not do so; instead, on the third occasion, he attends to his clerical duties, putting his life at stake, for he does not want to betray the trust of the hapless masses. In the course of his clandestine wanderings, he encounters the lieutenant three times. On the first two occasions he goes unrecognized, but on the third occasion he is trapped and captured as priest and eventually put to death. The priest is as much committed to his vocation as the lieutenant is to his, and the love-hate relationship between the two is indeed a remarkable phenomenon. If the priest stands, as he should, for religion or spiritualism, then the lieutenant represents the powers of the state, and, in the present case, secularism and materialism. However, even though they are directly opposed to each other in their attitudes and operations, in a certain way and on a certain level they have their admiration for each other; at least, the lieutenant does have for the priest. This priest, this ‘bad priest’, this ‘whisky priest’ (p.60), father of an illegitimate child, all shabby, rather proud of being the lone priest in the forbidden zone, and not at all priest-like, may perhaps be a sinner and a saint at one and at the same time, a martyr to a cause, but also a law-breaker, a fugitive, and a proclaimed offender.

The Power and the Glory is a novel better than *Brighton Rock* in respect of form, for in this book, perhaps for the first time, Greene succeeds ‘completely in relating his characters and story to form a coherent, taut whole’. What is perhaps still more significant is the fact that in spite of its

religious ambience what we find in this novel is the evocation of a particular kind of atmosphere, an atmosphere of corruption, decay, abandonment and destruction through the use of such images as those of vultures, splintering fingernails, sharks, rubbish heaps, empty canisters, broken bottles, merciless sky and fossils, which are so very typical of the seediness of Greenland.

IV

The Heart of the Matter (1948) is much different from *The Power and the Glory*, for it is one of the most traditional of Graham Greene's novels, and yet it is, in its own way, an explication of the sinner-saint syndrome. This novel, says R.W.B. Lewis 'is the most traditional of Greene's novels in both content and construction. As such, it is obviously less representative than *The Power and the Glory*; as such, it has a special appeal for those who mean by the word novel the kind of work that was typical in the nineteenth century. The very title of Lewis' book, *The Picaresque Saint*, is highly meaningful and suggestive. The protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter*, Henry Scobie, is the deputy Commissioner of police in the British colony on the West African coast. He is an admirable person, responsible, honest and just, so much so that the commissioner of police, his immediate senior, calls him, even if jocularly, "Scobie, the Just". It is really unfortunate that he is denied promotion to commissionership for no fault of his own. Any other person, placed in a similar situation, would naturally have become utterly indifferent to his or her official duties and social obligations. Henry Scobie, however, is made of different stuff, for, in spite of all humiliations, he preserves his mental cool and generous spirit. He feels extremely sorry for the child who dies in a boat mishap, for he is reminded of his own dead child, but is happy to have rescued Helen, a young girl, who faces imminent death because of her agonizing poor state of health. He takes adequate care of her, accommodates her in one of the abandoned Nissen huts, provides her with food, clothing, medicine and, of course, shelter, and visits her frequently for this very reason. It is for the sake of Helen that he has to take money from one local Syrian merchant named Ali, a smuggler, racketeer and murderer, a ruthless person, at the cost of his avowed honesty and integrity. It is utterly unfortunate that people misunderstand him, that Edmund Wilson spies on him, and that his wife, Louise Scobie suspects him of adulterous relationship with Helen. He himself knows, though, that he has been doing all that he does out of sheer love, compassion and generosity. Nevertheless, he is sorely conscious of his involvement in crime after crime, though with good intentions. It is in such a grim and unredeemably desperate situation that Henry Scobie, a Roman Catholic and a saintly person, commits the horrible sin of suicide.

Louise Scobie wonders if Henry was "a bad Catholic" (p.271), but a clergyman, Father Rank, summarily dismisses the imagined charge as "the silliest phrase in common use" (p.271). he goes on to say: "The church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know that what goes on in a single human heart" (p.272). He further states: "it may seem an odd thing to say—when a man's as wrong as he was—but I think from what I saw of him, that he really loved God" (p.272). clearly enough, here is a character named Henry Scobie who goes on committing wrongs, and yet who is a devout Christian, a man charged with a genuine feeling of love and compassion.

V

The End of the Affair (1951) has generated a lot of controversy and the views expressed on this book have been sharply opposed to one another. If on the hand, as David PырceJones says, 'the plot of *The End of the Affair* is something more subtle and shifting than the great swathe cut across human life by *The Heart of the Matter*', on the other Francis Wyndham observes that after *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair* reads like a disappointing postscript'. The story of this novel, narrated in first person deals with the adultery and sanctification of Sarah Miles as also

with the miracles associated with her. It is indeed amazing that for one reason or the other Maurice Beatrix, Sarah's lover, is prevented from seducing a girl on the day of Sarah's funeral, that Parkis' son is cured of a dangerous fever on receiving a book Sarah owned during her childhood, or that the rationalist Smythe loses the ugly strawberry mark on his cheek where Sarah kisses him. That is why Francis Wyndham comments:

Despite the brilliance of the diary, The End of the Affair is an artistic failure. The first person technique makes for a lack of detachment that prevents the reader from ever seeing the story in perspective. At times it is embarrassingly personal. The time sequences, moving from past to present, are unnecessarily hard to follow. The miracles, even if they are perfectly logical in the terms of Greene's faith, fail to be an organic part of the book and simply strike a false note, as though they have been tacked on.¹⁵

And R.W.B. Louis states that *The End of the Affair* is 'a piece of unwillingly and skeptically reported hagiography'. However, David Pyrce—Jones, expressing a striking opposed view, says that the story of this novel is 'told in the alternative tenses of the past and the present with a long interlude of forty pages of Sarah's diary, a dramatic device that enables Greene to give her account of the affair'.¹⁷

