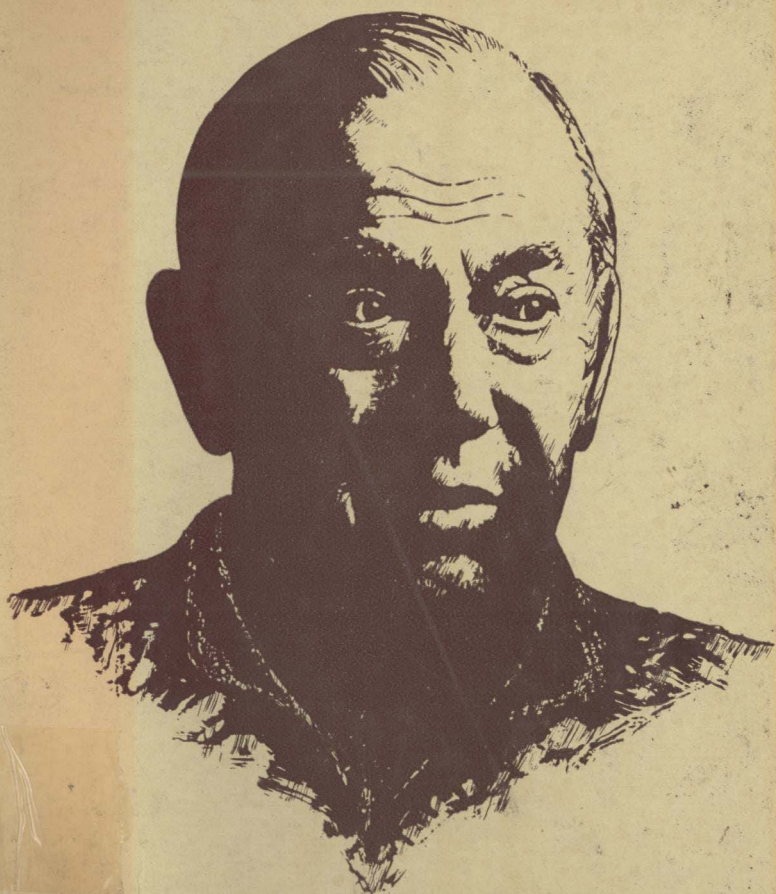


J. P. KULSHRESTHA

GRAHAM GREENE

THE NOVELIST



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Preface

Graham Greene's novels are an exploration of experience through character in action. He is concerned, like all creative writers, with the human condition and he reacts to it in attraction and repulsion. He sees and feels his characters in relation to his own intensely felt reactions. Most novelists create figures who stand for predilections and emphases serving as oblique indications of their inner lives. Greene's characters, too, may be used as signposts to his extraordinary and obsessed sensibility which envelops and overflows their individual outlines. The recurrence of certain types of characters and their situations leads one to sense the working of obsessions in Greene's mind. These obsessions constitute an inescapable challenge to his readers.

An obsession is what possesses a man's mind; it provides a kind of orientation that enables him to apply his sensibility to certain experiences (to the exclusion of others). In Greene's case, there is his primary obsession with evil, the 'dark' side of human nature and life, produced by his acute sensitivity to his varied experiences in childhood. Later, his radical experiences and observations of cruelty, violence and ugliness in lands as far away as Liberia, Mexico, Indo-China and Haiti served as accretions to his childhood awareness. This obsession accounts for a number of recurrent themes and motifs which form a matrix of impulses and circumstances for Greene's characters. Isolation and failure, guilt and betrayal, squalor and corruption, crime and violence, sin and suffering, tragic love and fatality, childhood traumas and adult perversions, excesses of pity and innocence—all these symbolize or dramatize the evil which permeates Greene's world. People whose lives are riddled with evil are imaginatively significant to Greene. They have a story—for him to tell. They embody what he feels

about life, and he can readily and sympathetically project them into the world he imagines. They nourish what Greene has called 'the manic-depressive' side of his talent.

