Graham Greene’s Characters

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Abstract

Graham Greene’s characters are lonely, alienated people. Living far away from the civilized world, the characters live a quiet life without exciting events at the exterior, but their inner experiences have a high degree of intensity. The majority tries to break with their barren lives, by means of a love affair. They think that communication with another human being that might understand them is the only solution against solitude. Due to the rules imposed by the society, the communication and understanding cannot last, and thus Greene’s characters will be haunted. We will try to analyze some of the most representative characters of Graham Greene.

Graham Greene was one of the most prolific British authors, writing over a period of six decades more than sixty books. He started as a poet and a historical novelist broke out as a writer of contemporary thrillers, continued as a cinema critic and a book reviewer tried his hand at journalism and drama; to the end he found the time to write prefaces to the collected edition of his novels, two volumes of autobiography as well as sharp political commentaries. In his lifetime he succeeded in covering all the spectrum of writings. Eduard Sackville-West once called Greene “the electric hare whom the greyhound critics are not meant to catch” [1].

The novelist was preoccupied by complicated cases, by the complex human typology whose representatives change according to the circumstances, to the life dynamism or to their fate. The writer’s duty was to explore and reflect the abyss of human decay but he preserves a certain hope and even a certain faith in man’s possibilities to revive. “Would the world be in the mess it is now if we were loyal to love and not to countries?” exclaims Beatrice in “Our Man in Havana” [2]. In the preface to “Brighton Rock” Graham Greene confesses that the book he always wanted to write was “the high romantic tale, capturing us in youth, with hopes that prove illusions, to which we return in age in order to escape the sad reality” [3]. His characters do everything they can to escape the “sad reality” but cannot change their lives as they are engaged in “the same subterranean struggle... between two eternities of pain – and God knows the opposite of pain, not we....There is no peace anywhere where there is human life ...” [4].

His characters are lonely, alienated people. They live in remote places like a colony – Scobie, Louise or Wilson, a leprosarium – Querry and the Ryckers or in a town like Brighton Rock which seems alive only during summer time. The main heroes lack external excitement but their inner
experience has a high degree of intensity. Pinkie, the main character in “Brighton Rock” finds his escape from the monotonous world through violence while most of Greene’s characters like, Scobie from “The Heart of the Matter”, Rose from “A Burnt-out Case” or Fowler from “The Quiet American” try to break with their barren lives by means of a love affair. What they really want is to find a way to communicate with other human beings. The communication and understanding cannot last due to the rules imposed by the society and thus their escape from monotony is only ephemeral. Pinkie will die being punished by the society for his crimes; Scobie will take his own life because he is tortured by his imaginary quilt and his impotence to do well. Quenty is destroyed just when he believes that he has regained the human feeling of understanding. Though Rose will keep on living she will live in the past by listening to Pinkie’s recorded voice over and over again. Despite their loneliness these characters are linked to society but this acts as an implacable destiny upon them and finally pushes them into the abyss. Mostly, the heroes of Greene’s novels are haunted by obsessions and fears and imaginary quilt. I will take a closer look at the main characters in two of Greene’s most representative novels – “Brighton Rock” and the “Heart of the Matter”.

Pinkie would have liked to be loved by others but he was considered to be a ‘bad guy’. He did not blame himself for his deeds but his parents and the world. He feels that his parents left him unprotected in this world and because nobody loves him his desire for love suffers a mutation becoming a wish to do harm. At a very early age Pinkie realizes that people are evil so he does not believe in heaven, only in hell, being sure that evil runs the world. In his mind, a place like heaven cannot exist as all men and women are sinners while Rose sees the people in the gang as “very kind: there seemed to be a companionship in mortal sin” [5]. All Pinkie remembers about his parents are the Saturday nights, when they made love, but he feels this as a betrayal towards him, a waste of the love he should have had on someone else. While alone in his room, we can sense in his thoughts, the disgust and repulsion for the act of making love and marriage. When he decides to marry Rose, he does it to save his freedom and life. He does not want Rose because she reminds him of his mother whose love he could not have because the Saturday nights. At the same time he realizes that by having Rose – a common, simple-minded girl – he turns into a man of no importance as others do not have a motive to envy him for. He would not touch Rose but he seems to know that nothing could prevent a wife, except love, turn her husband to the police. In order to save his liberty he is determined to do anything. Pinkie understands that he was forced to do something against his will, a thing he
feels only repulsion for. On his way to the room where they were to be declared ‘man and wife’, by mistake, he went towards the door on which the word ‘taxes’ was printed, as if he unconsciously associated this word with the payment of his actions in front of Him. His feelings of frustration are expressed by the words he voiced to be recorded as a souvenir for Rose: “God damn you, you little bitch, why can’t you go back home forever and let me be” [6].

