
CATHOLISM: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

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ABSTRACT:

'The Heart of the Matter' along with 'Brighton Rock' and 'The Power and the Glory' belongs to a group of novels generally called 'catholic trilogy' is the most contentious novel of Greene that deals with the catholic arguments and circumstances. It is a story of life and death of a virtuous catholic Major Henry Scobie, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, posted in West African Coast during the World War II. The novel presents moral dilemma of Scobie who is not capable to decide among his wife, his beloved and his Catholic faith. He gets involved in the evils and corruption. He is incapable to exist no longer with the burden of his sin and suffering and finally commits suicide. The critics have discussed on Scobie's death and discovered catholic elements in the novel chiefly concerning to his damnation and salvation. As Father Rank remarks Scobie was a virtuous Catholic man, who loves God and deserves His mercy. It is not easy to understand his predicament in being enable him to the mercy of God. He struggles between his religious beliefs and worldly circumstance.

KEY WORDS: Catholic trilogy, Vultures, Moths, Cockroaches, Chigoes, irreconcilable

Francis Wyndham remarks regarding the themes dealt with in the novel: *"In it he has fully and finally developed the themes that have run through all his novels: the pity, fear, love and despair, the search of man for salvation. He has too, carried to its conclusion the implications of his own faith the love and mercy and mystery of God."*¹ The theme of the novel is based on these viewpoints that show different catholic circumstances. As a Catholic Scobie is placed and surrounded by secular forces.

The setting and background of the novel is based on the realistic facts of the contemporary life, the description of the humid and seedy climate of West Africa, the natives, vultures, moths, cockroaches, chigoes, mosquitoes and rats that symbolize the presence of evil and corruption in the world and presents the inborn sin of man. Greene has imagined the place as a hell on the earth and heaven exists on another place that is possible after death. *"Nobody here could ever talk about a heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on his side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up."* (35-36) Greene emphasizes that the background of the particular place has its impact on the people as he writes in 'Brighton Rock'. *"People are made of places..."*² It has natural impact on Scobie's personality. He finds himself destined and completely involved with this place as being fixed to the place. He wondered *"Why... do I love this place so much?"* (35) While his wife, Louise wishes to escape from this place; she finds it unbearable as she says, *"I can't bear this place any longer."* (58) Although he is responsible police officer, he is surrounded by the evils and corruption of the place; he is unable to leave this place. *"The magic of this place never failed him: here he kept his foothold on the very edge of a strange continent."* (37) He chose to stay there instead of a chance of promotion to the post of commissioner. He accepts that he has involved in evils and become corrupt, *"I'm carrying my corruption, around with me. It's the coating of my stomach.'..... like seeds towards the stony floor."* (232-233) He like Pinkie and the whiskey-priest has struggled between his evil and faith. *"God was lodged in his body and his body was corrupting outwards from that seed".* (244) Greene shows the prevalence of sin, evil, and suffering as the fundamental reality of the world. The overwhelming reality of

evil has its influence upon the characters. Scobie's evil involvement leads him to unpleasant experiences that are basically associated to his spiritual awareness.

