

The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God:
Sex, Salvation, and Damnation in Graham Greene's Early Novels

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Honors Thesis
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University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
2017

Approved:

INTRODUCTION

Greeneland, the name that scholars have given to the world Graham Greene's characters inhabit, is cold and unforgiving. It's dark, and there is almost never a character who is without a significant moral flaw. It's a fantastic landscape for an exploration of humanity and its relationship with God—a topic that fascinated Greene, who was raised the son of an Anglican boarding-school housemaster, and considered himself an agnostic until he converted to Catholicism in 1926 to marry Vivien Dayrell Browning (Sherry, vol. 1, 352). His religion and preoccupation with the relationship between humanity and God influenced his writing for the duration of his career, which spanned most of the 20th century. He wrote 26 novels, along with autobiographical works, screenplays, and short stories.

Though most or all of Greene's novels contain some religious themes, he wrote four in the first half of his career that critics have deemed his "Catholic novels": *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951). Each novel critically examines Catholic beliefs and practices. More importantly, each produces fierce debates about what does and does not constitute a sin. Along with religious influences, Greene's novels are also influenced by his personal experiences and places he lived. For instance, *The End of the Affair* is loosely tied to an affair he had with a woman named Catherine Walston; *The Power and the Glory* is based on his time spent in Mexico; and *The Heart of the Matter* is influenced by the time he spent in Sierra Leone as a spy.

Greene's preoccupation with religious themes leads me to entitle my thesis "The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God," which is a reference to a statement made by an old priest at the end of *Brighton Rock*. He says to the young and immature Rose: "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the...appalling...strangeness of the mercy of God"

(Greene, *Brighton* 268). As we'll soon see, God's mercy isn't always peaceful—it's often agonizing. The word "agony" comes from the classical Latin *agōn*, meaning a contest or struggle (OED). In a sense, these novels are *agōns*. Each character's path through life is a struggle—a struggle to find meaning, a struggle to build a relationship with God, and a struggle to answer two central questions: One, what does it mean to be a good Catholic? Two, how does one achieve salvation? Through close analyses of each text and, more specifically, their male protagonists, we'll attempt to answer these questions.

Each chapter is focused on a single book, and they appear in the following order: *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The End of the Affair* (1951), and *The Power and the Glory* (1940). The chapters are not organized chronologically. Instead, they are organized by the protagonists' closeness to God. Pinkie Brown, the protagonist of *Brighton Rock*, is the farthest from God. He is a self-proclaimed Catholic, but he is also a murderer, fascinated with the idea of damnation. Major Scobie, the protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter*, is also a Catholic, but he is an adulterer. His immense pride leads him to commit suicide in the hopes of saving his mistress and his wife, and he equates himself to Christ. Maurice Bendrix, the protagonist of *The End of the Affair*, begins the novel as an atheist and ends as a reluctant believer. He would like nothing more than for God to go away—he has lost his mistress to God and the Church. The whiskey priest, the protagonist of *The Power and the Glory*, is the closest to God out of all of Greene's men. The whiskey priest is far from perfect—he is an alcoholic and has an illegitimate child—but his lack of pride and his complete submission to God make him holy.

The novels are difficult to unpack, and their messages are not concrete or fully-formed. They do, however, all point to a rough guideline for salvation. The whiskey priest is the only

protagonist who is undoubtedly saved. He, unlike the others, has no pride. He has nothing to prove, and dies in a state of self-doubt. His humility and submission to God are what make him a saint, and the lack of those qualities in the other characters prevents them from achieving salvation.

I've made use of the work of scholars and authors like George Orwell, J.M. Coetzee, James Wood, and others in my analyses of the novels. The main biographical text that I've worked with is Norman Sherry's *The Life of Graham Greene*, which I've supplemented with Michael Shelden's *Graham Greene: The Man Within*. As a Catholic in 20th century England, Greene almost certainly used a Douay-Rheims bible, an English translation of the Latin Vulgate. As such, each biblical reference in this thesis comes from the Douay-Rheims (abbreviated DV).

