

Graham Greene's Twisted Characters and Their Catholic Roots

Joshua Liller

English IV, Martin County High School, Fall 1998

Graham Greene's use of Catholicism in selected novels led to strange characters with twisted beliefs and outlooks on life.

Graham Greene's youth greatly affected his writing. He lived at the school in Berkhamstead, England where his father was headmaster. As Votteler (1992) noted, "the regimented life and lack of privacy at the school, along with his father's constant moralizing on the sinfulness of sex, deeply affected Greene" (p. 146). He was also tormented for being the headmaster's son. It is therefore not surprising that Greene was a withdrawn, bored child. He often skipped school to read adventure novels and attempted suicide nearly a dozen times before he was twenty years old. At age 15, he went to a therapist who advised Greene to write and introduced him to his circle of literary friends who influenced his writing style. The therapy itself did not help much and he spent most of college drunk and in debt (Yiu). In the mid-1920s, Greene converted from atheism to Catholicism. Although he claims it was to satisfy his future wife and kill time, Catholicism would later have a great effect on his writing (Votteler 1992). He also joined the communist party during the 1920s. However, he claimed it was for "amusement" and was never seriously involved (Yiu). Greene's marriage was never in good shape as he had numerous affairs before he and his wife separated in 1948.

The most notable aspect in most of Greene's writing was his use of Catholicism, which led to characters with twisted beliefs and outlooks on life. His characters were often paradoxes: sinners who were really saints and philanthropists who were really destroyers (Burgess, 1968). As Gene Kellogg (1970) said, "whoever shall seek to lose his soul in Greene's superbly generous way shall save it" (p. 209). Greene's characters portray the idea that they can "...scarcely act without alienating Him [God]" (Kermode, 1973, p. 216). Most of Greene's characters act as if conflict and pain is all they will get from religion and they should expect exactly that. It is as though they succeed by failing.

George Orwell (1968), probably Greene's greatest critic, stated:
He [Greene] appears to share the idea...that there is something rather distinguished in being damned; hell is some kind of high-class night club, entry to which is reserved for Catholics only, since the others, the non-Catholics, are too ignorant to be held guilty...
We are carefully informed that Catholics are no better than anybody else; they even,

perhaps, have a tendency to be worse, since their temptations are greater... (p. 216)

Greene held prejudiced view that only Catholics had even "the most elementary knowledge of Christian doctrine" (Orwell, 1968, p. 217)

In The Power and the Glory, the priest is obsessed with "...the need to protect God from himself. Sin is the shadow thrown by the strong light of God" (Kermode, 1973, p. 216). The priest cannot stop giving last rights despite the fact that he is a sinner, evading both the communist police and God and sustaining himself with alcohol (DeVitis 83). Yet Greene portrays the priest as "an index to his love of God" (DeVitis, 1964, p. 83) because he is an evil man who discovers himself. The priest simultaneously descends into darkness and ascends into martyrdom. Like many of Greene's novels, the priest in The Power and the Glory is "fallibly human but in his priestly function beyond reproach" (Updike, 1990, p. 179). A priest who had been forced by the new government to marry (and was too cowardly to refuse), considers himself worthy of damnation rather than doomed to it.

In The Heart of the Matter, Scobie is corrupted by his pity (Kellogg, 1970). It is considered a sort of egotism and leads to his eventual suicide. Yet it is "a love of God that orients his actions" (DeVitis, 1964, p. 85). Scobie, like Greene, seems to have his own kind of God. Scobie feels the God who he believes in "will not exact damnation from one so young, so unformed" (DeVitis, 1964, p. 85). Scobie accepts personal responsibility for sin, seeing himself as some kind of Christ. He accepts the Church for himself, yet refuses to accept them for others. He fears the loss of God that damnation will cause yet chooses to kill himself because he does not want to hurt his wife and mistress any more, even though experience has shown he cannot arrange the happiness of another person. His ultimate undoing is that while he loves God, he refuses to trust Him (DeVitis, 1964). Scobie seems to be yet another paradox with two halves that do not fit together. "If he felt adultery was mortal sin, he would stop committing it. If he believed in hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women" (Orwell, 1968, p. 217). If he has an immense fear of causing pain, he would not be a colonial police officer (Orwell 1968).

In The End of the Affair, the theme is brought forth that acceptance of God requires pain and that unforgivable sins are the most tempting. Sarah Miles, the main character, is portrayed almost as a saint. Bendrix serves as both Sarah's lover and the narrator. Interestingly, he maintains a non-religious view of the events, but also comments on the religious parts. "He is skeptical about what he calls the religious 'hanky-panky' of the novel, yet is the one left to make a final assessment of the meaning of the love affair" (DeVitis, 1963, p. 88). Near the end, Sarah promises God that she will give up Bendrix if he is still alive (she thinks he died when a bomb fell on the building he was in). Yet if he was dead, she would have had to give him up anyway (DeVitis, 1963).

