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# Treatment of sin, evil and thrill in the works of graham Greene

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## ABSTRACT

Graham Greene is a colossal figure in twentieth century literature. He is a prolific writer and has proved to be one of the main literary experts to the English speaking world. His writings are not just pieces of entertainment. They have more profound meaning and significance. Greene's childhood seemed to be unhappy. From the events and influences of Greene's early life readers can gather evidence of "flight, rebellion and misery during those first sixteen years when the novelists is formed."<sup>1</sup> Being a sensitive boy, Greene felt cramped in the environment in which he was placed. From his book of essays, *The Lost Childhood* and from his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, we get an idea of Greene's feeling of a sense of emptiness, boredom and lifeless depression during his early years.

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## Introduction

Greene made many attempts to escape from these unhappy feelings. He indulged in such neurotic acts as drinking hay fever lotion, eating a bunch of deadly nightshade or taking twenty aspirins before swimming. In his prologue to the *Lawless Roads* Greene describes the school of his father as a place where two worlds existed side by side. He writes as "One was an inhabitant of both countries: On Saturday and Sunday afternoons of one side of the baize door, the rest of the week of the other. How can life on a boarder be other than restless? You are pulled by different ties of hate and love."<sup>2</sup> This image of two adjacent and opposite worlds recurs in his novels and short stories to separate the world of knowledge, the world of love from the world of hate and the world of the child from the world of the adult. Greene visualizes man as hanging between two worlds – heaven and hell – both claiming his allegiance. In this connection Walter Allen says, "This vision of human life as the point of intersection of heaven and hell, Greene has pursued through a series of novels with increasing single mindedness."<sup>3</sup>

In his essay entitled "Walter De La Mare's Short Stories", Greene himself says, "every creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can be called, in the wide eighteenth century use of the term, a poet is a victim, a man given over to an obsession."<sup>4</sup> For Greene this obsession is with sin, with evil and with the seediness of our civilization. With great psychological insight Greene says that man's sense of guilt and his utter helplessness prevents the recurrence of the sinful act. Evil is the "leitmotif" in the novels of Graham Greene. His is a "bitter universe in which the devil is abroad, utterly malignant and baleful."<sup>5</sup>

Greene believes that evil is an essential, inescapable element of life. He says that evil and suffering is one, but our finite intelligence cannot fully grasp that. In his critical comments on Greene, George Woodcock states "Theologically Greene may recognize original sin, but in his writings, the evil in man is always less than evil without, arising from the collective activities of society. His observation of humanity forces him into a revolutionary attitude."<sup>6</sup>

Greene portrays evil in all its possible dimensions. But, he also wishes to resist it. Vexed by the problem of evil and suffering, Greene found the hint of an explanation in the Roman Catholic faith. He was impressed by the theological arguments of the Catholic Church. Greene declares that he "is a Catholic with an intellectual if not an emotional belief in Catholic dogma."<sup>7</sup> The Catholic symbols of sin and evil appeal to him because they evoke the real world of man.

Greene considers the problems of sin and suffering incisively. He not only describes sin and suffering but points out that through suffering God strips us of our false in order to bring out our true enduring selves. Greene depicts sin, crime, evil, fear, despair and damnation and believes that they are not inseparable from redemption, salvation, love, pity and belief in God. He looks upon them as two sides of the same coin. Greene's world is inhabited by isolated, hunted and guilt-ridden men and women. Jim Hunter argues "Greene's central characters are failures often scape-goats being hunted by society. He writes about them because he finds their courage and integrity winning virtues though not of a conventional kind."<sup>8</sup>

Greene dramatizes the loneliness of the agonists in his novels. He shows their moral failure. Their loneliness and moral failures are symptomatic of the presence of evil in their lives. They are driven to crime and sin that leads to despair and death. Yet, they attain salvation or regeneration of the spirit either by virtue of an act of love or charity of through the grace and mercy of God. Greene repeatedly points out that the presence of evil is the first thing we have to apprehend in our lives. He pin points the idea that it is not easy to sustain innocence in this world. Greene writes in *Brighton Rock*, "You had to go back a long way farther before you got innocence; innocence was slobbering mouth, a toothless gum pulling at the teats; perhaps not even that; innocence was the ugly cry of birth."<sup>9</sup> In his story *The Innocent*, Greene presents a painter who finds his own drawings to be obscene after some time. According to Greene any attempt to nourish innocence in this world is doomed to failure because the lure of corruption is irresistible. Greene in his novels shows how easily innocence is

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threatened and destroyed during childhood. He speaks of the childhood of Anthony Ferrant in *England Made Me*, Raven in *A Gun for Sale*, Pinkie and Rose in *Brighton Rock* and Rose Cullen in *The Confidential Agent* as the cases in point. Even the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* remembers how far he has travelled from his days of innocence and how soon he has reached a state of mortal sin.