CH 1: MATURITY VS KNOWLEDGE IN *BRIGHTON ROCK*

Graham Greene was critical of religion from the beginning of his career. Michael G. Brennan notes that Greene's first published story was an atheistic tale about the pagan Pan's trial "before the tyrannical and ridiculous law court of God..." (Brennen 139). Greene later moved on from his atheism and converted to Catholicism before he married Vivien, and retained his desire to critique and examine the church through his writing. As J.M. Coetzee notes in his introduction to the Penguin edition, *Brighton Rock* was Greene's "first serious novel, serious in the sense of working with serious ideas. For a while, Greene maintained a distinction between his novels proper and his so-called entertainments" (Coetzee xii). Greene used the term "entertainment" to describe his early novels like *Stamboul Train* and *A Gun for Sale*—both meant to please the reader, not to make deep philosophical or theological statements. In *Brighton Rock*, Greene finally digs deep into some of the mysteries of religion, into what his old priest calls the "appalling...strangeness of the mercy of God" (Greene, *Brighton* 268). The novel pits Ida Arnold, a barroom singer and fornicator, against Pinkie Brown, a young mobster and self-proclaimed Catholic. Ida doesn't believe in Heaven, Hell, or God. Instead, she places her trust in the magic of a Ouija board. Living by the principles of right vs. wrong, she chooses the path she deems to be right. Pinkie, by contrast, lives in the realm of good vs. evil, as framed by the Catholic Church. In the end, he chooses evil. *Brighton Rock* is an epic battle between these two moral frameworks, one earthly and one otherworldly.

Greene paints Ida as strongly sexual and also maternal, using descriptions of her breasts as one of his primary tools. Pinkie, on the other hand, is presented as a young boy who initially refuses to engage in vices like alcohol, sex, and gambling. Though Pinkie may be stunted and immature in some regards, the reader can see in Greene's descriptions of Pinkie's ancient eyes

that he has access to realms of knowledge the earthly Ida can only dream of. As I will show, Pinkie's Catholicism is the source of his knowledge. As an additional plot device, Greene uses Pinkie's naïve bride, Rose, to show how easily one can be swept up by the mystique that religion, and specifically Catholicism, offers—and how it can lead to despair. The novel is neither an argument for nor against religion. Rather, it is a statement of the depth of knowledge the believer has access to: the harsh dichotomies of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, temptation and abstention, salvation and damnation.

Understanding Ida

One of the main difficulties one faces when analyzing *Brighton Rock* is defining Ida's character and working out her relationship with the values of right and wrong. Ida's right and wrong are more fluid than the rigid framework of good and evil. Ida doesn't worry about her promiscuity or drinking as long as she doesn't hurt anyone. All she cares about is bringing Pinkie to justice for murdering the journalist Charles Hale, and she successfully pulls Rose out of Pinkie's grasp before he has a chance to take her life. From the view point of civil society, she does the right thing. Yet at the end of the book, her friend Clarence rebukes her: "You're a terrible woman...but I got to give you credit. You act for the best" (Greene, *Brighton* 266). What Clarence means is that Ida acts with the intention of doing right, but in the process, she may be doing wrong in a more profound sense. She misunderstands that Rose and Pinkie, who represent the deeper spiritual values of good and evil, are made for each other. She can't comprehend their love, even though Pinkie treats Rose horribly from the start of their relationship—Pinkie only courts her to cover up his murder. However, a horrible life with Pinkie, and even suicide, is perhaps better than the prospect of Rose moving back to her parents, who sell her to Pinkie for a

few pounds. Pinkie and Rose are ready to go to hell together—their relationship is something purer, deeper, and more absolute than Ida has ever known.

