

Theme of Sin, Guilt and Suffering as Projected in the Fictional world of Graham Greene: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies at length the theme of sin, guilt and suffering as projected in the fictional world of Graham Greene, who is considered as one of those distinguished writers who offered a distinctive vision or world-view thereby combining the gripping readable and the revealingly intelligent in the fictional world in the Twentieth Century Literary Cosmos. It neatly projects one major conspicuous feature of Greene's novels nothing but the presence of the element of pursuit – the pursuit of a criminal by the police, of a traitor by those whom he has betrayed, of a victim by his persecutors, symbolising the pursuit of man's soul, his inner self by God. It reveals well Greene's fictional art in depicting the world of sin, guilt, and suffering leading to death and destruction, bringing home the fact that God teaches us while he punishes and how he takes pain to explain the inevitability of suffering and evil in this world from the point of view of Christian religion with a statement that spirituality is intimately connected with the experience of suffering.

Key words: *sin, guilt, evil, suffering, death, spirituality, pursuit, literary cosmos, inner self, God.*

Graham Greene is considered one of those distinguished writers who offered a distinctive vision or world-view, there by combining “the gripping readable and the revealingly intelligent” in the fictional world in the Twentieth Century literary cosmos. One major conspicuous feature of Greene's novels is the presence of the element of pursuit – the pursuit of a criminal by the police, of a traitor by those whom he has betrayed, of a victim by his persecutors, symbolising the pursuit of man's soul, his inner self, by God. Caught between pain and pain, formented by pity, afraid of damnation, Greene's characters are often the victims of their own unforgettable love for God. It is said that he has done as a writer what he aimed at doing; he has expressed a religious sense and created a fictional world in which human acts are important. In that world, ‘creative art’ is a function of the religious mind, for the critics have accepted Graham Green as a Catholic novelist who often wrote about Catholics and made Catholic belief ‘the arbiter of his work’. His novels are contemporary as regards their subject – matter. Greene himself described his work as ‘being fist political, then Catholic and then political again.

Such a prolific writer was born on October 2, 1904. His father, Charles, was school master at Berkhamsted, a private school at Hertfordshire and his mother Marion was the cousin of R.L. Stevenson. The family was well-placed in the town of Berkhamsted thirty miles north-west of central London. Graham Greene

entered Berkhamsted School at the age of seven and at the age of thirteen, he was a border in the school and at the age of thirteen, he was a border in the school where his father was the headmaster. One of Greene's grand fathers had been mani-depressive, and Greene's memories suggest strongly that he himself had inherited that trait. “A manic-depressive, like my grandfather that would be the verdict on me today”, he wrote in 1971. After an episode of truancy, Greene, was released from school for a while to be treated by a psychiatrist, Kenneth Richmond, a Jungian and spiritualist who encouraged him in the recording and analysis of his dreams. This was to be a lifelong preoccupation and cryptic dreams were to figure prominently within his works too. Socially, Kenneth Richmond and his wife Zoe introduced Greene to a relaxed and permissive life style and fostered his literary ambition. He has to his credit publication of such notable works, novels, short-stories and Essays – 1 *The Man Within* 2 *It's a Battlefield*, 3 *A Gun for Sale*, 4 *The Third Man*, 5 *A Burnt-Out Case*, 6 *The Confidential Clerk*, 7 *The bomb party*, 8 *The Power and The Glory*, 9 *The Heart of the Matter*, 10 *The Quiet American*, 11 *The Captain and the Enemy*, 12 *Collected Stories*, 13 *The Last Word and other Stories*, 14. *In Search of a Character*, 15 *Reflections*, 16 *Collected Essays*, 17 *Collected Plays* and, 18 *Fragments of an Autobiography* and also a Biography *An Impossible woman* and children's books like *The Little Train* and *The Little Fire Engine*.

