

## 26

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### Graham Greene

#### Introduction

Born in the same generation as Borges, Beckett, and Barthes, Graham Greene (1904–91) studiously avoided postmodernism: not for him, the myth-making, the magic, the bizarre hilarity of a world gone crazed after the death of God. Although his career spanned the period that, in England, ran from the height of modernism in the 1920s to that of postmodernism in the 1980s, his major novels display little of the self-consciousness characteristic of these literary movements, and their only implausible events are the result of his Catholicism (though even these are always capable of a natural explanation). Occasionally a character speaks to God, and God replies. How are we to construe that? The odd unobtrusive miracle takes place – or does it? Apart from these brief flashes of the supernatural, Greene is relentless in portraying the world as absurd, grotesque, and deeply disappointing. His first novel, *The Man Within*, appeared in 1929, two years after Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. It contains passages that could be described as stream of consciousness, but Greene soon abandoned this modernist technique for a tougher, more muscular stance that he shared with George Orwell: enough of this effete introspection – let's portray the real world in all its horror and squalor.

He wrote twenty-six novels<sup>1</sup> (including two that were never published and those he called 'entertainments') plus short stories, poetry, plays, screenplays, biographies, autobiographies, children's books, travel writing, journalism, essays, and film criticism. At least thirty-eight films and seventeen television adaptations have been made of his fictions so far. With an author as prolific as this, it is even more necessary than usual to indicate a select few works to recommend as his best. My choice would be as follows: *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The End of the Affair* (1951), *The Quiet American* (1955), *The Comedians* (1966), *The Honorary Consul* (1973), and his fine short story

'The Destructors' (1954). These are complex works that focus on major religious, political, and ethical themes, and they will be the main subjects of this discussion, but the selection excludes another important aspect of his fiction: the comedies. Perhaps the best introduction to Greene would be *Our Man in Havana* (1958), *Travels with my Aunt* (1969), and *Monsignor Quixote* (1982). Here some of the same themes are treated with whimsical humour and a touch of magic.

By the 1950s, Greene was generally acknowledged as one of the finest writers of his generation, and that opinion was voiced again and again over the years. V. S. Pritchett claimed that Greene was the first English novelist since Henry James to represent evil in the world. In her introduction to the centenary edition of *The Quiet American*, the novelist Zadie Smith had this to say about his moral sensibility:

No twentieth-century writer had a subtler mind for human comparison. Where lesser novelists deploy broad strokes to separate good guy from bad, Greene was the master of the multiple distinction; the thin lines that separate evil from cruelty from unkindness from malevolent stupidity. His people exist within a meticulously calibrated moral system. They fail by degrees. And so there is no real way to be good in Greene, there are simply a million ways to be more or less bad. (QA, v)

In each of these assessments, the writer tries to isolate what is special about Graham Greene, and that will be my focus here too: the essay will glance at Greene's life then discuss various aspects of his works – his style; his treatments of religion, sexuality, and politics – in the hope of arriving at conclusions about his place in the literary canon.

### Life

Henry Graham Greene was born in Berkhamsted – a small town about one hour north of London by train – in 1904. The Greene family was large and prosperous. One ancestor – Benjamin Greene III – founded the Greene King brewery in Bury St Edmunds in the early nineteenth century and owned sugar plantations in the West Indies. Graham's parents were cousins, and his mother was a cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Graham attended Berkhamsted School, where his father was headmaster. There Graham had his first painful experiences with divided loyalties, betrayal, and persecution. He overheard other boys ridiculing his father and knew that in order to be accepted he would have to laugh with them. One of the boys bullied him, and another, whom Graham had considered his friend, turned out to be in league with the bully. This situation – a banal enough example of the everyday brutality of school life – provided a basic pattern for his fiction. As

## Graham Greene

Greene's biographer Norman Sherry has observed, *The Power and the Glory* is based on this template: the whisky priest is the persecuted hero, the lieutenant the persecutor, and the mestizo<sup>2</sup> the Judas-figure. The hunted protagonist, alone in a frightening and treacherous world, became Greene's specialty. The persecution is often political – the Tontons Macoute in *The Comedians*, the Paraguayan police in *The Honorary Consul* – but Greene had learned the nature of torture and gratuitous evil not in exotic Third-World situations of political tyranny but as a bullied schoolboy in an English boarding-school.

