

# SAINTLY SINNERS: A REVIEW OF GRAHAM GREENE'S PROTAGONISTS

G.CHANDRAMOHAN

---

Among the English novelists of the twentieth century, Graham Greene occupies a prominent place. His earlier works were meant to be regarded as light matter rather than serious fiction with a definite moral purpose. He himself has distinguished between his 'novels' and 'entertainment'. The 'entertainment' are crime stories and the 'novels' something more than that. It can be said that his novels are 'catholic' and entertainments are 'lay' though Greene himself has not made any such suggestion. But even in the earlier works, the echoes of the great themes that he explored in his later can be traced.

Greene is extremely good at conveying 'an atmosphere of unromantic corruption' and one cannot miss the 'distinct vision of life' in his novels. Being a convinced catholic, Greene is concerned with moral problems. In his novels that action in his world (Greenland) takes place with a consciousness of the other. His novels, it could be said with certainty, deal with the 'Operation of the Grace of God'. Though Greene was born a non-catholic, he became a devout catholic (he has said that his was an intellectual conviction and not an emotional one). Most of his themes are influenced by his faith. His conversion was the turning point in his and career. His principal themes may be summarized as follows:

- (i) Man is basically a fallen creature and carries with him the stain of sin.
- (ii) Since the world is full of sin and corruption it is possible that an innocent man could be tempted into the life of sin.
- (iii) Even though men are sinful, they can be saved if they ask for divine mercy (because in Roman Catholic faith men can be saved only when they pay for their sins – through death or through repentance).

Summing up we can say that man has the makings of the saint and the sinner alike, and that it is his return to God that can bring him to the path of virtue. The fundamental characteristics of Greene's view of the world are sin and unhappiness. The most important fact about his world is that God has deserted it and since this sense is very strong in Greene's novels, we can say that he is a religious novelist in the broad sense of the term.

The three novels published between 1938 and 1948 (Brighton Rock, The Power and The Glory and The Heart of the Matter) are sometimes taken together as a 'trilogy'.

Brighton Rock marks the beginning of Greene's 'Serious novels'. Published in 1938, it is the story of the world of race gangs and deals with the question of sin, Damnation and Salvation. A depth of meaning is to be found in this novel and the ones which followed this, setting apart the secular novels. The handling of a specifically catholic theme relates this novel to The Power and the Glory (1940) and The Heart of the Matter (1948).

One cannot fail to note the constant presence of the element of pursuit in Greene's novel: pursuit of a criminal from police, a traitor by those whom he has betrayed etc., and it only symbolises the pursuit of man's soul – his inner self by god. In *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*. The protagonists are ready to be damned for the sake of others. The 'Whisky Priest' in the former, prays for his illegitimate daughter thus: 'O God, give me any kind of death – without contrition, in a state of sin – only save this child'. In the latter, Scobie, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, at the end is willing to commit suicide and be damned rather than decide between the claims of his wife and mistress – to choose between them would result in the suffering of one of them.

In a Greene novel, characters are no longer in control of their destinies. Since Greene's Characters are full of sin and corruption, one sinful act leads to many such actions. They become victims of their actions. In this sense, Green's heroes are more victims than heroes. They are often victims of their own love of God. They are caught between pain and despair, and are afraid of damnation (Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* for example). But Greene's 'victims' do not meet miserable end always. He permits his sin-ridden characters, to repent when they realize the corruption of their lives. At such times the victims become conscious of corruption and even if they are about to die, as the 'Whisky Priest' in *The Power and the Glory*, they recover a genuine humanity. Hence, the victims of Greene are capable of being saved.

Almost all his heroes, in spite of personal degradation, have a vision of saintliness, while their inner conflict results from their inability to live up to their ideal.

Like Oedipus, whose pride has overwhelmed his sense of reasonableness, Scobie (*The Heart of the Matter* 1948), Pinkie (*Brighton Rock*, 1958) for example...Recognize how for short they have fallen of the ideal, How mortal they really are [1]

Nothing other than suffering and recognition of self can help a Greene character by making him dissatisfied with the devil and save him. Greene's heroes live and act within a corrupt world. They seek God in a devil-controlled universe. But they are all the while aware of their weakness and yet in Greene's world, 'few are past saving'. So tragedy in the real sense of the word can exist only 'in a world stripped of the Christian amenities, a world in which heaven, paradise and salvation are meaningless terms'. In Greene's characters – more specially his heroes – we notice that 'the fall still permits redemption', because Greene believed that god is an 'enigmatical being' who extends 'grace in ways that man can never understand'. (This is the faith of the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory*). Greene's characters may be 'lapsed Catholics, or whisky priests, but their situations are metaphors for human condition, and in this fundamental sense Greene's novels are relentlessly contemporary.' [2]

Greene's account of his childhood and adolescence explains the seedy backgrounds, obsessed characters and extreme situations in his novels. Much of the experience given expression in his novels flows from his memories – the unhappy childhood which has had a great influence on all his novels.

Greene has said that every creative writer 'is a victims a man given over to an obsession'. Even the most casual reading of his novels and 'entertainments' is enough to understand that everything he writes 'is discolored by an original hurt to his sensibility'. Characters recur in his books, 'certain types of incident are also repeated such as pursuit (which Walter Allen has described as almost a formula for a

Greene fiction) or acts of suicide, brutal violence and voluntary or involuntary betrayal'. There is little gaiety in the 'Greenland'.

Greene is primarily obsessed with evil, the dark side of human nature and life produced by his various childhood experiences. People whose lives are full of evil are important to Greene. He is also obsessively aware of God and His mercy, being a devout Catholic. So his preoccupation with evil is linked with his religious consciousness. Hence, his characters are pulled in opposite directions (Good-Evil) as he himself was in early years. The Power and the Glory illustrates Greene's obsession with evil which operates in man's life. But the question of repentance and God's grace is also indicated as in most of the religious novels of Greene. The novel from the beginning prepares us for the 'Spiritual transformation of a sinner into a saint'.

