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MAJOR THEMES IN GRAHAM GREENE'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Graham Greene was an English writer and journalist regarded by many as one of the leading English novelists of the 20th century. He acquired a reputation early in his life time as a major writer, both of serious Catholic novels and of entertainments. Through 67 years of writing, which included over 25 novels, he explored the conflicting moral and political issues of the modern world. Greene knows about defects and despairs of life. He writes what he sees. He observes the activities that were going on around him and gives an exact picture of the world. In almost all of his novels, especially in his entertainments, he presents the contemporary scene as it is. The eternal conflict between good and evil is revealed through a contemporary setting. In his novels, Greene deals with the theme of human dignity. He insists on individual's right to live in accordance with his conscience. He was basically concerned with the individual's struggle with things as they are. He is concerned only with the capacity of human heart for sacrifice and greatness within a world governed by God. His novels often portray the dramatic struggles of the individual soul from a catholic perspective.

Keywords: Entertainment, War, Crime, Lost Innocence, Evil, Sin

Novelists are always concerned with life- its manifold problems, pains and pleasures, hopes and fears, failures and aspiration. The everyday reality falls heavily on the mind of a novelist. With his keen sensibility and sharp intellect, he reaches to it, picks up and chooses those aspects of life which appeal and haunt him so much that they would not let him be till they are appropriately expressed out. A writer portrays, more or less, the times in which he lives; he cannot avoid vices and virtues of his days, Graham Greene points out the ills and evils of the society that are prevailing in the modern world.

After the publication of his first novel, 'The Man Within', Greene was basically concerned with

the individual's struggle with things as they are. The things may be social or religious or political. He has an abiding fascination for the lines demarcating countries and continents and also for the razor-sharp edge that separates childhood from adult life, innocence from corruption, good from evil and loyalty from betrayal. As the novelist himself puts it, "If there are recurrent themes in my novels, it is perhaps only because there have been recurrent themes in my life".¹

Greene's novels of the thirties have an immediate topical theme; they have a contemporary atmosphere - strikes and political murder in '*It's a Battlefield*', the machinations of armament

manufacturers in 'A Gun for sale' and the Spanish civil war in 'The Confidential Agent'. Greene concerned himself particularly with the loneliness, anxiety and fear of men living and struggling in an urban and industrial society whereas the Assistant commissioner in 'It's a Battlefield' says, "nobody cares about anything but his own troubles. Everybody is too busy fighting his own little battle to think of the next man"²

Modern war is also one of the major themes in the novels of Greene. *A Gun for Sale* was suggested by the nefarious activities and alliance of armament manufactures, 'The Confidential Agent' by the Spanish civil war, *The Ministry of Fear* by Nazi fifth column activities in Britain etc. His age was an age of war. In the novel *A Gun for Sale*, the characters are obsessed by the threat of war. Samuel Hynes describes the book as "a war novel before the event". In the novel, Sir Marcus and Devis welcome the expected war because they are the manufacturers of armaments.

'The Confidential Agent' and 'The Ministry of Fear' develop the idea that war does not so much change society as bring into open the condition that the peace time disguises. In the novel *The Confidential Agent*, the agent called D. comes from an equally anonymous country torn by civil war and is impressed at first by the calm and security of England. He is soon disillusioned as he realises that beneath the veneer of peace is raging the private war of the individual, struggling for life in a world without God. D. has been psychologically conditioned by the experiences of war. He has gone through the pain and violence of war; his wife has taken hostage for wrong man and shot; he himself saw the innocent people being murdered. "War has made death more real to him than life".³ It has left him lonely and dispossessed. "His territory was death; he could love the dead and the dying better than the living".⁴

Crime is another important theme that Greene has presented in his novels. Greene's obsession with crime and violence is vividly illustrated through his characters. The meeting between Rollo and Harry in 'The Third Man' is a typically Greenesque meeting. The pursuer and the

pursued are face to face with each other. Harry says to Rollo, "In these days, old man, nobody thinks in terms of human beings. Governments don't, so why should we..... They have their five year plans and so do I".⁵ Harry is so cool about the crimes he commits that he tells Rollo, "I'm not hurting anybody's soul by what I do. The dead are happier dead, They do not miss much here, poor devils." In the novel 'The Confidential Agent' D. seems to carry the infection of violence everywhere. He is beaten up, shot at and when he befriends Else, the hotel maid, she is murdered. For most of the time, D. is the passive victim of violence. In fact Greene sees violence as the essence of present human life. Violence and cruelty make up the milieu in which Greene's characters live.