In 1920, when his depressive tendencies became obvious, his parents sent him to live with a psychiatrist. Greene kept a dream diary and underwent therapy sessions every day. This early experience with psychotherapy (early in both his own life and the history of psychoanalysis) would serve him well later as a novelist: it taught him the value of dreams and the subconscious. Greene sometimes uses the dreams of his protagonists to reveal what they are repressing. He also relied on sleep and the subconscious as part of his writing method: every morning, he wrote five hundred words, and every night before he went to sleep he read over what he had written so that the subconscious could work on it overnight.

At Oxford he was more interested in drinking and pranks than in studying. At one point he joined the Communist Party as a joke. But he was already deeply committed to literature: as editor of the literary magazine *Oxford Outlook*, he accepted works from Louis Golding, Edith Sitwell, Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden, C. Day-Lewis, Rex Warner, and Emlyn Williams. His first book – a volume of poetry entitled *Babbling April* – appeared in 1925. Despite this apparently full life, he was always plagued by boredom. He claimed that at Oxford he had played Russian roulette, simply to alleviate the sense of stultifying boredom that oppressed him.

After university, under the influence of his love for Vivien Dayrell-Browning, he began to work hard and eventually got a job as a sub-editor at *The Times*. In this period, he was romantic and politically conservative. He was a strike-breaker at *The Times* during the General Strike of 1926. His letters to Vivien, who married him after a great deal of hesitation in 1927, reveal an enthusiastic, foolish, traditional young man, deeply in love with a rather remote young woman. In order to persuade her to marry him, Greene offered her a celibate marriage in which they would live together but have no sexual relations. His conversion to Catholicism in 1926 was in part another attempt to win Vivien, but it also went deeper than that. In a letter to her of 5 November 1925, he wrote:

I admit the idea came to me, because of you. I do all the same feel I want to be Catholic now, even a little apart from you. One does want fearfully hard,

something fine & hard & certain, however uncomfortable, to catch hold of in the general flux.<sup>3</sup>

In the years that followed, Greene's personality and beliefs evolved. Marriage, the discovery of his vocation as a writer, and disastrous political events transformed him from a traditional and conservative romantic into the iconoclastic, radical, cynical mind we recognise behind the major novels. For example, as a boy, he had loved to read the adventure stories of John Buchan, but years later, in *Ways of Escape* (1980), he had this to say about Buchan's view of Britain and the empire:

Patriotism had lost its appeal, even for a schoolboy, at Passchendaele, and the Empire brought first to mind the Beaverbrook Crusader, while it was difficult, during the years of the Depression, to believe in the high purposes of the City of London or of the British Constitution. The hunger-marchers seemed more real than the politicians. It was no longer a Buchan world.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of adventure and detective stories stayed with him: Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and G. K. Chesterton left their traces in Greene's imagination. But there are also palpable influences of a darker and more modern kind: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford.

With this new persona came the restlessness, the itch to travel as a way of escape but also as the satisfaction of his voracious desire to see the world – all of it, in all its aspects, no matter how ugly or difficult. He was very good at getting newspapers, publishing houses, and intelligence services to pay for his travels. He crossed Liberia and Mexico in the 1930s; he worked for British intelligence in Sierra Leone during the Second World War; he travelled, sometimes in difficult and dangerous conditions, in Estonia, Israel, Vietnam, Argentina, Cuba, Kenya, the Belgian Congo, Haiti, Panama, Paraguay, Chile, Nicaragua – the list goes on. He was attracted to trouble spots, to war, poverty, and persecution, and these became the raw materials for his fiction.

