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The Heart of the Matter

A Critical Examination of Religious Integrity and the Saviour Complex

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Abstract: Psychology and philosophy work hand-in-hand in the institution of society and the quality of man as an individual. This can be best manifested in the relationship between religion and man in society. Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* is such a novel, diving into the complexities of religion established by the paradox of man's faith. This novel focuses on the fears and conflicts that unnerve the human spirit and drive them to their highest peaks as well as their downfalls.

This paper explores the plot and central characters of the novel to expand on the theme of religion, particularly on Scobie's sense of responsibility that is rooted in his saviour complex. Concluding with the infallible dogma of one's spirit which is both vast and varied, this study reveals the religious hypocrisy of man under a guise of forgiveness while succumbing to temptation, reflected in Scobie's guilt and avoidance of confrontation.

Index Terms – Graham Greene, fiction, literary criticism, Catholicism, salvation, saviour complex.

1. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Greene (1904-1991) was an English writer and journalist, considered as one of the leading novelists of the 20th century. Renowned for his novels, short stories, plays, and journalism, Greene explored the complex moral landscapes of his era with a distinct style that merged literary sophistication with widespread popular appeal. His work is marked by an acute focus on life's moral ambiguities, often set against contemporary political backdrops. Characterised by a clear and concise writing style, Greene's prose is fast-paced and dramatic, often blending different elements and genres to explore complex, moral dilemmas, particularly influenced by his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1926. This dual approach led Greene to categorise his works as either "entertainments"—gripping thrillers such as *Stamboul Train* and *The Confidential Agent*—or serious novels like *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, which tackle issues of faith, guilt, and redemption.

Greene revived the English novel with a "religious sense," focusing on the inner turmoil caused by the decay of religious sentiment in the modern world, and portraying faith as central to confronting existential crises. His characters reflect the inexplicability of human life and man's attraction to and tendencies towards faith. The recurring themes in Greene's novels span questions and problems inherent in human existence, often through introspective characters with issues of identity and faith, facing the reality of evil, the mystery of grace, and the importance of individual conscience.

2. THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Graham Greene's, *The Heart of the Matter*, published in 1948, is a deeply introspective novel exploring themes of morality, guilt and redemption. Set in a British colony in West Africa during the Second World War, the story draws heavily from Greene's experiences as a British intelligence officer. Centered on the character of Major Henry Scobie, *The Heart of the Matter* unravels the repercussions of the protagonist's actions as he grapples with moral dilemmas and personal failures that push the limits of his shortcomings and faith. Here, Scobie is depicted as a person struggling with his morality and spirituality—caught between his duty to his job, his wife, and God, and the personal desires tucked under an unstable façade of integrity and responsibility.

The chain of events that triggers Scobie's tragedy begins when he is sidelined for a promotion. His wife Louise, dissatisfied with their life at the colony, pleads to Scobie for an escape, cornering him into borrowing money from Yusef, a local black-market merchant. His confusions mostly revolve around his Catholic beliefs, and escalates when he becomes romantically involved with a widow and shipwreck survivor, Helen Rolt. Yusef's discovery of this affair forces Scobie to engage in diamond smuggling, further pushing him into the downward spiral of paranoia and guilt which later leads to the unjust murder of his loyal servant boy, Ali. Eventually, Scobie's continuous betrayals begin to tear down the walls of his faith and enforced civility, compelling him to face the truth of his inherently selfish actions, a reality he refuses to accept till his bitter end. Burdened by the weight of his choices, Scobie fakes heart troubles to acquire sleeping pills and dies by suicide in an attempt to 'spare' God from his sins. After freeing himself from the consequences of his actions, the novel ends with Scobie's loved ones left to deal with the aftermath, reflecting on the purpose of his decisions and its insoluble relation with God.

The title phrase, "The Heart of the Matter" refers to the core issue of the novel, used metaphorically to indicate the central truth in Greene's narrative. It highlights the novel's exploration of the central issues of morality, sin, guilt, and redemption, showing how what happens "in the heart" is often hidden from outside judgment. Greene's narrative dives into the moral ambiguity of what is right and what is accepted, presenting a vivid image of the struggles of man and his faith. In a broader sense of the word, the heart can be visualized as the root of a person's emotions and insight, presenting the critical task of seeking out what is true and sincere in matters of one's choices and short-comings. But interpretations of "the heart of the matter" often falls short of complete accuracy and so, Scobie's actions, which embody the "heart" of his intentions regardless of the factors that he appears to be driven by, are left obscure for others to speculate for themselves.