Though consider foremost among the post-war novelists who tried their level best to depict the anguish and despair of lost generation, Graham Greene did not claim to stand in the first rank of authors for he recognized the superiority of Conrad and James. He could not even rival Conrad's Olympian wisdom, his beauty of description, or his searching technical innovations. He lacked James's civilised delicacies and elaborate subtleties. In spite of all this, Green's range was found to be rather immense, and he succeeded in gaining both critical acclaim and a vast international readership. He produced novels, tales, plays, poems, film scripts, critical and political essays, autobiographical works, travel books, biographical studies. They all vary greatly in quality. Some of his works are casual while others are intense, deep and complex likely endure in all respects. He is one of those writers who could offer a distinctive vision or world view. Through his writings, he is said to have offered searching his writings, he is said to have offered searching analysis of the tensions between the religious and the secular outlooks and between political commitment and political skepticism. No doubt, he was a literary citizen of the world seeking to build imaginative between continents displaying energy and courage always in making a search or quest for something and portraying the stresses of modern life in numerous geographical regions. His fictional work at the most possible level is characterized by lucid intelligence, descriptive verve and deftly perceptive analysis of characters and situations.

Most of his novels are concerned with the impact of original sin on individuals. "The modern age is an age of deepening inner despair and of appalling catastrophes, an age when society says one thing and does something entirely different, when everybody talks about peace and prepares for more wars. Western man is more schizophrenic" (Priestly 266). Like T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Green emphasizes on the sterility and despair of the modern civilization. Greene's novels of the thirties have an immediate topical reference; they have a contemporary atmosphere. These novels superficially deal with the theme of great thirties David Pryce Jones writes:

"Strikes and political murder in *It's battlefield* (1935), the irresponsible power of international finance in *England made Me* (1935), the machinations of armament manufactures in *'A Gun for Sale* (1936), the Spanish civil war in *The Confidential Agent* (1939), culminating in *The Power and The Glory* (1940) with the confrontation of Marxism and religion" (P 10)

No doubt, Green deals with the uprooted man drifting in the urban society and his characters are placed in the contemporary setting in the fundamental human situation. In his novels, he points out the meaninglessness, the seediness and the vulgarity of the society that has already banished God. The idea that there is neither good nor evil in any absolute moral or religious sense is widespread. It is the introduction of this religious conception of evil into his work that Greene differs from most of the modern writers. He deals with faith, salvation and damnation in his major novels. He emphasizes in his religious novels that religion alone can give us relief from our ever increasing dissatisfaction and despair and help us to defend ourselves against dehumanising social and moral impulses. Truly speaking, man will lose his human qualities unless he holds on to faith in religion.

A creative writer, in his opinion, has a zeal for novelty and he is more influenced by the trends and tendencies of his time. He feels that every writer has a responsibility to depict what he finds true around him. The writer has to reproduce all his impressions in the form of thoughts, descriptions and assessments. Greene depicts the world of sin, suffering and death Being exposed to the ugliness of urban centers, he witnessed many shocking events as a young boy. In *The Third Man* (1950), he deals with the suffering experienced by a small boy with the elders a round acting in an immature manner. Greene's novels are drawn from life as it is and his characters are grounded in it. He is said to have travelled almost every continent, collecting the materials for his novels. As one critic says, he is "the spokesman of tragic times".

Sin, redemption and grace are three important ideas of Christianity. Christianity teaches that through Adam's sin, man has lost the blessings of eternal life. But with the crucifixion of Christ, man is assured of his eternal life provided he asks for forgiveness of his sins. In *The Quiet American*, Fowler is shown as an unbeliever doing things as he likes. This is against the Christian tenets that he is not ready to submit to God. Fowler is shown sinning by not keeping the sanctity of marriage. Even after his marriage, he gets involved in another affair just for the pleasure of flesh. Christ taught that the bond of marriage is unbreakable and forbade divorce. Fowler writes to his wife seeking divorce. On the other hand, we have Pyle who wants to get married to Phuong just for his selfish ends. In *The Honorary Consul*, Brown is shown drifting from faith and arriving at a position where one is only seen wearing masks. He dreams that he is a boy

