

Anxiety of the Age Portrayed in the Novels of Graham Greene

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ABSTRACT

An enduring feature of Greene's fiction is the keenness to look at the disgusting face of the twentieth century. Greene's fiction dwells on the conflicts and pains of the modern world. He used the powerful imagination that led him to speak of his work as a "guided dream." That imagination fired by intense moral and religious perception and made Greene's fiction the best-realized portrayal in its time. The paper undertakes an analysis of stark portrayal of the modern age through Graham Greene's novels

KEYWORDS

Modern Age; Graham Greene; Novels analysis.

An enduring feature of Greene's fiction is the keenness to look at the disgusting face of the twentieth century. Greene's fiction dwells on the conflicts and pains of the modern world. He used the powerful imagination that led him to speak of his work as a "guided dream." That imagination fired by intense moral and religious perception and made Greene's fiction the best-realized portrayal in its time of the drama of the human soul.

Brighton Rock (1938) was his first critically acclaimed religious novel. It describes a betrayal of loyalties in gangland Britain and remains a disquieting parable of conscience. Greene's fallible, ambivalent characters are unlike any others in British fiction. Pinkie, the juvenile hoodlum of Brighton Rock, murders without a qualm, yet, as a lapsed Catholic, he fears damnation, and Greene establishes our empathy with him. In Catholicism Greene had found a sense of melodrama – an atmosphere of good and

evil – that was useful to him as a novelist. Over the sixty years of his writing career, he created characters who try to hide their weaknesses from the world and themselves. In Catholic terms, Greene was a moralist excited by human turpitude and evil in our times.

The theme of man alone dangling between hope and despair runs in Greene's novels - *England Made Me* and *The Ministry of Fear*. In these novels Greene takes up the question of alienation against the background of political stress. *It's a Battlefield* is a novel which mirrors a good deal of alienation due to mechanization and political unrest in London. It also depicts the economic crisis of this period, the dull life of the average man, who is suffering between death and disfigurement, unemployment and unrest.

England Made Me creates as sombre a picture of modern life as *It's a Battlefield*. It is one of Greene's finest evocations of the seedy world of modern economic man at

his most urbanized and atomized condition. A truly memorable character in *England Made Me* is Minty. Minty is portrayed as a maladjusted individual who feels his integrity threatened by society. His wretched loneliness makes him a typical Greene character. He was so lonely, so isolated that he drove the others back into companionship they had lost, even a shared uneasiness, a shared bickering had a friendly air compared with his extreme friendlessness.

Graham Greene is the most skilled and powerful creative artist who has a standpoint and a vision. The existence of evil in this world as a predominant and driving force fascinates him. His presentation of man's predicament is a recognizable one. Life for Greene is an endless quest for the understanding of certain serious matters like good and evil, justice and grace. Art is the reflection of life and the readers find in Greene's fiction a preoccupation with eschatological issues.

Men in this world can be divided into two sharply opposite types - those who are committed to reality and those who are afraid of it. Characters like Scobie, the whiskey priest and Dr Magiot are alive to the tragic reality. Wormold and Aunt Augusta cling to appearance. Greene in his serious books deals with people who display a sense of commitment. Those who are afraid of reality and those who are congenitally deficient and cannot envisage it, are content with the peripheral, the external, the appearance and the illusion. Such are Greene's characters in his lighter fiction. These men and women are mere products of the age in which they live, their environment and upbringing. They are worldly than the men and women in his serious novels. Though their attitudes are different both the types live in the same world of violence and distrust. Reality for them is something horrifying and hence their attempt to escape and strive for something which appears to be within their reach.

The major themes in Greene's fiction are closely related to evil and they recur in several of his novels. Betrayal is one of the most recurring themes the readers find in his fiction. To these one may add 'justice', 'pity', 'responsibility', 'jealousy' and 'innocence'. Greene's obsession with the seedy and the shabby and his fascination for failure come up in most of his novels.

The fundamental themes in his novels are: betrayal and jealousy in *The man within*, *The Name of Action*, *Basement Room* and *Stamboul Train*; justice and "honour among thieves" in *A Gun for Sale*, *It's a battlefield* and *England Made Me*; childhood and its terrible impact in *Brighton Rock* and *A Gun for Sale*; pursuit in *The Confidential Agent* and *The Ministry of Fear*; pity and responsibility in *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*; love and hate in *The End of the Affair*; fear and suspicion in *The Third Man* and *Our Man in Havana*; the unintelligibility, absurdity and illogicality of existence in *A Burnt-Out Case*, *The Comedians* and *Travels with my Aunt*. Then there is his idea of resurrection and reanimation which comes out in some of his novels and plays. Greene's principles are torn between ambivalent attitudes like love and hate and sympathy and jealousy.

The intentions of *The Third Man* were to reflect the economic, social and moral reality of the period which is in an uncomfortable position sandwiched between the menace of Hitler, the growing influence of communism and a triumphant American capitalism. However, while doing this, he discovered the already prevailing absurdity of certain modernity. He has sympathy for those who live in it, who fight against this aggressive modernity where they either blend in or submit. The novelist was preoccupied by complicated cases, by the complex human typology whose representatives change according to the circumstances, to the life dynamism or to their fate.

