

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract

One of the most popular British novelists of the twentieth century, Graham Greene is also one of the most fascinating examples of misreading and critical contention in literature. The cause of this critical contention could reside in the dilemma in placing the British author given the complexity of his writing and its protean nature. Hence, in light of critics' and audiences' hesitations in deciding whether Graham Greene is a catholic writer or just "a writer who happens to be a catholic," an agile storyteller or a fine psychoanalyst of the human soul, we will endeavour to try to trace to what extent the elements of the Psychoanalytical critical tradition (besides the Catholic one) have influenced Graham Greene's artistic creation. We will therefore endeavour to try to give a psychoanalytic reading of the theme of pity in the novel *The Heart of the Matter*.

Keywords: Graham Greene, psychoanalysis, *The Heart of the Matter*, pity, Catholicism

***The Heart of the Matter* - A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Concept of Pity. A Case Study**

The third of Graham Greene's religious novels, *The Heart of the Matter*, is a complex, psychological and analytical novel which probes with a sometimes disturbing clarity into the very essence of the human mind.¹

Readers confronted with this novel become instantly aware of the "overwhelming sense of pity" which permeates Graham Greene's writing. Furthermore, it is particularly this concept of pity which aroused the deepest critical contention regarding the validity and credibility of Greene's characters. Evelyn Waugh wrote upon the publication of the novel: "To me the idea of willing my own damnation for the love of God is either a very loose poetical expression or a mad blasphemy, for the God that accepted that sacrifice could be neither just nor lovable." (*Felix Culpa*). Many other critics have come up with similar arguments, while the author himself

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writes in the *Introduction* to his novel that “The character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride.”² Several other critics, however, have expressed divergent views. Roger Sarroock in his *Saints, Sinners and Comedians* referring to the protagonist Scobie says: “[...] if he is a monster it is not through monstrous pride but on account of his absurd attempt at pure moral action in a fallen world [...]” (qtd in Pierloot 104).

By introducing this discussion about Scobie’s damnation or salvation in light of his “overdeveloped sense of pity and responsibility” we argue that insisting on a purely philosophical or catholic explanation critics fail to recognize that Graham Greene’s interest with psychology and the psychology of the sinner in general which is rooted in the author’s humanitarian approach. We also argue that it is with the analysis of Scobie’s character that the reader comes to understand the writer’s complex use of the concepts of sin, evil and damnation. The focus on the “subtle nuances of the human psyche” in the portrayal of the main character makes us discover the reality behind the apparent, the thin line separating sinners from saints. Furthermore, we consider *The Heart of the Matter* is most representative of Graham Greene’s literary universe as it re-enacts most of its thematic concerns and preoccupations.

Not only Scobie from *The Heart of the Matter* but also all of Graham Greene’s characters are tormented individuals continuously torn between two sides, inwardly focused and unable to fit into an acceptable role assigned by society. They represent different stages of the author’s own development where the fears of the external world must be overcome and internalized. This is probably the main reason why according to psychologists a writer’s efforts to escape his own fears are clearly linked to his coming to terms with his unconscious fantasies through artistic creativity. One of the most renowned literary figures of the twentieth century, the writer Marcel Proust, in his work *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* dwells upon the artist’s need to create in order to recover his lost past. Therefore, the writer’s artistic merit lies in the imaginative power with which he creates a fictional world in which he restores and integrates memories of his past. The argument to support this view can be found in Graham Greene’s own statements. He notes with respect to his creative activity: “Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape

the madness, the melancholia, and the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation.” (*Ways of Escape*, 275).

Our attempt at a psychoanalytical approach to Graham Greene’s novel *The Heart of the Matter* is also motivated by the general critical opinion that any tentative decoding of Graham Greene’s characters asks for psychoanalytic approach. Therefore, our endeavour in analyzing Graham Greene’s novel from the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism is aimed at producing as many perspectives of Greene’s work as possible in order to better grasp his literary universe.

