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Tragic Vision of Graham Greene in His Select Novels

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Tragic, Comic and Tragicomic Categories

Graham Greene's novels can be analyzed in terms of the artistic exploration of modes of experiences that is tragic, comic and tragicomic. The preoccupation with evil sharpens Greene's tragic sense. Greene's heroes in most of his early and middle phase novels are undeniably tragic. The tragic is always referred to some aspect of man's concrete involvement with evil. William J. Rewak in his essay "Maturation of Graham Greene's vision" in *The Catholic World* (December, 1957) notes this: "Real maturity does not stop at an insight into the tragic; it involves the tragic completed by and suffused with, a vision of joy."

This paper focuses on the first phase of novels written by Graham Greene. Distinct features of Greene's early novels are dealt with in this paper. Characters of Greene are analyzed and compared

The Features of the First Phase of Novels of Graham Greene

In the novels of the first phase, Greene's tragic sense is predominant. Contradictions, duality and conflict, inner or outer are the essence of tragedy and Greene's intention is of a tragic purport in his first novel *The Man Within* (1929).

The Man Within is set in the late 19th century on the English coast. It is the story of Francis Andrews who is tormented by the memory of his dead father, a smuggler. Andrews

hates his father for the abuse of his mother which eventually led to her death. Written during his early years as a writer, Graham Greene's *The Man Within* is a novelette of self-discovery, friendship and the power over one's ultimate destiny.

Haunted by memories of his father and his belief in his unworthiness, Andrews the chief character of the novel, betrays his fellow smugglers in the hopes of redeeming himself both in the eyes of his fellow crew and his own. Greene portrays the character of Francis Andrews as the "Judas figure" who had betrayed his fellow shipmen and Captain Carlyon. The story of the novel revolves round Andrews who is a victim of unhappy childhood and has always been chased by haunting memories of his brutish and cruel father. He comes to a disastrous end trying to bring about a happy reconciliation of the opposing selves in him and the opposing forces of good and evil. By the time the good appears to have won and the evil to have been mastered, events went beyond his control and lead him to suicide.

Unhappy Childhood as the Root Cause

Greene makes one to believe that Andrew's guilt is rooted in an unhappy childhood. Unhappy childhood vitiates his existence and leaves him a twisted being. The pale-faced, flower-loving mother and the cruel bullying father leave everlasting memories on the young mind. Throughout the novel there is a brooding pre-occupation with death and the existence of God. Andrews is the first exemplification of Greene's tragic sense. He brings himself to the point of illumination though the process of his self-discovery has been tortuous. The confusion in his mind is an outcome of the division in him, an explicit tragic device. Janet McCann writes:

It may well be, of course, that Andrews has brought himself to the pinnacle of self delusion rather than of self-knowledge (McCann Janet, 1977).

Andrew's death by suicide is an attempt to prove his sincerity in trying to resolve the conflict by means of his love for Elizabeth which helps him discover his true self.

Comedy, No Comedy

In *The Comedians* (1967) the narrator Brown who considers everyone around him a comedian playing a role comments on the African American lover of his mother when he ends himself after her death: "Perhaps he was no comedian after all. Death is a proof of sincerity" (Greene Graham, 1967).

This novel can be described as a thriller. It is set in Haiti during the years of Papa Doc Duvalier's Regime, when Mr. Brown, Smith, Jones and various other passengers, have travelled there from America by ship. Mr. Jones has many stories about his army days. He talks cheerily enough about 'the Commandos.' Here is a simple intensification of a tragic situation which leads the hero into a self-devised duplicity with the result that the tragedy misses its mark.

Lyrical in Essence

As the title implies, *Stamboul Train* (1932) is a thriller about a group of travellers aboard the Orient Express which ran across Europe from the English Channel to Istanbul, Turkey. The descriptions of Istanbul are based upon a visit which Greene once made during a vacation cruise. The novel is prefaced with a sentence from George Santayana: "Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate and comic in its existence" (Rao Rama, 1978). The final impression about the book is the novelist's understanding of the nature of things in general.