The writer's duty was to explore and reflect the abyss of human decay but he preserves a certain hope and even a certain faith in man's possibilities to revive. "Would the world be in the mess it is now if we were loyal to love and not to countries?" exclaims Beatrice in *Our Man in Havana* (17). In the preface to *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene confesses that the book he always wanted to write was "the high romantic tale, capturing us in youth, with hopes that prove illusions, to which we return in age in order to escape the sad reality" (*Brighton Rock* p. III). His characters do everything they can to escape the "sad reality" but cannot change their lives as they are engaged in -

the same subterranean struggle... between two eternities of pain - and God knows the opposite of pain, not we....There is no peace anywhere where there is human life ... (*The Lawless Roads*, 34)

His characters are lonely, alienated people. The main heroes lack external excitement but their inner experience has a high degree of intensity. Pinkie, the main character in *Brighton Rock* finds his escape from the monotonous world through violence while most of Greene's characters like, Scobie from *The Heart of the Matter*, Rose from *A Burnt-Out Case* or Fowler from *The Quiet American* try to break with their barren lives by means of a love affair. What they really want is to find a way to communicate with other human beings. The communication and understanding cannot last due to the rules imposed by the society and thus their escape from monotony is only ephemeral. Pinkie will die being punished by the society for his crimes; Scobie will take his own life because he is tortured by his imaginary quilt and his impotence to do well. Query is destroyed just when he believes that he has regained the human feeling of understanding. Though Rose will keep on living she will live in the past by listening

to Pinkie's recorded voice over and over again. Despite their loneliness these characters are linked to society but this acts as an implacable destiny upon them and finally pushes them into the abyss. Mostly, the heroes of Greene's novels are haunted by obsessions and fears and imaginary quilt.

The hero of *Brighton Rock*, Pinkie liked to be loved by others but he was considered to be a 'bad guy'. He did not blame himself for his deeds but his parents and the world. He feels that his parents left him unprotected in this world and because nobody loves him his desire for love suffers a mutation becoming a wish to do harm. At a very early age Pinkie realizes that people are evil so he does not believe in heaven, only in hell, being sure that evil runs the world. In his mind, a place like heaven cannot exist as all men and women are sinners while Rose sees the people in the gang as "very kind: there seemed to be a companionship in mortal sin" (193)

All Pinkie remembers about his parents are the Saturday nights, when they made love, but he feels this as a betrayal towards him, a waste of the love he should have had on someone else. While alone in his room, one can sense in his thoughts, the disgust and repulsion for the act of making love and marriage. When he decides to marry Rose, he does it to save his freedom and life. He does not want Rose because she reminds him of his mother whose love he could not have because of the Saturday nights.

At the same time, he realizes that by having Rose - a common, simple-minded girl - he turns into a man of no importance as others do not have a motive to envy him for. He would not touch Rose but he seems to know that nothing could prevent a wife, except love, turn her husband to the police.

In order to save his liberty, he is determined to do anything. Pinkie understands that he was forced to do something against his will, a thing he feels only repulsion for. On his way to the room

where they were to be declared 'man and wife', by mistake, he went towards the door on which the word 'taxes' was printed, as if he unconsciously associated this word with the payment of his actions in front of God. His feelings of frustration are expressed by the words he voiced to be recorded as a souvenir for Rose: "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be" (84).

If Pinkie is a character whose sin consists in his hatred of the world, Scobie, the central personage in *The Heart of the Matter* has a distinct status. The hero is a sinner too but of a very peculiar structure. His sin is due to his excess of kindness rather than the lack of it. He is endowed with a series of virtues which make him a singular character among the other colonial clerks that one of them will say: "You're unbearable – you're too honest to live" (*The Heart of the Matter*, 103). Scobie's supreme quality is that he feels responsible for all those around him.

Although he stopped loving his wife – a double-faced woman who does not understand him – he feels it is his duty to protect her, to make her happy. Overwhelmed by an honest desire to do good to people, Scobie is continuously tortured and vexed. The happiness he finds in his love affair with Helen Rolt – survivor of the wreckage – is nothing else but another element that leads to complication. The only way to simplify his life and the lives of the 'victims' of his generosity is to commit suicide. He plans everything carefully as: "If possible no one must even suspect. It was not only the question of life insurance: the happiness of others had to be protected" (257). Like Pinkie, he speaks of damnation although he does not seem to figure the exact meaning: "I know what I'm doing. I'm not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means" (258).

Greene's characters are tortured by inner conflicts and they struggle to survive and at the same time to escape, are doomed

to failure. The novelist believes that the original sin is the main justification for misery and corruption of the world his characters live in. Graham Greene despite his many journeys in fact and imagination has never revealed himself directly. Some critics consider that the novelist used his own experiences, fears and obsessions to create his characters. Greene stresses the problem of lack of objectivity of human judgment in all his Catholic novels. A man is weak and he is susceptible to fears and desires and as such he becomes subjective. Nobody, not even a priest, knows neither the feelings of a sinner nor his motivation. Hardly anybody pays attention to his experiences from the past and the torments of present.