Henry Scobie, the protagonist from *The Heart of the Matter*, is a conscious police officer who works in a hostile British colony in West Africa during World War II. His wife Louise is an unhappy and demanding woman whose ambitions and hopes to be accepted by the other Brits are shattered when her husband is passed over for promotion. Scobie feels responsible for her misery and blames himself for her solitary life. Their only child had died in England a few years before. Although they are both devoted Catholics, Louise’s going to church every Sunday does not seem to ease her pain at all so her husband tries to arrange for her to go on a holiday tour to South Africa. He tries to borrow money from the bank but he is turned down. Yusef, a Syrian trader believed to be involved in illegal trade with diamonds, offers to lend him the money and Scobie although aware of his benefactor’s corrupted nature, after initially declining, finally accepts the offer because he wishes to please his wife. His overwhelming sense of pity forces him to accept an immoral offer in order to minimize his wife’s sufferings. Shortly after his wife’s departure, the survivors of a shipwreck arrive in the colony after a forty day struggle on the sea. Scobie is reminded of his dead child as he tries to comfort a young girl dying. His memories of the painful loss also surface when a nineteen year old widow named Helen Rolt arrives too in critical condition. Fortunately she recovers quickly and Scobie who spends a lot of time in her company falls in love with her. Although being painfully aware that they are committing the sin of adultery, they start a passionate love affair. Helen is young, immature and a non-believer and she fails to understand Scobie’s feelings of guilt because he blames himself for hurting God with his actions. She would like him to be less preoccupied with their carnal sin because she holds his religious concerns to be “humbug.” Later on, a letter Scobie writes to Helen trying to convince her of his love and loyalty finds its way into Yusef’s hands and he uses

it to blackmail Scobie. When Louise unexpectedly returns from her trip, Scobie struggles to keep secret his relationship with Helen. But his wife indulges into a subtle torture of Scobie as she insists that he should accompany her to Mass as a good Catholic ought to do. Scobie is aware that he will be unable to receive communion in a state of mortal sin. Scobie develops feelings of insecurity and suspicion about his servant Ali and commits the error to confess this to Yusef. Shortly after, Ali is killed by teenage thieves. We are led to believe that Scobie blames himself for his killing as he believes that Yusef arranged the death of Ali. A victim of his own guilty conscience, Scobie decides to free everyone from himself and commits suicide. His last words are: "Dear God I love...."

Greene portrays his protagonist as a desperate character who commits the most abominable sins, he is an adulterer, the moral author of a possible crime and he defies God by recurring to the ultimate sin which is his suicide. He is a fallen man whose damnation seems certain. However, as the title of the novel clearly suggests, the truth is not as simplistic and transparent as it might seem, rather, at a close analysis of Scobie's motifs, the reality hidden behind the apparent, the very "heart of the matter" is revealed.

The novel raises a wide range of questions regarding the nature of sin and religious faith in the modern context. It interprets virtue and vice, good and evil as interchangeable values. Scobie has both something of a sinner and of a saint in him. He is a complex psychological character, a very good example of a man with good intentions who ultimately brings unhappiness to the people around him: his pity for his wife leads him to borrow money from the corrupt trader Yusef to pay for her holiday. Pity further leads him to indulge into an affair with the childish widow Helen and then to kill himself in order to spare both women of pain. Sometimes his sense of pity and responsibility reaches universal proportions. When Scobie contemplates the lights of the hospital where the survivors of the shipwreck are cared for, he thinks: "What an absurd thing it was to expect happiness in a world so full of misery...If one knew, he wondered, the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called *The Heart of the Matter*?" (*The Heart of the Matter*, 141). In spite of Scobie's intentions being apparently good, the ultimate source of the evil he spreads around him like an epidemic is undoubtedly his own consciousness.