Greene's preoccupation with evil is inextricably linked with his religious consciousness, his obsessive awareness of God and His mercy. It is, therefore, not surprising that so many of his characters, in spite of their experience of evil, cannot altogether stifle their longing for God or for a lost peace or ideal. They are pulled in opposite directions, as Greene was in his early years. They live on the point of intersection where the devil wrestles with God for the possession of the heart of man. In their stories, Greene exhibits not only sin, corruption, egoism and, in general, the 'demonic' element in man; he exhibits with equal force man's impulses towards love, charity, fidelity and self-sacrifice—in general, the 'angelic' principle which makes man turn to God. The force and significance of antinomies in Greene's novels, their entire spectrum of possibilities between the poles of good and evil, derive directly from his two primary obsessions—evil and faith. It is the dialectic of good set in motion by their surrender to evil which orients the destinies of Greene's character.

I suggest that Greene's characters in their attitudes and sensibilities reflect those of their creator. They may and do exist independently of Greene's life but they do not exist independently of his sensibility. Greene has himself said: 'Books inevitably, are formed out of bits and pieces of one's own experience. Which doesn't mean that the characters are founded on oneself, but that one must have felt parallel emotions. One doesn't have to be a murderer, but one must have felt a murderous instinct at one time or another.' It is because of such 'parallel emotions' that Greene cannot get away from his characters. He has been charged with converting his 'personal anxiety' or 'private nightmares' into the temperaments and dilemmas of his *dramatis personae*. This need not, however, derogate from his merit as a novelist. Almost every great novelist explores his own self and tries to realize in his novels what he finds there. 'Bovary, c'est moi', said Flaubert.

In making his characters Greene stresses various characteristics in obedience to his obsessional urge to seek out the impulses of good and evil in man. He may even distort his material the better to give form and substance to those feelings of pity and horror which, since his earliest years, he has felt when confronted by certain human types

and their destinies which appear and reappear in his novels. It may be contended that the character is not an isolable element in the total pattern of a novel. Of course it is not. I shall, therefore, be led on from characters to consider themes and milieu which help to shape and define them. But, as I mentioned earlier, the present study examines Greene's characters in terms of his sensibility. There is no attempt to create a biography of Greene from his novels, nor is it the intention to 'psychoanalyse' him. But we certainly can trace recurrent patterns of human feelings and behaviour in the novels which seem to derive from facets of the author's psyche. In Greene's life, as in those of his characters, the psychic imprints of childhood seem never to have been revised. The self is the product of inborn tendencies, assimilated childhood influences and the discoveries made about both the outer and the inner worlds during one's progress towards adulthood. Since these tendencies, influences and discoveries have made Greene the kind of novelist he is, they must be taken into account before we proceed to examine his novels *in extenso*. In writing this book, I have received invaluable help from some of my colleagues in the Department of English Studies and Modern European Languages, Allahabad University. I have to record my special thanks to the late Professor Rabindra Nath Deb whose constant encouragement and guidance saw this study through. I should like to thank my friend Mr V Rajamani for his kindness and consideration in going over the manuscript. I should also like to thank Msgr I A Extross, Professor of Dogmatic Theology and Peritus of the Vatican Council II, for many helpful suggestions and insights, particularly in the chapters on Greene's religious novels.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my grateful thanks to Mr Graham Greene and to Laurence Pollinger Ltd for permission to reproduce extracts from the works of Mr Greene's novels. I would also like to thank the publishers—The Bodley Head: *The Comedians*, *Travels with my Aunt*, and *The Honorary Consul*; Eyre and Spottiswoode: *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*; and William Heinemann Ltd: *The Man Within*, *It's a Battlefield*, *England Made Me*, *A Gun For Sale*, *The Confidential Agent*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Ministry of Fear*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Quiet American*, *A Burnt-Out Case*, *Journey Without Maps* and *The Lawless Roads*.

