

The Heart of the Matter (PLOT) ^{English} Greene's depiction of the conflict b/w Faith & Humanism

The novels of V. Woolf and J. Joyce present in the interior monologues of their protagonists who can be called anti-heroic like, the protagonist of Flaubert and his followers and those of the modern French novelists like Gide and Sartre. Greene reacting consciously against this tradition seeks to reconstruct the tragic hero on the basis of Christianity. In "A sort of life", he chooses an epigraph for all his novels "Bishop Blougram's Apology" -

"Our interests on the dangerous edge of things
The honest thief, the tender murderer.

The superstitious atheist denier -

That loses and saves his soul in his French books.

We watch while these in equilibrium keep

The Giddy line midway."

Karl calls such characters "Marginal" because they stand on "the giddy line midway". The heroes of G. Greene are not good men in quest of the city of God but imperfect men stumbling along the way to the Heavenly city almost forsaking God. They are all Catholics, painfully aware of the difference between the real and ideal makes all the novels in the same way.

In this essay on Francis Xerine, Greene says, "We are saved or damned by our thought, not by our actions." In his novels, he presented the inner struggle of his Catholic heroes who find their life to be sort of the ideal. Arnold Kettle criticises him for his narrow range for this conflict excludes much of life, but we find in "A sort of life" how carefully Greene suited "The craft of fiction and realised the importance of the point of view".

and
Humanism
'The Heart of the Matter', like ~~The Power and the Glory~~ or ~~The Quiet American~~ is the study of sinful human nature in conflict with the Catholic ideal. This conflict is the heart of the matter and reveals man's need for God's mercy. The plot has to be mechanically managed by the novelists.

Siaka, the central character, is a highly placed police officer in Sierra Leone in West Africa is honest and dutiful, quite in love with that place, although it is full of corruption. His wife,

Louise lives in a society, which needs money and prestige, but Scobie cannot satisfy her needs. Although they are presented to be in love, it seems pretty obvious that they were no longer in love. She did become the mother to his child once, but the child died. All that happened in England and so Scobie can only imagine the whole affair.

The crisis comes when Scobie is superseded by a new officer. Louise decided to go to South Africa, but Scobie cannot find the ^{pay} necessary money. Yewy, the corrupt businessman has always wanted to lend money to him but he has refused to accept any money from him. At last, after long struggle with himself, he borrowed two pounds from Yewy.

In the meantime, an English man named Wilson has appeared on the scene. He is a clerk, but it is suspected that he is a spy. Scobie has encouraged him to read books with Louise. Wilson appears to be in love with her, for he writes a poem on her and gets it published in the magazine of the school where he reads. When Louise leaves South Africa in the company of Mr. Halifax; not only her husband but Wilson is also there to see her off.

Wilson's visit to see the Brothel presents the degradation of the life all around. There are a number of ^{pye-}dogs which live and die in the most sordid way. As Wilson proceeds towards the brothel, he notices a dead pye-dog in the gutter with the rain running over its white swollen belly. Scobie also sees his car one day to avoid a dead pye-dog while thinking about the corruption of the place.

"There was a veto in this colony to every accusation.

There was always a blake corruption elsewhere to be pointed to."

At the Brothel, among the naked regresses, Wilson is with but racial, social and individual traits "reduced to human nature". This nature is not very different from that of the pye-dog. In this atmosphere of degradation Scobie struggles with himself to remain true to his Catholic idea.

He is haunted by the memory of a young Englishman, fresh from college, who comes to the colony as an officer and committed suicide in the end. He feels pity for that immature young man much as Fowler Pities, the young American at Saigon. In fact in every novel written by Greene, we find pity for the immature.

When the passengers of the ship reaches the colony, Scobie takes charge of them. Here the novel takes a turn. Among the passengers Scobie finds a little boy and a young married girl, whose husband was drowned. When the boy dies in the hospital, Scobie is alone by his side. As the boy opens his eyes and looks for his father, Scobie folds his handkerchief in such a manner that its shadow looks like an animal. He would have done this if he had been besides his own child's death bed.

When Helen, the young girl, recovers, her immaturity draws pity out of Scobie who ~~talks~~ talks to her about her school and her interests in games. In order to save her from men, he keeps a close watch over her and finally becomes her lover. Even the watchful Wilson finds him coming out of her hut one night.

When Louise get this information, she returns to Sierra Leone. The situation becomes very difficult for Scobie, in spite of Helen's declaration that he may give her up, but then he cannot leave that immature girl to a hungry pye-dog, of a man called Bogaster. Louise insists on his going to the church with her, but he cannot after what he has done. Once he gathers courage enough to go into the confession box, but he cannot promise not to commit adultery again and if he doesn't repent he is not entitled to salvation.

He falls deeper because he begins to suspect Ali of spying on him. Once he tells Yusuf of his suspicion with the result that Ali is killed like a pye-dog by Yusuf's men. After this Scobie suffers from self-pity. The image of Ali haunts him and reminds him of Jesus.

Although Scobie is promoted at this time, he is spiritually a bankrupt. He goes to man without having repented and suffers more terribly and finally commits suicide.

Louise condemns him, but father Rank thinks that he must go to heaven. Wilson marries Louise. Helen, however, cannot forget Scobie. When Bogaster is not ready to make love to such an indifferent girl.

Thus Graham Greene shows that gradual fall of Scobie and his intense conflicts between what he is and what he ought to be according to his Catholic belief. His interest in this conflict is so great that he does not satisfy our curiosity about the Portuguese Captain who manages to send letters to his daughter in the occupied territory or about Yueny's smuggling of industrial diamonds and his rivalry with the Syrian merchant. He does not even tell us everything about Wilson about whom Father Rank says in the end that he is a mere clerk and no great officer sent to spy on others. But we are not really sure if Father Rank is right.

In "A Sort of Life" Graham Greene refers to Pope Paul who had told him, "some parts of all your books will always offend some Catholics. You should not worry about that."

In fact Greene believes that God's ways are inscrutable and beyond the laws of any church. He like Dostovsky and Francis Maurice, he gives his own vision of God's ways. Thus "The Heart of the Matter" ends with the suggestion that Scobie will go to heaven.

The book is obviously not a great novel because as a critic points out in his review, its plot is mechanical and its protagonist Scobie is made 'highbrow' by theological preoccupation. The vision of life embodied in the novel is depressing and Scobie's effort to live up to his ideal in the surrounding degradation is heroic, no doubt but doomed to failure. His tragedy however loses its edge because it is suggested that his soul will go to heaven.