



**THE GERM OF CORRUPTION IN GRAHAM GREENE'S
*A BURN-OUT***

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Abstract

Like their predecessors, the thirties generation of poets and writers responded to the problems of their age. Writing at times of political crisis was the only weapon to maintain some sort of human values against the forces of evil. The writers thus reasserted the primacy of literature as a guide to the moral confusion their age entailed. From *Stamboul Train* (1932) onwards, Graham Greene's work displays the chaotic nature of the new world. In this paper, I shall analyse Greene's *A Burnt-out Case* (1960) to throw light on what the author saw as the core of alienation and fragmentation in Western contemporary society.

Keywords: Africa, Colonialism, Civilisation, Barbarism, Alienation, Modern Man

1. Introduction

Greene's examination of contemporary life and the sickness that affects the world is conspicuous not only in the novels of the Thirties but in nearly all of his subsequent fiction. Greene's *A Burnt-Out-Case* (1960) is most explicitly apocalyptic in bringing forth the death of Western civilisation and Western imperialism as well as the perversion of idealism. It is a study of disillusionment and meaninglessness in the face of success.

Greene uses the Congo as a setting for *A Burnt-Out-Case* and explains his choice in the dedicatory letter of the novel. 'The Congo,' he says, 'is a region of the mind.' It appealed to him because of its remoteness from 'world-politics and household preoccupation,' and from the brutality of the world.

However he realizes that this Edenic land offers no real alternative to the decadence of Europe since corruption and destruction are everywhere.

2. THE MUTILATED MIND

In *A Burnt-Out-Case*, Greene reveals that the contemporary situation is not simply the outcome of socio-political forces but the result of something deeply ingrained in human nature. Greene's title, which is taken from medical jargon, echoes with diverse levels of physical, emotional and spiritual meaning. Medically speaking, a burnt-out-case is a mutilated person in whom the leprosy has run its course and left him toeless and fingerless and totally insensitive. Taken as an emotional symbol, a burnt-out-case represents modern man emptied of all human values; and spiritually, it is 'the mutilation of the natural man' (ABOC, p.197) by worldly success and pride which inflict their 'secret wound' (Greene).

Query, the protagonist, more than any other character in the novel, represents the condition of modern man. He is a burnt-out-case. His disease is more spiritual than physical. He is a hollow man. Like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *A Burnt-Out-Case* presents a double picture: on the one hand, there is a tortured mind – Query's – and on the other hand, we are faced with an arid world. Its sense of sterility, its failure to cope with the 'machine age' recalls T.S. Eliot's.

Greene's novel is about the escape from the modern world and from the self. Query is a world famous architect whose life had been spurred by professional ambition. However despite his success, he is haunted by a sense of vacuity. He is bored. His inner hollowness, 'nothing. I want nothing...I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to an end of all that too ... to the end of everything,' (ABOC, p. 16) symbolises the spiritual hollowness of modern civilisation. The extract from Wardekar's pamphlet on leprosy, which Greene uses as a symbol also initiates *A Burnt-Out-Case's* consideration of egoism, and self-disgust. And like the lepers Wardekar depicts, Query suffers from self-loathing for what he is and for the hero his society has made of him. He thus gives up his old life and embarks on a lonely journey to Africa to run away from the glamour of worldly success.



The 'Hermit of the Congo' (132) stands in the midst of this vast landscape of malevolence and decay. He feels unsatisfied. Just as illness has run its course in the leprosy, leaving the patients mutilated, Querry feels mutilated if not physically, at least spiritually. All his worldly success is inane, unhelpful. This is the import of the parable he tells Marie Rycker at the hotel, in the town of Luc: a clever man left family. He transgressed all the rules he could think of and became very rich. He made beautiful jewels for the king. It was a good time then. But in the end, he became very bored and realized that his life lacked any piquancy and that his heart was swollen with pride. He also realized that 'there was no other King but *his*' (p. 154).