His incessant travels might also have been a way to escape from his family: he and Vivien now had two children, and Greene found the domesticity stifling. The boredom he dreaded had set in once more, and he was determined to resist it. He had affairs and went to brothels. His first important affair was with Dorothy Glover, with whom he spent much of his time during the war in London, while Vivien and the children were safely out of the way in Oxford. He then fell in love with Catherine Walston, a married woman and mother of five, who was the original for Sarah in *The End of the Affair*. His affair with Catherine Walston lasted many years, and for several of those he was still seeing Dorothy Glover. Finally, in the 1960s, he formed

## Graham Greene

a new and lasting relationship with another married woman: he left (though never divorced) his wife and settled in Antibes, where he spent the last thirty years of his life with Yvonne Cloetta.

His travels, then, were both physical and psychological: he spent his professional life roaming the world and his personal life moving from one love to another, often playing a double game of betrayal and deception that mirrored the still cloudy complications of his espionage activities. Betrayal, marginality, crossing borders – these were to him the central weapons in the battle against boredom and the forging of his consciousness as a writer. From the provincial, middle-class, Home-Counties boy, Greene had become a citizen of the world and, in doing so, had produced a truly global body of work.

### Style

In 1948, the novelist Evelyn Waugh had this to say about Greene's style:

[T]he style of writing is grim. It is not a specific literary style at all. The words are functional, devoid of sensuous attraction, of ancestry and of independent life. Literary stylists regard language as intrinsically precious and its proper use as a worthy and pleasant task. A polyglot could read Mr. Greene, lay him aside, retain a sharp memory of all he said and yet, I think, entirely forget what tongue he was using. The words are simply mathematical signs for his thought.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that Greene is no stylist in the ordinary sense of the term; we remember him for his content. Although he was a rigorous rewriter, honing his prose to a point of absolute precision and economy, his focus was more decidedly on content rather than form. His prose, like Hemingway's, shows the influence and discipline of his experience in journalism, but, unlike Hemingway, he does not encourage the reader to pay as much attention to the sound as to the sense of his words. His own estimation of his style, in an interview with the novelist Anthony Burgess, is not very different from Waugh's:

I started off with the desire to use language experimentally. Then I saw that the right way was the way of simplicity. Straight sentences, no involutions, no ambiguities. Not much description, description isn't my line. Get on with the story. Present the outside world economically and exactly.<sup>6</sup>

The choice of simplicity has a political dimension: he seems determined to avoid the ivory-tower aspect of literary greatness. His novels are complex in their ideas and imagery, but he makes them accessible to the ordinary reader. For example, in *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie receives a telegram from

his wife, Louise, who has been in South Africa for some time. During the interval, Scobie has become involved in an affair with Helen. Louise's telegram reads: '*Have written am on my way home have been a fool stop love*' (HM, 173). In a telegram, the word 'stop' simply indicates punctuation, but on the symbolic level Scobie must indeed 'stop love', now that Louise is coming home. This is the sort of thing that critics make a living decoding, but Greene precludes that by repeating the phrase a few pages later, so that even the untutored reader gets the double meaning. It may be irritating for the literary critic, whose services are thus rendered superfluous, but for the ordinary reader it is liberating.

People quoting Greene tend to choose the moral pronouncements, the pearls of wisdom, such as the line in *Brighton Rock* about the 'appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God' (BR, 268) or the great simile in *The Quiet American*: 'innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm' (QA, 29). However, Greene's incisiveness is also evident in simple powerful observations. This is from the scene in *The End of the Affair* in which Henry and Bendrix go to a pub: 'A little hilarious man darted in and called out, "Wot cher, everybody," and nobody answered' (EA, 6). In a single sentence, Greene evokes not only the loneliness and disappointment of an individual life but also the lack of social cohesion in the twentieth century that was first explored by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. Had a similarly hilarious little man walked into a tavern in a nineteenth-century novel – the Rainbow in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, for example – he might have been ridiculed as the village idiot (social cohesion is not always a positive thing), but this is no nineteenth-century village: it is London after the Second World War, and nobody cares whether the little hilarious man is an idiot or not.

