

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## GRAHAM GREENE'S PARADOXICAL VISION

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## ABSTRACT

Graham Greene is one of the most daring, politically and theologically controversial, and significant writers of the twentieth century. Most of his novels are phenomenally popular and address difficult religious and political issues. The paradoxical streams—religion and politics—are fused together in his novels, and the novelist works upon them and develops them together to integrate his fictional works into articulate products of art. His concept of 'paradoxical vision' is inherently attached with his antithetical mingling of religious and political ideas. His religious ideas are fundamentally Catholic and political ideas admittedly left-leaning. In fact, his novels clarify that religion and politics—Church and State are components of the same reality that originates the existence of the paradoxical vision.

**Keywords:** Paradoxical, religion, politics, contradictory, Catholic, left and American.

Graham Greene is one of the most important novelists of the twentieth century, indeed, of any century. Undoubtedly, his major novels are world-famous and have remained steadily marketable, while at the same time they challengingly display religious and political problems of abiding importance. Indeed, they make a happy blend of the two paradoxical ways of life: the religious and the political. Naturally the first continual theme of Greene is good and evil, that fight over man continually, and the second one is the political current that leads to disaster.

The term 'paradox' has its origin in the Greek word 'paradoxos — para + doxa (opinion). Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as 'a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, especially one that is incredible, absurd, or fantastic' or 'a seemingly absurd or self-

contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated or explained may prove to be well-founded or true'.<sup>1</sup> The adjective form of the word is paradoxical.

Thus, 'paradoxical vision' means the vision which includes two contradictory ideas or principles. Greene's vision of life is paradoxical as he holds both Catholicism and modern politics together in unison. In his interview with Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh, he, very emphatically, says that both religion and politics can be combined and made complementary to each other. In fact, he has tried to make a compromise between two contradictory ideas—religion and politics, and soften the opposition between the two through his novels and other prose writings. Finally, it is right to argue that Greene's concept of 'paradoxical vision' is closely associated with his contradictory blending of religious and

political ideas. His religious ideas are faithfully Catholic and political ideas avowedly left.

Greene's fictional man hovers between damnation and salvation, an ambivalent idea which can be interpreted either as religious liberation or political liberty. The novels present characters often in close-up, in extreme situations, at dramatic moments, to accentuate that there is no true religion, nor the moral life without its embodiment in politics, and there is no true politics without religious underpinning. Indeed, his novels illuminate the moral sense by structuring the narrative within a framework of religious consciousness and political awakening. They illustrate that religion and politics, traditionally seen as antagonistic forces, Church and State, sacred and secular, God and Caesar, are elements of the same reality.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Greene has developed his own world vision in both religion and politics. His conversion to Catholicism, his flirtation with Communism and his travelling as a spy sprouted the seeds of religio-political growth in his fictional world and he flourished as a religio-political novelist of the paradoxical vision.

A close look at the modern criticism on Greene reveals that critical emphasis has largely been placed on the religious and political themes in his novels. If some critics concentrate on Greene's socio-political consciousness, others tend to interpret his novels in terms of religio-political obsessions. A major chunk of criticism on Greene is focused on his Catholicism. Marie-Beatrice Mesnet perceives a 'mysterious pattern' wrought by the grace of 'a living God' when she says: "The description of the complete failure of man left to his own devices, of his miserable condition, of his evil works, is intended as a tribute to the power and the glory of the Living God.... The greater the failure of man, the greater the mercy of God."<sup>3</sup> God's presence, Mesnet asserts, gives a new meaning to everything in Greene's novels and gives an "answer" to "those who despair."<sup>4</sup> In *The Labyrinthine Ways of Greene*<sup>5</sup> Francis Kunkel studies the use of religious symbols, character development and themes and analyses and evaluates both literary and religious influences on Greene as a maturing artist. Robert A. Wichert suggests that Greene "wants God to have the last word."<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, A.J. Smith

maintains, "The very crux of Greene's plots is the true cross."<sup>7</sup> The Catholic critics display a marked tendency to treat Greene's novels as problems in applied theology. Greene's Catholic-convert colleague Evelyn Waugh said about *The Heart of the Matter*: "It is a book which only a Catholic could write and only a Catholic can understand."<sup>8</sup>