When he finds out that Rose knew about all the crimes all the time, he has the proof that the evil runs the world. “Then he laughed softly with infinite contempt and superiority at a world which used words like innocence” (p. 85). Rose looks up to her husband and she just wants to be like him as she thinks she loves him and he loves her. “I’m not asking for absolution. I don’t want absolution. I want to be like him-damned” (ibid. p. 245).

If Pinkie is a character whose sin consists in his hatred of the world, Scobie, the central personage in “The Heart of the Matter” has a distinct status. The hero is a sinner too but of a very peculiar structure. His sin is due to his excess of kindness rather than the lack of it. He is endowed with a series of virtues which makes him a singular character among the other colonial clerks that one of them will say: “You’re unbearable – you’re too honest to live” [7]. Scobie’s supreme quality is that he feels responsible for all those around him.

Although he stopped loving his wife – a double-faced woman who does not understand him – he feels it is his duty to protect her, to make her happy. Overwhelmed by an honest desire to do good to people, Scobie is continuously tortured and vexed. The happiness he finds in his love affair with Helen Rolt – survivor of the wreckage – is nothing else but another element that leads to complication. The only way to simplify his life and the lives of the ‘victims’ of his generosity is to commit suicide. He plans everything carefully as: “If possible no one must even suspect. It was not only the question of life insurance: the happiness of others had to be protected” (ibid., p. 257). Like Pinkie, he speaks of damnation although he does not seem to figure the exact meaning: “I know what I’m doing. I’m not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means” (ibid. p. 258).

The dramatic changes in Scobie’s life are seen by the way his office is described. When he first came to the colony the office was well furnished and decorated. After fifteen years the office looked totally different: the coloured cushions, the photography of his wife, Louise had vanished. He became bored and fed up with his marriage. The less he needed Louise, the more he felt responsible for her. He even tries to find her a companion in
the person of Wilson. He cannot make his wife happy as he feels repulsion against her. When they had to go to bed becomes the most stressing moment for Scobie. Louise permanently reminds him of his failure and thus he associates his boring, unfulfilled life with his career that comes to an end. He does not want to retire as he considers himself a man with enough strength and personality. When he meets Helen he finds understanding, love, peace and to a certain extent the lost youth. His obsession of duty and responsibility is a mask to conceal his pride. In an imaginary conversation with God he says: “No, I don’t trust you. I’ve never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I’ve always carried about like a sack of bricks. I’m not a policeman for nothing – responsible for order, for seeing justice is done. There was no other profession for a man of my kind” (p. 259).

He overestimates himself claiming the power of a creator: “I made her”, referring to both Louise and Helen. In a way, he is a victim of his feeling of guilt. Accumulating so many responsibilities Scobie is crashed by their weight. When he says he does not want to bother about others’ lives because he has nothing to give that they cannot find somewhere else, we understand that at last Scobie faces the truth: he deceived himself and that was a great sin for which he had to pay. Graham Greene himself wrote that the character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride. He said that his scruples were grotesquely exaggerated and he was but “a weak man with good intentions and doomed by pride”.

The Heart of the Matter was not Greene’s favorite novel although it was his first popular success. Philip Stratford considers that “...not only that this novel is central and representative but also that it is the most beautiful and provocative of all his books” [8].

Greene’s characters are tortured by inner conflicts and their struggle to survive and at the same time to escape, is doomed to failure. The novelist believes that the original sin is the main justification for misery and corruption of the world his characters live in. Graham Greene despite his many journeys in fact and imagination has never revealed himself directly. Some critics consider that the novelist used his own experiences, fears and obsessions to create his characters.

His editor, Philip Stratford, found the best words to speak about the contribution of Graham Greene to the development of the modern novel saying that: “Nevertheless, one can say that for more than sixty years he has, with courage, tenderness, and remarkable intuition, explored the unmapped region that lies between the risk of betrayal and the risk of love. That, I think, is the extra dimension that Graham Greene has added to the
The twentieth-century novel” [9]. And we may add that his characters move between love and betrayal to find what most of us are looking for: peace of mind. The novelist wondered how “… all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation” [10]. We might answer that we, the readers, escape by reading what the great authors wrote.

REFERENCES

[6] Ibidem, p. 84
[8] Stratford Philip, cit.ed., p.78
[9] Ibidem, p. XIV