### Religion

For the first decade after his conversion to Catholicism in 1926, Greene did not write about Catholics, because he felt he knew too little. His best novels focus on the Catholicism of their central characters; at the same time, politics becomes increasingly central. He was always irritated by being seen as a Catholic writer:

Many times since *Brighton Rock* I have been forced to declare myself not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to be a Catholic ... Nevertheless it is true to say that by 1937 the time was ripe for me to use Catholic characters. It takes longer to familiarize oneself with a region of the mind than with a country, but the ideas of my Catholic characters, even their Catholic ideas, were not necessarily mine.<sup>7</sup>

As often in *Ways of Escape*, one feels the gentleman doth protest too much. There is no doubt that Greene is fascinated by Manicheism and Jansenism.<sup>8</sup> Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* believes firmly in hell but not necessarily in heaven. Brown in *The Comedians* declares himself a Manichean. The Catholic ideas that predominate in Greene's fiction are generally heretical ones: that people are incapable of keeping God's commandments without special grace from Him; that the presence of evil in the world proves that God cannot be both omnipotent and benevolent.

At the end of *Brighton Rock*, Rose goes to a priest and confesses that she wishes she had committed suicide with her husband, Pinkie. The priest replies as follows:

There was a man, a Frenchman ... who had the same idea as you. He was a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all through his life, because he couldn't bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation ... This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments, he never married his wife in church ... some people think he was – well, a saint. I think he died in what we are told is mortal sin ... You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God. (BR, 268)

The Frenchman is the writer Charles Péguy (1873–1914). Greene's epigraph to *The Heart of the Matter* is from Péguy: 'The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity ... No one is more competent than the sinner to understand Christianity – no one except the saint.'<sup>9</sup> In *The Lawless Roads* and *Brighton Rock*, Greene modifies Wordsworth's happy Pelagian phrase to his own sinner formulation: 'Hell lay around him in his infancy.' In *The Power and the Glory* and *Monsignor Quixote* (which were written over forty years apart), Judas is seen as a heroic figure, a saint in the Ethiopian Church.

Orwell, in a review of *The Heart of the Matter*, famously attacked Greene's concept of 'the sanctified sinner':

He appears to share the idea, which has been floating around ever since Baudelaire, that there is something rather *distingué* in being damned; Hell is a sort of high-class nightclub, entry to which is reserved for Catholics only.<sup>10</sup>

But it is important not to detach the Catholic ideas from their contexts: Greene interweaves them with politics and the theme of betrayal. The connection between religion and politics in Greene's work has been remarked by many commentators. For Greene, Catholicism at its best is revolutionary, opposing tyranny and oppression in defence of the poor and powerless. He often expressed his admiration for the 'liberation theology' of South America and frequently criticised the Vatican for its conservatism.

Late in his career, Greene makes the connection between Catholicism and Communism playfully explicit in *Monsignor Quixote*. The Quixote-figure is a Catholic priest in bad odour with his bishop; the Sancho-figure is the Communist mayor of El Toboso, who has just lost his seat in an election. This is from a conversation between the two:

Someone had painted a hammer and sickle crudely in red upon the crumbling stone.

‘I would have preferred a cross,’ Father Quixote said, ‘to eat under.’