When the religious novels by Greene are studied, it is felt that Greene has almost an obsessive awareness of God, His mercy and Grace. Though Greene depicts evil in all its dimensions, yet behind them all, the underlying sense of God as well as His grandeur is noticeable. It appears that Greene's pre-occupation with evil is inextricably linked with his religious consciousness. Greene, it is believed, has rehabilitated the religious sense in the English novel, which was missing since the death of Henry James. He has also incorporated in the English novel a metaphysical dimension and the concepts of the Catholic faith. Frequent references are found in terms of sin, redemption, damnation, grace, faith, and salvation in many of Greene's important novels. He, however, denounces conventional piety and the formal aspects of religion. He feels that they tend to drive out the essentials—love for God and love for a corrupt and suffering humanity. Faith, to Greene, is unconditioned and unconditional. It is the free movement of the heart. Greene seems to be concerned with redefining religion and its functions. He feels that religious faith is not simply a matter of detached practice of rituals for its own sake. It is precisely an affair of the spirit and so of subjectivity. Knowledge of God is actually an inward experience. Greene feels that every individual must have the freedom of faith. Like Dostoevsky, he too, believes that material proofs are irrelevant as regards faith and the existence of God. According to Greene, every individual has his own orientation towards the ultimate reality of human existence. The concept of salvation and the means by which it can be achieved may differ from man to man. It is seen that every protagonist in Greene's novels, whether a criminal or a normal man of the world, makes a painstaking and conscientious effort to attain salvation no matter if it is attainable even through suicide. This sustained effort by a person to achieve salvation according to his or her own individual orientation is nothing but a kind of religious persecution.

Greene is of the belief that it is better to keep hold of the comfort provided by religion than be disillusioned by the hypothetical happiness based on materialism. He points out that man will be left with nothing in the absence of belief in God.

The God of Greene's religion is a merciful God, the source of all love; a Being who is 'the Supreme Good, or has all the attributes of Good in infinite intenseness'. As a convert to Catholicism, he is not burdened by the traditions of theology. François Mauriac sums up Greene's belief and art:

"What I find most authentic in Greene's novels is Grace.... He enables us to rediscover Christian faith; his solutions to the problems posed by Grace and salvation are free from the rigid categories of our theologians and our casuists. The liberty he grants to God over mankind is at once terrifying and reassuring because, at the final count, God is love and if nothing is possible to man, everything is possible to Eternal love."<sup>9</sup>

The theme of religious pursuit can be traced in the very first novel, *The Man Within*. Francis Andrews is a coward and fugitive. When he meets Elizabeth, it appears that he stumbles upon goodness. She becomes the agent of his possible redemption. Andrews's fumbling quest for redemption begins when he betrays the smugglers to the authorities. It seems that he is saved by the love of Elizabeth. Her goodness lifts Andrews out of the mire of sin. His death is a kind of sacrifice which atones for the weakness of the flesh. It also represents the triumph of the good in him over the evil. Not only Andrews but also Elizabeth, perhaps achieves salvation through love and charity, culminating in the supreme act of self-sacrifice—dying for other's sake. Indeed, *The Man Within* focuses on one dimension of the politics of conscience that underlies all his novels.

*Brighton Rock* is the first explicitly Catholic novel by Greene in which the theme of salvation and damnation is very dominant. In this novel Greene suggests that there is no limit to God's mercy which operates in queer, irrational ways beyond human comprehension. Even a sinner like Pinkie can receive the mercy of God and be saved. In fact, Rose is engaged in her religious pursuit with such a pure heart and in such a loving and conscientious manner as to become a possible agency for the operation of

God's grace to save Pinkie.

Besides, the character of Pinkie may also be analysed and examined as a Napoleonic strategist, and this analysis unites the novel to the paradoxical approach of the novelist. Central to this aspect of Greene's conception of Pinkie are the figures of Napoleon I and Napoleon III. Pinkie's youth and diminutive stature are in this context reminiscent of Napoleon I. He conceives of life as "a series of complicated tactical exercises, as complicated as the alignments at Waterloo." He laments the lack of sufficient time for quasi-military planning: "Tactics, tactics, there was never any time for strategy."<sup>10</sup>

Coexisting with this impression of Pinkie is his posture after he has been attacked by Colleoni's men at the racetrack, an image which recalls the familiar pose of Bonaparte with one hand tucked inside his coat: "Pinkie limped along the sand with his bleeding hand hidden, a young dictator...." (*Brighton Rock*, 133.) Later, at the sight of Pinkie's wounds, his lawyer Prewitt picks up the image of combat: "Oh dear, oh dear," he says, "you've been in the war." (*Brighton Rock*, 143.)