In Brighton Rock, the idea is presented that someone who is raised Catholic is "capable of great intellectual subtlety" (Orwell, 1968, p. 217), no matter how stupid they are. Also, while Greene begins a focus on right and wrong, but Greene's Catholicism shifts the focus to good and evil (DeVitis, 1964). This provides a Catholicism-induced paradox: that good and evil are somehow different from right and wrong. The character Ida is "'a stickler where right is concerned'...but an alien in a spiritual dilemma" (DeVitis, 1964, p. 81). Pinkie, a character who is convinced he is damned and that there is nothing he can do about it, is drawn to his wife because she is good and he is determined to destroy that goodness (DeVitis, 1964). Ida is portrayed as a good person, but operating in a vacuum while Pinkie's actions are morally superior merely because of his belief in Catholicism. Pinkie's actions are sin, but his actions are actually easier to live with because he is convinced of his damnation. He seems damnation as a guarantee that his life had a purpose and that he will eventually be free of reality which he detests. He believes in hell yet cannot acknowledge belief or disbelief without contradiction himself. Hell cannot exist without heaven, but if heaven exists, there is the possibility of eternal reward. The novel suggests that Pinkie's commitment to damnation is in a way a commitment to Catholicism and therefore gives him a chance of forgiveness (Johnstone, 1982).

Some critics, however, disagree that Greene's characters were so bizarre and twisted. Many of Greene's characters' lives were paradoxes, but as V.S. Pritchett (1980) stated, "Such paradoxes fit in

admirably with Greene's gift for creating suspense" (p. 157). Pritchett also felt the strangeness of some characters was because Greene was trying to send the message about loneliness in the world and a lack of communication, especially in love (Pritchett 1980). Richard Johnstone (1982) felt Brighton Rock contained some of Greene's most twisted characters because Greene was trying to show the necessity of religious belief. The priest in The Power and the Glory is not bizarre and twisted. He is greatly dedicated to his priestly duties, despite the threat to his own life. He knows that he is a sinner, impure and shamed (Mauriac 1951).

A.A. DeVitis (1963) explains Scobie's twisted beliefs in The Heart of the Matter as also being a message and not a dysfunctional use of Catholicism:

...pity is shown to be a force that dominates the personality and the actions of the protagonist, making him subject to the suffering of the world, the victim of the unhappy and the disconnected. This pity is diagnosed as a sort of egotism, insisting as it does that the individual assume responsibility for his fellow man without consulting the referents of religion or philosophy. Hence, pity is shown to be an excess, and Greene comments indirectly on the value of a religious or philosophical orientation that accounts for suffering. (p. 85)

The most obvious observation that this researcher can make is the Graham Greene was a fruitcake. The strange and disturbed characters in his novels reflect that he seemed to have become mentally disturbed at an early age. Nearly all of Greene's novels seem to be nothing more than well organized paradoxes with the repetitive theme of confused characters that ended up murdered or killing themselves. It was interesting to discover that none of Greene's novels have happy endings. Research has shown that Graham Greene's use of Catholicism in selected novels was the reason for strange characters with twisted beliefs and outlooks.

In addition to the proven thesis, it seemed that Greene was trying to send messages in several of his books. Only two critics (Mauriac and Orwell) had decidedly positive or negative opinions on Greene's work. Based on what he has read by the critics, this researcher does not think Greene's writing was very good. This researcher is looking forward to reading The Power and the Glory to see if this opinion of Greene's work will be changed.

Works Cited

- DeVitis, A.A. Graham Greene. Twayne, 1964 Rpt. in Bloom, Harold. Graham Greene. USA: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, pp. 80-91.
- Riley, Carolyn, ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 3. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1975, pp. 207-10, 214.
- Bell, Pearl K. "Sinners and Saints." New Leader. October 15, 1973. pp. 16-17.
- Burgess, Anthony. Urgent Copy: Literary Studies. W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968, pp. 13-20.
- Hall, James. The Lunatic Giant in the Drawing Room: The British and American Novel Since 1930. Indiana University Press, 1968, pp. 111-23.
- Kellogg, Gene. The Vital Tradition: The Catholic Novel in a Period of Convergence. Loyola University Press, 1970, pp. 111-36.
- Nye, Robert. "How to Read Graham Greene's Books Without Kneeling." Books and Bookmen. Oct 1973, 18-21.
- "The Man Within." The Times Literary Supplement. September 17, 1971, pp. 1101-02.
- Riley, Carolyn and Phyllis Carmel Mendelson, eds. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 6. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1976, pp. 216-17.
- Orwell, George. Sonia Brownell Orwell and Ian Angus, eds. "Review: 'The Heart of the Matter' by Graham Greene." The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol 4. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968, pp. 439-43.
- Moss, Howard. Saturday Review. August 2, 1969.
- Kermode, Frank. Samuel Hynes, ed. Mr. Greene's Eggs and Crosses. Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays. Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp. 126-37.
- Votteler, Thomas, ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 72. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992, pp. 146-179.
- Allott, Kenneth and Miriam Farris. The Art of Graham Greene. Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963.
- Bawer, Bruce. "Graham Greene: The Politics." The New Criterion. Vol. 8, No. 3. November 1989, pp. 34-41.
- Johnstone, Richard. The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-thirties. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 62-78.
- Mauriac, Francois. Men I Hold Great. translated by Elsie Pell. Philosophical Library, 1951, pp. 124-28.
- Pritchett, V.S. The Tale Bearers: Literary Essays. Random House, 1980, pp. 78-91.
- Updike, John. "The Passion of Graham Greene." The New York Review of Books. Vol. XXXVII, No. 13. August 16, 1990, pp. 16-17.
- Yiu, Melody. "Greenland: The World of Graham Greene." <http://members.tripod.com/~greeneworld/>.