Dichotomy in Catholic Novels of Greene

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Abstract:
Greene has depicted dilemma of the intellectuals with artistic grandeur in his novels. Contradictory situations, points of views, characters and incidents are intermingled to investigate the similarities of opposites. In Brighton Rock Pinkie and Ida have dichotomy in their own characters. Pinkie and Rose with contrasting nature are bound together. The priest consoles Rose that a man’s personality is dichotomous he may appear a Satan by his deeds but he can be a saint. In The Heart of the Matter Scobie is a rare combination of good and evil, morality and immorality. His relations with his wife, his friendship with smuggler Yusef, and his affair with Helen present a rare dichotomy. In The Power and the Glory both the priest and the lieutenant are striving for sainthood, paradoxically, without asceticism for the priest or humanitarianism for the lieutenant. In The End of the Affair Bendrix’s affair with Sarah swings between love and hate and ends with faith in God. Sarah gets sainthood through sin. Greene shows that sin and sanctity, good and evil are intensely intertwined in a man and it is impossible to separate them. Thus the dichotomy of good and evil and their coexistence focuses his central themes.

Key words: Opposites, coexistence, non-cofimrity.

1. Introduction:
The dilemma that the modern age is fighting with can only be termed dichotomous. Greene has depicted dilemma of the intellectuals with artistic grandeur in his novels. His Catholic novels are not exception to it. As a film critic and screenplay writer he excelled in art of cinematographic depiction of things. Application of contradictory situations or points of view came to him naturally in describing things, characters and incidents. As an intellectual, he was moved by the similarities of opposites, the possibilities of twilight zone, the intrigue caused by raising the bar of previous human thought. Greene is fond of quoting from Robert Browning’s ‘Bishop Boulgram’ that very effectively highlights the dichotomy of his thoughts;

Our interest in the dangerous edge of things,
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist,

2. Intellectual and Religious Non-Confirmity:
Greene has used his fluid intellectual non-conformity to highlight different and contrasting entities like good and evil, right and wrong, innocence and shrewdness, cruelty and mercy, profane and sacred, Heaven and Hell.

A hypocrite Pinkie of Brighton Rock claims to be a proud Roman; but does everything against Catholic religion and morality; talks of murder, killing and massacre. In his contrast Ida a secularist, doesn’t believe in religion, a woman of cheap value, talks of moral values, right and wrong, of justice and injustice. Pinkie and Rose have contrasting temperament; they make an odd pair like that of fire and ice, heaven and hell. Fate brings them close to each other. ‘Rose passively, almost sacrificially, acquiesces in the face of Pinkie’s diabolical
temptations.’ Rose has kind heart and soft feeling; as against a callous heart of Pinkie. In one of their meetings she brings her face close to him in expectation of a kiss. Pinkie responds, “with contempt in his nails, pinching the skin of her wrist until his nails nearly met” or with anger, “I could break your arm.” Both of them are proud Roman but Pinkie believes in ‘Hell and damnation’ the negative and dark side of Catholicism, Rose believes in ‘Heaven’ the sunny side of the same. Greene’s personal and Catholic belief reflects in Pinkie’s thoughts that ‘good and bad’ cannot exist without each other as light exists only with darkness.

“She was something that completed him. He thought: she has got more guts than Spicer. What was most evil in him needed her: it couldn’t get along without goodness… She was good, he’d discovered that, and he was damned: they were made for each other”

Rose survives with her despair and love while Pinkie has his damnation with hate. Thus the dichotomy of good and evil and their coexistence focuses the central theme. It reflects Greene’s ambivalence and dichotomy of profane and sacred.

3. Dichotomy in Characters:

Ida owns personality with contrasting characteristics. Life for her is ‘only fun after all…’ ‘You Only Live Once’. She does not believe in any religion. The dichotomy in her character is that she launches herself for right goals; she honours great human values of rationality and justice; - ‘A warship on the right side in a war to end war.’

Innocent Rose in spite of Pinkie’s evil intentions knowingly damns herself and bemoans her decision not to kill herself with Pinkie. The Priest tries to console Rose that a man can have dichotomous personality he may appear a Satan by his deeds but he can be a saint. He cites example of a Frenchman who lived in mortal sin all through his life:

This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacrament; he never married his wife in church.’…‘but some people think he was, a saint…

Cedric Watts comments on the paradoxical aspects of the novel:

Here he goes deeper into Greeneland than ever before; and here he presents in most stark and appalling form the paradox of ‘virtue of evil’.

The epigraph of The Heart of the Matter quotes the paradoxical perspective of Charles Peguy: “The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. No-one is as expert as the sinner on the subject of Christianity. No-one except a saint.”

4. A humanistic Approach:

Greene has used dichotomy in this novel also because it coincides with his humanistic approach to profane. Religion Tate-a-tat to profanity, honesty with corruption, love with infidelity, urge to live and desire of death, cruelty and pity face to face with each other serving his purpose to bring the real world as it is before his readers. He often depicts self-contrasting concepts with dichotomy like: Revenge was good for the character: out of revenge grew forgiveness.

