

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MATTER OF COMPASSION IN GRAHAM GREENE'S *THE HEART OF THE MATTER*

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ABSTRACT

Graham Greene's novels are formed and figured with the wit, passion and compassion that made him a great and glorious novelist. Many critics emphasize that Greene's novel—*The Heart of the Matter*— is the most frustrate and compassionate novel. The scene of the novel is laid in a West African Port during war. The place is inhabited by outsiders—British officials, Asians, Syrians and West Indian Negroes. Major Scobie, a Deputy Commissioner of police, is the hero of the novel. He is an honest officer but gets involved in criminal deeds only to please his wife, Louise who wants to go to South Africa; Scobie has no money to arrange for her passage, so he borrows money from Yusef a criminal. Now Yusef blackmails him into participating in his business of illegally exporting diamonds. Thus, Scobie—a pure and noble-hearted person—becomes corrupt out of pity and compassion for his wife. The greatest turning point in the life of Scobie comes when he receives the survivors of the ship torpedoed in the Atlantic as a result of the war between the British and the Germans. These survivors include a young widow, Helen Rolt whom Scobie befriends and, in the absence of his wife, falls in love with her which is against his Catholic faith. Getting the wind of his affair, his wife returns unexpectedly and asks him to accompany her to Mass. As a Catholic, he cannot go to the Communion without prior confession and repentance since it would mean damnation. Scobie's conscience pricks him, and he doesn't know what to do as he is torn between his love for Louise and Helen, and his love for God. Unable to bear the tension he commits suicide compassionately. Thus, it proves that there is only one central theme that is 'compassion' in the novel.

Keywords: Compassion, heart, Catholic, God, pity, commissioner, smuggler, damnation, salvation, mercy, and sympathy.

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Graham Greene is Britain's "main literary expert"¹ in the contemporary world. *The Heart of the Matter* is one of the most important Catholic novels of Greene. Along with *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, it belongs to the group of his novels popularly called 'Catholic trilogy'. The membership

of the 'fallen' world in Greene's novels produces tensions and longings which can only stop with the passage of time. In other words, it carves the Cross:

"The Cross is not only a unique event in time, but also something inherent in human life and which has to be lived through by every individual,

who must ascend his own Calvary and die on his isolated Cross so that he may have the possibility of returning to God."²

The Heart of the Matter, like *The Power and the Glory*, has a title based on the chief theme it deals with. Like other Catholic novels of Greene, it deals with the themes of God and His mercy, and the issues related to sin, damnation, sainthood and salvation. It also presents a conflict between the love of woman and love of God. It brings out the infiniteness of God's mercy and the impenetrability of the workings of the human heart as well as those of God. On the other hand, we can say that Greene emphasizes the mysteriousness of the workings of the human heart and also the mystery of God. The title phrase takes place after the opening of the novel's second part, when Scobie, momentarily alone in the night time and looking up at the stars, asks the question: "If one knew the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?"³ Thus, the title of the novel is meaningful and appropriate, for there is only one central theme—the heart of the matter—that is compassion.

The Heart of the Matter is set against the background of the British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa. The use of wartime atmosphere is made in it by the introduction of an important character, Helen Rolt, a survivor of a torpedoed boat. Greene used to feel a great attraction of Africa even during his childhood. This feeling was produced in his heart chiefly by the novel *King Solomon's Mines*, written by Rider Haggard, which he read as a small boy. This romantic tale, set in the African region, created in Greene a keen desire to visit Africa. On growing older, Greene retained this interest in Africa. His African visits have provided him with the setting and background of one of his greatest novels, viz. *The Heart of the Matter*.