Greene's novels have the paraphernalia of chase and escape, crime and intrigue, espionage and conspiracy, murder and suicide. They are full of thrill, suspense and excitement. Greene's books have intellectual penetration, psychological probing and an art of social and moral questioning. His first novel, *The Man Within* is set in the eighteenth century Sussex of smugglers and excise men. As we pursue the adventures of the hero, Francis Andrews, we find ourselves enmeshed in a crisscross of crime and murder and suicide. This novel depicts the agony and desperation of a person who tries to go by moral considerations. In spite of its religious overtones *Brighton Rock* is a tale of crime and violence centred on betrayal or the fear of betrayal. The hero of this novel is a seventeen year old boy, Pinkie, who slowly but steadily emerges as the leader of a race-course gang and indulges in evil, betrayal and violence. When writing a criticism of this novel Paul West says that "we can understand such a novel if we read it as a thriller – a gangster story ... if we go into it looking for special antithesis which floods over us, when we read it as a thriller."<sup>10</sup>

*A Gun for Sale* is a psychological study which gives us the full blooded image of hunting and hunted man. The central figure of this novel is Raven who belongs to the world of violence, gangsterism and terror. If one examines Greene's writings carefully he can find elements of established thrillers in most of them. Greene's works reflect his sustained interest in melodramatic situation – murder, suicide, chase, violence and crime. But at the same time through them he speaks so frequently and probingly of sin and grace, guilt and mercy, salvation and damnation, Heaven and Hell. Greene's fictional writings have an unmistakable religious and eschatological dimension.

*Brighton Rock* was his first critically acclaimed religious novel. It describes the betrayal of loyalties in gangland Britain and remains a disquieting parable of conscience. In his three subsequent theological novels – *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*, his gift was to locate the moment of crisis when a character loses faith, religious or otherwise, and life is exposed in all its drab wonder. 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.

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In his three subsequent novels, *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene tries to explain the nature of evil and the burden of suffering that afflicts human beings in theological terms. Pinkie, the whisky priest and Scobie are all obsessed with the prospect of salvation. As Catholics they are aware of their sinfulness and are naturally tormented by its realization. In *The Power and the Glory*, the whisky priest says to the lieutenant "I don't know a thing about the mercy of God; I don't know how awful the human heart looks to him. But I do know this that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too."<sup>11</sup>

Greene deals with the dilemma and anguish of the contemporary man and he speaks in terms of individual commitment, possibly leading to the longed – salvation, lends existential bias to his novels. Greene is aware of the predicament that drives man to the necessity of some conclusive action. Such a predicament arises in the life of his heroes partly from the collective forces of society and partly from his own moral constitution. Greene's fiction grows out of his intense experiences of man's struggle and trail. In him there is no separation between the man who suffers and the mind that creates. While writing his novels, his experiences as a suffering man work as the hinter-land of his artistic vision and creation. The existence of evil in this world is the predominant and driving force that fascinates Greene. He does justice to his subject by bringing the full weight of his artistry to bear upon the appalling vision. Life, for him, 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 we find in Greene's fiction a preoccupation with eschatological issues. Greene's novels introduce us to a world which to a large extent resembles our own. But his vision apprehends reality in such a way as to reveal a new perception. With his clinical detachment while surveying sin, Greene reminds us of the lines of T. S. Eliot:

Men's curiosity searches past and future And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend The point of intersection of the timeless With time, is an occupation for the saint—No occupation either, but something given And taken, in a lifetime's death in love, Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender. (T.S Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*, *Four Quarters*)

Greene is considered one of the most outstanding British novelists of the century. Widely praised for his superb narrative abilities, vivid cinematic descriptions, and compelling fusion of religious and political themes, he is regarded as a master craftsman and formidable moralist. His novels project a vision of life in which physical pursuit, thrill and suspense on the one hand and existential and religious elements on the other got intrigued into articulate works of art.

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