Greene uses physical descriptions of Ida, emphasizing her breasts, to portray her as mature, protective, and maternal, while simultaneously letting his reader know that she is promiscuous and liable to give in to earthly temptations. When the reader first meets her, she is singing in a bar: “You thought of sucking babies when you looked at her, but if she’d borne them she hadn’t let them pull her down: she took care of herself. Her lipstick told you that, the confidence of her big body” (Greene, *Brighton* 5). This simultaneous sexualization and maternalization is puzzling. But that’s Greene’s point. Ida’s character isn’t meant to be one dimensional. She flows back and forth between a meaty sexual being and a protector. Later on, when Ida meets Charles Hale, who is quite aware that Pinkie’s mob plans to murder him, her physical presence comforts him: “She smelt of soap and wine: comfort and peace and a slow sleepy physical enjoyment, a touch of the nursery and the mother, stole from the big tipsy mouth, the magnificent breasts and legs, and reached Hale’s withered and frightened and bitter little brain” (Greene, *Brighton* 14). While engulfed by Ida’s presence, he is aroused and simultaneously feels protected by her maternal characteristics. Her breasts and smells create a safe haven, at least for the moment.

There are other instances throughout the novel when Greene simply can’t help himself from presenting Ida in metaphorical sexual situations. For example, when Ida sits eating an éclair with a friend: “the cream spurted between the large front teeth...She took another bite and a wedge of cream settled on the plump tongue” (Greene, *Brighton* 157). Indulging himself with this blatant metaphor for oral sex, Greene also reminds the reader that no matter how protective

and maternal Ida may seem, she enjoys indulging in earthly vices, whether they be sweet deserts, or sexual experiences.

The reader quickly learns that Ida's personality parallels Greene's physical description. Soon after meeting Ida, Hale discloses that he believes he is going to die. He asks Ida if she will stay with him, and she responds without a pause: "'Of course I will,' Ida said, hiccupping gently as she stepped out. 'I like you, Fred. I liked you the moment I saw you. You're a good sport Fred'" (Greene, *Brighton* 17). Ida has just met Hale, and she doesn't even know that his real first name is Charles. She hardly knows the man, yet her first instinct is to comfort him—both with sexuality and generosity. Sadly, when Ida briefly leaves Hale to use the restroom, Pinkie and his boys arrive. As the protective maternal presence disappears, the murderers swoop in.

Understanding Pinkie

Though the murder is off-camera, critics like Coetzee agree that Greene intends the reader to assume that Pinkie kills Hale "by pushing a stick of the hard red-and-white candy known as Brighton Rock down his throat," suffocating him (Coetzee vii). While being interrogated by Ida about the murder, one of Pinkie's cronies, Cubitt, blurts out, "'I can't see a piece of Brighton rock without...' He belched and said with tears in his voice, 'Carving's different'" (Greene, *Brighton* 178). Cubitt claims that murdering someone by slicing him up with a knife feels different than watching him slip into a hypoxic state, choking on a piece of candy shoved down his windpipe. The fact that Pinkie suffocated Hale with a piece of candy—an emblem of childhood—serves two purposes. One, it accentuates the trope of the evil child that Greene plays with in Pinkie's character, painting him as simultaneously young and savage. Second, it emphasizes how touristy Brighton is. The vacation atmosphere of the town helps him

accomplish his murder under the radar, using an implement that he could have asked his parents to purchase for him from a street vendor.

Physical descriptions of Pinkie's body and his aversion to sex, alcohol, tobacco, and gambling all supplement his aura of immaturity. In fact, when the reader meets Pinkie, she doesn't even learn his name. Instead, Greene simply refers to him as "a boy of about seventeen" with "narrow shoulder[s]" (Greene, *Brighton* 5). When Hale offers Pinkie a drink, he responds, "You know I don't drink, Fred. You forget a lot, don't you?" So, Hale offers him a soft drink, which Pinkie accepts. Greene goes on later to describe Pinkie's facial hair as "soft chicken down" (Greene, *Brighton* 21), yet another sign that he has barely reached puberty. However, Greene juxtaposes this description with actions showing Pinkie's maturity and hardness in other regards. As Pinkie walks by a shooting booth along the waterfront, he roughly demands the pistol from the owner, and points at the target: "He raised it: the young bony hand was steady as a rock: he put six shots inside the bull" (Greene, *Brighton* 21). Though Pinkie does have a young, immature hand, he is steady with a deadly weapon, an experienced killer.