3. Scobie's Awareness of Faith

Greene's narrative skill displays the vicissitudes of spirit and freedom, providing a realistic approach of life that accepts the existence of sin in the system of man's salvation and devotion. Scobie's predicament shows how the impulse of sin that invades life is both poison and cure- brought onto man as a lesson as well as a pitfall if he allows himself to be devoured by his vices. Loyal and honest, Scobie initially appears in the novel as a man of integrity and thought, but such charitable nature of his quickly turns into a liability. He is drawn to the misery of others, regarding it as a sign to step in as their knight in shining armour. However, his actions lack proper initiative. To help his wife Louise leave the colony camp, he seeks the help of the corrupt merchant, Yusef, putting his government position at risk. However, Scobie's relationship with his wife has its own shifts and turns. On the surface, Scobie appears as a devoted husband willing to do anything to appease his wife, but his gestures are often inconsistent with his thoughts and lack genuine emotion.

These were times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion.

-Book I, Part 1

Scobie finds Louise pathetic, ugly and unimaginative, yet he blames himself for her flaws even though he is most critical of her. He remains ignorant of his blatant hypocrisy, persisting in his filtered view of life and humanity. He seeks to appease his wife, not out of love and concern for her well-being, but out of a misplaced sense of pity and responsibility. Their marriage is more of a partnership than a union of love and endearment. The amalgamation of his pity and obligation distorts the sanctity of human compassion, infiltrated by his own helplessness and commitment, more as guardian than as Louise's husband.

It was a formality not because he felt himself free from serious sin but because it had never occurred to him that his life was important enough one way or another.

-Book II, Part 1

Scobie's sense of responsibility creates a relentless pattern of pride, regret and guilt which drives the course of the plot. He is depicted as a man with little self-awareness, constantly stuck between his own perception before God, the transgressions that create the problems in his life and the growing distance

from his Catholic dogma. He professes his love for God but cannot adhere to the principles of his faith. His sense of responsibility gradually morphs from a heroic characteristic to an exploitative shortcoming.

He never regarded this absence of sin as a virtue.

-Book II, Part 1

His goodwill is implemented to feed his pride, and the assertion that he is mostly absent of sin disregards the moral code of man's self-awareness of his shortcomings. By this point, he has committed the inescapable sin of adultery with Helen Rolt whilst also engaging in other dishonest actions such as his illicit deals with Yusef. As a devout Catholic, Scobie is acutely aware of the gravity of his actions- adultery, deceit and suicide. He believes his actions will eternally damn him because he knowingly defies the teachings of his faith, unable to extricate himself from the allure of his sins. This cycle of guilt, ignorance and sin runs itself around Scobie's life, affecting those around him due to his inability to redeem himself in the right path.

Oh God, I have deserted you. Do not you desert me.

-Book II, Part 3

Scobie's relationship with his faith is essentially unilateral; an exploitative dependence on the mercy of God over man and his repentant choice. By relying on the Catholic notion of forgiveness, Scobie plays ignorant to the weight of his actions- his infidelity, his unlawful conduct, and his religious hypocrisy. He hides behind the banner of a responsible man; his saviour complex feeding into his imagined role as a pious benefactor when in reality all his actions revolve around elevating his own image and ego, often at the expense of those around him. His supposed love for his wife does not deter him from committing adultery, his so called "sense of responsibility" is a façade he uses to excuse his actions, even when Helen comes to recognise the reality of their predicament and offers to leave, he entraps her with false promises only to leave both women behind when he is unable to hide from his inherently selfish choices and sins. The death of Ali, his young servant boy, by the hands of Yusef as a result of Scobie's guilt and paranoia is the final nail to the path of no return.

Scobie's journey highlights Greene's exploration of Catholicism as a religion of mercy and mystery as well as of man's incompetence when driven by his hubris- especially considering how Scobie dresses his vanity as his conscientiousness of a "superior" man. Unable to separate himself from his transgressions, Scobie ultimately decides to end his life to atone for his sins, an act which ironically violates Catholic teachings. Even this decision is done discreetly, painted over as a physical illness instead of his inability to face the consequences of his actions, as if deceiving others of the true cause of his death will absolve him of all his sins. He expresses his love for God even in the face of despair, underscoring his conflict between faith and hopelessness which leaves the fate of his redemption on the fence.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie's faith is deeply intertwined with his Catholicism which influences his moral struggles, hypocrisy, losses, and his ultimate downfall. The impact of his religious creed profoundly affects his varied relationships in the novel, shaping his interactions with his wife, his mistress, and even in his faltering connection with God. His faith creates a moral framework that simultaneously guides and burdens him, leading to many conflicts, violence and tragic consequences that tear him apart both spiritually and physically.