*The Power and the Glory* is set in a Mexican region where the government had decided to stamp out Catholicism and erect in its place socialism and atheism as guiding principles. In this novel, Greene has presented the theme of religious pursuit in a very vivid and powerful manner. The whisky-priest is not very much a virtuous man, yet he clings tenaciously to his faith. He is aware of the fact that his cowardice is due to his religious faith. He exemplifies the importance of suffering for the purification of the soul and heart of man. Such a purification is necessary for redemption and salvation. He is full of repentance and humility. He surrenders himself completely to the will and mercy of God. Eventually the priest lays down his life for God and His beloved, thereby accomplishing the greatest act of love. The course of his life is a perfect illustration of religious prosecution which entitles him to salvation by the infinite mercy of God.

Indeed, *The Power and the Glory* is a truly religio-political novel in which the fate of religious men in an anti-religious political system is subjected to a searching analysis. It is not concerned with political systems or conflicting political ideologies but the conflict between the individual and the anti-

religious state. Politics provides the basic conditions and the framework within which the protagonist (the whisky-priest) and his antagonist (the police lieutenant) work out their respective destinies. And, in showing the failure of atheistic politics, Greene implicitly reasserts his faith in Christianity and Catholicity.

*The Heart of the Matter* is basically the story of corruption settling on a God-fearing and religious minded-man, Henry Scobie. He is tormented by his love of God because he cannot reconcile it with his love of human beings. He does also discover that goodness involves suffering. Scobie suffers in and for his own life. But he does also suffer something which is most illogical and incomprehensible. He suffers in and for the lives of others. This saintly feeling is indeed a reflection of his religious pursuit. On the other hand, *The Heart of the Matter* is typically viewed as a novel having paradoxical analysis as Scobie, the protagonist of the novel, is a religious man as well as a political one having the status of a police-officer. Feeling the religious impact of the novel, one cannot ignore the political one that is playing an unavoidable role invisibly behind the curtain.

In *The End of the Affair* the theological element is very prominent. Like *The Heart of the Matter*, this novel too shows the possibility of redemption and salvation through love and suffering. The protagonist of the novel, Sarah is led through renunciation to sanctification. Sarah feels a peculiar delight in the spirit of self-surrender. She gradually comes to understand God's love and mercy. She has a firm resolve to achieve salvation and she pursues this goal single-mindedly. The political context is more muted than in earlier novels but it is significant that the setting is London under siege, a tremendous moment of fear, destruction, and political turmoil. Beyond that background, Greene's religious imagination focuses on the competing visions of a religious and specifically Catholic belief system versus the modern, secular visions of atheism.

Graham Greene's novels and, particularly his Catholic novels, deal with the nature of sin and salvation. His novels arouse a profound sympathy for the bewildered victim or the suffering seeker. He points out that the most important thing in life is

man's relationship to God. Faith is a leap in the dark to which human beings are driven sooner or later. Even then, he, sometimes, gives doubtful statements: "I am sympathetic to a religious belief but I can't wholeheartedly be a Catholic, or wholeheartedly a Christian. As I get older and older I lose more and more my belief in God. I have always liked the Biblical saying—Lord I believe. Help my unbelief." (The Gospel of St. Mark, 9:24)<sup>11</sup>

In the 1950s Greene's emphasis switched from religion to politics. He lived at the Majestic Hotel in Saigon and made trips to Hong Kong and Singapore. The Asian setting stimulated Greene's *The Quiet American*, which is about American involvement in Indochina. There is a conflict between Communism and the Catholic Church in the novel. Alden Pyle, the naive, "quiet" American, serves as Greene's subject in which to investigate the shift between European colonial rule and the new world order of U.S. economic and diplomatic interests. The imaginative world of Catholicism is minimal in the text, serving only as a political subtext in the plot when Vietnamese Catholics are under siege by insurgents. In this novel Greene still suggests that enclaves of Vietnamese Catholics stand apart from the ideological battle among the French, the communists, and the Americans in Vietnam. Catholic difference is still at play—a religious community that suffers as it is manipulated by opposing forces. And in the character of Fowler, the English journalist whose first-person narrative offers a nominal Catholic consciousness, Greene recreates his personal marital dilemma. Fowler, like his creator, suffers from a broken marriage to a Catholic woman in England who, in this case, refuses him a divorce. In the novel Fowler betrays Pyle to the communist insurgents, thinking the betrayal will save innocent lives, as well as win back his Vietnamese lover, whom Pyle promised to marry. In the last words of the novel, Fowler longs for an absent God to whom he could confess his betrayal: "Everything had gone right with me since [Pyle] died, but how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry."<sup>12</sup> Though the novel voices the metaphysical distance between God and Greene's main characters, confessional tropes of Catholic remorse and guilt still reveal the religious sensibility underlying the text.