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1. *Graham Greene's Lost Childhood*

In one of Graham Greene's novels, *The Comedians*, a character called Brown reflects:

For the writers it is always said that the first twenty years of life contain the whole experience—the rest is observation, but I think it is equally true of all of us. (67)

Anyone who reads Graham Greene's account of his childhood and adolescence cannot avoid feeling that the recurrence of seedy backgrounds, obsessed characters and extreme situations in Greene's novels is evidence of obsessional motifs in a single pattern established in his early years. The past of a writer is of great value to him in novel-writing. Francois Mauriac has said:

Even if he withdraws from the world and shuts his eyes and stops his ears, his most distant past will begin to ferment. His childhood and youth alone is enough to provide a born novelist with an immense amount of literary nourishment. Nobody can stop the flow of the river which flows from him.¹

Greene's novels and entertainments establish the truth of this statement. It is because so much of the experience communicated in his novels flows from Greene's memories that it is possible to view comprehensively in his work both the man who suffers and the mind which creates. Greene's unhappy childhood has had a seminal influence on all his fiction. We do not know all about those unhappy years, but from what we know of the events and influences of Greene's early life, it is possible to gather evidence of 'flight, rebellion and misery during those first sixteen years when the novelist is formed'.² The main sources of information are a

book of essays called *The Lost Childhood*, the autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, and two travelogues, *Journey Without Maps* and *The Lawless Roads*. Writing about H.H. Munro in *The Lost Childhood*, Greene says:

There are certain writers, as different as Dickens from Kipling, who never shake off the burden of childhood. . . . All later experience seems to have been related to those months or years of unhappiness. Life which turns its cruel side to most of us at an age when we have begun to learn the arts of self-protection took these two writers by surprise during the defencelessness of early childhood. (74)

Greene himself is one such writer. He was born a little too close to the 'pain-threshold', to use the expression coined by William James.³ Born in 1904, the son of Charles Henry Greene, Headmaster of Berkhamsted, Graham Greene attended his father's school. A sensitive boy, he felt cramped in his conventional Anglican middle-class environment and was thrown upon the resources of his own imagination to fight the ennui and despair which beset his life. In the Personal Postscript to his book of essays Greene writes:

I was seventeen and terribly bored and in love with my sister's governess—one of those miserable, hopeless, romantic loves of adolescence that set in many minds the idea that love and despair are inextricable and that successful love hardly deserves the name. At that age one may fall irrevocably in love with failure, and success of any kind loses half its savour before it is experienced. (173)

And he goes on to say:

I think the boredom was far deeper than the love. It had always been a feature of childhood: it would set in on the second day of the school holidays. The first day was all happiness, and, after the horrible confinement and publicity of school, seemed to consist of light, space, and silence. But a prison conditions its inhabitants. I never wanted to return to it (and finally expressed my rebellion by the simple act of running away), but yet I was so conditioned that freedom bored me unutterably. (174)

His rebellion ended after a few hours when he was ambushed by his elder sister on the Common. He was thereupon sent to a psychoanalyst. The psychoanalysis gave him a correct orientation but wrung him dry. Greene says:

For years, it seems to me, I could take no aesthetic interest in any visual thing at all: staring at a sight that others assured me was beautiful, I would feel nothing. I was fixed in my boredom. (174)

Greene's description of his state of mind in his teens brings to mind the mescaline experience which, according to Colin Wilson, 'plunges the taker into a kind of dream world, a world of inaction, where one has no defence against one's latent fears and fantasies'. Wilson writes about a young novelist who took mescaline:

She describes herself as inclined to catatonia—a state of mental automatism in which the will ceases to function and the limbs remain fixed in any position in which they are placed.⁴

Greene's state of mind was also akin to the 'wan and heartless mood' which Coleridge describes in *Dejection: An Ode*. Greene's boredom, like Coleridge's, was in truth a feeling of despair. Boredom/despair was and continues to be one of the strong emotions which lie behind Greene's way of seeing the world and the nature of man.

With great candour, Greene describes his persistent and desperate attempts to escape from this emptiness and lifeless depression. He indulged in such neurotic acts (he still considers them 'to have been under the circumstances highly reasonable') as drinking hypo or hay-fever lotion, eating a bunch of deadly nightshade or taking twenty aspirins before swimming. He was without any 'sense of strangeness' when he came to the Russian roulette act. He had read about the White Russian officers who used 'to invent hazards to escape boredom. One man would slip a charge into a revolver and turn the chambers at random, and his companion would put the revolver to his head and pull the trigger. The chance, of course, was six to one in favour of life' (173). At the age of seventeen, to discover the possibility of enjoying 'again the visible world by

risking its total loss', Greene began his experiments with Russian roulette, using his brother's revolver. He would put the muzzle of the revolver in his right ear and pull the trigger, not knowing whether he would shoot himself or not. The experiment was repeated several times until its novelty wore off. Eventually, it ceased to excite him at all and became as mundane as taking an aspirin tablet. After the sixth and last attempt, he gave up this particular campaign against boredom but the war against it had to go on.