kneeling at the communication rail asking for pardon of his sin. Christianity teaches that if a sinner asks for pardon, then he is forgiven. Martha on the other hand, breaks the sanctity of marriage by having an affair with Brown. Both of them forget that they will be punished for their sins. In *The Comedians*, Mrs. Fortnum is shown having an affair with Doctor Plarr and goes against the sanctity of marriage. She is shown later after suffering due to her sins. Doctor Plarr's case is even worse. Professionally being a doctor, he had to abort some babies for his patients. It's God who punishes him for his sins at the final stages of his life. Greene's obsession is with sin and the seediness of our civilization. He not only points out how sin and suffering are inevitable in this world from the point of view of the Christian religion, but also presents man's sense of guilt and his impotence to prevent a repetition of the sinful act with great psychological insight. Greene's views on the human situation have some similarities with those of T.S. Eliot and the Danish thinker Kierkegaard. Like T.S. Eliot, Greene believes that his world is a fallen world and man a fallen creature. Like Kierkegaard, Greene is aware of the burden and mystery, the anxiety and dread felt by the individual regarding his existence and that is why most of his novels particularly his Catholic novels deal with the nature of sin or guilt and the nature of the authority that might redeem or absolve us from it. His novels arouse profound sympathy for the bewildered victim or the suffering seeker. He believes that the most important thing in life is man's relationship with God. Faith is a leap in the dark to which man is driven by awe and dread and anxiety. His novels, however, not allegories or fables constructed to expound a previously determined scheme of ideas, falling in line with the state of G.S. Fraser who says: "The true novel nests on no such scheme; it is an exploration, not an exposition and the true novelist arrives at his sense of life through his story, he does not construct his story to illustrate that sense" (P 23)

In *The Quiet American*, Greene deals with sin and suffering during the war. He talks about Indo-china during 50's between colonialist France and Nationalistic Vietnam. United States tries to intervene to save the world from communism which poses a threat to democratic ideals. During this period, many innocent people are killed. Both Pyle and Fowler have a liking for Phuong for their personal ends. Pyle is shown as very innocent and is not fit to live in this cruel world. So he dies for his democratic ideals. The

novel also shows that the wrong choices of a man in a given situation may result in bringing harm not only to himself but also to the whole society for whose good the man makes the choice. Fowler is shown as a person living in reality but at the same time due to his sins, he has to suffer a lot.

The Honorary Consul deals with the Paraguayan rebels trying to kidnap the Ambassador, using him a hostage to force the government to release political prisoners, abduct a wrong person. The novel also talks about the torture meted out to the prisoners by the policeman. The doctor also helps them with information and gets caught. He also has to suffer a lot because of the illicit affair he has with another person's wife. In the end, he has to meet with a tragic death. *The Comedians* deals with the Duvalier's reign and his Tontons Macoute. The people of Haiti have to suffer a lot in different ways. Like Pyle, the Smiths also want to do some sort of good for people but they were not allowed to do that. Instead they were sent out of the country leaving their belongings. Brown is an unbeliever but he too suffers due to his sins.

Greene strongly believes that the corruption of human nature is the result of original sin. The tendency towards corruption according to him originates in childhood. Kenneth Allot and Miriam point out rather rightly:

"a terror of life, a terror of what experience can do to the individual and a terror at a predetermined corruption is the motive force that drove Greene as a novelist" (P 15)

Greene stresses how innocence gets threatened even in childhood and how quickly and inevitable the capacity for simple happiness disappears. He points out the corrupt influences in the childhood of Anthony Farrant in *England Made Me* (1935), Raven in *A Gun for Sale* (1936), Pinkie and Rose in *Brighton Rock* (1938) and Rose Cullen in *The Confidential Agent* (1939). In the fictional world of Greene, there is adequate number of references to the universality of man's sins. For instance, in *The Power and the Glory*, (1940), on seeing his illegitimate daughter, Brigitta in Maria's hut, the priest remembers his own childhood. He remembers how far he travelled from those days of innocence and how he has reached a state of mortal sin. He knows that he will not be able to save his child from sin and corruption which are inevitable in this world. Greene believes that the condition of sin is the result of man's corruption of himself. Ever since the fall, man carries within himself. Ever since the fall, man carries within himself this curse. Without God's grace, man follows his own will in doing evil and leads himself to destruction. Even since the

fall, sin exists as a disease in man. Grace is the only medicine which can control this disease. In the absence of grace, sin will destroy man in one way or another. In the other novels like *The Quiet American*, *The Honorary Consul* and *The Comedians*, one can see how man falls from his grace. This is due to their mortal sin which finally leads them to death. Graham Greene shares the mental anxiety and spiritual perplexity of cardinal New man. Like New man, Green also believes that evil is an essential element of and says:

