Grace in the Fiction of Graham Greene

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How appropriate is it today to talk about concepts like sin and grace?

Graham Greene is an author to whom I was introduced by my father, an English teacher. I remember reading The Power and the Glory (1940) and The Heart of the Matter (1948) at age fifteen and being impressed with Greene’s portrayal of moral dilemmas. I found the age-old theme of the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, good and evil, sin and grace fascinating. I realise now, with the benefit of maturity and of having studied in depth the works of the French novelists, François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, that Greene’s treatment of grace, in particular, is weak. I know that grace is an elusive concept and that it defies human comprehension. That said, there are successful ways of evoking its impact on the lives of ordinary, or extraordinary, human beings in the novel form.

It seems strange to be discussing grace at the beginning of the third millennium, a time when organised religion in the Western world seems to be inspiring fewer and fewer followers, especially among young people. The vocabulary of the past seems to be no longer relevant in the contemporary climate. How appropriate is it today to talk about concepts like sin and grace? This type of language is foreign to most people’s everyday experience. These are not the types of issues that are discussed in the all-pervasive media. That said, they do appear occasionally in literature and film, which are excellent tools through which to examine such matters. The fact that The End of the Affair has been made into a successful film makes it particularly relevant at the moment. I don’t intend embarking on a theological discussion of grace in Greene’s works—a task well beyond my limited knowledge of the subject—but rather to discuss briefly how the novelist suggests its appearance in the lives of some of his protagonists.

When you think of the 1940s and 1950s, the words existentialism, absurdity, despair, holocaust come to mind immediately. Europe had been ravaged by two World Wars, the second even more horrific than the first, and there seemed to be no end to the depravity of the human spirit. The conflict in Korea in the 1950s seemed like a reprise of the same tune. In France, thinkers like Sartre and Camus advocated that people take responsibility for their own actions, that they become active in determining the shape society should take. In America, the beat generation roamed around the continent in a wild and desperate search for identity and purpose—Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1958) is a classic description of a mystical journey
which is undertaken by young people who are totally outside the organised churches but whose quest for the Absolute is none the less relevant for that fact. There was turmoil everywhere. The reality of God was foreign to the experience of most people — Nietzsche’s nihilism was seen as a valid life-view.

Many of Greene’s novels date from this period. It is a little strange that a convert to Catholicism, living in a country where this form of religious belief was a minority concern, should emerge from the ashes of despair to declare that God was indeed present among us and intervening in our existence. Bendrix, the atheistic novelist of The End of the Affair (1951), describes how in his books there is always one character who obstinately refuses to come alive: ‘And yet one cannot do without him. I can imagine a God feeling in just the same way about some of us. The saints, one would suppose, in a sense, create themselves. They come alive. They are capable of the surprising act or word. They stand outside the plot, unconditioned by it.’ I wouldn’t necessarily agree with this assessment. In literary terms, depicting saints in a realistic manner has to be the greatest challenge of all, precisely because of their unpredictability and their otherworldliness. It is all too easy to indulge in hagiography and to glibly gloss over the human side that all saints must also possess. In his Diary of a Country Priest, Bernanos succeeded in doing it because we are never allowed to forget that this priest, in spite of his exceptional spiritual qualities, is a person like the rest of us, with the same inadequacies and fears. He is a poor administrator and commands no respect from his parishioners. He is inept, awkward, shy and yet is imbued with a strong inner life which attracts those who are suffering. The similarities between him and Greene’s whisky-priest are quite pronounced. Both are humble and poor in the biblical sense of the term. Both are the vessels through which grace makes its presence felt in the world. At the end of his life, the curé asks what difference it makes that he is dying. After all, ‘Everything is grace’, he says. This comment comes from a man who was struck down by stomach cancer at a young age, who loved life in spite of the suffering and ridicule he had to endure, and who felt that his pastoral work had just begun. We have the distinct impression that he is a saint and yet his humanity is clear at all times. We don’t get the impression that Bernanos is imposing his religious views on the reader.

Similarly, the whiskey-priest of The Power and the Glory is Greene’s most successful attempt at describing a saint. He is seen throughout in his most humble human costume: he is a weak, alcoholic man who, in a state of inebriation, fathered an illegitimate child.
Spirituality

He was complacent, almost arrogant at the time when the Church was triumphant in South America. It is when he encounters poverty first hand that he rediscovers the essence of Christianity. He shares in the fate of the victims of society and knows himself to be no better than they. The reader is convinced by the consistency in the priest’s character. He accepts his weaknesses, knows he is a failure and would laugh if he were told he was a saint. His humiliation and social degradation make him share in the suffering of Christ. His decision to return to tend to the spiritual needs of a hardened killer – which he knows to be a trap – is consistent with his commitment to a vocation which he holds dear in spite of the number of times he failed to live up to all its demands. So when he is executed at the end of the novel, the readers remember a man who, although a sinner, has shown evidence of great love and sacrifice. The possibility of his being a saint does not upset our sensibilities and is not inconsistent with the development of his character.