The first dichotomy that we come across in The Heart of the Matter is the relationship of Scobie and Louise living together as a couple of contrasting nature: ‘If home for him meant the reduction of things to a friendly unchanging minimum, home to her was accumulation.’ Louise craves for friends, possessions and
status; feels insulted for her husband passed over by juniors. Affair between Scobie and Helen, one God-fearing catholic other a non-believer, is also a weird combination.

Scobie is a rare combination of goodness and evil, morality and immorality. He deals the case of tenants and the owners in with a good and moral spirit. But finds that good tenants have bad intentions and bad owners have good heart and vice-versa. This postmodern dichotomy baffles the characters of Greene’s fiction as well as his readers. Scobie helps Helen to come out from her despair after her miraculous escape from the boat tragedy. But his pity very soon turns into an adulterous relationship. Helen wants him to marry her but as a Catholic Scobie expresses his inability to marry a second woman. Scobie ethically feels ‘to kneel down in confessional and say – “Since my last confession I have committed adultery so many times”’ Helen Rolt even remarks with sarcasm on his hypocrisy of Catholicism: “It’s a wonderful excuse being a Catholic,’ she said, ‘it doesn’t stop you sleeping with me-it only stops you marrying me.”

Scobie’s association with the diamond smuggler Yusef gradually drags him down into the lowest rank of his reputation and his identity from “Scobie –the just” comes down to a corrupt officer having nexus with a black marketeer. Yusef tells Scobie about a poem of a Syrian poet, “Of two hearts one is always warm and one is always cold: the cold heart is more precious than diamonds: the warm heart has no value and is thrown away.”

5. Dichotomy of approach and outlook:

Greene perhaps designed Scobie to fit into his scheme that, “it is by their capacity for corruption or damnation that the best – the believers – qualify for redemption.” Scobie is both, ‘the best, in the beginning and ‘the worst’ in the end. It is shown that ‘Scobie betrays his job, Ali, Helen and Louise; the full height of the argument is that he loves where he betrays and he also loves and betrays God’.

Greene enunciates through his tales that the inflexible rules and dogmas of the church have no application to the modern man’s psychological ills and modern dilemmas. Scobie’s life love and sin have become synonymous and his last words leave us in doubt “Dear God, I love…” whether he loved God or his sin-symbolized by Helen or his wife. Greene is out to show that sin and sanctity, good and evil are so intensely intertwined in a man’s being that it is impossible to separate them.

The Power and the Glory is based on a number of contrasts and antitheses, chief of them being the outlooks of the priest and the lieutenant, in other words, the disputation about the ‘is’ and ‘ought to be’ of the whiskey priest’s way of life. The lieutenant treats world as his church and he as a priest stands for everything except alter while the priest stands for alter. Lieutenant is ready to injure his own people (hostages) if necessary to find the priest. Lieutenant is willing to die to affect his ideas; as a representative God the priest is afraid of his life and unsure about being a martyr to the church. Fredric Karl says, ‘the roles of the two men have been reversed… the lieutenant, the devil’s agent is strong in his desire to destroy God’s image on earth, and the priest, God’s representative, is weak in defending God’s image … Both the priest and the lieutenant are striving for sainthood, paradoxically, without asceticism for the priest or humanitarianism for the lieutenant.”

Like the priest’s mission the lieutenant has a vocation to which he has given his life. He thinks of the children of the state – “it was for these he was fighting. He would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth – a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes – first the Church then the foreigners and then the
politician – even his own chief would one day have to go. He wanted to begin the world again with them, in a desert.”

Also the picaresque progress of the priest is deliberately contrasted with conventional saint’s life that a mother reads to her son and two daughters; but it is emphasized that it is the sinful priest’s life which is nearer the passion of Christ. Although Juan the saint in the book is presented as a saint of the future who died for the church, his life is unreal in its inhuman charity and foresight; the authentic martyr, the whiskey priest, prowls the dark streets in fear of capture and death, conscious of his weakness and unworthiness: “The mock-heroic epic,’ writes Douglas Stewart, “with its hero behaving heroically, forgiving his enemies, crying, …in the moment of martyrdom, proceeds alongside this real story, with its priest in his last hours, crouching on the floor of his cell, clutching the brandy-bottle charitably provided by his enemy, the lieutenant, and wishing he could pray.”

In ‘The Power and the Glory’ the author has painted a stark picture of human pity fullness with the sinner-saint discovering the angel within the maimed human soul—‘Hate was just a failure of imagination.’ The novel obviously ‘Transcends its ostensible theme of the struggle between the Catholic church and the particular brand of secularism in Mexico.’ The universal theme of struggle between good and evil has been projected by Greene centralizing it on specific locality. ‘It is Greene’s most comprehensive projection of his vision of a world in which good and evil are continually at war; for most of time the war is cold one, but in parts of Mexico in the late thirties it was a hot war.’

