

Graham Greene's Fiction from the Perspective of Dark Narrative

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Abstract

This research paper 'Graham Greene's Fiction from the Perspective of Dark Narrative' attempts to explore Greene's works aiming to investigate whether and which works of Greene fall under this category; to determine how far Greene's literary world conforms to the characteristics of a dark narrative, to trace how does an air of gloom, seediness, evil, corruption, and darkness permeate the atmosphere of Greene's fiction. It also undertakes to probe into Greene's conviction, as reflected in his fiction, that man cannot get along without faith. If faith in religion is abandoned, some other tenet must be adopted. Man is capable of selfishness and a great sin, but he is also capable of great love and unstinting sacrifice. The realization of sin leads to pricks of conscience, agony, and suffering, which purges man, finally paving the way for redemption.

Keywords: Dark narrative, Sin, Sacrifice, Purgation, Redemption

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does an air of gloom, seediness, evil, corruption, and darkness permeate the atmosphere of Greene's fiction. It also undertakes to probe into Greene's conviction, as reflected in his fiction, that man cannot get along without faith. If faith in religion is abandoned, some other tenet must be adopted. All our humanitarianism, philanthropy, and welfare work are endeavours to fill the great spiritual void left by the decay of faith. This research will shed light on Greene's emphasis on the view that man is fundamentally a mystery that refuses to be degraded into a problem. Man is capable of selfishness and a great sin, but he is also capable of great love and unstinting sacrifice. Greene points out the dual nature of sin. It impedes to loving God; at the same time, it can pave the way for greater love of God through subsequent guilt, confession, and repentance. The realization of sin leads to pricks of conscience, agony, and suffering, which purges man, finally paving the way for redemption. This paper deals with the definition of a dark narrative. The term 'dark' designates the features of a work of art or a literary composition associated with the negative aspects of life, such as degeneration, unwholesomeness, evil, filthiness, corruption, injustice, poverty, squalor, etc. There are many narratives in the history of English literature which are situated within the socio-economic, socio-cultural, and ideological aspects of an era marked by the darkness of evil, corruption, moral wrong-doing, lack of hope, death, disappointment, disease, sadness, depression, etc. "Dark fiction is another term for

horror, a genre of fiction concerned with fear, death, and the sinister side of human nature. This is not limited to written literature but encompasses a wide body of popular media... Dark fiction describes fiction that contains horrific elements but may fall outside the standard definition of horror literature. Similar terms include dark fantasy, which is used for fantasy stories concerned with death and horror. The word dark can be added to any genre term to denote bleak moods and storylines."¹A dark narrative may deal with anything from the horror of wars, drugs, people trafficking, child abuse, genocide, terrible crimes, terrorism, gritty or grim urban tales, or atrocity to good old-fashioned blood and guts horror. Some critics stress the element of passivity in art and literature; however, one also needs to work on focusing on the activity and interaction of different parts or signs in a work of fiction.

Structuralists emphasize the meaning, significance, and symbolic interpretation of verbal and nonverbal signs in a work of art. Structuralists consider a work of literature as a mode of writing that is in no way related to the author's personal, subjective, or expressive intentions. Rather it is constituted by a play of signs which collectively form a system of literary conventions and codes. While analyzing the fiction of Graham Greene, we come across sure signs of evil, corruption, disease, squalor, immoral practices, etc. interacting with each other creating an atmosphere of darkness. As pointed out by Arnold Kettle in 'An Introduction to the English novel,' " 'seediness' is Greene's forte and the colonial scene gives him a unique opportunity... Graham Greene has inherited the experience of the American 'social-realist' novelists of the between-the-wars period: their narrative ease, which takes violence and melodrama in its stride, their economy of construction, a kind of brash sentimentally

masquerading as toughness, eye for the sharp detail, the sordid and the grotesque."²The period of the second quarter, i.e., 1925 - 1950 of the twentieth century has been a less productive period, to a considerable degree, in terms of fiction, as observed by various literary critics. The novels written during this inter-war period are marked by an atmosphere of gloom, darkness, confusion, pessimism, and decadence. These works seem well-embedded in their historical context. Even the novelists exhibit similar characteristics, as exemplified in their works or experience, such as negative attitudes and pessimism resulting from their inner struggle of trying to adapt to the new and changing world. Their literary works are conspicuously highlighted by hollowness, vacuum, spiritual conflicts, and effort. Their fiction encompasses a peripheral world as they lived and experienced, affected by their neuroses, psychological vacuum, and spiritual battles.

