

— THE HEART OF THE MATTER

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In his essay on Henry James "The Private Universe", Graham Greene has a revealing sentence — "In all writers, there occurs a moment of crystallisation when the dominant theme is plainly expressed, when the private universe becomes visible even to the least sensitive readers". Such a crystallisation occurs to my mind, in The Heart of the Matter, perhaps Greene's best book, because of its tautness, economy and evenness of style.

The extraordinary intensity of the novel is derived from its rootedness in a profoundly personal element. The autobiographical element has found a perfect objective co-relative and is transmuted into a self-contained work of art. Scobie, like Greene is a Catholic convert, and like Greene, the real motive of his conversion lay in his love-affair with a Roman-Catholic girl, Louise in the novel and Vivian Dayneil Browning in Greene's autobiography "A Sort of Life". Malcolm Muggeridge, in his autobiography describes how during the war years at Sierra Leone, Greene had attempted to commit suicide by swimming out far into the sea.

His conversion led him to explore "the nature of Catholic theology" — the problem of Good and evil; of sin and damnation. In Brighton Rock and far more powerfully in The Heart of the Matter, Greene captures the very essence of Peguys dictum that "the sinner is at the heart of Christendom".

David Lodge rightly remarks that if Greene is to be considered a Catholic writer it is because his major novels revolve round characters and situations deeply concerned with the dogmas of Catholicism, unlike Laura Evelyns Waugh, who joined the Roman Catholic Church for the

infallibility of its dogmas, Graham Greene continued to contend from within the fold, for extending the frontiers of dogmatic theology. In his Essay Why do I write, Greene confessed that there is in the artist an instinct to betray, to evade conformity.

The dominant theme in The Heart of Matter is what Jacques Maritain demands of the creative artist - a sense of compassion Scobie is truly three dimensional in a sense that no other character had been in Greene's novels to date. He's an Anglican who got converted to Catholicism when he married his pious Catholic wife. As Deputy Commissioner of Police in West African district, he is, above all, an honest man incorruptible. Perhaps this is the reason why he is passed over for promotion. His wife who suffers from social shyness, feels outraged and humiliated by his defeat. Yet, it is pity that Scobie feels for her, pity - as she lies under the mosquito net "like a joint of meat under a meat cover". It is this sense of pity that sets in a chain of events that lead to disaster. Louise wants to go to South Africa for a holiday, Scobie promises her that she shall go, although he knows that he has not got the money for her passage. Pity for Louise, a passion more intense than love, drives Scobie to borrow money from the Syrian, Yusef - a smuggler of commercial diamonds. While Louise is away, he falls in love with a nineteen year old widow, who is brought to the colony as a survivor from a torpedoed ship. Again it is pity

of which his love springs.

"Pity for this child hovering between life and death," still clutching the stamp album that her father - gave her on her fourteenth birthday."

Out of pity as much as love, he starts an affair with Helen Rolt. An indiscretion involves him further with Yosef. A tightly woven web of intrigue, reminiscent of Fogo's subtler machinations, ensnares Scobie, and the incorruptible man finds himself caught up in corruption. Greene employs melodrama, as powerfully as Dostoevsky to bring out the spiritual anguish and the relentless tragedy that overtakes the protagonist.

Louise, who has heard about the affair, suddenly returns and asks her husband to go with her to the Holy Communion. This is the greatest moment of the novel - spiritual as well as psychological - Greene's art reaches the highest point of artistic beauty in the wonderful description of Scobie's feelings as he approaches the sacrament - "A little hurt to Louise is an irreparable hurt to God".

Greene employs the technique of "interior monologue" to let us see into the mind of Scobie. He says to God - "you'll be at peace when I am out of your reach".

And God says to Scobie - "Now that ~~to~~ you push me away, you put me out of your reach ... can't you trust me as you trust a faithful dog?"

An existential choice has been forced upon Scobie. Feigning a serious cardiac trouble Scobie commits suicide with a stark awareness of damnation. The Heart of the Matter is a study

in anguish and despair - what Kirkegaard calls, "sickness unto death"

But it does not end there. There is Scobie's cry, "Dear God, I love - - -" and there is Father Rank's angry reply to Louise, (who talks of her dead husband as a bad Catholic)

- "The Church knows all the rules but it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart - - -"

And his final summing up of Scobie -

"I think from what I know of him, that he really loved God".

The Heart of the Matter is Greene's best book; the dominant strands that run through all his previous works - pity, Despair, Fear and love - have been consummately woven into an artistic unity. It affirms a religious belief by negation. Greene's supreme achievement is that he restores to the novel the moral, metaphysical and religious dimensions and an awareness of the mystery of God.