Greene is beyond doubt interested in the doctrines of the church – more specifically in the fundamental doctrine which states that 'good and evil' are not mere relative terms like 'right' and 'wrong' but unchanging absolutes. J.B. Wilson says that "Green has been obsessed with the problem of good and evil and his books are a curious compound of theology and a stark modern realism" [3].

According to the Catholic faith the four lasting things ever to be remembered are death, judgment, hell and heaven- and Greene dealt with these and is called by critics as an eschatological writer. His philosophy seems to be (at first glance) one of inflexible pessimism. But it will not survive mature reflection. Greene is certainly disturbed by the evil in the world. But it takes its origin from his early days at boarding school and the realization of an evil world by a school boy whose sensitive nature suffered because of the absence of response from the surrounding.

In the prologue to *The Lawless Roads*, one of his travel books, Greene writes: '... one began to believe in heaven because one believed in hell, but for a long time it was only hell that one could picture with a certain intimacy'.

However, it would be a blunder to conclude that Greene exhibits only sin, corruption, egoism – in general the 'demonic element' in man. He certainly also exhibits man's inclination towards love, charity, fidelity in self-sacrifice – in general 'the angelic element' in man. This is because of his two primary obsessions – evil and faith. Scobie, the protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter*, illustrates Greene's obsession with man's sinfulness and the need of divine mercy. Like Pinkie (*Brighton Rock*) and the whisky priest (*The power and the Glory*). Scobie, suffers from a conflict between evil and faith.

The intention of this dissertation is to analysis the theme of sin, Damnation and salvation in Greene's 'trilogy' (*Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*), in the following chapters. It would, however, be a mistake to determine that Greene did not treat the theme in question in other novels. Being a man obsessed with sin probably because of man's original sin), damnation (the deep impression he had of view of life during childhood) and salvation (the concluding tone of Greene because of his theological background), he uses them as the basis for almost all his novels.

His novels juxtapose despair and belief, evil and faith and infact the existence of the one colors the existence of the other. It was Greene's opinion that knowledge of good and evil is an essential part of the novelist's equipment.

The leading characters in Greene's 'trilogy' – Pinkie, The Whisky Priest and Scobie are sinners no doubt. But they are aware of it, and are annoyed on account of the awareness. In the opinion of Marie-Beatrice Mesnet:

They are like Harry in T.S. Eliot's play, *The Family Re-union*, wide awake to the Nightmare ... This spiritual intensity, this Quality of deep reality is the main unifying factor in these three consecutive novels and identifies us to treat them as a trilogy.[4]

Greene is obviously moved to express his pity for the banished and he is interested in human life in its exposed and cruder conditions like the dark corner of Brighton, the jungles and prisons of Tabasco and the coast of West Africa, places where 'human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself'. All the three protagonists – Pinkie, the whisky Priest and Scobie appear in all three novels in different shapes and they tend to resemble one another.

Greene had strong belief in the inevitability of suffering and sin and hence importance is given to sin, suffering and misery of human beings which could be erased only by the grace of God. Thus, in the 'trilogy' Greene expresses his philosophy or vision of life. One could say that Greene's novels are meant to express human nature rather than to give moral instruction. Answering a question in an interview with Gene D. Philips, Greene himself has said that his novels are 'about human beings'.

On account of the special nature of Greene's themes, the techniques adopted by him in his novels have a strange appeal for the reader. As Greene's protagonists are often embodiments of evil and are often sinners trying to save themselves, he finds the spy-thriller a very useful method of writing. A spy-thriller is usually full of crime, hunts and journeys and Greene's characters – more specially, his heroes – are gangsters, smugglers, criminals and outcasts of society. Very often these characters are shown to be caught in desperate plights and are shown to be either escaping the law or betraying or murdering their friends. Just as we feel fascinated by a spy-thriller so we feel drawn to a Greene novel, but with a difference. In an ordinary spy-thriller we are just interested in the story and how the criminals are punished. In a Greene novel, on the other hand, we are involved with the characters, and we partake of their emotions.

Greene's technique is cinematic. His interest in film began early as a student. He wrote scripts during the thirties and was the film-critic of *The Spectator* from 1935 to 1939. He is 'a film man' as referred by himself in the *Paris Review* interview. The opening paragraph of *The Power and the Glory*, describing Mr. Tench's search for either cylinder is often quoted by critics to point out the cinematic technique of Greene.

Many of his best-known novels are based on the conventions of the thriller and have been made into successful films. That explains the entertaining capacity of Greene but his place among the modern novelist is not with writers of popular thrillers, but with artist like Conrad and James (novelists whom he admires). Like these, Greene understood that if a novel is to matter, it must be moral and more technique is not adequate. Describing his own work, Greene once remarked that his fixation could best be described as 'the melodramatic, the contemporary and later the catholic novel'.

REFERENCES

1. Frederick R. Karl, "Graham Greene's Demonical Heroes" in A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel, Rev. dn. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), P.88.
2. Samuel Hynes, "Introduction" in Graham Green: A Collection of Critical Essays, Samuel Hynes (ed.) (Englewood cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-hall, 1973), p.3.
- 3.....English Literature: A survey for Students (London: Longmans, 1958), p.288.
4. ....Graham Greene and the Heart of the Matter (London: The Cresset Press, 1954; Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, First Reprinting 1972), p.1.

---

**Prof.G.Chandramohan**  
**PG& Research Dept. of English**  
**Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai**  
**Tamilnadu, India.**