

## IRONY AND MELODRAMA IN *THE HEART OF THE MATTER*

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Edward Sackville-West in his perceptive essay on Graham Greene called him "the electric hare whom the greyhound critics are not meant to catch" (Sackville-West 1959: 141). This aphoristic statement is especially true in relation to the lasting controversy about the crux of *The heart of the matter*.

Oddly enough, despite immense public and critical acclaim *The heart of the matter* is not Greene's favourite novel. The author repeatedly gave an expression of his weariness caused by reiterated arguments in Catholic and other magazines over the problem of Scobie's eventual damnation or salvation, sin and grace, Manichaeism and Jansenism, and other religious implications of this novel.

The appearance of *The heart of the matter* in 1948 gave an unusual amount of erroneous identification between the writer and the protagonist of his book. One reason for this identification might be the fact that Scobie in the novel, like Greene himself, was a converted Catholic married to a Catholic wife. Thus, the writer found himself in the centre of a fervent and, sometimes, silly public dispute. In his new preface to *A burnt-out case*, published in the British Collected Edition in 1974, he writes how he was molested by all kind of cranks and unhappy people, including priests, who hoped that the writer could help to solve their religious and other problems. No wonder Greene started to resent the situation of a father confessor to his readers who, in his own words, "should have been confessing the novelist instead".

At the beginning of the seventies, when he started writing new prefaces to the Collected Edition of his novels, Graham Greene decided to revise the text of this novel. He reinserted a very important scene which had been eliminated from the original manuscript and from all earlier editions of *The heart of the matter*. Thus, after more than twenty years since its first publication, the novel was presented for the first time exactly as the writer had written it, apart from some minor revisions and corrections. (In England the definitive version of *The heart of the matter* appeared in the new W. Heinemann and the

Bodley Head Edition in 1971, whereas in the United States it was published by the Viking Press in *The portable Graham Greene* edited by a well-known critic Philip Stratford. In this paper all references will be made to the American edition of the novel).

The reinserted passage is about six pages long: it comes between the end of Chapter 1 and the beginning of Chapter 2 in Book One, Part II (pp. 169 - 174). In this scene Louise Scobie and Wilson are shown on an evening walk along the abandoned railway track below Hill Station. Although the scene occupies only a small portion of the text, it is of great importance for the whole novel, because Louise is shown here in a more favourable light.

Obviously, the author was troubled by a rather unexpected reaction of his readers, who thought Scobie to be exonerated in the novel: they assumed that Scobie was essentially "a good man", Scobie the Just, hunted to his tragic end by the harshness of his wife. This was certainly a misinterpretation of Greene's artistic intentions which he put explicitly in his introduction to *The heart of the matter*. The writer says that his intention was to present "the disastrous effect on human beings of pity as distinct from compassion. ... The character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride. But I found the effect on the reader was quite different. ... Suicide was Scobie's inevitable end". The author also quotes his own words from *The ministry of fear*: "Pity is cruel. Pity destroys. Love isn't safe when pity's prowling round" (Greene 1973 : 100 - 101).

In his preface Greene admits that there was a technical fault on his part, not a psychological one, for Mrs. Scobie is chiefly seen in the story through the eyes of her husband. The same refers to the character of Helen Rolt who thus gains an unfair advantage, because Scobie is in love with her. The reinserted fragment, although it seems to break Scobie's point of view prematurely, restores a balance sought for by the author: Louise is presented here through the eyes of Wilson, who fell in love with her. But perhaps the most important thing in this scene is Louise's declaration of love for her husband, despite her awareness of the fact that Scobie does not love her any longer.

It must be stressed that this declaration of love comes at the moment when Wilson is making amorous advances to her at a secluded spot: "He made a movement and she cried furiously out, 'Keep still. I don't love you. I love Ticki'. 'I was only shifting my weight', he said. She began to laugh. 'How funny this is', she said. 'It's a long time since anything funny happened to me. I'll remember this for months, for months'. But it seemed to Wilson that he would remember her laughter all his life. His shorts flapped in the draught of the storm..." (Greene 1973 : 174). Needless to say, this is one of very few comic scenes in this rather gloomy and pessimistic novel.

Graham Greene's own remark upon the novel made from the perspective of over twenty years seems to be very significant here: "Perhaps Scobie should

have been a subject for cruel comedy rather than for tragedy" (Greene 1973 : 101). And Greene seems to be at his best when he juxtaposes tragic and comic elements, especially in his later novels and plays. Yet in *The heart of the matter* humour is almost absent, apart from the scene quoted above and another scene taking place in a rest-house (Book Two, Part I, Chapt. 4). In this scene Scobie tells an invented adventure story to the boy rescued from a torpedoed ship. He pretends to read it from a book taken from the Mission library. The source of humour lies in the incongruity between the title of an edifying book, which happens to be *Bishop among the Bantus*, and Scobie's improvised, highly improbable story. The boy's off-hand comments on Scobie's story, which sounds like a parody of a spy-novel, enhance the comic effect.