We may term it as Humanistic approach or Greene’s idea of God’s mercy, which of course, is inscrutable, incomprehensible and ‘appallingly strange’ to him because he also believes like the priest in The Power and the Glory that ‘Venial Sins – impatience an unimportant lie, pride, a neglected opportunity-cut you from grace more completely than the worst sins of all.’

This is why he adduces every evidence to give us the idea that the priest guilty of mortal sins, desecration of his office, and profanity ascends to heaven, but the complacently pious and smugly religious have no such chance. “Greene himself has said,” writes, Marie-Beatrice Mesnet, “that his purpose, like Francois Maurice’s, in choosing the weakest, the most abandoned human being as material for his creative imagination, was to throw a brighter light on god’s infinite mercy and on his power to turn even evil etiam peccata- into good.”

In this he recalls the revelations of St, Augustine and of the mystics, who comfort themselves with the knowledge that “Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well…evil is the way of the world, but the love the way of God, which love was never slacked nor ever shall be.”

6. Dichotomy of Catholicism and Conservatism

Greene’s conviction, as he puts in an essay on Eric Bill, is well expressed in the words that ‘conservatism and Catholicism should be …impossible bed fellows.’ He fostered the will towards compassion, ideal communism even more Christian than communist. He correlated God and the humanity, ‘when you visualized a man or woman you could always begin feel pity –that was a quality God’s image carried with it.’

Greene shows with almost eager care how unworthy the priest is to be the final representative of the church, in a province cleared of priests. “If you combed the world you could scarcely find a worst priest.” His sins have been elaborately catalogued-chronic alcoholism, pride alternating with despair and worst of all an illegitimate child to confront him with incarnation of his lust. Not only this he is even denied his last confession, for the renegade priest, Don Jose will not risk hearing it and the priest dies unabsolved in a state of
mortal sin. He could still be saved if he could bring himself into a mood of contrition-genuine contrition. This he fails to do. When in Maria’s town and about to be interrogated by the lieutenant and in fatal danger... he recited an act of contrition silently with only half a mind’. Again when he is caught carrying liquor and in danger of detection which will surely be followed by death ‘he began to say silently an act of contrition... he could give his mind to it’. And again when he is about to be executed: ‘he crouched on the floor with the empty brandy-flash in his mind in his hand trying to remember an act of contrition...but his mind was on other things.”

Cats Baldrige commenting on Catholic nature of the novel says, “The Power and the Glory has been called the greatest Catholic novel ever written. While I would not quarrel with this assessment, I would also contend that it is also perhaps the greatest anti-Catholic novel ever written.

Bendrix, the novelist who relates his story in The End of the Affair says in the very beginning, ‘So this is a record of hate far more than of love.’ Jealousy arises from the deadly combination of love and hate, and Bendrix is a good hater. He hates Henry for possessing Sarah, he hates her when she trying to end the affair, he hates the unknown lover who he thinks has enticed her away, and when he discovers that it is God, then he hates God. And throughout the story he hates himself. His affair with Sarah, wife of a civil officer, is dichotomous – “Love-hate relationships burgeoned; he himself knew them all too well: the love-hate relationship with promiscuity, with sexual passion, with the decadent and the depraved.” Bendrix is filled with hatred and revenge for one:

More than anything in the world I wanted to hurt Sarah. I wanted to hurt Sarah. I wanted to take a woman back with me and lie with her upon the same bed in which I made love to Sarah; it was as though I knew that the only way to hurt her was to hurt myself.”

In fact, through Bendrix, Greene wants to prove that it is difficult at times to tell hatred from love and a hater from a lover. Bendrix himself avows: ‘Hatred seems to operate from the same glands as love; it produces the same actions. If we had not been taught how to interpret the story of the passion, would we have been able to say from their actions alone whether it was the jealous Judas or the cowardly Peter who loved Christ.”

Lodge has noted of The End of the Affair, ‘it rings with the repetition of love and hate. For statistical record these words or forms of them recur about three hundred and one hundred times respectively in this short novel.”

Pryce Jones comments on the dichotomy in God’s love – “Bendrix’s hatred of God ‘is really the only possible form of God-love.’ His ‘love-hate is something religious in itself.’” Richard advises Sarah to discard the idea from her mind to mix up mundane things with God that is only a shadow not a real entity, ‘leave the idea of God out of this. It’s just a question of your lover and your husband. Don’t confuse the thing with phantoms.’ That one incident changes the course of her life and now she puts her step on the path of God though she has to undergo a lot of conflict between her desire and charity. Sarah’s transition from a slut and sinner to saint is on the card. Greene plays with the dichotomy that the elements of ‘a slut’ and ‘a saint’ exist in the same seed.

7. Conclusion:

Thus, dichotomy plays an important part in the catholic novels of Graham Greene as it suits the postmodern spirit where two opposite elements are put together and produce brilliant contrast. It is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Sin and sanctity, moral and immoral, good and evil, right and wrong, love and hate, faith and unfaith, truth and lie are intensely intertwined in a man’s being impossible to be separated.
References

19. Marie-Beatrice Mesnet Ibid 78

Work cited: