

Fallibility of the human soul in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

Rekha. R
Assistant Professor
Don Bosco College
Yelagiri Hills.

Graham Greene was an English writer, playwright and literary critic. He has written a considerable number of novels which, while popular, have none the less pleased the critics because of the tautness of their construction and their imaginative exploration of character. Whatever he writes seems to be topical, not just in subject matter and location but in the emotions stimulated, for Greene has the gift of evoking the atmosphere of a period as well as giving an accurate depiction of surroundings. Catholic religious themes are at the root of much of his writing, especially the four major Catholic novels: *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*.

The Heart of the Matter (1948) is a novel by the English author Graham Greene. The book deals about a life-changing and moral crisis for Major Henry Scobie, a Catholic police officer in a British West African Colony. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked *The Heart of the Matter* 40th on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. In 2005, the novel was chosen by TIME magazine as one of the one hundred best English-language novels from 1923 to the present.

The book is about the fallibility of the human soul. It seems that none of us are beyond temptation. First we see the temptation of the flesh; what began as a wish to protect a fellow human ends with adultery, a mortal sin. Then it is as if Scobie stumbles into a declining, inescapable, vortex of sin, each worse than the one that went before: lies, corruption, murder. Every step leads Scobie further and further away from redemption. He is a man of principle who thinks he is a recalcitrant slob. He is a man of conscience who presents a pragmatic face. He makes decisions fully aware of their consequences, but remains apparently unable to influence the circumstance that repeatedly seems to dictate events. He remains utterly honest in his deceit, consistent in his unpredictability. His life becomes a

beautiful, uncontrolled mess. His wife's simple orthodox Catholicism contrasts with his never really adopted faith. He tries to keep face, but cannot reconcile the facts of his life with the demands of his conscience. His ideals seem to have no place in a world where interests overrule principle. As the story moves we realize that there is only one possible conclusion to the story.

Scobie is a man whose merit is frequently overlooked and whose capacities for sensitive reaction are underestimated. Thus, when he learns he is not to be chosen district commissioner, he feels the slight more for his wife than for himself. He is scrupulous in his dealings, and he has a reputation for honesty earned in fifteen years of hard work. Scobie's search for a light in this humid darkness is presented in masterly terms, with no bit of drama overlooked, no symbol wasted. Pity is Scobie's fatal flaw. Scobie feels nothing he could call love for Louise, but he is driven mad by her unhappiness--or even by the prospect of her unhappiness. His affair with Helen is repulsively shallow; she, with her mood swings and stamp collection, seems little more than a love-struck child, and yet he cannot bear the thought of her suffering either. Too late he realizes, when he receives a letter from Louise announcing her return, that he has put himself into a bind, and must cause suffering to either his wife or his lover by abandoning one of them. He pities the planets: but the thought that he might be pitiable comes as a shock. It is no surprise that Scobie cannot succeed in bringing happiness to everyone, and as a result concludes that everyone would be better off without him. As a result, he makes himself the most pitiable character of all.

The Heart of the Matter tells the story, principally, of Scobie, a colonial policeman trapped in a loveless marriage. Scobie has an overdeveloped sense of pity; he is never so moved by his wan, cheerless, and complaining wife than when she looks ugly and vulnerable. At those moments, his pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion. He feels 'bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness'. Scobie and his wife lost their daughter when she was a little girl, and it is perhaps this wound that has made him so helplessly drawn to the wounds of others. In the course of the novel, Scobie is repeatedly placed in suffering's way. First, he is called to deal with the aftermath of a suicide involving Pemberton, a young district

commissioner. Suicide is of course a mortal sin for a catholic, but Scobie feels that God would forgive Pemberton, partly because the dead man was not a Catholic: When the local Catholic priest remonstrates that the Church's teaching is emphatic, Scobie cuts him off.

It is Pende that Scobie meets Helen Rolt, one of the survivors, who lost her husband at sea. She is young, childlike, and unattractive. Scobie is drawn to her. While Louise is away, Scobie and Helen begin an affair. Scobie is once again married to misery, though this time adulterously. His life begins to unravel when Louise returns home. Scobie is torn between his responsibility to his wife and his responsibility to his mistress. Scobie's ultimate breakdown is religious in nature. His adultery, and above all the crisis false communion, seems to condemn him to damnation; he feels that he is 'desecrating God because he loved a woman'. When his mistress complains that his Catholicism seems to her bogus, he fiercely replies:

'I believe that I'm damned for all eternity... What I've done is far worse than murder' (158-59)

In the last fifty pages of the book, Scobie veers between his usual exaggerated feeling of responsibility, and a great desire to 'get out' – to commit suicide. He seems to think that in dying he can offer himself as a sacrificial victim. Returning alone to church one last time, he sees himself as an outcast, an inhabitant from another country.

He is determined to kill himself, despite the Church's prohibition, and begins to reformulate what had first occurred to him when he falsely took confession: he thinks that he may offer himself up as a kind of sacrificial lamb, thereby bringing peace both to Louise and Helen, and to God himself. The novel ends with his suicide. The scene is Scobie's bungalow shortly after his suicide.

Scobie has slipped into a depression and feels that peace will never come to him again. Scobie's state, his lack of peace could have been seen as something he willed away. Every criminal activity Scobie goes into is promoted, not by self-interest, but for his wife's happiness. It could be said that Scobie's motives are influenced by self-interest because Scobie wants his wife to leave him in peace, a peace which will be seen to have been

voluntarily given up. Scobie's main concern is not to cause his wife any pain; and after he begins his affair with Helen, not to cause any pain for Helen either. In the end he takes his own life in order to spare the two women any more pain from himself.

Scobie often seen as a reflection of Greene; and many of the longings desires and fears Scobie has can be viewed as a reflection of Greene. Greene didn't live in a perfect world and neither do his characters. Greene also longed for peace just like Scobie longed for peace. We can see Greene speaking through Scobie during Mass.

Peace seemed to him the most beautiful word in the language; My peace I give you, my peace I leave with you..... In the mass he pressed his fingers to his eyes to keep the tears of longing in. (48)

The morally corrupt situation that Scobie goes through, especially adultery sin reflects Graham Greene's own personal life. Norman Sherry's three volume biography highlights many correlations to Greene's own life in *The Heart of the Matter*. We learn from Sherry's biography of Graham Greene that these two novels developed during "the most emotionally wrenching period of his life."

'*The Heart of the Matter*', is a great novel written by Graham Greene. It is a cautionary tale of what happens when you make a deal with the devil, and love too well. Treatment of death in *The Heart of the Matter* is the strongest. In this novel Greene's central paradox is that love leads to sin and redemption. Obviously this novel can create a great impression in reader's heart.

Works cited

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