

“Scobie and the ‘Stigmata of Loneliness’”

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ABSTRACT

The Heart of the Matter is usually considered a 'Catholic' novel as the protagonist, Major Scobie, is a Catholic by religion. His broken rosary points to the muddle of religious belief set up in him. Scobie is nailed to the cross by his compassion and feeling of responsibility for the pain and misery of others. When he partakes of the Sacrament in sin and laments having lost his way, his self-imposed duties lead him down a road to self-destruction. This anti-hero takes his own life, committing the ultimate sin of Despair in God's Providence. Yet, paradoxically, Father Rank pronounces that Scobie really loved only God, and the narrative suggests that he died a saint, albeit an anonymous one. Greene avers the transaction between Modernity and Catholic conservatism to be a vital one; that the writer should be a protestant in a Catholic set-up and be a catholic in a Protestant one. A deep yearning energizes Greene's narrative for Good amid evil plaguing the world.

Keywords: *Stigmata, loneliness, alienation, ambiguity, religion.*

Introduction

The Deputy Commissioner of Police in a British colony in West Africa is Major Henry Scobie. The Commissioner of Police lauds him as "Scobie the Just"; even corrupt antisocial elements such as Yusef and Tallit admire his honesty and praise him as "Daniel come to judgement" (HM,18,91). Scobie's tragedy lies in the fact that whereas other policemen have been corrupted by money, he is "corrupted by sentiment" as is evident when he destroys the potentially incriminating letter of the Portuguese Captain to his daughter in Germany (HM,55). He does this out of pity and refuses to accept bribe. Scobie believes "a policeman should be the most forgiving person in the world if he gets the facts right" (HM,81). Scobie is emotionally nailed to the cross by sympathy, responsibility, innocence, and conversely an overpowering feeling of guilt. Ironically, "virtue the good life enticed him in the night as if it were a sin" (HM,186).

Discussion

The "terrible impotent feeling of responsibility and pity" is "the heart of the matter" and which ultimately leads him to damnation (HM,124). His compassion is ubiquitous, and it "smouldered like decay at his heart" (HM,178). He feels pity for Louise, Helen, the stars, and eventually God, but the only person in the universe he does not feel pity for is himself. He feels responsible for Louise's happiness and at all costs will maintain his secret vow, taken at their wedding

ceremony, to always keep her happy. He pities his wife who feels unwanted by their own community; he pities her for her sense of disappointment when Scobie fails to be promoted as Commissioner of Police. Stifling his sense of self-worth he takes a loan from Yusef and puts himself in the power of the corrupt Syrian gangster of a trader. This act of obliterating his self-esteem marks the “enormous breach pity had blasted through his integrity” (HM,115). With this loan he is able to send his wife to South Africa enabling her to begin life afresh and thus make her happy. Pity leads him to commit adultery with Helen Rolt. Scobie feels compassion for Helen who has had a traumatic experience at sea and horrified at her plight Scobie inexplicably begins to feel responsible for her. He shrinks from the thought of abandoning her to Bagster and despair. He can repent all his sins except his love for Helen whom he loves “more than God I think” which is blasphemous (HM,181). Yet “against all the teaching of the Church, one has the conviction that love -- any kind of love --- does deserve a bit of mercy”. Scobie cannot go to Confession without intending to give up Helen because then it would mean “damnation. To take my God in mortal sin” (HM,210). At Communion he takes the sacrament in sin and commits sacrilege and begins to think of God as “an enemy—there was bitterness between them” (HM,235). He feels that he now belongs to the devil’s party and that he is damned for all eternity, but for some miraculous intervention. Scobie is morally responsible for Ali’s death and cries out “Oh God... I’ve killed you” (HM,247).

Ultimately Scobie commits suicide, the “unforgivable sin” and for which Catholics believe one is condemned to Hell forever. Suicide is “the final expression of an unrepentant despair” in God’s Providence but Scobie rationalizes that even “Christ had killed himself” (HM,190). In the grip of deep inner turmoil, Scobie decides he would rather commit suicide than rain a “continuous shower of blows” on the bruised face of Christ (HM,237).