I am not nearly as convinced by Scobie, the hero of *The Heart of the Matter*. This is a man who seems to be mechanically constructed with a view to proving a particular thesis. This character, who appears to be honourable and good throughout, is not totally credible. He enters into an adulterous affair with a young widow, on whom he takes pity, and then receives communion while in a state of mortal sin. As if to ensure his damnation, he commits suicide at the end of the novel. Scobie is feeble and incapable of taking any decision that might hurt his wife or his mistress. But the question remains: what good does his pity do these two women? Where is the evidence of love, so necessary in anyone purporting to be a saint? Being docile and allowing things to happen to you as Scobie does are not really the ingredients that go into making the saint. And if there is such a thing as the use of sin by Grace – as Mauriac claimed was the case in *The Power and the Glory* – it is not applicable to Scobie’s situation. His prayer: ‘O God, I offer my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them’, does not ring true somehow. Such selflessness fails to strike the correct note. It is probably because there are no signs of spiritual progress in the hero. I suppose it could be said that there is no one way of being the recipient of the sanctifying power of grace. Still, the hero in this instance adopts a strange position in moral or religious terms. He allows things to happen which he knows are wrong. He is not an active agent in ensuring the common good. Whether or not Scobie is saved remains a mystery but the whole account of his struggles fails to satisfy the reader. Neil McEwan argues that there is no way a novelist should raise the question of a character’s salvation and leave it...
We are meant to believe that this woman is transformed into a saint by the action of grace.

unanswered: 'Greene surrenders his decision to God but Scobie's soul is subject only to the novel's laws: the last judgement on him should be there.'(i) Perhaps, but there are times when it is better for the novelist to remain coy rather than pronounce on these issues as is apparent in The End of the Affair where we are treated to too much evidence of the heroine Sarah's sanctity.

I think that Neil Jordan's film adaptation is more discreet in dealing with the issue of whether or not Sarah is a saint. Firstly, he decides that it is more realistic that she resume her relationship with Bendrix, whom she had 'given up' after a promise she made to God when she saw him lying dead on the floor after a bomb attack. Bendrix, on coming into possession of Sarah's diary, realises exactly why she had abandoned him a few years previously and insists that they resume their relationship – as I already stated, this does not happen in the book. He is a man without any religious convictions and he has great difficulty accepting the rival claims of God on Sarah. It was bad enough sharing her with her husband, Henry, a boring, insignificant man, but how does one compete with God?

'There it goes again – the I, I, I, as though this were my story, and not the story of Sarah, Henry, and, of course, that third, whom I hated without yet knowing him, or even believing in him.'

God is a character in this novel and one who exerts great influence on the plot. Sarah does not convince me as being a selfless woman prepared to abandon her happiness because of a promise made in a moment of despair. The 'miracle' of Bendrix climbing unharmed up the stairs after she had known him to be dead is not very persuasive either. I don't mean to be sceptical of miracles and I realise that they are not confined to the 'just', but the whole fabric of the story does not hang together well. Does the surreptitious baptism of her by her mother enable Sarah to 'catch belief like a disease'? Is her abandonment of Bendrix consistent with her previous indifference to religion? She seemed to have no remorse at committing adultery and was clearly not in love with her husband. When making love in the Miles' house, it is Bendrix who is conscious of the danger of discovery by Henry: 'When the moment came, I had to put my hand gently over her mouth to deaden that strange angry cry of abandonment, for fear they should hear it overhead.'

Sarah was obviously a woman who enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh and her delectation seems to have been heightened by the danger of discovery. At best, she was indifferent to her husband. We are meant to believe that this woman is transformed into a saint by the action of grace. After her death, the proofs of the mira-
cles she performed come rolling in. By kissing the rationalist Smythe’s cheek, she rids it of an ugly mark. Similarly the private investigator’s son is cured of a serious stomach ailment after her death. He is convinced that it is attributable to Sarah’s intervention. The priest who comes to speak to Henry and Bendrix informs them that she had sought religious instruction before dying with a view to becoming a Catholic. It all seems more than a little fabricated. Like Scobie, she asks God to intervene in the lives of those to whom she has caused suffering: ‘I believe you were born. I believe you were born for us. I believe you are God. Teach me to love. I don’t mind my pain. It’s their pain I can’t stand. Let my pain go on and on, but stop theirs.’

In an article recently published in *The Month*, Patricia Tyrell asserts that fiction cannot successfully embrace apologetics. She says that irrespective of the subject matter of a novel the rule still applies that ‘characters must be complex and be capable of surprising us in the same way that real people do, but the surprise must be of the kind which is, after a moment’s reflection, acceptable to the reader.’

This is a most telling comment and summarises the unease I feel when confronted with the workings of grace on the souls of Scobie and Sarah. My surprise at their actions is never adequately explained by the organic presentation of their characters. In the case of Sarah, the *deus ex machina* is all too apparent for my liking and totally destroys my willing suspension of disbelief. It is not grace itself that bothers me but rather this lack of consistency and coherence. The French writers come to grips with the subject much more successfully in my view than their British or Irish counterparts.

I am an admirer of Graham Greene’s novels and do not for a minute doubt his many gifts as a writer. In his approach to the mysterious workings of grace, however, I find him less rewarding.

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