This admirable comic scene may serve as an example of Greene's very effective method of juxtaposition of tragic and comic elements, employed more frequently in his later works, because in the previous scene Scobie witnessed the agony and death of a six-year-old girl rescued from the ship. The effect of comic relief is achieved in this passage in the fashion modelled upon Shakespearean tragedies: the analogy with the gravediggers scene in *Hamlet* and the porter scene in *Macbeth* is striking here.

As has been already said, the sparkles of Greene's humour are very scarce in *The heart of the matter*. Yet, it must be emphasized, comic elements together with bitter irony pervading the whole novel perform a very important role, because they add an extra dimension to the melodramatic story of Major Scobie.

The plot of *The heart of the matter* reveals the author's predilection for sensationalism and melodrama. He exploits here one of the most hackneyed situations in literature: adultery and the eternal triangle, combined with other motifs characteristic of melodrama, such as intrigue and jealousy, murder and betrayal.

There is a series of acts of betrayal in the novel. First of all, Scobie is a double betrayer, for he betrays God (the sacrilegious reception of the Eucharist), and his wife (an adulterous love affair). Scobie, in turn, is betrayed by Wilson, a government secret agent, who uncovers his illicit dealings with Yusef and informs Louise of her husband's infidelity. Later in the novel Scobie learns that he was also betrayed by his servant Ali. As far as the character of Wilson is concerned, his chief motive for betrayal was jealousy. He was jealous of Scobie's wife with whom he fell in love. By disclosing the facts of Scobie's relations with Helen he aroused, in turn, Louise's suspicions, jealousy, and hatred.

Shortly speaking, the novel abounds in effective melodramatic devices and even whole scenes, including a very naturalistic description of a child's death in the hospital mentioned previously (in Book Two, Part I, Chapt. 3), and beating the characters; there is a grotesque scene at the end of the novel

when Wilson, the rejected lover, is humiliated, lying on the floor with his nose bleeding after Louise has hit him (Book Three, Part II, Chapt. 1).

Some effects in the novel are certainly overdone, yet they seem to serve the writer's purposes well. As Morton Dauwen Zabel rightly observed in his illuminating essay on Greene, "His style and imagery can be as melodramatic as his action, but he has made of them an instrument for probing the temper and tragedy of the age" (Zabel 1957: 95).

In his youth Greene was inspired by some melodramatic adventure stories which he started to imitate: He gives an account of his early readings and the influence these books exerted on him in his well-known essay *The lost childhood*. It was Marjorie Bowen's historical romance *The viper of Milan* that supplied the melodramatic pattern for his novels, says Greene: "She had given me my pattern — religion might later explain it to me in other terms, but the pattern was already there — perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again" (Greene 1951: 16-17). In the interview for *The Paris review* he also admitted that "... what I wanted to express, my fixations if you like, could best be expressed in the melodramatic, the contemporary and later the Catholic novel" (Shuttleworth 1973: 160).

Greene, the literary artist, has adapted the melodramatic stereotypes to the demands of the sophisticated twentieth-century reader with a great technical skill. Firstly, he uses melodramatic materials within a framework of allegorical narrative. The moral and religious allegory in *The heart of the matter* has been the subject of numerous critical essays.

Secondly, he creates a rich network of symbolic allusions and parallels by saturating his fiction with sharp visual images riveting the reader's attention. One can easily notice that the recurring images in Greene's novels are essential to his method of setting a scene, establishing character, and creating atmosphere. Dominick Consolo thus comments upon Greene's technique of "close-up" which he obviously learned from the film: "... he carefully chooses an angle of vision that allows him to shift rapidly from the long panoramic view to the closeup, using the catalogue to take in those representative parts which suggest the whole to the imagination and frame the action. The technique is cinematic, bringing into sharp relief those elements that serve a dramatic or thematic ... function in the scene" (Consolo 1963: 67). The method is both effective and economical: due to its economy the narrative development is not halted, whereas a high emotional charge is accumulated.

It is worthy of notice that Greene for five years was a successful film critic and reviewed about 400 films for *The Spectator* (between 1935-1940). A collection of his film criticism has been recently published under the title *The pleasure-dome* (1972). He is also the author of a number of highly successful film scripts. It is no wonder, therefore, that most of his novels read like film scripts.