Life and Politics – A Battlefield

It's a Battlefield (1934) is an early novel by Graham Greene, first published in 1934. Graham Greene later described it as his "first overtly political novel" (West W. J., 2002). Greene said that its theme is "the injustice of man's justice" (Couto Maria, 1988). Drover, a bus driver, stabs a man who is about to attack his wife. The man is a policeman and Drover is a Communist and so he is sentenced to hang. The novel explores the intersecting lives of those close to Drover in the days before the hanging. His Communist colleagues want him to die because this will gain support for the party; his wife and brother begin an affair. There is no hero. With few exceptions, the characters are deliberately limned as, in one critic's view, "mediocre, bleak, uninspiring and at times perverted and stupid" (Gordon Haim, 1997).

It's a Battlefield makes manifest Greene's tragic sense in more clear terms. Puzzlement and a sense of waste of positives make for the tragic sense and the Assistant Commissioner and Conrad stand for these diversely tragic impressions. The theme of the novel is the injustice of human justice. The title of the battlefield is opposite in the context of the violence and confusion of the events described in the book. *It's a Battlefield* portrays a world of lost values where justice and fairplay run away. From *The Man Within* to *It's a Battlefield* it is a rapid stride towards a more convincing and more realistic presentation of man's helplessness in the face of a confusing uncertainty about the very fabric of justice, human or divine. There is a deepened tragic sense when compared to *The Man Within* since it is not merely a divided mind or conscience that causes the agony, but a large scheme of things suggestive of a metaphysical dimension.

Nationality, Identities and Childhood Impressions

The novel *England Made Me* (1935) focuses on the question of nationality, and the ability to fashion self-identities. Greene uses the character of Anthony Farrant as the key protagonist, whose self-creation of a heroic self represents a questioning of modernism itself, and wondering where it is going. In *England Made Me* the tragic vision is exemplified through the motifs of exile and alienation with a tangle of a hopeless pair of twins. The real significance of the novel lies in the portrayal of the tragic vision and terror of life. The world that is made manifest here is one of human fecklessness. The evil of life is poignantly dramatized. To the much recurrent theme of depraved innocence is added to the theme of exile. Greene points out that childhood impressions, specially the unhappy and painful, leave permanent scars and that growth into adulthood is a process of corruption.

Anthony has a very close relationship, which borders on incest, with his twin sister, Kate. Kate is the personal secretary and mistress to Erik Krogh, a wealthy Swedish businessman. Through Kate's influence, Anthony obtains a job as Krogh's bodyguard. Krogh

is ruthless and amoral in his pursuit of more wealth and power. A central theme of this book is internationalism. Krogh has no allegiance to any country. His only loyalty is to himself and his fortune. If wealth corrupts Krogh, it is insecurity that corrupts the twins. The tragic sense of life intensifies and reaches a further death in this book for it is as much a tragedy of alienation and exile as it is one of depraved innocence, perhaps the taint of original sin. Kate realizes it: "There is honour among thieves. No brotherhood in our boat. Only who can cut the biggest dash and who can swim." (p.256) The subtle tragedy of the book lies in the relationship between the twins in the tangle of the incestuous relationship. The central point of this novel is Kate's incestuous desire. Greene himself states what the novel is really about:

The subject – apart from the economic background of capitalism staggering from crisis to crisis – was simple and unpolitical, a brother and sister in the confusion of incestuous love (Greene Graham, 1970).

Both Kate and Anthony know what goes on in each other's mind and the author tells us several times that they might have been a married couple for thirty years:

She was aware, having shared his thoughts for more than thirty years, felt his fears eat in her own body, of his incalculable nerves. (p.6)

They had as many memories in common as an old couple celebrating their thirtieth anniversary. (p.8)

The memories one turns over like an old couple after thirty years, who have shared first love, first hate, first drink, first treachery... (p.76)

The characters in this novel are pawns in the game of a millionaire aspiring to climb supremacy, the millionaire himself being an intellectual moron. Greene centres the tragic uncertainties that cloud the thinking of the doomed pair. *England Made Me* is a significant document in cultural decadence, which is an aspect of the tragic vision Greene projects in the first phase of his career.