The protagonist Henry Scobie, a Deputy Commissioner of Police, who, as the novel opens, is passed over for promotion. He has something of both Pinkie and the whisky-priest in his character. He is, like Pinkie, involved in crime and he has, like the whisky-priest, a plodding desire to do good and an innate love of God, which means, as Edward Sackville West puts it, 'the love of one's fellow men

raised to the highest power, at which every man assumes the form of Christ crucified, which is one aspect of the Incarnation."⁴

The scene and sight of the African region where Scobie's world is visualized is as dirty and squalid as Mexico and Brighton. Greene's realistic picture of the West African colony is undoubtedly based on the details of the physical and moral climate which he must have watched scientifically during his stay in Sierra Leone when the war was in full swing. The town where Scobie lives is an ugly and uncomfortable place. The heat is oppressive as well as depressive. The climate of the land develops its frightful fauna—rats, cockroaches, flies, mosquitoes, pye-dogs, vultures and scavengers. This rotting and decaying region symbolises the corruption and frustration which will soon overpower Scobie's natural instincts.

Scobie's wife, Louise is a foolish and pretentious woman, who desires her husband's official importance but she has no appreciation for his sensitivity, or his sense of honour. She has been deeply affected by the loss of their only child, a nine-year-old daughter, named Catherine. Since Catherine's death, some years ago, Louise's childish dependence on Scobie has heightened his feelings of inadequacy both in private and professional spheres of life. Moreover, Louise's disappointment at Scobie's failure to get a promotion has a detrimental effect on him: in fact this failure may be the starting point from where the tension in the husband-wife relations is aggravated. Professional failure does not mean much to Scobie, but the self-conscious Louise, feels insulted. In the present state of affairs, when she would not be able to call herself the Commissioner's wife, she longs to escape from the society which she finds unbearable. Scobie, unable to withstand her importunities, promises to find money for her passage to South Africa. This triggers off the chain of events which carries Scobie relentlessly to his doom. So overpowering is the sense of pity in Scobie that he would have made the promise even if he had foreseen the terrible consequences.⁵ Although Scobie longs to make his wife, Louise happy with her ambitious emotions, he does not know the disastrous consequences:

"He had always been prepared to accept

the responsibility for his actions, and he had always been half-aware too, from the time he made his terrible private vow that she should be happy, how far this action might carry him." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 60.)

Scobie feels that his particular sense of responsibility, the desire to carry the burden of others' suffering, involves pity, sympathy and sorrowful emotion or grief. Indeed, this is the heart of the matter—compassion so far as the unhappy life and death of Henry Scobie are concerned. He is a good man betrayed into evil by an obsession, 'the horrible and horrifying emotion of pity', which imposes paradoxical obligations on him and brings him to a deadlock.

When Louise incites Scobie into raising the money to allow her to escape from the Colonial gossip, as well as from the heat and humidity of West Africa by going away on a holiday, Scobie is compelled to disregard his ideals of righteousness. To please his wife he is forced into borrowing money from Yusef, a Syrian trader and smuggler who loves Scobie because they are both human sufferers, but at the same time Yusef also hates Scobie for his honesty. The deal with Yusef, heightens Scobie's feeling of worthlessness as well as loneliness. Thinking of Louise's unhappiness and his inability to understand the miserable situation, Scobie confesses that one can never come to know and understand another human being fully. Scobie's pondering over this fact is noticeable:

"If I could just arrange her (Louise's) happiness first, he thought, and in the confusing night he forgot for the while what experience had taught him—that no human being can really understand another, and no one can arrange another's happiness." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 85.)

When Louise leaves the colony, Scobie's feelings of discontent and loneliness cause him to fall into an adulterous relationship with Helen Rolt, a young widow, rescued under his supervision from a ship that has been torpedoed by a German submarine. Helen's uncomprehending nature intensifies Scobie's isolation, especially when she scorns his religious scruples as a Catholic, which prevents him from obtaining a divorce and marrying her. She asks him if he can never marry her, he replies that, being a Roman Catholic, he

cannot marry her. She says that it is a strange excuse: as a Roman Catholic he can sleep with her but cannot marry her. Scobie then tells her that he would do anything in order to please her. But Helen loses her temper and says: "Go to hell, clear out, and do not come back." At these words, Scobie leaves her.