In Greene's 'The Heart of the Matter,' the setting and character define each other and combine to suggest the existence of darkness and corruption in life. Calling it a moral fable, Arnold Kettle interprets it as "based on an abstract concept of the nature of existence. The heart of the matter is man's innate sinfulness and his need for divine mercy. Graham Greene's novel illustrates this concept. The novel is set in a West African colony. In one of his travel books, Graham Greene suggests some significance in the geographical shape of Africa - the shape of man's heart. The setting invites comparison too with another story of corruption and death, Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,' that extraordinary revelation of the horrors of imperialism in the Belgian Congo... The peculiarly sordid corruption of the colonial scene is bound to attract writers determined to spare no pains in the doing-down of the nobler human aspirations."³Graham Greene, like any other

writer, is the child of his age. The mood of his generation also conditioned his outlook on life. The period was affected by First World War and the resulting darkness, devastation, death, depression, trauma, frustration, poverty, and squalor. The war left a legacy for the future-anxiety, apathy, and agnosticism. Modern man was profoundly frustrated and bewildered by the so-called scientific and psychological developments, by industrial and social changes. The man had reached a saturation point given financial matter and had degenerated critically in spiritual terms. The situation called for a sane, equitable, and human approach to man's social and political problems. The age was making new demands on the human mind.

In Russia, the socio-economic structure was being transmuted. A socialistic economy had replaced monopoly, leading to an era of social and economic justice. But evil, corruption, exploitation, injustice, negativity, and other dark aspects of existence merged with the world, and this darkness became a social syndrome. The socio-economic system had nearly exhausted itself. Poverty, misery, and the exploitation of man by man inevitably proved breeding grounds for evil and corruption in a world replete with darkness. It was essential to bring about a transmutation in the entire system. The consciousness was drawing on man to live a better life free from the taint of evil and darkness. During this time, a sense of social awakening, leading to an urge to combat the existing conditions and a yearning for the liberation of man, was noticeable. The attention was focused on the dark and negative characteristics of the new society and the ill effects of unmanaged capitalism. The actualities of life determined the writer's sensibility. The struggle against this darkness and the forces of alienation is the hallmark of the novels of the thirties. Almost every writer was compelled to

face and realize the actual world with valiance. Greene is one of them, and he not only expresses the indefectible reality of evil but has also approached to represent the conscience of humanity in the contemporary world of darkness. Greene is a humanist, a novelist who is sensitive to the intrinsic human situation and compassionate to what is happening to man in the era. Greene's worldview, his central obsession with the evil, degeneration, moral corruption, and negative features of the world is conditioned by the temper of the age. It acts out the tension between man and his world, which was so acutely felt in the decade. Greene's greatness lies precisely in his persistent endeavor to discover the various determinants responsible for the predicament of the contemporary man and to seek how he can come to know his actual condition, his true self.

Greene was a close observer of the prevalence of evil long before religion could give him an explanation for it. It seems that the consciousness of sin was a prominent feature of Greene's emotional outlook even from childhood. Peter Quenelle, Greene's contemporary at the school, remembers the school as dull, but the undertones of evil that Greene detected made no impression on him. Though he revolted against his humdrum surroundings, he never associated his revolt with a sense of sin. On the other side, the awareness of darkness of evil, corruption, conspiracy, exploitation, crime, moral depravity, and prevalence of other negative traits experienced persistently by Greene during various stages of life accounts for the recurrence, in his writings, of the theme of childhood as the period during which innocence is betrayed and corrupted. Greene's life is interesting to perceive how a writer with a peculiar sensitivity builds his art out of his own experience. The predicament which Greene projects through his novels is not a

Catholic metaphysic but the transmutation of his personal experience.

Graham Greene was born on 2 Oct. 1904. His father was the headmaster of an English public School, Berkhamsted, where Greene studied. Life at school appeared to him barren and unresponsive. He had more than his usual share of misery and pinpricks that characterize school life. He was keenly conscious of the barbed wire atmosphere, the do's and don'ts, and the cramped effects of control. It was, for him, a world where every form of pleasure was denied. At school, Greene was initiated into a strange, horrifying world. He had unconsciously realized the terror of life. The school was a veritable prison for him. Things came to a pretty pass when Greene ran away from school. This was the inevitable consequence of his inability to cope with his inhuman surroundings. The little rebel, the sensitive individual, could not long stand the barbarities of life. He rebelled against the manner in which children were required to conform, obey and follow. Greene was overwhelmed by disgust, boredom, and the monotony of life. He was kept under the observation of psychoanalysts. The diagnosis showed that he was suffering from the morbidity of imagination.