People usually want to see a morally corrupted man who has sinned and whom they may denounce. Unfortunately, they do not realize that his deeds are the resultant of his weaknesses, bad choices, even of dejection but hardly ever of evil. A morally corrupted man does not see anything wrong in committing a crime or a sin. The protagonists of Greene's novels have the overwhelming sense of guilt. They are conscious of the gravity of their sins. Their faith is pure, even pushed to the extreme. They are willing to support the Church, even at risk of losing their lives and they read to their children about the holy martyrs and unconditionally trust the priests. But at the same time their hearts are empty and as hard as stone. They do not recognize the importance of mercy and forgiveness. They know no compassion. Considering themselves as the only people worth salvation, they condemn everybody else. Their faith is strong but affected by pride, conceit and bigotry. Greene's protagonists realize how much their sins harm God, how much they have failed Him. They carry the burden through their lives and, in most cases it appears to be too heavy for them.

What truly characterises Greene's fiction is neither Catholicism nor

humanism but a form of Catholic realism or Catholic engagement with the human factor that is as serious about the moral and religious dimension of life as it is about the social and political one. To Greene, no diagnosis of the human condition in the 20th century can be wholly realistic without taking into account the experience of faith.

Maurice Castle, the protagonist of *The Human Factor* (1978), is quite an unlikely traitor. Doctor Percival warns against “people who believe. They aren’t reliable players” (163). Colonel Daintry thinks that “it’s generally the brilliant and ambitious who are dangerous” (32). Castle is, by his own admission, “what’s generally called a traitor” (187). At the end of the novel, he finds himself in exile in Moscow, involuntarily separated from Sarah and Sam. The reasons for Castle’s behaviour must be sought in his own personality and in his attitude to private life. The name ‘Castle’ itself characterises the man. It recalls not only Berkhamsted’s ruined medieval castle but also the saying that ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’. It signals a defensive attitude, a fortress mentality, and even an unwillingness to engage with the outside world. Castle is described as “a creature of habit” (19) who above all seeks a “sense of security” (21).

Castle suffers from a feeling of inferiority aggravated by his infertility. Sam is Sarah’s son by another man, yet Castle claims he is content to be childless himself, telling his wife:

You want to look under stones too much, Sarah. I love Sam because he’s yours. Because he’s not mine. Because I don’t have to see anything of myself there when I look at him. I see only something of you. I don’t want to go on forever. I want the buck to stop here (24).

To Castle, a child is simply “a responsibility” (23), not a source of joy or pride; just as the ineffectual watchdog,

Buller, is ‘only one more responsibility’ (58). Castle’s attitude is instinctively defensive and evasive, displaying the deep insecurity of a man who does not believe anything of himself to be of permanent value.

Like most of Greene’s novels, *The Confidential Agent* and *A Burnt-Out Case* raise questions about the modern world, its predicaments and destination. Greene’s treatment of the dissonant and painful realities of humanity in the modern world is both remarkable and unique. The characters are out of step with their societies because the values of the societies are seen as warped or misguided. Those characters might be considered evil or psychoanalytically troubled, but they should also be seen as products of their societies, as personalities shaped by the problems of those societies and by the warped values the societies have come to represent. The characters rebel against the pressure and stress of the modern world, but, according to a seemingly ineluctable strategy of containment, they pay for their temporary emancipation with some significant loss of lives and of social respectability.

Set in England, during a civil war in a neighbouring country Holland, *The Confidential Agent* traces the gradual dehumanization and brutalization of a spy D. It shows how a person can degenerate into crime and violence in such a situation. In line with a tenet of dystopian fiction, D is a protagonist who questions his society, because he often feels intuitively that something is terribly wrong with it. In the novel, Greene presents the problems of humanity in the modern world by a most skilful manipulation of plot and structure, depicting each stage of brutalization and frustration processes, proceeding very logically and inevitably from the preceding.

A Burnt-Out Case lends itself to modernist critical probing because it foregrounds confusion, disillusionment and despair. The novel is Greene’s stock-

taking of the problems of the post-world war era. Like the features of the period, the story deconstructs every established convention in society and critiques the rationale behind social institutions such as marriage, economy, politics, religion and education. The setting of the novel, a mimesis of the modern world, signposts confusion, bleakness of horizon, excessiveness of freedom, liberality in doing things and the collapse of human civilisation – all are a result of the

aftermath of the world war. However, in the novel, Greene is not absolutely pessimistic; rather, he maintains a tolerable outlook on life.

Greene's novels reflect the problems of the modern world and they do not just reproduce what is wrong with the modern world. They offer an alternative view of socio-political potentials of the world, where there would be social harmony, economic prosperity and political stability.

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