Querry moreover thought that in Africa, man is preserved from the manipulations and torments of a civilisation. But the so-called unspoilt environment he has come to, continues the exposure to selfishness started in Europe before the novel begins. The irony in the first section of the novel is biting: the European world Querry escaped from is ever-present in the Congo. It is a sordid replica of Europe. The hypocrisy Querry flees lives in the colonial world of the Congo. In addition, Deo Gratias's yearning for the Edenic 'Pendélé' is not a romantic delusion. Pendélé did exist before the colonies broke in and turned Africa into the heart of desolation, the 'heart of darkness.' Greene moreover makes it very explicit that the European kind of egoism far outdistances the harmless African brand: 'Hola Camp, Sharpeville and Algiers have justified all possible belief in European cruelty,' says Greene (*ABOC*, p. 39).

Yet, Querry goes through a process of re-insertion into life. After he refutes the hypocrisy of society which doggedly pursues him to Africa, he seeks and finds an honest and useful outlet. The depiction of an individual finding redemption in life through life efforts, dedicated to a collective good, is a humanistic premise in Greene's work. Furthermore the society Querry escaped, in its being the source of general corruption, is the true field of conflict where hypocrisy will ultimately be fought.

In *A Burnt-Out-Case*, the emphasis remains on the importance of reality. When Querry says 'I am happy here,' Parkinson reappears on the scene. He becomes another agent of Querry's ruin. Parkinson stands for the Great Lie of civilisation, and personifies egoism. The depiction of Western agents and Congo hangers - on as murderous people is an important cultural



perception in the novel for Greene shows egoism in the individual and in society as a perverse historical force.

Querry's sense of renewal after he tells Marie the parable of the jeweller is significant. He moves from the Cartesian 'I' feeling of egoism – with which he left Europe – to communal feeling. *A Burnt-Out-Case* preserves certain features of the Faustian tragedy. Throughout the narrative, the Faustian theme of false power obtained at the cost of destruction and death is maintained. Both tales are dramatisations of the ways in which civilised men's desire to conquer the world leads to destruction on the environment, to self-destruction and to an absurd death.

Greene's protagonist indeed recalls Faustus. He is a man of great repute, a man whose heart is swollen with pride and self-love. Like Faustus, Querry has sacrificed his soul for worldly gratification. But unlike him, Querry flees worldly success. He goes to Africa, to 'the heart of darkness,' to find some peace of mind. Despite such resemblances with Faust's drama, Greene partly reverses the Faustian narrative. In *A Burnt-Out-Case*, suspense is generated by our hope that Querry may be saved. In Greene's novel, Parkinson whom we may consider as Lucifer's agent ie. Greene's Mephistopheles, and later Mr. Rycker destroy that hope for salvation. Mephistopheles summons the devil in the shape of Marie Rycker. Like Faustus who has embraced Helen of Troy, Querry's embrace of Marie Rycker proves fatal. As the Old Man confirms to Faustus that he is lost forever, Querry too is damned. It is indeed his relationship with Marie that causes his demise. Thus in *A Burnt-Out-Case* lust has proved more dangerous than love. It has destroyed Querry in Europe and in Africa. His quest for identity has thus been interrupted not only Mr. Rycker, but also by Parkinson, the journalist, Querry's alter-ego.

3. THE DOPPELGANGER

Critics and literary historians of the nineteenth century attributed the use of the 'doubles' (Doppelgangers) in prose fiction to the writer's desire to depict traits of himself. The Doppelganger also overstates in characters, the divisions inherent in a culture. The 'double' is found, for instance, in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) but the most psychologically profound handling of the double theme is Dostoevsky's early novel *The*



Double (1846). And both Stevenson and Dostoevsky, one must point out, had a serious impact on Graham Greene.

Furthermore the literary representations of the double-motif, which describe the persecution complex, confirm not only Freud's notion of the narcissistic tendency towards paranoia but they also reduce the main pursuer to the ego itself. The person of the pursuer often represents the father or his substitute (brother, teacher etc...). In Greene's work, 'the double' represents the father, a man who left an indelible mark on him. The dual image of his father emerges: on the one hand, the loved family father; on the other hand, the authoritarian school headmaster and it is the latter that traumatized the young Graham most. References for instance, to Andrews's 'other self' in *The Man Within*, or his 'inner critic' are but interiorized interpretations of his father. Thus it is not surprising that Greene strove to get rid of the 'shadow' of his father. The creation of the 'double' to another person functions as a way of separating loved and rejected aspects of that person. From this attitude of rivalry, the death wish and the drive towards murder of the 'double' become quite understandable.