As soon as Scobie reaches his house that night, he writes a letter to Helen. In it he sketches: "My darling, I love you more than myself, more than my wife, more than God, I think. I want more than anything in the world to make you happy. I love you. Forgive me." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 166.) He signs the letter and goes out again in the rain. Arriving at Helen's hut, he pushes the letter under her door, and then returns to his house. But it so happens that the letter falls into the hands of Helen's boy-servant who carries it to Yusef and hands it over to that man. Yusef uses the letter to blackmail Scobie who is already guilty of professional indiscretion by borrowing money from him. Yusef seduces him to strike a deal: he agrees to return the letter if Scobie will carry a packet of industrial diamonds for him. Thus, Scobie is blackmailed into smuggling. That is not all. Scobie discovers that he is being officially "watched" by Wilson, a British counter intelligence agent who has newly arrived in the Colony to look into the smuggling of industrial diamonds to Nazi Germany. Wilson, the shrewd young man, not only observes Scobie's underhand dealing with Yusef but also looks on Scobie contemptuously for the way he neglects his wife, Louise, with whom he himself is passionately in love. Soon Wilson finds out Scobie's affair with Helen and in an angry outburst accuses Scobie of his undignified conduct. These are the things that lead him to a compassionate position. The following conversation between them conveys Wilson's contempt for Scobie's affection for Helen:

"There are rumours going about that Yusef is protected... they say that you and Yusef are on visiting terms... You are too young for job Wilson (Scobie says). His (Wilson's) face was aflame, even his knees seemed to blush with rage, shame, self-depreciation. "You sent Louise away," Wilson said, "because you were afraid of me... she couldn't stand your stupid, unintelligent... you don't know what a woman like Louise thinks... she is too good

for you... Don't think I haven't my eye on you. The absurdity of the phrase took Scobie off his guard. "You watch your step," Wilson said, "and Mrs. Rolt... Don't think I don't know why you have stayed behind, hunted the hospital..." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 132.)

Scobie's mental suffering intensifies when his wife returns suddenly from her trip and suspects his infidelity, about which she has already been informed, by post, by Mrs. Carter, one of her scandal-mongering friends. Now, she wants to confirm the rumours she has heard about Scobie and Helen; Louise persuades Scobie to accompany her to Church and receive the Holy Communion at a forthcoming Sunday Mass. Scobie finds himself trapped, he fully recognizes the theological implications of his adultery, particularly when he cannot bring himself to say with surety in the confession that he will completely break off relations with Helen. Later he tells himself that he can find an escape from the tortuous pressures of both Helen and Louise. He thinks: "Of course there's the ordinary honest wrong answer, to leave Louise, forget that private vow, resign my job. To abandon Helen to Bagster or Louise to what? I am trapped, he told himself... trapped." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 220.)

Finally, ensnared by his wife into taking the Holy sacrament while in a state of mortal sin, Scobie commits sacrilege, and suffers the torments of mental agony before committing the unpardonable sin of killing himself. Scobie's career, like Pinkie's and the whisky-priest's, exemplifies Greene's obsession with man's sinfulness and his need of divine forgiveness.

It seems that Scobie is always trying to plunge into the pond that has perennial sources of miseries and his career is guided by terrible agonies. This is the result not only of his own obsession but also of a fatality that enters forcibly upon his life. We witness in Scobie, as in Pinkie and the whisky-priest earlier, a conflict between evil and faith in human nature. Frank Kermode considers Scobie 'a classic case of victimage' and says that the main issue of the book is that 'Scobie's intolerable position is plotted by God; He demands more pity and love than anybody else and ought not to get them.'⁶

No doubt, Scobie is afflicted with extreme pain, suffering and anguish by his love of God because he cannot reconcile it with his love of human beings. The only way out for him is to kill himself but, as a Catholic, he cannot do it without wounding God. Scobie's love of God is inspired by the same pity which inspires his love of Louise or Helen. At the same time, his pity drives him to struggle with a God who does not seem to have the same compassion as he has and who would not allow him to arrange the happiness of others as he wishes. The tension in the novel arises from Scobie's endeavour to pit his own compassionate self against the Omnipotence which allows unreasonable anguish in human life. For the first time in Greene's fiction, as Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris observe, 'the problem of reconciling the existence of suffering with an omnipotent and merciful providence is now raised explicitly.'⁷

The religious motivation grows stronger in the novel when Scobie is faced with the problem of religious observance. Louise, who has heard about Scobie's affair with Helen, asks him to accompany her to Mass. As a Catholic, Scobie has the alternative of making his confession as an unavoidable preliminary, or, by his refusal, giving himself away and let Louise know the worst. He cannot hurt Louise by his refusal and he cannot hurt Helen by giving her up. He is concerned by his wife's insistence. But going to the Communion without prior repentance means damnation, 'taking his God' in a state of mortal sin. To Helen, an innocent non-believer, it is 'all hooey', but to Scobie it is the worst evil.⁸

However, Scobie must settle between the conflicting claims of his wife and Helen but, as he cannot decide without causing pain to one of them, there is in fact no choice left open to him. He is unable to promise in the confessional not to see Helen again. His brand of integrity and innocence is observable in this way: "I am cheating human beings every day I live, I am not going to try to cheat myself or God." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 237.)

Nonetheless, his spiritual situation is symbolised by the dream in which he discovers a smell of decay in his own living body. He has so far evaded the Mass (by feigning illness) to which his

wife, like a 'kindly remorseless gaoler', has been urging him. Caught between belief and pity, Scobie has given up his future. He says to Helen, who taunts him about his Roman Catholicism, "I believe that I'm damned for all eternity... what I've done is far worse than murder—that's an act, a blow, a stab, a shot: it's over and done, but I'm carrying my corruption around with me. It's the coating of my stomach. I can never void it." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 251.)

The believers in Greene's novels suffer acutely from their fear of damnation. Scobie realises, as do Pinkie, the whisky-priest and, later, Sarah Miles, that in the terms and structure of human existence there is no resolution of the complexities of their lives or assuagement of their agony. Scobie regards sin as an outrage perpetrated against God.... The fundamental terror of life is brought home to Scobie through sin as it is to Pinkie and the whisky-priest.⁹

The next significant incident is concerned with Scobie's faithful servant, Ali. He thinks that Ali has been spying on him and could ruin him as well as Louise and Helen. Hence he talks confidentially to Yusef about this matter and tells him that Ali had seen him kissing Helen and that he might convey this information to Louise. Yusef thereupon assures Scobie that Ali would no longer be allowed to disturb Scobie's peace of mind. A little later, a shriek is heard from outside. Rushing out of Yusef's house, Scobie finds Ali lying murdered in a pool of blood. Evidently Yusef has got Ali murdered. He looks down at Ali's body with intense pity and grief:

"Oh God... I've killed you: you've served me all these years and I've killed you at the end of them.... You served me and I did this to you. You were faithful to me, and I wouldn't trust you." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 269.)

Now, it seems that the pot of Scobie's suffering is going to be overflowed because, at one place in the novel, Louise says to Wilson: "We don't die for love." But Scobie is going to die for love which has brought him into a state of mortal sin and immortal sanctification. Indeed, there is an unbearable conflict between his love for Louise and Helen. Neither of the two—Louise and Helen, he can leave to the wisdom and mercy of God, and his love for God, whom he cannot go on profaning, is

revealed in an inner dialogue between him and God. Scobie reasons that by killing himself he will stop inflicting pain on those he loves—Louise, Helen and God:

"O God I am the only guilty one because I've known the answers all the time. I've preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can't observe your suffering. I can only imagine it. But there are limits to what I can do to you—or them. I can't desert either of them while I'm alive, but I can die and remove myself from their blood stream. They are ill with me and I can cure them. And you too God—you are ill with me... you'll be better off if you lose me once and for all. I know what I'm doing. I am not pleading for mercy. I'm going to damn myself...." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 281.)

The inspiration of God argues with him to live and give up either Louise or Helen, but Scobie, caught in the clashing tides of love, doesn't follow the will of God. He cannot transfer to God his burden of responsibility associated with his love, pity and sympathy and he cannot make either Louise or Helen suffer so that he may save himself. Laurence Lerner writes appropriately:

"Scobie mistrusts God because he cannot shrug off his part in Helen's happiness: the selfish action and the right action would, in his case, be the same, and he has to do the wrong compassionate action, even if it means giving up salvation."¹⁰

Here, Lerner's remark seems to be quite correct as Scobie hurts those he loves and he will hurt God once and for all. Even when God lowers the terms and asks him to go on living as he is, Scobie can only reply: "That's impossible. I love you and I won't go on insulting you at your own alter. You see, it's an impasse, God, an impasse." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 282.)