Scobie's intense sense of pity and responsibility for others lead him to an extreme situation. In spite of Scobie possesses virtues, he has weaknesses "*The flaw is an excess of the quality Greene calls pity.*"³ He feels need of responsibility towards his wife Louise because his relationship with her is not happy, he is failed to love her. He promises to send her on a holiday to South Africa but he does not have money. His pitiful sentiment encompasses him to borrow money from the corrupt merchant Yusef to send her South Africa. He keeps his promise for the happiness of Louise. Scobie faces the consequences of his decision after that Yusef obliges him to follow his instructions and he gets involved with the corrupt personality that leads him to his moral difficulty. He is incapable to maintain the relationship with his wife that increases the sense of pity and responsibility toward her. "*The less he needed Louise the more conscious he became of his responsibility for her happiness.*" (21) In fact, she is no longer attractive that makes him feel more responsible for her happiness. At the time "*he was bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness.*" (28) Scobie is provoked by the sympathetic attitude towards Louise; he gets unable to love her but wants to keep her happy. "*They had reached the quite centre of the storm: always in this region at about this time they began to speak the truth at each other.....In human relations kindness and lies are worth of thousand truths.*" (58) Their marital relation arrives at the coldness but they feel responsible for each other happiness. At the time, Scobie happens to meet Helen Rolt, a nineteen years old widow, who makes his life more critical. The love making with Helen makes him feel the sense of guiltiness and immorality "*....he has been corrupted by sentiment. Sentiment was the more dangerous, because you couldn't name its price.*" (54) Helen Rolt enters as a second woman in his life to whom his pity and responsibility shift itself and becomes his fatal flaw. He feels while making love with Helen: "*Was it the butterfly that died in the act of love?*" (161) After a difference with Helen, Scobie writes a letter to tell her that he loves her more than himself, Louise and God. He feels a sense of guilt and thinks surprisingly why he wrote words 'more than God'. As a man with "*an overdeveloped sense of pity and responsibility,*"⁴ he gets ready to take the pain of the child and he offers him all his peace. He is unable to bear the suffering of a little girl, who is breathing pitifully between her life and death that reminds him of his own dead child. His pity for her leads him into a monologue with God in which he deals for her peace: "*Father, look after her....give her peace... Take away my peace forever.*" (125) His prayer is answered, the child dies at once and almost all his troubles begin. Scobie's life is set in such situations that he can only shower his compassion upon the others. The heart of the matter for Scobie is his pity, his inevitable need to take up the burden of others, and in the process make a mess of his own life. His pity for others brings about his own doom. Greene emphasizes Scobie's readiness to take upon himself the pain of the child as a test of his sincerity. His responsibilities bring forth a chain of responsibilities in his way. "*It was as if he had shed one responsibility only to take on another. This was a responsibility he shared with all human beings... the only one who recognized his responsibility.*" (122) Scobie becomes victim of Yusef, who uses him first to be the better of his rival Tallit, later, he blackmailed him on a letter written to Helen and his servant Ali has been murdered. Scobie finds the dead body of his faithful servant, Ali under the petrol drums. As he looks down at Ali's dead body, He realizes sense of sin as the betrayal of God. He contemplates it in his emotional imagination with God. "*Oh God ...I've you: you've served me all these years and I've killed you at the end of them. God lay there under the petrol drums and Scobie felt the tears in his mouth... You served me and I did this to you. You were faithful to me, and I wouldn't trust you.*" (Hom p-247-48). His imagination makes him believe that he has not just killed Ali but God too.

He tries to arrange the happiness of others, as the obsessive feeling responsibility that pulls him into the world. His pity for others produces his trouble that leads him to professional indiscretion and he becomes the corrupt police officers. Conor Cruise O'Brien describes Scobie's story as "*the record of an attempt to imitate Christ and his pity as a simulacrum of the Passion*".⁵ He finds himself surrounded by his disloyal affair, sense of guilt, the sense of pity and above all the associations with religion. He is different with his sense of

pity and responsibility for the others for which he is unable to make detach himself from two women in his life. Frank Kermode considers Scobie a victim and says that the suffering and struggle are main issue of the book. *"Scobie's intolerable position is plotted by God; He demands more pity and love than anybody else and ought not to get them."*⁶ He is aware of his fallen state and of being out of reach of God's mercy. Greene shows God's mercy and grace to be infinite, and extending to the worst sinners because of there is no limits of God's mercy, so Scobie has the possibility of receiving it as well as a saint. The original view about God's mercy being infinite and incomprehensible to the church, he recognizes as the secret cause of his suffering. He is tormented by his love of God because he cannot reconcile it with his love of human beings. Conon Joseph Kartmell says *"No man can indeed appreciate to the full idea of the eternal loss of God."*⁷ The only way out for him is to kill himself but, as Catholic he cannot do it without wounding God. Scobie's love of God is inspired by the same pity which inspires his love Louise or Helen. In a monologue to God he speak, *"If you made me, you made that feeling of responsibility that I 'have always carried about."* (259) His responsibility drives him to struggle with God who would not allow him to arrange the happiness of others. *"I can't make of them suffer so as to save myself."* (259) He could speak to God as one speaks to an acquaintance. The religious inspiration grows stronger in the novel; Scobie is encountered with the religious observance. As a Catholic he damned by his knowledge of God and he knows the right answer to his problem: *"O God I am the only guilty one because I've preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can't observe your suffering. I can only imagine it...I know what I'm doing. I am not pleading for mercy."* (258) He deserted God for human love even if it means giving up salvation. Marie-Beatrice Mesnet says that *"Scobie ultimate fault is to believe that his sin is too great for God of forgive it."*⁸