Furthermore, *Our Man in Havana* has a political setting in Cuba before the Castro revolution. Indeed, It is a criticism of the American policy in Cuba and the incompetence of the British Secret Service.

*The Comedians* that happens to be about politics in the richest sense depicts Papa Doc Duvalier's repressive rule in Haiti. In the novel, Greene uses comedy to expose the inadequacy of human agency to effect real change in the political order of that nation. Most of the novel's characters are outsiders to Haiti and would indeed be a comical ensemble if not for the horror inflicted on Haitians by the abuse of political power and the collusion of U.S. support of such a regime. Peter Mudford's political reading of the novel presciently notes the new cultural context in which Greene wrote:

"In *The Comedians* ideological conflict has been reduced to the uncontrolled violence of the Tontons Macoute.... In a state where arbitrary violence and fear are the only instruments of government policy, betrayal ceases to have much meaning.... What is betrayed is not a faith but an underlying human dignity."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, *The Honorary Consul* is a well-written novel combining the elements of a political novel with those of a Greek tragedy. In this novel, Greene presents differing ideological visions of salvation through the discourse of three main characters: Eduardo Plarr, a doctor who helps the poor; León Rivas, a revolutionary ex-priest; and Charlie Fortnum the mistakenly abducted honorary British consul. The remarkable fact is that Greene has tried to interpenetrate the spiritual with the political — the city of God with the city of politics — in his novels.

Basic to Greene's politics is his loyalty to human rights and individual freedom, untrammelled by constraints of Church or State, dogma or orthodoxy—a value that provides the writer with an artistic form. Well-defined views on the connection between literature and politics provoke his distinction between fiction that is engaged and direct political comment, between personal experience and the effect of public events that seep into the creative consciousness. An enlargement of perspective and his search for spiritual values within the processes of cultural change differentiates Greene's work from that of François Mauriac, the

French novelist with whom he has often been compared.

Referring to *The Comedians* and *The Honorary Consul* during a conversation with Marie-Françoise Allain, Greene has admitted that he was attracted to Haiti and Paraguay because he has always been interested in political events and the places where such events take place. He says:

"I was haunted by Haiti... Papa Doc and his Tontons Macoutes (who) managed to turn the country into a particularly macabre place... (and in) *The Comedians*... I described some of the grim realities of Haiti...."<sup>14</sup>

Commenting further on the "political" nature of his novels he says:

"Certain books have clearly enough exercised a considerable political influence, but mine don't belong in this category... I don't want to use literature for political ends... Even if my novels happen incidentally to be political books, they're (not) written to provide changes...."<sup>15</sup>

As Greene travelled more frequently, the wider global concerns outside of postwar Europe took center stage in his novels. The Catholic matrix of Greene's imagination is still unmistakably present even as political struggles and moral commitments to political situations displace the extreme religious dilemma of his characters. This is illustrated in *The Quiet American*, a novel that explores the complex relationship between French colonialists, communist insurgents, and the growing American presence in Vietnam.

The analysis of Greene's despatches reveals qualities shared by leaders whom he supports in their struggle with existing colonial structures. He has given his unquestioning support, for instance, to Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Omar Torrijos, the Sandinista revolution and the directions of its struggle at the moment. All these represent a complete break with the colonial structure and post-colonial parliamentary democracy with the introduction of a Marxist model or, as in the case of the government of Omar Torrijos, consensus policies. After Vietnam and Kenya the focus of attention has been the Caribbean and Latin America where the mixture of races and religions has presented Greene with the base for exploration of his ideals of justice and freedom which includes the

freedom of religion.

The most important feature of the despatches from Latin America is that in all of them Greene builds upon the fact that there is no inherent opposition between Marxist economics and Catholicism which is why he argues with Castro for cooperation between Communism and Catholicism. Greene's perception of the role of the Church in this region began with his analysis of the religious persecution in Mexico during what he calls the 'phoney revolution' in 1938 when he recognised the depth of the faith of the peasants. Indeed, his work explores and illumines neither orthodoxy nor ideology but the core ideals shared by Catholicism and Communism.