Scobie, therefore, prepares methodically for the ultimate sin of despair, suicide. He is going to commit the worst crime a Catholic can commit and he is going to make it a perfect one. He thinks of a plan to make his contemplated suicide look like a natural death. He pretends that he has been having recurrent fits of pain in his chest. He goes to a doctor who, on the basis of Scobie's description of the symptoms, says that he is suffering from

angina. Scobie secretly harbours the fatal Evipan tablets which his doctor has prescribed for the illness. He invents evidence in his diary to persuade his survivors that he had no anticipation of his death. He feels the 'imploring fingers' touching him, trying to hold him. In Greene's novels, God does not quite give up a sinner and His grace always tries to reach him. But Scobie feels so mired in sin, so 'greased with falsehood, treachery', that he cannot believe that any hands can hold his fall.¹¹

It is a matter of agreement with Marie-Beatrice Mesnet when she says that 'Scobie's ultimate fault is to believe that his sin is too great for God to forgive it.'¹² Before swallowing the overdose of Evipan tablets, he says aloud: "Dear God, I love..." and falls dead. The story comes to an end with a conversation between Mrs. Scobie and Father Rank. Through Father Rank, Greene emphasizes once again upon the 'appalling strangeness' of the mercy of God. Louise believes that her husband is damned; but Father Rank tells her that God has infinite mercy for all His creatures though they may be leading a sinful life:

"For goodness sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you—or I—know a thing about God's mercy.... The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 297.)

Further, Father Rank lays emphasis that if Louise can forgive Scobie, God can be no less forgiving. He tells her: "It may seem an odd thing to say—When a man is as wrong as he was—but I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 297.) The priest is brought in at the end not to force our suspended judgement into 'positiveness and definiteness'¹³ as F.N. Lees puts it, but to present the doctrines of the Church as flexible enough to accommodate the redemptive power of a sinner's love and sacrifice. Indeed, Scobie is going to get the mercy and forgiveness of God as a result of his love, pity and sympathy he endowed Louise, Helen and Ali.

The Heart of the Matter is one of the most disputatious of Greene's novels as Arnold Kettle remarks:

"The implication of *The Heart of the Matter* is that human action, as such, doesn't really matter much at all. The ethics and aspirations of

sinful humanity are at best but poor things. It is the relation between man and God that is important."¹⁴

Indeed, Scobie's story is the record of an attempt to imitate Christ. Scobie's attempt to 'love human beings nearly as God loved them' illustrates Jesus's commandment: 'That ye love one another, as I have loved you.' (St. John 15:12) There is obviously something Christ-like in Scobie's self-sacrifice as he thinks: "Christ had not been murdered: you couldn't murder God: Christ had killed himself: he had hung himself on the cross as surely as Pemberton from the picture-rail." (*The Heart of the Matter*, 203.) Christ had his Judas and Scobie has his Wilson.

Finally, it is right to conclude that compassion—sympathy, pity and sorrowful emotion—is the main theme that is dominating in each and every part of the novel. For instance, having a sense of pity and sympathy for his wife, Scobie borrows money from the villainous Yusuf, and has to face disastrous consequences. Further, it is again, on account of, a sense of pity and sympathy for the helpless victim of the torpedoed boat, Helen Rolt, and later develops an adulterous relationship with her, which goes against his Catholic principles, and causes his fall from his position of dignity and integrity. Besides, Scobie himself is an object of pity as he wonders: "Am I really one of those whom people pity?" (*The Heart of the Matter*, 194.) Considering the compassionate nature of the novel, Cedric Watts rightly says, "It seems that the 'heart of the matter' is pity."¹⁵ While R. H. Miller explains better: "The 'heart of the matter' is fundamentally the totality of vision that rests with an omniscient God that can account for the problem of evil, natural and moral, and how one is to reconcile it to one's belief in that loving God."¹⁶ Consequently, we can say that it is the matter of compassion that leads Scobie to his disastrous end and passion.

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