It is the goodness of his heart that leads him off track. His pity for others produces his trouble that makes corrupt him to his duty as a police officer. His conflict does not for love between Louise and Helen but it is responsibility for them from which he can never rid himself: *"He has a terrible sense of responsibility"*. (132) He is unable to love them when he expresses pity to Helen, she replies *"I don't want your pity'pity smoldered like decay at his heart. ...He knew from experience how passion died away and how love went, but pity always stayed"*. (178)

Greene presents the theme of evil and sin through the character of Scobie who involves in the sinful act of adultery that leads him to his downfall and possibly to his damnation. Scobie realizes in the condition of human being that is no resolution of the complexities of life or easiness of woe. In spite of his sins, he is not shown forever to be placed out of the range of God's mercy. When he does not keep his promise of not seeing Helen again, he feels that he is cheating himself. He prays: *"Oh God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it, Use it for them."* (225) Scobie's is going to die for love, which has brought him in to a state of mortal sin. He cannot continue desecrate that reveals in a monologue between him and God. Scobie argues on it to kill himself that breaks his inflicting pain on those he loves Louise, Helen and God. As a Catholic, Scobie has the option of making confession, or by his refusal, give himself away and let Louise by his refusal and he cannot hurt her by giving up. Although F. N. Lees brings his weakness to light, blames: *"The personality presented is, in fact, curiously egotistic, blind one, insensitive to the fullness of other' existence, prone to sentimentality, self-deceived in its very self-knowledge, and lacking in real moral courage."*⁹

He is cornered by his wife's insistence but going to the Communion without prior repentance means damnation, taking his God's in a state of mortal sin. Scobie must, however, decide between the conflicting claims of his wife and Helen but, as they cannot decide without causing pain to one of them, there is in fact no choice left open to him. As one of the Catholic damned by his knowledge Scobie knows the right answer to his problem-to confess, repent and to avoid Helen but that means to abandon her to Bagster. In Greene's fiction as Kenneth Allot and Miriam Farris observe, *"the problem of reconciling the existence of suffering with an omnipotent and merciful providence is now raised explicitly. Scobie believes in God and yet he can believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created."*¹⁰ Scobie is isolated by his own

betraying emotions of love and pity. His suffering is his own and his earnest endeavor to get across to people only leaves him reeling in his own perplexed and unhappy state. It is the pathos of his goodness that becomes fixed to him like a permanent scar and drives him ultimately to despair. He is, then, the sanctified sinner who cannot be appeased by any institutional rules and is compelled to search for peace within him. As father Rank says in support of Scobie: *"The church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart"*. (268) He insists upon the mysteriousness of God's mercy and grace that is beyond a religious institution. He has need of peace within himself and the search of peace is his individual matter which cannot be settled by any religious institution. Scobie is a virtuous Christian in spirit though he violates the rule of the church. Greene presents Scobie as a selfless character, who has struggled between his evils and Catholic beliefs. As Marie Beatrice Mesnet remarks, *"man is split between supernatural forces while the great conflict between God and Satan rages in the world and more deeply in his own heart."*¹¹ Scobie should be damned on the basis of his sins from the viewpoint of the Catholic beliefs but he has possibility of receiving God's mercy or being saved from damnations as hinted by Father Rank. Greene presents the mysterious elements such as God's love and mercy are in comprehensive to the clergymen and the Church. There is nobody who can understand how lonely he really is at heart. Father Rank performs that function in the conclusion Greene has characteristically tacked on to ensure our mystification. His last words of Scobie's are: *"Dear God, I love..."* (265) the sentence remains incomplete but it is complete in itself. There is a kind of resolution between his love for human beings and love of God. It is his human nature that carries him to believe in God but he cannot believe in God who was not *"human enough to love what he created."* (121) practically as he gets unsuccessful in his career and in his marital life, he surrenders his life to the happiness of others. When Louise compels him to confess he faces dilemma. He tells lie without giving pain to Louise give Helen up. The Relation between God and man is one of the Greene's major preoccupations. His characters are saved by the grace of God.