“What elicits human horror and indignation is not so much the suffering that the strong may with courage endure, as the suffering at random inflicted upon the weak and innocent and defenseless” (P 265)

According to Greene, the fall of Adam and Eve was a catastrophe and man suffers permanently as a result, the suffering is different in the case of different individuals. The suffering of Fowler who wanted to keep away from all things got involved with the kidnapper's issue. His relation with his friends made him get involved in things. Doctor plarr had an affair with Mrs. Fortnum and never realized the consequence of that. His relation with her was to quench his thirst for flesh and not due to love. Then he found himself in a mess as he helped the kidnappers. In the end, no one raised a finger to save the hostage and he met with death rather unexpectedly. In *The Quiet American*, Fowler and Pyle meet with suffering in different ways. Pyle has to die living for the ideals of democracy. Fowler with his attitude of degage gets involved and has to face a lot of problems.

Greene raises in his works the problem of sin, suffering, pain and misery of man. However, Greene does not stop with describing the suffering and evil. He points out that God strips us of our false, superficial self, in order to lead us to our trueselves. He brings home the point that God teaches us while he punished us. Greene takes pain to explain the inevitability of suffering and evil in this world from the point of view of Christian religion. In *The Honorary Consul*, Greene tells through Rivas as to how both the General and the Archbishop sit together and see all bad things happening in the world and they say man has got the free will to choose. Rivas also says the same thing that man has right to choose between the good and the bad. Spirituality is intimately connected with the experience of suffering. A sensitive awareness of evil and a capacity for suffering are attributes of a spiritual man. The miseries and all obstacles we meet in our path help to develop our spiritual personality. They should be regarded as a trial of capacity of our inner strength to assert itself and away of self-

liberation. A spiritual attitude to suffering implies illumination. The crucification gives a new value to suffering and Sarah in *The End of The Affair* refers to this fact when she says, “Dear God..... Let my pain go on and on but stop theirs. Dear God, if only you could come down from your cross for a while and let me get up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like you” (EDTA 144)

What is understood through an analysis of Greene's works is that we are born to suffer in this world. Only suffering can save us and only death can end our suffering. The novels of Greene are novels of love and suffering. In this view, he who avoids this glorious suffering shuts himself out from salvation and wallows in selfishness. No doubt, Greene has approached the problem of evil from the point of view of Christian theology and stresses the fact that suffering, evil and even sin work together towards good. They are nothing but a part of the scheme of Christian providence. Evil is rooted in man himself and this poses a constant temptation to his imagination as well as a constant threat to his spiritual security. For the man who falls, there awaits the punishment of physical affliction and spiritual despair. He can be saved from these only by grace and trust in god. There seems to be two causes for man's suffering; God's will and men's sin. The bad man suffers as a punishment for his sin while the good man suffers due to suspicion that follows sinful acts. He describes the suffering and anguish brought about by intense feelings of guilt with great psychological insight.

Christian religion teaches us that pride is the foundation of all sins. Pride takes away from God and brings about our ruin. In the Christian view of the world, it is inevitable that failure to obey God's commandments will lead only to disappointment but also to the deepest suffering which is alienation from God. The pain of loss, the irony of human aspirations, the root of evil in the will of men are conceptions which are central to Christian theology. Greene has clearly drawn from its doctrines the ideological bases for his portrayal of the dark side of human existence and he makes use of modern psychological concepts to throw light on the inner life of his characters portrayed in his fictional world.

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