Scobie's awareness of faith is central to the novel's moral complexities and religious paradox. He is portrayed as a man torn between religious obligations and human frailty, stuck at a phase where his faith is both salvation and torment, exemplifying Greene's nuanced exploration of religion, morality and the human heart. It brings to light how man is a flawed creature that continuously attempts to climb over towards salvation and forgiveness through the plateau of his wrong-doings, often resorting to blaming the same hubris he has used to drive his actions as a cause to seek deliverance.

4. The Saviour Complex

Though lacking a definitive pioneer, the saviour complex evolved as a form of expression rather than a formal diagnosis, drawing influence from concepts like codependency and compulsive altruism. Simply speaking, it is a psychological pattern where an individual is compelled by a sense of duty to rescue or "fix" others, often at their own detriment. This mindset drives a person to disregard their own worth for the purpose of providing comfort or salvation to a more vulnerable counterpart, driven by an unfeasible hope to help anyone and everyone regardless of whether it is needed or not.

Pity smouldered like decay in his heart. He would never rid himself of it...pity always stayed.

-Book 2, Part 3

In Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, the savior complex is best perceived through Henry Scobie, a man whose moral and spiritual downfall is prompted by his relentless pursuit of becoming the ever-faultless Good Samaritan. His actions are steered by an overcompensating weight of pity which draws much inner conflict with his crippling dependence on religion. He remains married to a woman he does not love which traps both parties in a marriage of no convenience and yet he allows himself to start an affair with another woman whose displaced fragility calls on Scobie's need to be a hero, this too is short-lived but lingers on due to his unwavering sense of responsibility. Keeping two women in despondence while wholly aware of his sins to God, Scobie's compassion feeds on pride rather than humility. Every action is wrapped in a need to rescue others when in reality he is only creating a web of lies to accommodate his self-serving ego - decisions he justifies as acts of mercy to "free" those he loves from further hurt.

Taking reference from Teju Cole's Atlantic essay where he criticizes the saviour complex as a performative act of privilege, Scobie's character is presented as a reflection of the chivalry that appears to thrive on the illusion of virtue that he so desperately clings to. His commitment to aid others twists pity into despair; he gives Helen a false sense of hope because of his guilt and inability to let go, blames himself for Ali's murder and his desecrations, believing that removing himself from the narrative is the only plausible solution to prove himself. In fact, his actions simply depict how cowardice is haphazardly wrapped as acts of heroism, his death does not erase the repercussions of his sins; Louise is left a widow, Helen is morally corroded and left without any stable support system and young Ali will never get to experience the blessings of old age. Scobie is a complex figure whose warped compassion clashes with his theological doctrine, echoing the Messiah complex as he places himself as the pillar to bear the burden of others, culminating in suicide disguised as a natural death to relieve Louise, Helen, and even God from his existence when in truth, his sport of benevolence has left behind a plethora of tragedies for others to take care of. Contrasting human pity with divine judgement, Scobie's endeavors illustrate how the saviour complex distorts the inevitably off-putting nature of truth where one's insistent pursuit of "rescuing" others erodes the self and by association, ruin others.

5. The Heart of The Matter: A Personal Review

Graham Greene's catholic agnosticism is readily embodied through Henry Scobie who, in his obviously mortal vices, acts on his conceit whilst still believing in the hellish consequences of his sins. His devotion and skepticism work hand-in-hand as he tries to navigate through what his conscience expects from him and what his heart desires. Scobie's train of thoughts often fluctuate between the moral weight of his transgressions and quick compliance to his temptations, which leaves little space for contemporary readers to sympathize with him when he constantly falls back into his vices despite the guilt he is tormented by.

Greene's writing also demonstrates the mystery of religion and its appeal to the minds of men who constantly pursue a sense of connection with something that cannot be defined by human standards; the systemic structure of human understanding has yet to decipher the unknown. Father Rank, the colony's local priest, voices this nuance when he tells a distraught Louise how the church appears to know all rules but cannot decrypt the workings of a single human heart. *The Heart Of The Matter*, in essence, tears away the front of the protagonist's beliefs, baring him for what he truly is: a man who hides behind the doctrines that raised him until he chooses death to escape the chains of guilt that are tied to his corporeal self. But many might consider Scobie's actions as simply an effective illustration of man's inherent weakness to his desires; everyone is prone to sin for to err is human. Ultimately, it depends on one's drive for salvation and faith that will decide what end a person will embrace for themselves, it is up to man to understand the heart of their own matters.

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