‘What does it matter? The taste of the cheese will not be affected by cross or hammer. Besides, is there much difference between the two? They are both protests against injustice.’ (MQ, 38)

In his controversial lecture, ‘The Virtue of Disloyalty’, delivered in Hamburg in 1969, Greene brings together three of his major themes – Catholicism, Communism, and betrayal – under the canopy of defining the writer’s vocation:

The writer is driven by his own vocation to be a protestant in a Catholic society, a catholic in a Protestant one, to see the virtues of the capitalist in a Communist society, of the communist in a Capitalist state ... Loyalty confines you to accepted opinions: loyalty forbids you to comprehend sympathetically your dissident fellows; but disloyalty encourages you to roam through any human mind; it gives the novelist an extra dimension of understanding.<sup>11</sup>

Catholic novelist and critic David Lodge has argued that Greene’s Catholicism – far from being a drawback, ghettoising him as a ‘Catholic author’ and alienating non-Catholic readers from his works – enriches his fiction immensely by giving it a vivid sense of humanity’s yearning for good in a world full of evil.

### Minds and bodies

Greene achieves something that is very rare in literature but common enough in the visual arts: the representation of the mind’s relation to the body. As a Catholic, Greene presumably believes in the soul, and he represents these souls as trapped in repulsive bodies from which they are utterly alienated. Even non-Catholic readers can identify with this, because, regardless of our personal beliefs, most of us have been formed by cultures rooted in religions that encourage a sense of alienation from the body.

For example, sex in his works is a rather unsavoury business, usually linked to betrayal and/or disgust. Most of the sexual relationships he describes are adulterous, and the dominant emotion is jealousy. Brown in *The Comedians* is in this respect not unlike Bendrix in *The End of the Affair*. Sexual advances

in *Stamboul Train* are furtive and predatory. Pinkie (*Brighton Rock*) finds the prospect of sex frightening and repulsive. Scobie's affair with Helen (*The Heart of the Matter*) is characterised more by pity, sadness, and guilt than by desire. At the centre of Fowler's love-affair with Phuong (*The Quiet American*) is not sex but the ritual of preparing opium pipes. This grim view of sexuality is perhaps epitomised in his short story 'May We Borrow Your Husband?' (1967), in which a couple of homosexual men seduce a bridegroom on his honeymoon, while the middle-aged male narrator, observing from another table in the same hotel dining-room, debates whether to make advances to the stunned and despairing young bride.<sup>12</sup> Squalor was Greene's *métier*, and the twentieth century gave him plenty of scope to develop it.

Loving relationships between men in Greene's fiction are much more convincing than those between men and women: Bendrix's ménage with Henry at the end of the novel; Scobie's affection for Ali; Fowler and Pyle; Querry and Deo Gratias in *A Burnt-Out Case*. In *Ways of Escape*, Greene is silent about his affairs with women, claiming that he is protecting their copyright, but he describes deep friendships with men with a kind of wistful romanticism.

Greene's most convincing and three-dimensional female characters are the waifs – Coral in *Stamboul Train*, Rose in *Brighton Rock*. They are small and slim, strangely reminiscent of Dostoevsky's women – souls with faces but no real bodies. Perhaps his most dynamic and fully realised female character is Aunt Augusta in *Travels with My Aunt* – a flamboyant, red-haired, spirited, adventurous, bawdy, and intensely vital old lady, an aged twentieth-century Moll Flanders.

But the love objects of Greene's male protagonists rarely 'come alive'. Bendrix insists on describing Sarah in specific physical detail, but in fact we do not see her; she never 'comes alive' in the way Bendrix, Henry, and Parkis do. The female beloveds of Greene's fiction may have orgasms, but we get no sense of how their bodies look or feel or what it is like to inhabit them. Only the repulsive women have bodies: the drunken lesbian journalist Mabel Warren in *Stamboul Train*; Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock* ('her big breasts bore their carnality frankly down the Old Steyne' (*BR*, 84)).

Male characters, by contrast, have bodies we can see, feel, and smell. We understand what it is like to inhabit the bodies of Wilson in *The Heart of the Matter*, with his bald pink knees, and Mr Smith in *The Comedians*, with his large innocent hairy ears. In *The Quiet American*, the one truly loving relationship is between Fowler and Pyle. The lovely young Vietnamese woman Phuong represents Vietnam, but Pyle is a complex, convincing, three-dimensional character, and, despite or perhaps because of his atrocious innocence, Fowler loves him.