While Greene has thus reintroduced religion as a relevant theme into English fiction, he has not failed to take into consideration the findings of modern politics. On the other hand, it can be stated that Greene attempts to interpret religious doctrines in terms of the concepts of modern politics. The parallel theme of religion and politics is evident in his major novels. About his religio-political theme that is the coral part of his paradoxical vision, Greene said in an interview with Gene D. Phillips:

"For one period I did write on Catholic subjects: from *Brighton Rock* to *The [sic] Burnt-Out Case*. But the majority of my novels do not deal with Catholic themes. One only began with a Catholic subject because one found it a great interest of the moment, *The Comedians*, for example, is not a Catholic novel. Brown happens to be a Catholic; it was this formation that made him the type of person he was. But Brown, as I said in the preface, is not Greene. *The Comedians* is essentially a political novel. My period of Catholic novels was preceded and followed by political novels. *It's a Battlefield* and *England Made Me* were political novels. I was finding my way. Even the early thrillers were political: *The Confidential Agent* deals with the Spanish Civil War. *The Quiet American* and *The Comedians* are political novels. One has come full circle in a way. I am not taking anything back from my Catholic novels. The fact that Brown seems to continue in disbelief at the end of *The Comedians* should not be thought to mean that."<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Greene is an active part of the antithesis, whether talking about the Church in Moscow, or communism in the West. Besides, Greene found a remarkable sense of unity among the politicians he met. He liked them. They belonged to the new class of Communists who appeared so briefly and prematurely during the Czechoslovakian spring. Undoubtedly he was getting involved in politics in his later days as he writes:

"I find myself getting involved in politics that are really a matter of life and death, as they were in the Far East and are in Central America where children's lives depend on it. If *Getting to Know the General* comes out, I want it to appear before the U.S. presidential elections. I feel strongly about Reagan's policy in Central America. The United States is upholding the people who murdered Archbishop Romero in San Salvador and are responsible for thousands of other innocent deaths."<sup>17</sup>

Once Greene became so much involved in politics that he did belong to a party for a short time. He joined the ILP, the Independent Labour Party around 1933, but he did not have much time to be fully involved and hence resigned. While he was attending an interview with Maria Couto, he was quite explicit:

"...I've often been asked what draws me to these places and the only answer I can think of is that politics out there are not an alternation of political parties but a matter of life and death. I am interested in such politics and I write about such politics."<sup>18</sup>

Praising the communist leaders — Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, Greene claims that these leaders had, unlike their capitalist counterparts, succeeded in reaching the hearts of the common people and gaining their confidence. Similarly, he had been sympathetic towards the down-trodden and the oppressed and rather hostile to America's capitalism from the very beginning of his literary career. At the concluding period of his novelistic age, he, once, remarked: "politics are in the air we breathe in." This statement proves that none can avoid of politics; it is as pervading as air and indispensable too. He always maintains his own fundamental vision of life and the ideology of

combining Catholicism with Communism having a layer of political division.

We have seen Greene's intimate knowledge of human psychology concerned with religious and political concepts in his works, and his attempts to interpret religious doctrines in terms of the concepts of modern politics. For instance, in *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene points out some parallels between the doctrine of Confession practised by Catholics and the principles of modern politics. It seems that Greene always considers human problems and human behaviour simultaneously from the points of view of religion and politics. While presenting his Catholic characters, Greene shows how their mental processes are influenced by their belief in religion.

In fact, Greene's attempts to interpret human behaviour with reference to religion and politics are evident in his major novels, it is in both earlier and later novels— *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana* and *The Comedians* etc.— that the fusion of these two elements is seen at its best. Greene has made a very fine political study of religious consciousness and religious behaviour in these major novels. He shows great familiarity with the concepts of modern politics regarding the workings of the religious mind. The tension in the characters in these novels is due to the belief in their religion. It is due to the conflicts between desire and faith, or due to a sense of guilt as a result of breaking the commandments of God.

Indeed, in Greene's major novels, religion and politics are the two paradoxical themes which form the background of the paradoxical vision. He has made use of the concepts of religion and modern politics to penetrate to the root causes of man's distress and has achieved something unique in English literature by this blending of religion and modern politics in his works.

In a world which is rapidly drifting away from God and moral values, Greene's works are of special significance. His interpretation of many of the concepts of Catholic Religion in terms of modern politics accounts for his appeal to the modern readers. It is this paradoxical vision as well as harmonious integration of religion with politics in his works which has secured a special and distinguished

position for Graham Greene among modern novelists.

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