Greene himself is a Jekyll and Hyde character who has not succeeded in bringing together the two sides of himself into any sort of harmony. There is a continuous conflict within him. Greene was a dual man: He was a moralist and a sceptic, a pessimist and a humanist, a romantic and a realist, a catholic novelist for some commentators, a Jansenist writer for others. And the epigraph Greene has chosen for his first published novel, *The Man Within* (1929) is very telling: 'There's another man within me that's angry with me' (Sir Thomas Browne). It reveals the inner conflict within Greene, a struggle which is suggested by the 'cloning' of characters.

In a 'double' narrative, two contrasting characters who may prove to be but one being, interchange roles. This pattern fits *A Burnt-Out-Case* where the *dédoublement* is an obsessive theme. It is therefore worth dwelling on this aspect of Greene's novel for it highlights the inner divisions the writer suffered from.

Greene's handling of the theme of the divided self starts with his account of modern's man capacity to sustain various attitudes. The divided self becomes a reflection of the divisive qualities of the age. Just as society is



losing its cohesion, so the individual feels that his own mind is coming apart. The characters whose minds are cast in the image of the new society are prone to mental disorder for when they come under stress; they are quite unable to cope. As in Dostoevsky's *The Double*, Greene's characters often come to confront some 'double,' a 'secret sharer', who resembles them, and reminds them of the complexity of the world and the incompleteness of the self.

In *A Burnt-Out-Case*, There are in effect two 'real' Querrys: the one who lived in Europe without any moral conscience and the one who is ultimately reborn after he joins the community of lepers and makes himself useful in the hospital. These twin identities are joined. The protagonist comes to terms with a part of himself, by confrontation with a character representing his own destructive alter-ego.

From the moment of Parkinson's arrival to the leprosy, Query recognizes him as his double. When they meet, Query says, 'you are a man like me,' and 'we are two of a kind' (p. 110). He also adds: 'You are my looking-glass - I can talk to a looking glass, but one can be a little afraid of one, too - It returns such a straight image' (p. 116). Soon, Query suspects that his image is his main foe and tries to protect himself against this threat. The loathsome fellow pursues Query even in his dreams, in which fleeing from his double, he sees him standing on his way. This is mostly revealed in the protagonist's second dream from which he 'woke with terror.' But even in his waking hours, this uncanny relationship haunts him.

The 'doubling' perspective, which derives from this view of self-division, extends through other relationships in the story. Marie Rycker for instance, is a child-like wife but within her lays a ferocious doppelganger: she does not shrink from lying about her pregnancy, in order to escape the fiasco of her conjugal life. Even her husband is a double man. At first, he appears as someone who has a certain superiority of intellect, but soon after he hears the gossiping about his wife's pregnancy, he becomes blinded by the idea of revenge. The evil instincts that lay dormant in him come to the surface; he becomes a murderer.



4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, one can say that in *A Burnt-Out-Case*, the leper, his deformity and mutilation are used as emblems for modern man and the long disease that affects modern life. The novel conveys the writer's disenchantment with Western civilisation. Greene expresses an acute rage against material, industrial and technological society and the self-destructive propensities of the modern world. He reveals the sordidness that lies behind the surface appearance of civilisation.

Greene also shows that anxiety is at the core of man's relationship with others. Moreover the existential view that man suffers alienation and anguish through his life with others is seen in this novel. Alienation is illustrated in the isolation of the protagonist.

Isolation in Greene's fiction is indeed more than a striking image. It is the condition of the test which each of their main characters must undergo. It is the main cause of their failure. They are loners because they do not care about others. Isolation, corruption, a pervasive sense of evil, and the ugly aspect of modern life are displayed in Greene's novel like symptoms of an epidemic. Another characteristic of the disease is absurdity, the absurdity of human truth, the truth of *La Condition Humaine*.

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