One part of the particularity of Greene's vision is his sense of how our bodies betray us. Few other writers have attempted it, and most of them were writing about extreme conditions. It is there in the great novels of torture – George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* – and in fiction about old people, like Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* and T. C. Boyle's short story 'Rust'. Milan Kundera and Pat Barker have done it more recently, but Greene was the first novelist fully to explore the alienation of the mind from the body it inhabits, even when that body is young, healthy, and not in pain.

### Politics, espionage, and empire

In his essay 'Henry James: The Private Universe' (1936), Greene writes, 'It is always the friend, the intimate who betrays.'<sup>13</sup> He is referring to James's fictional worlds, but the statement is as true of his own, and this is one of the few links between Greene and his postmodernist contemporaries. His fascination with and sympathy for the Judas-figure has led to much speculation about whether Greene was a double agent. We know he worked for British Intelligence during the war under Kim Philby, who later defected to Moscow. In *Stamboul Train* (1932), Mr Savory gives his unsavoury definition of the novelist: "'E's a spy!'" (51). If it were not so early, this could be construed as Greene's private joke about his own espionage activities,<sup>14</sup> but by his own account the Depression, the hunger marches, and the rise of Nazism precipitated the central change in his political views:

I think of those years between 1933 and 1937 as the middle years for my generation, clouded by the Depression in England ... and by the rise of Hitler. It was impossible in those days not to be committed, and it is hard to recall the details of one private life as the enormous battlefield was prepared around us.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the tone of commitment here and elsewhere in his writings, Greene's political choices were not always explicit or consistent. The conflict between his political and religious allegiances divided him over the issue of the Spanish Civil War – a Catholic Republican could support neither one side nor the other. When in June 1937 a booklet entitled *Authors Take Sides* appeared, in which leading left-wing authors of the day declared their support for the Republican government of Spain and their opposition to fascism, Greene's name was conspicuous in its absence from the list, as Anthony Powell noticed in his review of the booklet.

A certain left-wing distrust of Greene as a political ally has pervaded commentary on his life and work. Post-colonial critics like Martin Green and

Elleke Boehmer tend to see Greene as endorsing colonial perspectives even as he tries to criticise imperialism.<sup>16</sup> Jon Thompson, by contrast, sees him as working in ‘the critical or ironic tradition’ beginning with Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and continuing in Somerset Maugham, Greene, Ambler, and Le Carré.<sup>17</sup>

Greene may be accused of representing British imperialism in a rosy light in the benign and fair-minded character of Scobie, but in the end Scobie’s condescending pity for everyone – the women who love him, the Africans under his jurisdiction – is seen as dangerous and wrong. And surely *The Quiet American* is one of the best anti-imperialist novels of the twentieth century, vivid in its representation of the political complexities and the major actors’ inability to understand them, startling in its historical foresight.

The critic Paul O’Prey argues that Fowler (*The Quiet American*), Brown (*The Comedians*), and Plarr (*The Honorary Consul*) all begin by cultivating a detached position of non-involvement but are forced by events to become involved.<sup>18</sup> In an article of 1967, Anthony Burgess links Greene’s political engagement to his religious heterodoxy: ‘The Jansenist in him is led to the places where the squalor of sin is exposed in its rawest forms.’<sup>19</sup> In his discussion of politics in Greene’s novels, Burgess focuses on Dr Magiot’s letter at the end of *The Comedians* as Greene’s most explicit discussion up to that time of the connection between religion and politics – or, more specifically, Communism and Catholicism. Dr Magiot, the quiet, heroic, Haitian dissident, writes to Brown, the narrator. Magiot’s letter is given great weight by appearing very near the end of the novel and when Magiot himself is dead:

I have grown to dislike the word ‘Marxist’. It is used so often to describe only a particular economic plan. I believe of course in that economic plan – in certain cases and in certain times, here in Haiti, in Cuba, in Vietnam, in India. But Communism, my friend, is more than Marxism, just as Catholicism ... is more than the Roman Curia. There is a *mystique* as well as a *politique*. We are humanists, you and I ... Catholics and Communists have committed great crimes, but at least they have not stood aside, like established society, and been indifferent. I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate.