Let us examine, for example, the opening scene of *The heart of the matter*, with Wilson sitting on the hotel balcony and enjoying a panoramic view of the seaside town. The future conflict between the two characters is foreshadowed at the very moment of introduction of Major Scobie: "Look down there", Harris said, 'look at Scobie'. A vulture flapped and shifted on the iron roof and Wilson looked at Scobie. He looked without interest in obedience to a stranger's direction, and it seemed to him that no particular interest attached to the squat grey-haired man walking alone up Bond Street" (Greene 1973: 104-105). Here the scene suggests in an effective and economical way the identification between Wilson, who is a government spy, and the vulture. The suggestive image of vulture recurring in the novel assumes a symbolic quality.

*The heart of the matter* abounds in recurring suggestive objects and small details which perform an analogous function, e.g. Helen Rolt's stamp album, the inventory of Scobie's office (juxtaposition of rusty handcuffs and Louise's photograph), and even the rain of pity — the African rains falling "in interminable tears" when Scobie's love-affair begins (in Book Two).

The third, and perhaps the most important factor is existential irony pervading the whole novel, which is an effective instrument transforming the melodramatic pattern. As has been already mentioned, irony adds a tragic dimension to the melodramatic story of Major Scobie.

The existential irony resides in the fact that Scobie's actions, despite his best intentions, bring disastrous effects. Greene's view of Scobie's plight is existential. He seems to show little faith in the possibilities of human good. T. Eagleton remarked in his perceptive essay that in Greene's novels "... human relationship is inherently tragic: love, pity, and innocence are lethal because they entice men out of their safely sterile *dégagements* into the corrupting complicities of passion and responsibility, into infectious and conflicting involvements which proliferate beyond control" (Eagleton 1970: 110).

The problem of man's emotional involvement with other people has attracted the writer's attention in his earlier novels, especially in *The ministry of fear* (1943). *The heart of the matter* offers perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this problem. Greene generally accepts the necessity of love and concern for others, but he makes his readers aware of the fact that a good-natured man's actions, when he is caught in the conflicting currents of pity, may cause disastrous effects.

The protagonist of the novel seems to be endowed with a tragic flaw, *hamartia*, which is a basic requirement of the tragic hero. Scobie in his actions is guided by "the horrible and horifying emotion of pity" which impels him to assume responsibility for suffering fellow-creatures. Pity generates responsibility, yet responsibility may easily degenerate into despair: "... he had sworn fourteen years ago ... that he would at least always see to it that she

was happy... He would still have made the promise even if he could have foreseen all that would come of it. He had always been prepared to accept the responsibility for his actions, and he had always been half aware too ... how far *this* action might carry him. Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgivable sin, but it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practices... Only the man of good will carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation" (Greene 1973 : 152 - 154).

It is Scobie's pity and overdeveloped sense of responsibility that lead him, under the specific circumstances, to his professional delinquency, and finally, to his suicidal death. The influence-seeker might speculate here about Greene's legacy from Joseph Conrad, who showed the debilitating effect of pity for a dying man in *The nigger from the Narcissus*.

*The heart of the matter* is a novel about the progress of pity, a study in the anatomy of pity, says Donat O'Donnell in the illuminating essay on Graham Greene (O'Donnell 1954 : 63 - 64). "Pity" and "responsibility" are two key-words repeated in the novel with approximately the same frequency. The two key-words seem to hint at where to look for "the heart of the matter". It is essential that Scobie should fail and that he should fail with good intentions. This accounts for the improbabilities of the plot which has been the target of severe attacks of many critics, for example in George Orwell's essay *The sanctified sinner* (Orwell 1968 : 440). These critics failed to notice the existential paradox which is pivotal to the plot of *The heart of the matter*. At the beginning of the novel Major Scobie, an honest and efficient police officer, makes his appearance as Aristides the Just. He is even disliked for his rectitude. In the final chapters he acts like a criminal. Paradoxically, the reader is led to identify not with the brave and honest hero, but with an anti-heroic and criminal character; Scobie is a lonely hero, or rather anti-hero, who has lost everything except the knowledge of his fatal end.

The existential irony and paradox are also present in the epigraph taken from Péguy: "The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. ... No one is as competent as the sinner in matters of Christianity. No one, unless it is the saint".

It is existential irony and paradox that save the story of Major Scobie from superfluous sentimentality and cheap pathos of melodrama. By means of existential irony and paradox the author transformed an apparently melodramatic story — because on the surface level *The heart of the matter* is a sui generis melodrama — into the unforgettable drama of man's tragic predicaments in the modern world.

In the final judgement it seems relevant to say that it is Greene's tragic vision of the world that determines the aesthetic shape of his novels and thus justifies the choice of themes and techniques. Fowler's casual comment in *The quiet American* after having seen an American film may serve as a post-

script to *The heart of the matter*: "It was what they call a film for boys, but the sight of Oedipus emerging with his bleeding eyeballs from the palace at Thebes would surely give a better training for life today" (Greene 1956 : 237).

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