Sarah Miles is unfaithful to her bureaucrat—husband, Henry Miles; she is plainly and obviously a sinner, and yet it is because of her faith, her determination to keep herself away from Maurice Bendrix to which she assiduously sticks, and the miracles associated with her that she is virtually presented as a saint, as a sinner-saint. Curiously enough, it is revealed from Sarah's diary that her mother had got her baptized a Catholic during her childhood. It then appears that in spite of her being a sinner, 'a bitch and a fake', Sarah has essentially been a catholic, a woman of ardent faith. In her diary Sarah mentions one particular detail of her life while she was a student, and in this regard says:

When I was at school I learnt about a king—one of Henry's the one who had Becket murdered—and he swore when he saw his birthplace burnt by his enemies that because God had done that to him, 'because you have robbed me of the town I love the most, the place where I was born and bred, I will rob You of that which you love the most in me (p.98)

Sarah quarrels with God, and yet had faith in him; she hates God, and yet loves him, and all this is possible because, in essence and spirit, she is a believer.

Sarah's case is not at all one of lost childhood; in fact, her case is one of gained childhood, gained even if by proxy; it is beyond questioning that her religious leap could be possible because of the acknowledged or unacknowledged influence of her childhood on her. *The End of the Affair* takes us to war-time London, but notwithstanding the 'detective' element in the book, Bendrix's unhappiness and Sarah's remorse, the theme of this novel is 'quite simply, grace'.

VI

A Burnt-Out Case, published ten years later in 1961, takes us to Africa, precisely speaking, to a leproserie in the Belgian Congo, where Dr. Colin, an atheist, is the resident physician and Father Thomas, an insensitive and self-seeking priest, the attending clergy. The protagonist of this novel, Quarry, a world-renowned Catholic architect, gets so much of success in life and pleasure from women that after a certain point he withdraws himself from the glamour and sophistication of modern cities and in a mood of utter disenchantment and indifference goes to the far-off Belgian Congo to reside in the leproserie there. His mental and emotional state is very well suggested by the title of the novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*, as also by the motto which has been borrowed from

Dante: 'I did not die, yet nothing of life remained'. Query's psychic state is similar to a leper's physical condition after he has been cured of the disease but remains mutilated, a condition in which he does not really know what he suffers from, a condition in which he does not have any idea of what suffering or pity is like. Query says: "I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to an end of all that too".²⁰ Moreover, the parody of Descartes, "I feel discomfort, therefore I am alive" (p.9), appearing on the very first page of the book, is also extremely relevant in this context.

However, slowly but steadily Query moves towards his spiritual rehabilitation: he shows his anxiety for his leper-boy, Deo Gratias, when he does not get back from the jungle and when he responds agreeably to Dr. Colin's proposal to prepare the design of a new hospital for the lepers there. His recovery appears well in sight, but his initiatives are thwarted by such characters in the novel as Father Thomas and Andre Rycker, manager of a palm-oil factory situated nearby. However, it is Montague Parkinson, a journalist, who hails him as "An Architect of Souls" (p.138). It is indeed grimly ironic that on being framed by Marie-Rycker in a false case that it is Query who is the father of the child in her womb, her husband shoots him dead.

Query may or may not be a saint; he may or may not be a part of 'the Christian myth' (p.128); his initial lack of belief may or may not be a reflection of his faith, and his dying words, "this is absurd or else..." (p.205) may or may not be a philosophically or psychologically intelligible to us: nevertheless, two things are very clear with regard to his case. The first thing is that after enjoying great success and pleasure in life he becomes indifferent to the world, human society, and thus sinks into a state of sinfulness. Explaining the nature of indifference in his essay on Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot says:

*So far as we are human, what we must do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human, and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation.*²¹

It is because of his indifference that Query, in a way, is a damned person, and may be looked upon as a sinful man, a sinner. And the second thing is that subsequently it is through his involvement with people, through "the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering" (p.128) that he tries and hopes to rehabilitate and save himself, to attain salvation and possibly be a saint.

Query's is rather a strange case, for, in direct or accepted terms, he is neither a sinner nor a saint, for while on the one hand his indifference forces him to languish in a morbid state of inaction which indeed is a form of self-denial and sin, on the other his desire to prepare the design of a new hospital building for the lepers and his love and concern for the leper-boy, Deo Gratias, reflect his renewed interest in and zest for life. His perception of human suffering and his compassion for the ailing and despised section of humanity do earn him the distinction of being a saint. It is, in fact, a tribute to Query's sainthood that the journalist in the present novel, Montague Parkinson, calls him "An Architect of souls" and "The Hermit of the Congo" (p.138).

Commenting on *A Burnt-Out Case*, Graham Greene himself says that this novel is 'an attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief, and non-belief, in the kind of setting, removed from world politics, and household preoccupations, where such differences are felt acutely' (p.5) and that this Congo is 'is a region of the mind' (p.5).

It is very often that noble and virtuous individual, either because of personal compulsions or on account of circumstantial pressures has to get involved in crime and violence, and have to

commit sins in all their possible forms. However, the reverse is also equally true, for we know the story of Valmiki, earlier a highwayman and murderer, transforming himself into a sage and writing the *Ramayana*. Graham Greene's characters, his sinner-saints, in these five novels are different from our Indian mythological figures because of the difference between the East and the West in respect of Ethos, perspective and outlook.

These five novels are usually called the Catholic novels, first because the protagonists in them are Catholics, secondly because through them what Graham Greene seeks to do is to reinterpret the concepts of hell and heaven, sin and virtue, damnation and salvation in the context of changed and changing times, and not in any theological or doctrinal sense, and lastly because the sinner-saint syndrome in these novels is an element that has been injected into them to impart a human and humane face to Christianity.

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