

## Character and Symbol in Graham Greene's Works

Yukio Ando

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 enlists 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, hating 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 writer 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 Drover in *It's a Battlefield*, Marie Rycker, Helen Rolt, Anna Hilfe 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 come over him too young, as it does over Pinkie and Raven. Pinkie, hating sex because he saw his parent's joyless, aggressive 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. Christianity 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 notably 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.