The theme of lost innocence can easily be traced in Greene's major entertainments. Greene shows how soon innocence is threatened even in childhood and how quickly the capacity for simple happiness disappears, "Pinkie or the boy of *Brighton Rock* is a creation of 'the evil in propria persona' which Greene saw as a child in school in the boy called Carter."⁶ Early life and circumstances had left only one alternative for Pinkie - a life of evil. He had reached a point of no return, so steeped in crime he had become, Pinkie is naturally possessed by the Devil himself.

In another novel 'A Gun for Sale' Raven has wounds since childhood that would never be healed up. Raven carries the wretchedness and poverty of his early life which stigmatizes him with evil forever. He tells Anne, "It was like you carry a load around you. You were born with some of it..... Then when you're a kid, the load gets bigger."⁷ Crime for Raven is an escape, a vengeance on the merciless cruelty of his childhood. Crime appeases his tortured mind. He turns out to be a murderer but his childhood training makes him intolerant of deceit. He regards murder just as a new job. He is a lost child petulantly demanding our attention.

The view that the experiences of childhood have a dominating influence over the future course of life persists and finds expression in his autobiography *A Sort of Life* where Greene talks of his accumulated unhappiness in childhood. Our lives

are shaped to a larger extent by these impressions and experiences of early life. One never escapes one's past. In *The Fallen Idol* Greene develops the idea that a single event in an individual's childhood could leave a permanent scar on the whole of his life. The sight of the house - keeper's crumpled body had a permanent effect on Philip's mind. He witnessed certain things which made an unforgettable impression on him. One of them was the sight of Mr. Baines sitting in the tea-shop with the girl. When he was dying sixty years later he asked, "Who is she? Who is she?"

Greene believes that presence of evil is the first thing we apprehend in our lives and so the theme of evil is recurrent in his works. Greene's basic obsession is the predicament of man in an evil world, man's struggle against the evil of the world, against the world that creates conditions in which evil inflates. This is not an abnormality; it is a regular feature of life. It reflects Greene's inborn humanism. As K. Prasad says, "Evil is his personal discovery, an artist's unshaken grasp of truth."⁸ Greene asserts that, "the pattern was already there - perfect evil walking the world where perfect goodness can never walk again and only the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done."⁹ Greene does not condemn man. Instead, he condemns the world. He says that we cannot dissociate evil from the world just as we cannot dissociate the evil in man from the evil of the world. In '*A Gun for Sale*' it is the violent and wretched world that stigmatizes Raven with evil forever. He tells Anne that a man is born with evil and the conditions of early life nurture it. The hatred and the evil of the world have made him into a thin, murderous figure hunted by everyone.

Greene once remarked that he was not a catholic novelist but a novelist with a catholic faith, still he has some religious views which he expresses through the theme of sin and salvation. According to him the bad man suffers as a punishment for his sin while the good man suffers as a test from God. He shows that once a sin is committed, it leads to fear and guilt. The sinner seeks every possible means to make himself secure. The desire for security leads him to commit more sins and makes him lose all peace of mind.

In *Brighton Rock*, Pinkie to ensure his security kills several persons and marries Rose. At one stage, just to get more secure he decides to kill Rose who loves him so much that she commits a mortal sin by marrying him without sacrament. Greene has presented very vividly the degeneration of the human soul brought about by sin. Greene's concern with sin is very intense and he believes that sin in one form or the other, is universal. Greene's evil characters like Pinkie, Scobie etc. can in many respects be identified with Greene himself, "Greene, we feel, has translated his own experience, his sharp and early sense of evil, in term of fiction".¹⁰

We see that alienation, corruption, sin, violence, guilt, betrayal and man hunt are familiar traits of our world, and there are the recurrent themes in Greene's fiction. Blighted by the shadows of love and lust, the world of Greene's entertainments is very like our own - troubled, violent, sordid and seedy. But Greene is always interested in the human factor. Even as nations fight and power - brokers conspire for total domination, Greene can be seen worrying about a lonely, individual's search for a home, "Whether Greene deals with the theme of lost childhood, innocence, trust, love or belief, his novels are permeated with tragic awareness of human condition, and yet he can make us laugh till the tears come."¹¹ And herein lies his greatness as an artist in the domain of fiction.

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