The war has gone on in Greene's life. He writes in *A Sort of Life*:

A kind of Russian roulette remained too a factor in my later life, so that without previous experience of Africa I went on an absurd and reckless trek through Liberia; it was fear of boredom which took me to Tabasco during the religious persecution, to a *léproserie* in the Congo, to the Kikuyu reserve during the Mau-Mau insurrection, to the emergency in Malaya and to the French war in Vietnam. There, in those last three regions of clandestine war, the fear of ambush served me just as effectively as the revolver from the corner-cupboard in the life-long war against boredom. (95-96)

We have Greene's word for a climacteric personal experience during his trek through Liberia when, almost dying of fever, he discovered 'a passionate interest in living', though he had 'always assumed before as a matter of course, that death was desirable'. Greene speaks of this experience as a 'conversion' which strengthened him 'with the intellectual idea that once in Zigi's town' he had been 'completely convinced of the beauty and desirability of the mere act of living' R.W.B. Lewis defines this conversion (which he considers a feature of the modern novel) as 'any kind of radical, wholehearted shift of allegiance and belief . . . from something like death to the outlines of something like life—from a felt loss to a potential gain'.⁵ Greene was thus forced to revitalise his sensibility, to gain a sense of reality, by risking danger and death. As with Greene, so with his characters. His protagonists often seek to conquer boredom and frustration through a more or less clear-sighted acceptance of evil and all that it entails. They try to achieve a sense of life and self-identity through submission to 'the destructive element' in their own nature and in the world outside.

A revealing piece of autobiography is the Prologue to *The Lawless Roads*. Here Greene describes the school (his father's school from which he ran away) as a place where two worlds existed side by side—the school dormitories and the family rooms—separated by a green baize door. He writes:

One was an inhabitant of both countries: on Saturday and Sunday afternoons of one side of the baize door, the rest of the week of the other. How can life on a border be other than restless? You are pulled by different ties of hate and love. For hate is quite as powerful a tie: it demands allegiance. In the land of the sky-scrapers, of stone stairs and cracked bells ringing early, one was aware of fear and hate, a kind of lawlessness—appalling cruelties could be practised without a second thought; one met for the first time characters, adult and adolescent, who bore about them the genuine quality of evil. There was Collifax who practised torments with dividers; Mr. Cranden with three grim chins, a dusty gown, a kind of demoniac sensuality; from these heights evil declined towards Parlow, whose desk was filled with minute photographs—advertisements of art photos. Hell lay about them in their infancy. (4)

The dichotomy suggested in this passage, the image of two adjacent but opposite worlds and the life lived on their border, has become important in Greene's fiction. The image of the green baize door recurs in his stories and novels to separate the world of innocence from the world of knowledge, the world of love from the world of hate, the world of the child from the world of the adult. Greene sees man as suspended between two worlds—heaven and hell—both claiming his allegiance. Walter Allen remarks:

This vision of human life as the point of intersection of heaven and hell Greene has pursued through a series of novels with increasing single-mindedness.⁶

The passage also suggests Greene's revulsion from the horror of life at school with its cruelty and suspect sexuality in which he found intimations of evil. He imparts some of that revulsion to his characters. Francis Andrews, Conrad Drover, Minty, Anthony Farrant and even James Wormold harbour painful memories of school life.

Andrews hates his school and runs away from it. For Anthony, there is 'something too tragic or too questionable' in school life. School and Minty are 'joined by a painful reluctant coition'. It may be observed that the red-brick building, the cracked bell, and the stone stairs of Greene's own school recur in his novels. These images have become permanent tokens of a period of suffering. For Greene, the public school in England lies grimly 'between childhood and manhood'. Any interpretation of his work must, therefore, take account of the school life which so deeply affected his outlook. In fact, Gabriel Fielding considers Greene one of the typical products of the English public school. He says:

Ever since Arnold went to Rugby the English public school, I think, has been turning out numbers of adolescents. The best of them shine in war, the preponderantly mediocre become 'Establishment' men. . . . The third group, the failures of the system, drift into eccentricity, into crime or the arts. A number of them write novels and a few become deeply religious; as opposed to the successes, the failures enjoy drinking, travel, and women. They are catholic material, they have continental souls, a memory, an urgent unhappiness. When I am reading Greene this is what I am forced to bear in mind.⁷

This is perhaps a generalisation, but judging by the influence of his school on Greene's career, it seems to contain an element of truth.