In the conditions of human existence, Scobie realizes that there is no resolution of the difficulty of their life or easiness of their woes. The desire for peace is an emotional grounding for the suicide. He dreams of peace but the peace is denied to him; *"peace seemed to him the most beautiful word in language: My peace I give you, my peace I leave with you: O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace."* (60) Scobie commits suicide with complete awareness; he is not only look for a release in death but also to secure happiness of Helen and Louise. Additionally, his suicide is provoked by a desire of escape into ultimate peace. His spiritual condition turns hysterical when he is refused absolution even though he goes for confession. It is in his rejection of God that he actually encounters Him, the real living God whose voice is heard from his own conscience. He knows he is damned for all eternity and he offers his damnation to God. *"The mysterious love of God and mercy and But the possibility of his receiving god's mercy and being save from damnations in hinted at by Father Rank ... Scobie's conduct in this world and his chances in the next. It is suggested in the last lines that Scobie may really have loved God; and it is suggested that God may be the only being he did love."*¹²

He would rather damn himself by self-murder than continue the acts of sacrilege. He feels that he is contaminated by evil and will only terminate others if he continues to exist. The crisis in his life is that he is *"too damned honest to live."* (132) Death alone can redeem him of a life of intolerable loneliness. Having sinned against God, he cannot continue to live with the burden of his suffering. As a Catholic he cannot plead for mercy; he is prepared to be damned. As Marie-Beatrice Mesnet points out. *"The greater ambiguity and confusion of Scobie's character result from the merging of the two themes of sin and redemption to the point of bringing about the extreme paradox. The progress of sin of love in Scobie can be traced back through an equally logical chain of argument. He is the perfect illustration of how the pendulum swings between two extremes only to be stopped by death."*¹³ Having sinned and with the burden of his suffering, he cannot go on to exist.

Moreover, the irreconcilable conflict between his responsibility for Louis and Helen makes him aware that it is only by removing himself that he is the cause to inflict pain upon them. He knows that he is the cause of the suffering of others as much as his own. This longing for peace is a kind of psychological preparation for suicide. As a Catholic he cannot plead for mercy; he is prepared to be damned. His sacrifice is attached to catholic beliefs and relatable to Jesus's sacrifice. As Francis Kunkel remarks: "*Greene instills a reverence for the individual person despite his sin and cultivates a more profound respect for the mysterious transforming powers of grace which can enable a penitent thief on the cross to steal paradise.*"¹⁴

He associates himself with the figure of Christ. Scobie tries to overlook his act of despair by seeing it in imitation of Christ. At the point Scobie sees himself on the cross of Jesus Christ as he *thinks* "*I am the cross, he thought, He will never speak the word to save Himself from the cross,*" (225) It is his free will through which he chooses to commit suicide as the only possible solution of his problem. Scobie is a Catholic, who is placed in a spiritual situation and troubled by secular forces. "*....of course one accepted the church's teaching. But they taught also that God had sometimes broken his laws....Christ had not murdered-You couldn't murder God. Christ had killed himself: He had hung himself on the cross...*" (190) Greene shows God's mercy and grace is infinite, even for those who are the worst sinners that have a chance of redemption for it.

Greene gives much importance to God through actions and situations of his novel. God is seemed to be interrelating with his characters. Arnold Kettle remarks: "*The implication of The Heart of the Matter is that human action, as such doesn't really matter much at all. The ethics and aspirations of sinful humanity are at best but poor things. It is the relation between man and God that is important*".¹⁵ Greene's Catholicism, there is the elements of inventiveness as he shows God's mercy being extended even to the sinners like Scobie. He establishes the mystery and the infinity of God's mercy through his characters. At the time critics argue on Scobie's destiny in terms of damnation or salvation, Greene comments: "*I've simply written one about a man who goes to purgatory. I don't see what all the fuss is about*" (Time, October 29, 1951, p. 103). By committing suicide he breaks the rule of the church but he does not refuse the hope to find God's mercy and salvation.

Scobie is not unable to get God's mercy, at the last page of the novel Father Rank said "*he truly loved God.*" (268) He also loved human being, "*He wants happiness for other.*" (189) He is a selfless man, who possesses moral superiority. Even on the possibility of damnation, he chooses death as the price to pay for his peace. In the Ways of escape Greene says, "*The Religious Scruples of Scobie too extreme.*"¹⁶ In the novel, Catholic beliefs have a significant place. It is a story of the fate of Scobie, who is unable to settle between his catholic faith and the distinct worldly circumstances. Greene does not set his character just on the teaching of the Church; he sets them to the conscious condition and allows them to do so which their circumstances force them to do. Greene does not propagate Catholic beliefs; he tries to link the catholic beliefs to such conditions which are non-Catholic. Scobie's Catholicism is an enlarged situation that is treated in the secular conditions.

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