The life of Graham Greene moved through a troubled childhood, the morbidity of imagination, bipolar disorder, and depressive illness. Graham Greene faced the bullying behavior of his classmates at school. The doctor, studying the case, concluded that Greene's depression might be concerning another boy at his school. "Graham Greene's parents were first cousins. His father was a man with a paranoid obsession regarding homosexuality."⁴To relieve monotony and escape boredom, Greene simulated suicide by putting the revolver to his head and pulling the trigger. He confesses: "It (the act) may have removed all sense of

strangeness as I slipped a bullet into a chamber and, holding the revolver behind my back, spun the chambers round."⁵Through experimenting with a sense of danger by pressing the trigger of a revolver that he knew to be empty, he was trying to deal with his boredom, emptiness, and aridity. Greene went to Balliol College, Oxford, with his burden of childhood. He met a Roman Catholic lady, Vivien D. Browning, and in February 1926, he was received in the Roman Church, an institution epitome of power and prestige. Vivien - a devout Catholic- believed that Graham Greene's conversion into Roman Catholicism was not an act of faith. However, for Graham Greene, this act of taking refuge in Roman Catholicism suggested the recovery of self through faith. Religion was called upon to do what psychoanalysis had failed to do. But where the public school discipline and psychoanalysis had remained ineffective, Catholicism was not likely to yield any good. There is no doubt that the church extended to him a sense of belonging, but it could hardly make things easier for him. In Greene, it is the experience that writes itself. He tends to see the cosmos moving in the crystal of his personal experience. Green's preoccupation with sin has outraged the Catholics because they opine that instead of condemning sin, Greene condones it.

Of course, the experiences of life substantiated Greene the conviction that sin, evil, suffering, death, despair, and degeneration is a part parcel of life. It is an inevitable reality that no one can eschew. Man's predicament in such a dark world infested with sin, evil, and corruption became his obsession with Greene. In fact, the revolt against the dark forces seems to be the central thread in his humanist make-up. It forms the nucleus of his critical formulations even as it becomes an abiding theme of his novels. Greene's concern with the darkness and evil is

the culmination of his preoccupation with the negative aspects of the world. His concept approximates an ideology that lends the whole body of his work to the significance of a system. Greene was much influenced by Marjorie Bowen's 'The Viper of the Milan' (1906). It was the mirror of the world for the child Greene in which he viewed the whole world outside, cracking up. This provided him "once and for all with a subject because they realized that evil was more real than goodness."⁶As the child peered into the heart of darkness, he felt as if he were on the brink of a precipice; Greene came to acknowledge the existence of evil and darkness relatively early in his life.

Callousness, misery, tyranny, treachery, and betrayal are unavoidably interlaced with his sense of night. The awareness and consciousness of darkness and evil generate from the ill - effects of the capitalist society. The wretched plight of man accrues from the tragic forces engendered by evil. Fight it or surrender. Greene does not condemn man being the victim of a world replete with corruption and hostility, but he criticizes the globe. Greene avers, "...human nature is not black and white but black and grey."⁷Like Shakespeare, Fielding, Tolstoy, Malraux, Sholokhov, and Sartre- the great humanists in world literature - Greene is committed to humanity in its struggle against sin, evil, and the darkness of the world. There is a moral intensity in this struggle which symbolizes man's indomitable will and his relentless fight against the petrifying brutality, rushing confusion, and bewilderment of the world. Greene reflects: "Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a house there."⁸

Owing to the multiplicity of the impact of the different forces during his formative years, including economic, social, psychological, and

religious factors, Greene's genius came to be leavened by the essentials of creation, literary formulations as a broad texture, and the situations and characters in particular. In terms of perception of the thematic concerns of his novels, the interrelationship between his themes and reality, and the consequent crystallization of his total vision into such concepts as social well-being, humanism, economic welfare, quality of character of the positive side, and forceful factors like sin - all found a new dimension, definition, and practice in creative terms.