Murder on Demand

A Gun for Sale is a thriller in the 'cloak and dagger' genre. Raven is hired for a murder and paid in stolen currency. The central themes of the novel are pursuit and betrayal. Raven the sensitive criminal is a victim of betrayal. About Raven we are told:

He had been made by hatred; it had constructed him into this thin smoky murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly. His mother had borne him when his father was in gaol, and six years later when his father was hanged for another crime, she had cut her own throat with a kitchen knife; afterwards there had been the home. He had never felt the least tenderness for anyone; he was made in this image and he had his own odd pride in the result; he didn't want to be unmade. (p.67)

Raven belongs to the world of wounds and guilt. Son of a criminal and a social detritus, his childhood has been to him a single horrifying memory of his mother who hacked and sawed

at herself with a kitchen knife. Unhappy childhood, early experience of horror, physical deformity, injustice and double-crossing corrupt the outlook of the helpless man. He knows that he is criminal, but he knows how his mind is made and how his impulses have been conditioned. Life having not offered him anything pleasant or happy, he is a bitter example of the terror of life. In the shed when Anne tells him that in the event of a war, babies shall have to die for gas-masks have not been invented for them he says stubbornly:

The poor ones'll be lucky. And what do I care about the rich? This isn't a world I'd bring children into.' She could just see his tense crouching figure. 'It's just their selfishness,' he said. 'They have a good time and what do they mind if someone's born ugly? Three minutes in bed or against a wall, and then a lifetime for the one that's born. Mother love,' he began to laugh, seeing quite clearly the kitchen table, the carving knife on the linoleum, the blood all over his mother's dress. (p.124)

Raven's death is not far from being tragic in spite of his being a hired murderer. His introspection and self-analysis make him Greene's principle characters. There is not a single lovable character in the book. Apart from Raven being a criminal everyone else is an unpleasant person.

In Pursuit of Hell

Brighton Rock is a tragedy showing the progressive deterioration of Pinkie ultimately resulting in his damnation. Greene himself told in an interview that Pinkie is a man who goes to hell.⁸ Pinkie is deeply evil. His grey eyes are "ageless" and they had an effect of heartlessness like those of old women in whom human feeling had died. The key to Pinkie's mental conditioning lies in his horror of the sex act:

It was Saturday night. His father panted like a man at the end of a race and his mother made a horrifying sound of pleasurable pain. He was filled with hatred, disgust, loneliness; he was completely abandoned; he had no share in their thoughts – for the space of a few minutes he was dead – he was like a soul in purgatory watching the shameless act of a beloved person. (p.189)

Ida Arnold, who was a woman that Hale picked up in an attempt to avoid being killed, becomes obsessed with finding Hale's killer and bringing him to justice. Ida represents the modern person. She has no religious beliefs to speak of, she just believes in "right and wrong." However, Ida finds no fault in anything which brings her pleasure. Ida sees nothing wrong with casual sex, for instance. "It's natural" she says, and there's nothing wrong with it. "She wasn't religious. She didn't believe in heaven or hell, only in ghosts, ouija boards, tables which rapped and little inept voices speaking plaintively of flowers." So while "the good guys" in this novel are not religious, "the bad guys" are very religious. Hale's killer Pinkie was reared as a Roman Catholic, sings parts of the Mass to himself, and believes in all of the doctrines of the Church. Outside of the fact that Pinkie is also an evil psychopathic killer, he's not a bad bloke.

If the tragic heroes fall in classical tragedy from worldly eminence, Pinkie's in this novel is from grace. Brighton Rock is the vehicle for Greene's exposition of the problem of evil in a world that has strayed into regions of godlessness. It is a remarkable achievement for sheer delineation of the artist's vision of the tragic aspects of the terror of life. The vision is one of violence, brutality, immorality and evil.

Greene's Characters

Graham Greene seems to hate lukewarm, spineless creatures who are not alive to the ultimate values. For his Heaven and Hell are facts of moral theology and of man's moral experience. Human beings have to validate their existence by a clear-cut unambiguous choice. The Catholic belief, the ineradicable sense of sin, seems to give Greene the necessary formula to build up the tragic sense. The exaggeration and the absurdity in Pinkie get him close to the vice of comedy. Thus, the first phase of Greene's novels has a tragic vision and Brighton Rock marks the end of the first phase.

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