Character and Symbol in Graham Greene's Works

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Greene's characters are neither saints, nor heroes in the conventional sense. The heroic age in literature is over; we are familiar now with the "little man," the anti-hero who enlist our sympathies by being as fallible and incompetent as ourselves. The novelist no longer presents an image of virtues which we can admire but can probably not go far toward attaining. The postwar British novel has seen a spate of these antiheroes: Murdoch, Wain, and others have made their principal characters reflect the sickness and self-seeking of the society in which they live. Greene has been doing this for rather longer.

Pinkie, the young gangster in Brighton Rock, is typical of a generation that has grown up without roots, without loyalties, the target of false promises that society never fulfills, twisted and embittered by disillusionment before he has become a man. Greene stresses the power of this disillusionment to become a driving, destructive force. Pinkie is a puritan, hanting drink and sex, seeking to keep his own inverted integrity untouched by others. Like the great Romantic Outsider, the Byronic rebel, he walks alone in the wilderness, Yet even his crime and violence are petty and ultimately self-destructive, for he lives in an age that lacks scope not only for the great hero but also for the great rebel.

Many of Greene's characters show this same failure either to adjust to society or to triumph over it. They are lacking socially, professionally, or personally, some of them bearing a physical defect to announce their failure in a society that judges by externals. The priest in The Power and the Glory is a drunkard; Anthony in England Made Me is a waster, with a scar caused by his own incompetence; Scobie in The Heart of the Matter is passed over for promotion; Rycker in A Burnt-out Case is a failed priest; Maurice in The End of the Affair, a witer dissatisfied with his achievement, is lame; Smythe, the militant atheist in the same book is disfigured; Raven in A Gun for sale has a harelip.

These failures and defects emphasize the loneliness of Greene's people. They are the very types of the present age, showing the isolation of the individual. Those of his characters who are exiles in the literal sense stand for the alienation of modern man from the stability that society seemed to promise when it was whole.

For Greene, like Henry James, has a gift of using symbols which help to create the character who sees them, which become part of the reader's understanding. To take but one example, the police official Scobie feels his experience in images of law, judgment, restraint, and punishment. Often the very setting of the background becomes like an extra, comprehensive character in the story, exerting its influence. This is a rare gift, which Greene shares with masters like Balzac, Zola, and Hardy: the description of the seafront in Brighton Rock is as significant in its way as the brooding introduction of Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native.

Greene is fascinated, almost obsessed, by the early loss of innocence. He sees life as a journey in which more experience brings more evil, the sorrow that comes through knowledge. One of his recurring characters is the childwoman, able to do harm because she has a woman's power with a child's disregard of consequences. In her fall, elder men are made the unwilling instruments of corruption. Such are Milly Drower in It's a battlefield, Marie Rycker, Helen Rolt, Anna Hilde in The Ministry of Fear, who looked "too young for all the things she must have seen" Most pathetic of all is Pinkie's bride Rose, willing to damn herself for love of an
evil that she cannot comprehend.

Greene’s own childhood was not happy, and he
has revealed some of the images of horror which
afflicted him when the dark night came over him
too young, as it does over Pinkie and Raven. Pinkie,
hating aggressive sex because he saw his parent’s joyless,
intercourse, tells the story of a young pregnant
girl’s suicide almost exactly as Greene
relates it elsewhere as a fact of his own hearing
when a child. Raven is brutalized by his institutional
childhood, and those characters who have been to
expensive boarding schools are little happier in
their memories.

God is the hunter, Francis Thompson’s Hound of
Heaven. If you run away, he tracks you down and
confronts you in your last loneliness, like the
Mexican priest who does not want to be a martyr but
cannot escape, like Sarah in The End of the Affair,
a saint against her will, like Scobie, held by the
images of faith even in his suicide. Once the fight
is joined, no one can choose how far he will go.
“There are no limits,” says Huxley’s sardonic Arch-
Vicar in the barbaric society of Ape and Essence,
and Greene could echo those words in his own way.
Like Newman, he regards the act of faith in God
as so tremendous and complete that nothing else is
a real problem; so Sarah Miles feels;

I believe there’s a God——I believe the whole
bag of tricks, there’s nothing I don’t believe, they
could subdivide the Trinity into a dozen parts
and I’d believe. They could dig up records that
proved Christ had been invented by Pilate to get
himself promoted and I’d believe just the same.
I’ve caught belief like a disease. I’ve fallen into
belief like I fell in love.

This is extremism indeed, unlikely to commend
itself either to unbelievers or to careful, “reasonable”
Christians. Yet who can dare to say that God
demands less than all?

Greene continually attacks “morality” as the world
at large undersands it. Morality is the god of people
like the Lieutenant in The Power and the Glory, a
predictable god, ensuring that certain acts will be
followed by certain consequences. Good intentions
may have some force, but they do not always lead
to better results than bad ones on the secular plane.
Scobie is a good man, noted for his sense of justice,
but he sinks to degradation and suicide through
trying to do the right thing for everybody.

Greene is surely right to emphasize that the
totality is more important than the details. Chris-
tianity is not a set of rules or precepts, but a
commitment to a Person. The precepts are there
and not to be ignored, but they take their force
from their Giver and the mutual love between his
creatures and himself. It is this relationship of love
that Greene continually describes, and this is what
transcends the seediness of the background, the
failures of his characters, and makes him a notable
Christian writer. There is something almost medieval
in the images of love, the power to wound Christ
through sin. Scobie, desolate with human love that
conflicts with religious duty, can see “the punch-
drunk head of God reeling sideways” The emphasis
is unfashionable today, even among Christians, but
Greene hammers it home continually and most not-
tably in The End of the Affair.

The lieutenant and the priest, Rose and Pinkie,
the “damned” and the “saints,” complete the roster
of Greene’s moral types. It may be that with Rose
and the priest Greene has burst through the moral
schema which is his direct concern. The priest and
Rose came as close to that borderline where the
moral flowers into the mystical as any characters in
Greene, or perhaps in contemporary literature. The
mystical air is rarefied, and Greene, like most of
us, does not linger there. This is a fact which should
be recalled by those who find Greene’s Christian
vision a lamentable truncated one.