Generally, Greene's characters are sinners; even those who ultimately reach blessedness do so, even to the point of damnation. He has never ventured to delineate his protagonist in terms of absolute goodness. Greene accepts in an interview with Toynbee: "One of the things that interest me most is discovering the humanity in the apparently inhuman character."⁹Sin, redemption, and grace are the three fundamental ideas in the Christian religion. Greene frequently refers to these Catholic concepts in his works. The soul is immortal, but sin deprives the soul of supernatural life, for it robs it of sanctifying grace. If a man expires in a condition of mortal sin, he loses salvation. God's forgiveness of sin restores the soul to sanctifying grace and makes it worthy to enter heaven. A Catholic, being wakeful of what he is doing, cannot ignore the fact that he has sinned. Some still don't heed moral laws and dismiss the idea of sin altogether. They deaden their conscience to any discrimination between what is spiritually sound and what is evil. The Catholic knows that if he does so, he must obliterate not only every spiritual value in the world but God. Greene, in his works, deals with the themes of the conflict between noble and dark forces at work in human life and destiny. He hints that the growing

mental anguish experienced in modern times is, to a great extent, due to the decay of religious faith, while our control over the forces of nature approaches the miraculous level; anarchy reigns supreme in the moral sphere. The proliferation of our knowledge seems to have brought about the disintegration of religious faith in the world. Greene's books repeatedly underline the convictions that man cannot get along without faith. If belief in religion is abandoned, some other tenet has to be adopted. All our humanitarianism, philanthropy, and welfare work are endeavors to fill the tremendous spiritual void left by the decay of faith. These are, after all, drab substitutes for the other creed.

Throughout his works, Greene emphasizes the fact that man is fundamentally a mystery that refuses to be degraded into a problem. Man is capable of selfishness and a great sin, but he is also capable of great love and unstinting sacrifice. Greene shows that the political architects of liberalism and progress have made a mess of our world and that only a return to belief in God and religion can save us. We perceive in Green's works a deep-rooted conviction that original sin has rendered irrevocable damage to man and resulted in human nature's degradation. Many of Greene's central characters in his major works are Catholics, but the devil of flesh more or less bewitches them. Their sensibility and subtle awareness of sin distinguish these catholic characters from others. This is the most striking feature of these characters and this sub-conscious awareness never fades even in their overwhelming passions. Highlighting the dual nature of sin, Greene believes that corruption impedes to loving God; at the same time, it can have the way for greater love of God through subsequent guilt, confession, and repentance. It can finally lead to redemption. The realization of sin brings man nearer to God as this realization

leads to suffering, which purges man. Each of the protagonists of Greene realizes his sins and yearns for reclamation.

All together, Greene's novels seem to propound the view that life without belief is worthless. He opines that man is a unique creation of God and that separation from Him leads to suffering, misery, and desolation. He stresses the idea that even a sordid life under the shadow of religion is infinitely better than an atheistic and purely materialistic life in a chromium world. Greene believes that it is only when one realizes the horrors and tribulations of damnation that one can visualize the significance of redemption. The quest for enlightenment through the darkness of the world is brought to pass by showing the consequences of sin and thereby suggesting the path of virtue and goodness. Therefore, Greene portrays a world where evil is rampant and is likely to devour virtue. In defeating the darkness and sailing all through it to the light of nobility, spirituality and redemption lay the man's strength. So Greene gradually procured maturity through vast experience and settled down as a writer to deal with such issues as evil, corruption, the prevalence of negativity and darkness in religion, society, profession, etc. In his essay, 'Walter De La Mare's short stories,' Greene states: "Every creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can be called in the wide eighteenth-century use of the term a poet, is a victim: a man is given over to an obsession."¹⁰

Dealing with sin, the seediness of the civilization and darkness in the abysses of humanity, Greene not only suggests that evil and suffering are inevitable in this world from the point of view of the Christian religion; but he also presents man's sense of guilt and his impotence to prevent a repetition of the sinful act with great psychological insight. Greene's novels, particularly his Catholic ones, deal with

the dark nature of evil, sin, or guilt and the heart of the authority that might redeem or absolve the sinner from it. His novels arouse profound compassion for the bewildered victim or the suffering seeker. He enunciates that man's relationship with God is the most significant thing in life. Reason cannot prove either God's existence or his goodness. Faith is the leap in the dark to which men are driven by awe, dread, and anxiety. Greene renders us aware that there is a dimension to human personality that cannot be explained solely on scientific evidence and that only a sound religious faith can rehabilitate the whole man, supporting him in crisis and giving meaning and purpose to his drifting life. Greene has utilized the concepts of religion and modern psychology to penetrate the origin of man's distress.