(C, 290–1)

Catholic writers from Dante to Greene have shared the contempt for indifference expressed here, but it seems excessive and dangerous when we consider that the indifferent are usually harmless. Wars are waged, people are blown up or beheaded, entire populations are exterminated by the passionate, the committed. Dr Magiot’s letter is a fine piece of rhetoric. Its power lies partly in the language (Greene may be no stylist, but his prose

nevertheless has great impact) and partly in the characterisation of Magiot. He is symbolic of an original Haiti, unspoiled by the Duvalier regime, much as Phuong is symbolic of an original Vietnam, unspoiled by imperialism (before the scatologically named Fowler and Pyle get to her). Readers who sympathise with the population he represents are likely to be moved by this passage in a way that is more common in political writing and speeches than in fiction: moved to a sense that something must be done. This is a striking contrast between Greene and many of the postmodernists; Borges, Grass, and Kundera all warn us against joining up, taking sides, getting in a uniform, or chanting with a crowd; Greene on the other hand repeatedly leads us on a journey from blameless indifference to bloodstained commitment.

His protagonists are, for the most part, lonely men living in foreign, usually Third-World countries, and as such they are the literary descendants of unromantic representations of agents of imperialism like the Boy in Kipling's 'Thrown Away', Kayerts and Carlier in Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress', and Alban in Somerset Maugham's 'The Door of Opportunity'. The difference is that Greene's protagonists are usually wandering the world after the European empires have collapsed. He explores the aftermath of imperialism in meticulous detail with great insight, and in this his fictions have a contemporary relevance and historical dimension that are unequalled.

Greene's fiction addresses twentieth-century global history as no other fiction writer has. This is clear in politically motivated reactions to it: the Duvalier government in Haiti issued a pamphlet denouncing Greene after the publication of *The Comedians*; the release of the 2001 film of *The Quiet American* was delayed for a year because its subject – an American involved in terrorist activity – was considered too politically sensitive. It is often said that dictators went pale at the sight of Greene setting up his typewriter in their capitals. Some commentators have suggested that his focus on contemporary politics reduces his fiction from literature to mere journalism, a point of view Greene gently ridicules by putting it in the mouth of his character Dr Saavedra in *The Honorary Consul*. Saavedra is a novelist who believes that political fiction must have a historical setting in order to attain universality; his own novels are romantic, false, and steeped in a sentimental reverence for *machismo*.

Even when the subject matter is not explicitly political, Greene's fictions vibrate with subliminal political meaning. In his brilliant short story 'The Destroyers', a gang of boys systematically destroys the beautiful house of their old neighbour. The destruction is perceived, by the leader of the gang, as a work of art: it has to achieve perfection; it has nothing to do with

## Graham Greene

financial gain; it is characterised by the perverse idealism we see again and again in the great destructions of the twentieth century.

### Conclusions

Novelist and critic Allan Massie, writing in 1990, saw *The Honorary Consul* and *The Human Factor* as among Greene's best works, because in them pity is represented as 'the emotion which makes life tolerable',<sup>20</sup> whereas in earlier Greene novels it is seen as corrupting. Pity may be a fine moral quality, but simply promoting it in one's fiction does not win one a place in the literary canon. As Oscar Wilde said in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.'<sup>21</sup>

Greene is important not because of the ethical content of his fiction, but because he is one of the best and most accomplished writers of the mid-twentieth century. He made groundbreaking contributions in the three main areas that have been discussed here: he was the first novelist in English since Henry James to portray evil in the world, the first fully to explore the alienation of the mind from the body it inhabits, and he addressed twentieth-century global history as no other fiction writer has.

