
Contribution of Graham Greene to English Literature

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Introduction:

Graham Greene is one of the most prolific and widely read English novelists and literary critic of the twentieth century. He is notable for both his best-selling suspense novels and for his more serious works of fiction, particularly the novels like *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter* and for his ability to combine serious literary acclaim with widespread popularity. Greene has also been lauded for such short stories as "The Basement Room," "The Destroyers," and "Under the Garden," all of which are generally considered classics in the genre. The protagonists of Greene's fiction are typically people torn by personal struggles with Roman Catholic concepts of sin and salvation, reflecting the author's concern with religious and moral questions. Greene also frequently addressed such themes as lost childhood, dreams, literature and art, and politics. In addition to writing fiction, Greene experimented with many other genres, including drama, film criticism, and travel writing. Grahame Smith has written that Greene's diverse writing career testifies "to a creative energy that sought to explore the forms open to literary

imagination, and to the fact that Greene was a writer in the deepest, as well as the widest, sense of the term."

Major Works of Short Fiction:

Greene did his best in the field of short fiction. His first short story collection, *The Basement Room*, was published in 1935, but was not able to receive critical attention until *Nineteen Stories* that appeared in 1947. The pieces in this work were written between 1929 and 1948 and many other also appeared in such journals as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *Commonweal*. In the preface to this collection, Greene declared, "I am only too conscious of the defects of these stories. The short story is an exacting form which I have not properly practiced: I present these tales merely as the byproducts of a novelist's career." Although at the time Greene was somewhat unsure about his talents as a short story writer, this volume contains some of his best-known stories, including "The Basement Room" and "The Hint of an Explanation." "The Basement Room" centers on a seven-year-old boy, Philip Lane, who is left by his parents with Mr. and Mrs. Baines, the butler and the housekeeper. Philip comes to learn that Mr. Baines is having an affair with a young woman, and this knowledge inadvertently causes the accidental death of Mrs. Baines. Narrated by Philip sixty years after the event, "The Basement Room" addresses such themes as childhood innocence, betrayal, trust, and the nature of evil. "The Hint of an Explanation," which first appeared in the American edition of *Nineteen Stories* and was later included in *Twenty-One Stories*, is often called a moral drama because of its focus on such religious concerns as temptation, compassion, and the origins of faith. The story begins when two men meet on a train. One of the men, David, relates to the narrator of the story a childhood experience that caused him to enter the priesthood. As a young altar boy, David was persuaded by the village baker, Blacker, an atheist, to steal a consecrated communion host from his

church. In return, Blacker would give him an electric train set. Although David does steal the host, he foils Blacker at the last minute by swallowing it. Another of Greene's most highly acclaimed works of short fiction, "The Destroyers," appeared in *Twenty-One Stories*. Set in London's Wormsley Common, much of which was destroyed or damaged during the German bombing of World War II, this story centers on a local gang of boys. After two of its members, Trevor and Blackie, struggle for leadership of the group, the boys decide to systematically gut one of the last standing houses in the neighborhood, a building designed by famed English architect Christopher Wren. Exploring such themes as class structure, politics, creation, innocence, and depravity, "The Destroyers" is considered one of Greene's most disturbing short stories. *A Sense of Reality* contains only four stories, with "Under the Garden" comprising more than half of the book. This story focuses on William Wilditch, who, suffering from lung cancer, returns to the house where he spent his boyhood holidays in order to confront a childhood memory that has obsessed him throughout his life. In this work, Greene examines lost childhood, memory, innocence, dreams, and the art of fiction writing. This collection also contains the story "A Visit to Morin," which relates the story of a man who meets a French Catholic writer whose works he admires. After their accidental meeting during mass in a village church, the two men share a drink and discuss faith and belief. *May We Borrow Your Husband*, contains twelve stories, many of which are set in the south of France and focus on marital relationships. The pieces in this collection are often described as being more humorous and playful than Greene's other short stories; Greene himself once noted they were written "in a single mood of sad hilarity." "Cheap in August," for example, relates the experiences of an English-born woman, Mary Watson, who is on vacation in Jamaica while her husband is conducting research in London for his book on James Thompson's *The Seasons*. Mary, looking for sexual adventure, has an affair with an older, overweight, and uncouth American

man. "May We Borrow Your Husband?" tells the story of two homosexual interior designers, Tony and Stephen, who attempt to seduce a young husband from his wife while the couple is honeymooning in Antibes. *The Last Word*, which appeared in Britain and the United States a few weeks before Greene's death, collects works written from 1923 to 1989, with only four of the stories previously appearing in book form. This work varies greatly in subject matter and addresses such themes as corruption, disillusionment, failures of communication, and death. Greene's books were a symptom of Catholic thinking that was increasing in depth, but inevitably his work collided with the pious rigidity inherited from the nineteenth century. Nevertheless his widely read fiction exerted a strong influence. The "open Church" of the 1960s, with its acceptance of all "men of good will" had in its background the puzzled, slowly comprehending, worldwide Catholic audience on which Greene's themes were working in the 1940s and 1950s. These were the decades when the separatism that had dominated the nineteenth century was surrendering to the older recognition that had begun with such men as Campion and continued with such men as Newman: that there was good in all people. Greene's work was a sign of the accelerated convergence between the Catholic and the non-Catholic worlds.

Major themes in major works:

When one bears in mind Greene's lifelong development of the theme of God's mercy, and when one looks back on his fiction with today's larger view of Catholic orthodoxy that does away with such mistaken encrustations as the notion of some sort of automatic damnation for suicides, one remembers Pinkie's verse about the stirrup and the ground [in *Brighton Rock*], and one feels sure that what Scobie found [in *The Heart of the Matter*] was indeed mercy, a compassion and a responsibility infinitely greater than his own. As in all Greene's novels, the measure of the protagonist before God is his love. And the

measure of God is the same, except that God's love in its illimitable vastness is immeasurable. Here again we see that Greene's best work goes back to forms that are very old, and far more complex than dramas in which the good suffer and the evil prosper, as in the early *Orient Express* and *England Made Me*.