In spite of having eaten from the tree of knowledge, humans are rarely fully aware of the possible outcomes of their actions, nor do they possess a complex understanding of the thin dividing line between good and evil. Scobie is the typical example of modern man trying to “arrange happiness” for others. Greene uses psychological analysis to look into his character’s mind in order to explain how he tries to cope with his interior conflicts. However, in order to understand Scobie as a character one must also grasp Graham Greene’s complex use of the concept of pity. In his introduction to the novel the author writes: “The character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride. But I found the effect on the reader was quite different. To them Scobie was exonerated, Scobie was “a good man.” (IX). General critics’ judgements on Scobie have given rise to moral and religious debates, however we argue that the protagonist’s pity can be best explained in light of his pride and here a psychoanalytical reading of the novel is most appropriate.

In psychoanalyst Roland Pierloot’s opinion, Scobie’s need to bring happiness to anyone who is helpless and vulnerable around him can be associated with an obsessive tendency towards reparation. In other words, what Graham Greene describes as being pride in religious terms, in a psychological reading is seen as a form of narcissistic omnipotence. This entails “an overwhelming need to undo every form of evil or unhappiness.” (Pierloot 105) The author wanted to express the essential difference between feelings of love and pity, between loving someone and being corrupted by pity or by sentiment as the author himself marvellously notes in the following excerpt from *The Heart of the Matter*:

They had been corrupted by money and he had been corrupted by sentiment. Sentiment was the more dangerous, because you couldn’t name its price. A man open to bribes was to be relied upon below a certain figure, but sentiment might uncoil in the heart at a name, a photograph, even a smell remembered. (*The Heart of the Matter*, 45).

Ultimately it is pity and pride which prevent Scobie from understanding the “appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.” In revealing pity’s destructive effects Greene wants to show readers how corrupt a man of good will can become. Graham Greene’s keen interest in the psychology of the sinner emphasizes just how much he is concerned with the

fate of the individual in general rather than with strict religious dogmas. Moreover, his endeavours to probe into Scobie's thoughts and mental processes are akin to the psychoanalysis used by D. H. Lawrence in his dealings with the dilemmas of the modern man. What makes them both very good psychoanalysts is their ability to evaluate their characters on the basis of how they think and act in the contemporary context.

Conclusion

The Heart of the Matter is not just a religious novel but rather a psychological study evoking man's struggles to live up to the demands imposed by both faith and society. Scobie believes in God but he cannot reconcile love with suffering and hence his need to alleviate other people's misery. He cannot believe in a God he finds unjust, "a God who was not human enough to love what he had created" (*The Heart of the Matter*, 121). Scobie's predicament might be that of the man who opposes God and is defeated precisely because he cannot understand His mercy. Without having the capacity to understand God's will, Scobie tries to play God himself in his narcissistic need to eradicate suffering. Graham Greene's daring in his placing the individual against God is one of the qualities that makes his fiction unique by raising his protagonists from the statute of outcasts and failures to that of heroes. Taking into consideration Scobie's efforts to prevent suffering, are his deeds justified? This is the question that readers must answer by the end of the novel. The message Greene seems to convey is that despite all his abominable deeds, the main character Scobie has not yet been deserted by God's grace. Father Rank gives readers hope for Scobie's soul when he comforts Louise after his death: "For goodness' sake, Mrs Scobie, don't imagine you know a thing about God's mercy" (*The Heart of the Matter*, 254). Mrs Scobie symbolically stands for all humanity, and for Greene himself: neither the pious nor the sinful have a full understanding of the nature of good and evil – humanity is condemned to exist forever outside the boundaries of true ethical wisdom.

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¹ Consider also John Updike's comment: "The three novels... *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *The End of the Affair*... all have claims to greatness; they are as intense and penetrating and disturbing as an inquisitor's gaze. After his modest start as a novelist under the influence of Joseph Conrad and John Buchan, Greene's masterly facility at concocting thriller plots and his rather blithely morbid sensibility had come together, at a high level of intelligence and passion, with the strict terms of an inner religious debate that had not yet wearied him."

² It is highly interesting to note that the Catholic Dictionary at catholicculture.org similarly associates pity with condescendence, and thereby indirectly with pride: "Grief or pain aroused by the suffering or misfortune of another. Pity is less than sympathy, which shares in the experience of another. It is a form of condescending sympathy."