Greene also uses descriptions of Pinkie's eyes to express that though his body is young, his soul is much older. He notes that Pinky's "grey eyes had an effect of heartlessness like an old man's in which human feeling has died" (Greene, *Brighton* 6). Later on, he says, "the slaty eyes were touched with the annihilating eternity from which [Pinky] had come and to which he went" (Greene, *Brighton* 20). Pinkie's eyes have a maturity and ancient quality that the rest of his body doesn't. His body has not caught up with his knowledge. This description is an ironic reference to Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," as he speaks of the source of children: "But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home" (Wordsworth). The hell that was Pinkie's source and is his final destination contrasts

with the heavenly source of children that Wordsworth portrays, and plays into Greene's portrait of Pinkie as an evil and demonic child.

Understanding Rose

Pinkie decides to court Rose when he realizes that she may have some knowledge about the murder he and his crew have committed. He knows that if they are married, she won't be able to testify against him in court. He is quite inexperienced with women, and is horrible to Rose from the start. But oddly, she falls in love with him immediately. Even when Pinkie thrusts a bottle of vitriol under her nose and demands that she smell it, she stays. And when Pinkie pinches her wrist so hard that "his nails nearly met" while asking Rose, "You'd like me for your boy, eh?" She responds with an affirmative: "'Oh,' she said, 'I'd love it.' Tears of pride and pain pricked behind her lids. 'If you like doing that,' she said, 'go on'" (Greene, *Brighton* 53-54). Pinkie is violent to Rose from the beginning of their relationship. In a way, they are meant for each other. The sense of pride Rose feels while experiencing this pain hints that she may have masochistic tendencies, perhaps based in a traditionally Catholic reverence for suffering. Pinkie, a sadist, likes nothing more than inflicting pain. Since the naïve Rose comes from an abusive household and has never had anyone pay her attention, let alone had a lover, she clings to Pinkie. Attention from this evil person is better for her than no attention at all.

During their first outing, Pinkie and Rose discover that they are both Catholic. In an odd moment for Pinkie, he recalls his time in the church choir, and the overpowering spirituality of the music:

suddenly he began to sing softly in his spoilt boy's voice: 'Agnus dei qui tollis pecatta mundi, dona nobis pacem.' In his voice a whole lost world moved—the lighted corner below the organ, the smell of incense and laundered surplices, and the music. Music—it

didn't matter what music—'Agnus dei', 'lovely to look at, beautiful to hold', 'the starling on our walks', 'credo in unum Dominum'—any music moved him, speaking of things he didn't understand (Greene, *Brighton* 54).

Pinkie is strongly affected by memories of his childhood singing in the choir. He recalls ancient songs sung before communion—agnus dei...means "lamb of god, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace"—the holiest of sacraments. He also sings part of the Nicene Creed, the Catholic profession of faith. The other two are pop songs—it seems that the strange magic of music is overpowering to Pinkie, no matter the source or meaning behind the lyrics. This sensation hints that there is some part of Pinkie that may be able to develop into something good, to feel emotions and passions other than hate. But he doesn't get the chance.