It is interesting to compare Greene's recollections of his school with those of his contemporary, Peter Quennell, who found no 'undertones of evil' in school life. His own recollections are 'strangely transmogrified' in Greene's version:

The school that we both attended proves to have been a place of almost unfathomable iniquity. . . . But I was conscious neither of the hellish atmosphere of the pedestrian life I lived at school, nor of the signs of spiritual degeneracy that I might have run to earth among the adjacent streets. . . . Perhaps I was unduly simple-minded, perhaps unusually self-centred; but the intimations of evil that seem to have coloured Graham Greene's youth, and that since then have had so profound an effect on the shaping of his creative talents, failed somehow to enrich mine;

with the result that my memories of the school and the town are much less valuable as a source of literary legend. It may be that they are slightly more accurate.⁸

Writing about Greene as a schoolboy, Quennell says:

Graham Greene was not, in those days, the careworn and hag-ridden personage whom one might possibly conjure up from a study of his recollections. Tall, lank and limp, with an extremely pallid skin but sharp, cheerfully observant eyes, he would have made an admirable Pierrot in the eighteenth century *commedia dell' Arte*, concealing, under his rather woebegone mask, his great capacity for cynical humour. He was often exuberant; he could be positively blithe. Nor have the exuberance and blitheness vanished. And even at the present period, when I re-read his books—those sombre chronicles of sin and suffering, where every form of pleasure is naturally suspect, every love-affair inescapably doomed, and a breath of Evil mixes with the fog that swirls the lonely street-lamps—I sometimes feel that I am confronting the spirited schoolboy in a more accomplished and more portentous guise. I cannot resist the suspicion that he gets a good deal of fun—light-hearted schoolboy fun—from causing his own and his reader's flesh to creep, and that he half enjoys the sensations of disgust and horror that he arouses with such unusual terror.⁹

It is, however, 'the careworn and hagridden personage' who has been predominant in the novels, while 'the admirable Pierrot' makes himself felt in the later entertainments. Reading Greene's recollections, one is often reminded of the irreparable damage wrought on a man in his childhood when the flaw enters,—the flaw which decides in what fashion the rock will split later. For Greene, childhood is not a period of Wordsworthian innocence, of the visionary gleam and the trailing clouds of glory. It is in childhood that innocence is betrayed and the seeds of future corruption sown. The child lives in an evil world, 'the world of moral chaos, lies, brutality, complete inhumanity'.¹⁰ The fate of so many of Greene's protagonists is directly traceable to the traumatic experiences of their childhood. Carolyn D. Scott remarks that 'no critic can escape the childhood theme in Greene, for it is the

one obsession out of which his tragedies grow'.¹¹ At the end of his essay, 'The Lost Childhood', Greene quotes the lines from A.E.'s poem *Germinal*: ' "In the lost boyhood of Judas/Christ was betrayed." ' Greene's own boyhood, we believe, provides the clue to his personality and outlook. His views about reality, formulated from experience and observation, have matured but, in their essence, remain unchanged. He might say with Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock*:

Look at me, I've never changed. It's like those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down, you'll still read Brighton. That's human nature. (266)

Early in his life, Greene showed a precocious awareness of the supernatural forces (not necessarily good or evil) behind experience. In an autobiographical passage in *Journey Without Maps*, he tells us how he was haunted in his sleep by the fear of 'something outside that has got to come in'. Later, the unseen presence was symbolised as the Princess of Time, the poisoned flowers, an old Arab, Tibetan Warriors, and the inevitable witch. Greene writes:

You couldn't call these things evil, as Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw* was evil, with his carrot hair and his white face of damnation. That story of James's belongs to the Christian, the orthodox imagination. Mine were devils only in the African sense of beings who controlled power. (219)

Years later, in 'devil'-infested Liberia, he rediscovered the Power which contains the synthesis of good and evil that has been lost in our civilisation. Writing about the bush devils of Liberia, Greene says that their supernatural authority could not be comprehended in a theological system.