From the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism, which uses the dynamic form of psychology for analyzing a work of art or literature, Graham Greene is concerned with the underlying human conditions. He reacts to them in terms of attraction and repulsion. His primary obsession with the dark side of human nature and life is engendered by his acute sensitivity to his varied experiences in childhood. Isolation and failure, guilt and betrayal, squalor and corruption, crime and violence, sin and suffering, tragic love and fatality, childhood traumas and adult perversions, excess of pity and feelings - all these typify and dramatize the darkness which permeates Greene's world. People whose lives are fraught with the darkness of evil are imaginatively significant to Greene. They have a story for him to tell. They seem to embody what he feels about life and he can readily and sympathetically project them into the dark world he visualizes.

Indeed, Greene's preoccupation with evil and dark forces is inextricably conjoined with his religious consciousness, obsessive awareness of

God, and mercy. It is, therefore, not astounding that so many of his characters, despite their experience of evil, cannot altogether stifle their yearning for God or a lost peace or ideal. They are pulled in diametrical directions. They lie on the point of intersection where the devil combats with God for the possession of the heart of man. Greene exhibits sin, corruption, egoism, and man's impulses towards love, charity, fidelity, and self-sacrifice. The religious sense gives a unique perspective to the novelist's perception of the terror of life, for the spiritual purpose is intimately connected with the apprehension of evil. The recognition of good and sin gives a religious quality that both touches and transcends the personal consciousness of the characters and their milieu.

Although Greene has proclaimed that his conversion to Roman Catholicism was precipitated by intellectual, not emotional, belief, one cannot help feeling that the impassioned revulsion rendered by the experience of evil had much to do with it. Vexed by the enigma of sin and suffering, Greene sought the hint of an explanation in a Roman Catholic Church. It may be stated that Greene's sense of wickedness, evil, and corruption cannot be attributed to his adopted religion. His sense of evil, already obsessive, was caught up in his conversion. This sense of sin is undoubtedly religious as it is grounded on recognizing supernatural forces responsible for man's life's mystery, horror, and glory. Greene proposes in his early novels that Catholics have tremendous inner resources of peace and stability to fall back on. In his later works, we witness the profound sense of upbeat and dark forces, which his Catholic characters invariably possess, often culminate in a mental conflict between religious duty and desire.

Greene allows his protagonist to descend and move away from the altruism of God because only when one is away from him can

one realize the dire need for his mercy. Greene's concept of religion is, in fact, above and beyond any sector creed. There is no propaganda for any faith or philosophy in his literary compositions. Instead, he raises specific questions and renders his characters to answer them. Greene is not confined to any set of rigid codes. He is liberal and human enough to consider human follies an outcome of the limited faculty of intellect and not to denounce them as demoniac aberrations. Being a keen observer of the evolution of personality and character, Greene scrutinizes life by placing a person in some distress caused by a particular contemporary environment and eventually bringing out his responses and action, motivated by his conscious or subconscious ideas and experiences. Greene believes that misery turns an individual towards God and works to subject the mind to a deep examination. Marie Beatrice Mesnet puts forth a similar view: "Only through violence and hell are we brought to faith and heaven."¹¹ Greene's novels, manifesting in a way the idea of suffering leading to redemption, shows the protagonist as indulged in a struggle which is likely to invite persecution and misery. The perpetrator is brought closer to humanity through pain, the realization of guilt, repentance, and suffering. Greene also portrays man as suspended between two worlds - heaven and hell - both claiming his allegiance. In his sublime poem 'An Essay on man,' Alexander Pope described human beings as "placed on this isthmus of a middle state, ... A being darkly wise and rudely great,"¹² stressing Pope's view that the proper study of humanity is a man. Man is hung between conflicting claims of heaven and hell, wisdom and ignorance, reason and errs, thus dangling between heavenly aspirations and earthly existence.

Similarly, Walter Allen remarks in this context: "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."¹³ The significant remarks of Laurence Lerner, in this context, are noteworthy. Laurence Lerner enunciates: "He depicts the world as hell since that is the first argument to faith: if there is Hell, must there not be Heaven."¹⁴ Greene regards evil as a natural part of the human heart as much as virtue is. Instead of depicting characters put to eternal damnation, having sinned, he offers a more considerate resolve for granting the opportunity to them to repent and redeem themselves. In his world, even hardened criminals, adulterers, and drunken priests are not beyond the pale of God's mercy. Greene has always mentioned some aspect of man's substantial involvement with evil. However, the expression of this belief is largely subjective. Greene has shown evil as originating from external sources or from within the individual himself. The peculiar tragic character of the protagonist's tormenting conflict turns upon his perception of evil and the possibility of making active, exploring, inventing, and bringing to the surface an agent to trigger the evolution of new dimensions of the character and personality.

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