After Greene presented his finest novel to the world, *The Heart of the Matter*, his strength seemed somehow impaired. As the critics defined a study of the works that followed gives one the impression that whatever he experienced while developing the character of Scobie must have exhausted him. In 1932, in his earliest widely read entertainment, *Orient Express*, the antifascist Dr. Czinner was a protagonist who dedicated his life to the political liberation of his fellowmen. In 1935, in the depths of the financial crisis that shook the world, Greene examined the theme on its economic side and portrayed the amoral financier, Krogh, a type of creature who, Greene felt, had by his irresponsibility brought about the sufferings of the countless millions of starving and unemployed. Later Greene examined figures of heroic responsibility, and created the child-woman, Rose, in *Brighton Rock* and the whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*. But after *The Power and the Glory* in 1940, Greene apparently began to reassess his major theme. The reassessment must have been painful, for responsibility had been not only Greene's answer to life as he saw it in the 1930s but it was the answer of the whole intellectual world of that era. The feeling was that irresponsibility had brought on all of the world's crises from depression to impending war.

The Power and the Glory had been particularly moving in its treatment of the theme of responsibility because the protagonist was a priest and the book traced the theme to its deepest roots, which lay in the Christian origins of Western civilization and Christ's commandment of love from man to man. *The Power and the Glory* is written by an artist who is carried by surging self-confidence in the rightness of his evolved beliefs, and who feels his command of his talent reaching a

peak. When one puts down *The Power and the Glory*, however, and picks up *The Heart of the Matter*, one is immediately aware of a change in spirit. *The Heart of the Matter* moves deliberately—painfully. It is one of those works in which one can almost sense the sweat on the author's pen. The brilliant cinematographic flashing from scene to scene is gone, the plot unfolds with terrible slowness, a crescendo of inexorability....

Where did Scobie go "wrong"; what was the nature of Greene's painful and astounding reassessment of the theme that had lain at the heart of his own beliefs and of the Western world's convictions since the 1930s? Greene's Scobie is shown as "corrupted" by the force of his pity....

Thus in his portrait of Scobie Greene reversed his great theme. Love of man for his fellow beings is the second commandment; the first and greatest is love for God "with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind." An ineradicable part of this love of God must be trust, and Scobie does not trust. Greene's theme now is that a man should indeed help and serve his fellow beings, but there are limits beyond which he cannot go, and times when trust in God must replace his own efforts. Scobie's lack of trust is self-destructive, and his ultimate suicide is inevitable.

In *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter* Greene had been like an embodied spirit of compassion, contemplating more and more deeply in each book the nature of man's fate in a fallen world. It would seem that the ordeal of writing *The Heart of the Matter* may have driven him spiritually into dryness, and, intellectually, he may have said, if not all, at least the utmost he had to say. The later Greene is like his own Quarry in *A Burnt-Out Case*. Only one book, *The End of the Affair*, whose craftsmanship was such that it evoked the warm sponsorship in America of William Faulkner, can even remotely be compared to the major novels; and the theme of *The End of the Affair* is significant: it is love and loyalty to God over love and loyalty to man; it is trust in God's own "responsibility" and a placing of final trust in the

goodness of creation when one reaches the place beyond which one's own effort cannot prevail. Looking back after fifteen years, one realizes that the steady deepening of Greene's achievements ended in mid-century, at the time of the reassessment of his great theme. Afterwards he turned increasingly to the mode of fiction that had always enabled Catholic writers to express their vision and yet maintain the detachment that is the artist's protection against pain.

Critical Reception

Greene has been the source of much contention among critics. He has been lauded as a master novelist who examined the place of religion and morality in twentieth-century society; he has also been decried as a melodramatic that relied too heavily on coincidence and metaphor. Although the majority of critics agree that Greene was an able storyteller, particularly in his delineation of setting and his skillful plot constructions, opinions vary widely concerning his ability to create believable characters and artfully communicate themes. Some of the most contentious critical debate has centered on Greene's depiction of Catholic concerns, even though Greene noted that Catholicism marked only "one period" of his career. Reaction to Greene's short fiction, which has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to his novels, reflects the general critical ambivalence toward Greene's work, with some reviewers dismissing his stories as mere preparatory sketches for his novels or simple burlesque pieces. Some have also stated that Greene used his short stories only as vehicles to work out traumatic events from his childhood or to didactically present a single theme or idea. Others, however, have called some of his short stories genuine masterpieces, and such works as "The Basement Room" and "The Destructors" have been widely anthologized and studied. Greene himself stated in the introduction to his *Collected Stories*: "I believe I have never written anything better than 'The Destructors,' 'A Chance for

Mr. Lever,' 'Under the Garden,' and 'Cheap in August'." Although earlier critics and writers tended to focus on moral themes in Greene's works and characterized him as a "Catholic writer," more recent scholars have commented on his political, social, and aesthetic themes and his use of myth, psychology, and symbolism. Recent critics have also placed more emphasis on Greene's short stories, underscoring the important role they played in the development of his writing, and have suggested they will garner wider and more serious scholarly attention in the future. Richard Kelly has concluded that Greene's short stories, "when reviewed in their entirety reveal a lifelong psychodrama that reflects his addiction to excitement, travel, and writing it. Further, these stories reveal his persistent battle with the demons of his youth and his ability to transform them into characters and themes and later to shape them into religious, political, and social issues."