In a Christian land we have grown so accustomed to the idea of a spiritual war, of God and Satan, that this supernatural world, which is neither good nor evil but simply Power, is almost beyond sympathetic comprehension. Not quite: for those witches which haunted our childhood were neither good nor evil. They terrified us with their power, but we knew all the

time that we must not escape them. They simply demanded recognition: flight was a weakness. (213)

In primitive Liberia, Greene was face to face with a way of life which had not lost its symbolic imagination and instinctive terror. He had 'the sensation of having come home, for here one was finding associations with a personal and racial childhood, one was being scared by the same old witches' (104). Unlike Marlowe's trip into the Heart of Darkness, which culminates in the horror of primitive barbarism, Greene's journey without maps 'reinforced a sense of disappointment with what man had made out of the primitive, what he had made out of childhood' (278). Our civilisation has exchanged 'the sense of supernatural evil' for 'the small human viciousness', and 'supernatural cruelty for our own'. The Eden of childhood is invaded by the adult world, the chrome civilisation. The harps and the drums are silent. The finer taste, the keener pleasure and the deeper terror are overlaid with the aridity and boredom of life, and one must go to Africa to regain the creative sensitivity to a supernatural power.

Evil creeps into the later dreams. Greene writes:

It was only many years later that Evil came into my dreams: the man with gold teeth and rubber surgical gloves; the old woman with ring-worm; the man with his throat cut dragging himself across the carpet to the bed. (220)

These dream images of ugliness and brutality continue to dominate Greene's imagination. In real life, evil incarnated itself in adults and adolescents—Collifax, Mr. Cranden and Parlow. Greene perceived its reality on various occasions which he recalls in *Journey Without Maps*. He found a dead dog at the bottom of his pram. This, the first thing he remembers, had 'no emotion attached to the sight. It was just fact.' Another fact he remembers was a man who rushed out of a cottage with a knife in his hand to kill himself. At the age of fourteen, like a revelation, Greene realised 'the pleasure of cruelty'. He wanted to do things to a girl who lived close by.

I didn't do anything about it, I wasn't old enough, but I was happy; I could think about pain as something desirable and

not as something dreaded. It was as if I had discovered that the way to enjoy life was to appreciate pain. (31)

To these childhood perceptions we may relate Greene's obsession with the sordid and violent aspects of life with which the majority of his works have made us so familiar. Greene sees squalor and violence as the essence of the human condition and from time to time he has sought them in the primitive sources of man's existence. He was, like Rimbaud and Conrad, fascinated by 'the dirt, the disease, the barbarity and the familiarity of Africa'. The motive behind his Liberian trek was to get closer to a state of life, primitive and inchoate, where the manifestations of evil were undisguised. Like the bush devils, the squalor and brutality of the Liberian jungles enabled him to link up his personal childhood with the racial childhood of man. Greene mentions Freud in this connection as one who has made us conscious of 'those ancestral threads which still exist in our unconscious minds to lead us back'. In the opening chapter of *Journey Without Maps*, he tells us that it was not his fully conscious mind which chose West Africa in preference to Switzerland. Africa seemed familiar to him, like an image embedded in the subconscious to which one gropes back under psychoanalysis.

The method of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient back to the idea which he is repressing; a long journey backwards without maps, catching a clue here and a clue there . . . until one has to face the general idea, the pain or the memory. This is what you have feared, Africa may be imagined as saying, you can't avoid it, there it is creeping round the wall, flying in at the door, rustling the grass, you can't turn your back, you can't forget it, so you may as well take a long look. (109-10)

So, while Greene's conscious mind records objectively all that he encountered—filth, disease, brutality, hardship and squalid discomfort—his subconscious is occupied with psychoanalytic prospecting with a view to locating himself in his spiritual home, the heart of darkness.¹² Africa explained to him 'the deep appeal of the seedy. It is nearer the beginning.' He writes:

There seemed to be a seediness about the place you couldn't