One of the reasons why he could do this was that he had deliberately placed himself on the periphery – becoming a Catholic in a Protestant culture, avoiding the ivory-tower aspects of literary fame, spending much of his time in the world outside the narrow enclave of middle-class Western privilege into which he was born. He always considered himself a marginal man, writing from the borders. In *A Sort of Life*, he quotes a passage from Robert Browning's poem 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', saying he would choose it as the epigraph for his collected novels, and the passage is perhaps the best last word on Graham Greene:

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things  
The honest thief, the tender murderer,  
The superstitious atheist, demi-rep  
That loves and saves her soul in new French books –  
We watch while these in equilibrium keep  
The giddy line midway.<sup>22</sup>

### NOTE ON EDITIONS

All Greene's novels have been recently reissued in the Vintage Classics Centenary Edition, except the following, which have not yet appeared: *It's a*

*Battlefield* (1934), *Loser Takes All* (1955), and *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988); also two early novels, *The Name of Action* (1930) and *Rumour at Nightfall* (1931), which Greene later suppressed.

## NOTES

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- 1 References to Greene's works are to the texts reprinted in the Vintage Classics Centenary Edition (2001–). The following abbreviations are used: *Brighton Rock* (BR), *The Comedians* (C), *The End of the Affair* (EA), *The Heart of the Matter* (HM), *Monsignor Quixote* (MQ), *The Quiet American* (QA).
- 2 A 'mestizo' is a person of mixed blood.
- 3 Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, vol. I, 1904–1939 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 256.
- 4 Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 69.
- 5 Evelyn Waugh, 'Felix Culpa?', in *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 97.
- 6 Anthony Burgess, 'Monsieur Greene of Antibes', in *But Do Blondes Prefer Gentlemen? Homage to Quert Yuiop and Other Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 21.
- 7 *Ways of Escape*, pp. 74–5.
- 8 Manicheism, which was widespread in the third and fourth centuries, was based on belief in a primeval conflict between light and darkness, good and evil, and that the two sides were equally powerful. Jansenism was a seventeenth-century heresy based on the idea that man has no free will: he either has God's grace and so can obey His commandment, or he has not, in which case he is bound to sin.
- 9 The translation is mine.
- 10 George Orwell, 'The Sanctified Sinner', in Hynes (ed.), *Graham Greene*, p. 107.
- 11 Graham Greene, 'The Virtue of Disloyalty', in *The Portable Graham Greene*, ed. Philip Stratford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 526. Most of the passage was formulated in a 1948 letter to V. S. Pritchett reproduced in *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene (London: Little Brown, 2007), p. 155.
- 12 *May We Borrow Your Husband? And Other Comedies of the Sexual Life* (London: Vintage, 2000).
- 13 'Henry James: The Private Universe', in *Collected Essays* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 22.
- 14 See Greene's 1968 essay on Philby, 'The Spy', in *Collected Essays*, pp. 310–14, and his coy comment in *A Sort of Life* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 100, that his days at Oxford were comparable to Philby's and MacLean's at Cambridge.
- 15 *Ways of Escape*, p. 34.
- 16 Martin Green, *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century: The Doom of Empire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 111–12; Elleke Boehmer,

## Graham Greene

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- 17 Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 86.
- 18 Paul O'Prey, '“Taking Sides”: Faith, Action, and Indifference in the Novels of Graham Greene', in *Graham Greene in Perspective: A Critical Symposium*, ed. Peter Erlebach and Thomas Michael Stein (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, and Paris: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 149–59, p. 151.
- 19 Anthony Burgess, 'Politics in the Novels of Graham Greene', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2.2, Literature and Society (April 1967), 93–9, p. 95.
- 20 Allan Massie, *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970–1989* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), p. 11.
- 21 Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Peter Ackroyd (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 3.
- 22 *A Sort of Life*, p. 85.

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