Despite such a bleak note, the novel closes with Father Rank asking if God can be more bitter with Scobie when Louise, his own wife, has hardly any rancour left against him. In Father Rank’s words: “the Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” (HM,272). The dying words of Scobie were: “Dear God, I love...” (HM,265). Father Rank opines: “I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God” and perhaps as Louise says he did not love anyone else (HM,272). Scobie is in ultimate analysis the victim of his own unforgettable love for God. In the autobiographical piece, *A Sort of Life*, Greene wrote that in his fiction he deals with the “dangerous edge of things” and its moral “equilibrium” (SL,92). In Scobie’s case the dangerous edge of things is his “pity and

responsibility”. The moral edge of things is the debatable point: whether Scobie will be assigned to Hell or Heaven?

Greene make Scobie’s goodness and fall equally convincing and offers us a movingly tragic vision of man’s predicament. He writes as a sensitive and intelligent Catholic, for whom moral law exists but finds its application problematic. Scobie could “believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created”. The problem is one of human suffering and how to “reconcile that with the love of God” (HM,121). He feels impatient of certain Catholic ideas. When Father Rank was a novice, he felt God would somehow give him the right words to minister to those in need of consolation, yet God doesn’t do so and this makes him sad: “I’ve never been any good to the living” (HM,183). Scobie too seeks consolation but the priest’s words were ineffectual and that it was he who was in dire need of the magic words offering peace and understanding. In *A Sort of Life* Greene writes “a real priest... wouldn’t have left the situation so unchanged”; how in a critical situation, the words of the priest were empty counters and yet the Rock of Peter “though it repulsed me, I couldn’t help admiring its unyielding façade” (SL,156).

In *A Sort of Life*, Greene writes that failure is a recurrent theme of his novels as also in his life. (SL,176.) Does it reflect on Scobie too—is a debatable question. Condemned to eternal punishment in Hell because he has knowingly committed sacrilege, his wife feels there is no point in praying for him. Father Rank is quick to rebuke her saying: “Mrs Scobie, don’t imagine you-- or I-- know a thing about God’s mercy” (HM,272). The corrupt and evil man finds expedient ways of getting around problems and never loses hope of making it good and like Fellowes is cynical in his attitude to the concept of Hell. Scobie retorts that it is because he has never lost anything important and valuable. Scobie wistfully looks at the congregation praying with simplicity of conviction, but he agonizes “I’ve lost my way” and how he repeatedly stands before Christ with adultery in his heart, indulging in a sort of Black Mass: “even that act of damnation” had become “as unimportant as a habit” (HM,244-45). He imagines his body to be stinking with the rank corruption of sin and resolves to commit suicide so that he can erase himself from God’s memory and no longer hurt Him. Yet God intervenes in the other voice which addresses him: “it spoke from the cave of his body: it was as if the sacrament which had lodged there for his damnation gave tongue”. The voice tells him: “I made you with love. I’ve wept your tears... I planted in you this longing for peace... I am not Thou but simply you, when you speak to me; I am humble as any other beggar. Can’t you trust me as you’d trust a faithful dog? I have been faithful to you for two thousand years”. Scobie indulges in too much

ratiocination and calls it an “impasse”, whereas the voice implores: “there’s no human hopelessness like the hopelessness of God” (HM,258-9). Perhaps paradoxically: “only the man of goodwill carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation” (HM,60). Perhaps the Derridean ‘trace’ of God’s existence reveals itself in this inscrutable, mysterious manner. The Heart of the Matter is a great exemplar of the Forsterian “rhythm in fiction...by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope” (Forster,148). Oscillating between faith and despair, Scobie kills himself thinking that his death will enable his wife and mistress to begin life anew. Scobie’s strong conviction of his self-damnation is not the last word as the priest rebukes Louise not to be presumptuous about God’s will. Perhaps as she says Scobie loved no one but God alone, and the priest concurs. The novel ends with a sense of symphonic rhythm of “expansion” an “opening out”, a sense of being carried off to a vaster dimension of thought---for Scobie falls to the floor, his medal spinning away like “the saint whose name nobody could remember” (Forster,149; HM,265).

Scobie is the modern anti-hero, the traditional strong, brave leader. In fact he is the aberrant: "the man who is given the vocation of failure" (DLT, 41). He says "I love failure: I can't love success" and "beauty is like success" (HM,253, 263). In Greene there is a long list of spoilt priests who have given up the struggle to be virtuous, finding consolation in the truths of failure. Greene writes "man was so limited he hadn't even the ingenuity to invent a new vice...it is for this world that Christ died...it needed a God to die for the half- hearted and corrupt" (PG,94). Christ died for the love of humanity and Scobie too loves the injustices and cruelties and meanness of the West African colony: "against the beautiful and the clever and the successful, one can wage a pitiless war, but not against the unattractive". Passion and love fade away but pity always stayed because "any victim demands allegiance" (HM,50,206). Scobie's affair with Helen is less a matter of desire; rather it bears the stamp of pity and responsibility. The guilt of playing false to his wife, Louise, and betraying God leads him to a deep sense of alienation: "I feel tired of my religion. It seems to mean nothing to me. I've tried to love God, but...I'm not sure that I even believe" and that "I feel empty" (153). He feels "an immeasurable distance" from the people praying in Church and "the words of the Mass were like an indictment"(HM,223). The "stigmata of loneliness" and alienation, “a permanent sense of loss” and exile from God's Grace, grip his heart (HM,193-4). He gives up hope of the future and feels irrevocably damned.

Although the best novels of Greene focus on the Catholicism of his central characters, the novelist emphatically declared that he was "not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to

be a Catholic"(Poole, 428). Greene adhered to the Jansenist views that man has no free will and is either granted Grace or condemned to damnation. In *The Honorary Consul*, the terrorist priest says that he does not forget his religious jargon even though he has never seen God intervening in the terrible wars and politics that go on. He wonders how a religious man ought to behave in a revolutionary situation and what God could he believe in as he acted out the daily life. The priest dreams of a great Church beyond our time and place. In *Why Do I Write* Greene states that if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, then there cannot be a Christian Literature as it would be a contradiction to have a sinless literature of sinful man. In *Collected Essays* he writes that one has to go beyond the accepted ideas of sin. He quotes Henry James's father who believed evil had 'productive... earthly uses'(18). What concerns him is the human heart and the need to reform religion for the happiness of man. George Orwell was highly critical of Greene's 'sanctified sinners'—the 'Whisky Priest', Scobie and similar others. Yet the Epigraph of *The Heart of the Matter* states 'the sinner is at the very heart of Christianity...no one is more competent than the sinner to understand Christianity-- no one except the saint'. Truth is ambiguous---"the truth...has never been of any real value to any human being " and is a symbol to be pursued in mathematics and philosophy. In human relations "kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths" (HM,58). He writes the "novel of pursuit", of police in pursuit of the criminal, and symbolically, of God the hunter and the chosen hunted human being and between them, their 'enmity' is really love. Paradox holds sway: "in the end is the beginning" (HM,245). Greene gives a profound rendering of the relation between God and man (Allen, 100-101).

Conclusion

There is an intertwining of modern aesthetics and narrative devices with Catholic doctrines which reflect the deep dilemmas arising out of a loss of faith in divine dispensation: "even God is a failure" (HM,254). The sacred and the secular intertwine in the novels of Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark and Graham Greene who hold up a mirror to social reality and the muddle of religious belief. This reflects the power of fiction to project thought- provoking ideas. For Greene, "Catholicism at its best is revolutionary" and he often criticized the Vatican for its conservativeness and was supportive of the 'liberation theology', of South America (Poole, 429). Greene had an insatiable desire for the immense possibilities and adventurousness of experience and it is difficult to put him in a straitjacket of labels. He is a novelist in the great humanistic tradition. T.S.Eliot in *Selected Essays* formulates how "the humanistic point of view is auxiliary to and dependent upon the religious point of view" (SE,441). Quoting *Babbitt*,

he writes that to be sufficiently modern is to be sufficiently experimental. Greene in holding up the mirror to society and in setting up a debate about the sinner-saint syndrome is offering “bitter medicine...necessary for the well-being of society”. (Church,51). William Empson in *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) catalogues and explains these ambiguities. The sixth type of ambiguity occurs when something appears to contain a contradiction and the reader has to find interpretations. Graham Greene invites the reader to choose how he interprets his novel. Gabriel-Desire Laverdant published *De la mission de l’art et du role des artistes* (1845) in which he formulated:

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer” and it fulfils its “mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde” when his work surveys “where Humanity is going (DLT,63).

The modern milieu expressed in the aesthetics of the Anti-hero, Ambiguity, Paradox, Irony, the harsh realities of loss of Faith, alienation, loneliness, wars, gunrunning, the dark underbelly of crime and the underworld mafia coalesce to make a plurality of resonances in *The Heart of the Matter*.

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