Understanding Spirituality

When Rose asks Pinkie if he believes in the doctrines of the Church, he states that nothing else could possibly make sense: "These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course there's Hell. Flames and damnation...torments" (Greene, *Brighton* 55). Devoted to Catholic theology, Pinkie truly believes every word of the Church's doctrine. When Rose anxiously asks him if he believes in "Heaven too," Pinkie responds, "Oh, maybe...maybe" (Greene, *Brighton* 55). Pinkie is not nearly as concerned with the prospect of heaven. He doesn't expect to end up there, and he isn't a fan of compassion or happiness. On the other hand, he is affected by the prospect of damnation. He fetishizes the idea of burning in hell for eternity. He fits quite well into Orwell's categorization of Greene and other Catholic authors: "[Greene] 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 night club, entry to which is reserved for Catholics only, since the others, the non-Catholics, are too ignorant to be held guilty, like the

beasts that perish” (Orwell 107). Pinkie, for all his boyishness, has access to this ruthless aspect of religion.

Unlike Pinkie, Ida’s spirituality isn’t centered around a religion. Instead, she places her faith in a Ouija board. When she realizes that Hale has been killed, she consults a Ouija board. The board spits out an answer “FRESUICILLEYE” which she interprets roughly as Fred committed suicide (Greene, *Brighton* 42). She thinks that he was driven to do it by Pinkie and the mob. She claims, “‘I’m going to make those people sorry they was ever born.’ She drew in her breath luxuriously and stretched her monumental legs. ‘Right and wrong,’ she said. ‘I believe in right and wrong,’ and delving a little deeper, with a sigh of happy satiety, she said, ‘It’s going to be exciting, it’s going to be fun, it’s going to be a bit of life’” (Greene, *Brighton* 43). Ida gets her charge from the idea that she is avenging someone. She doesn’t care about Hale as a person, but rather she cares about exercising her own principles and enjoying herself.

Pinkie becomes more anxious about Rose’s knowledge as the book moves on. He decides that he only has one option to keep her quiet: to marry her. So he does, though not in a Church. Instead he marries her in a government registry office. There is no religious ceremony, no communion, no prayer. After Pinkie signs the paper, he watches Rose sign and realizes the deal that he has done. He has traded “his temporal safety in return for two immortalities of pain. He had no doubt whatever that this was mortal sin, and he was filled with a kind of gloomy hilarity and pride. He saw himself now as a full grown man for whom the angels wept” (Greene, *Brighton* 186). Pinkie realizes that he is in mortal sin by marrying Rose in this secular way. In his Catholic framework, the marriage is absolutely not acceptable. Yet he is not scared. With this mortal sin come others, great and small. As Pinkie notes, he is “a drinking man these days” (Greene, *Brighton* 186). With this marriage, in Pinkie’s mind, he has made the transition from

boy to man, and bears full responsibility for his actions. Rose also knows that in the Catholic tradition, “this evening meant nothing at all, that there hadn’t been a wedding” (Greene, *Brighton* 187). Nevertheless, she is so devoted to Pinkie that she doesn’t care.

As Pinkie and Rose walk around the Brighton pier after their marriage, Rose spots a “small glass box like a telephone cabinet. ‘Make a record of your own voice,’ the legend ran” (Greene, *Brighton* 192). She wants Pinkie to record a loving message for her to listen to when he is away. Pinkie has other intentions. Instead of saying “I love you,” he records a message containing more vitriol than the bottle in his pocket: “God damn you, you little bitch, why can’t you go back home forever and let me be?” (Greene, *Brighton* 193). Pinkie truly doesn’t care about Rose. He is just using her as a cover up. Sadly, she won’t find this out until after his death.

Shortly after Pinkie and Rose’s marriage, they are refused service at a bar. Pinkie is distraught: “tears of humiliation pricked behind his eyes. He had an insane impulse to shout out to them all that they couldn’t treat him like that, that he was a killer, he could kill men and not be caught. He wanted to boast. He could afford that place as well as anyone: he had a car, a lawyer, two hundred pounds in the bank...” (Greene, *Brighton* 191). This overpowering emotion and insecurity shows the reader that Pinkie, though he is indeed a killer, is still quite immature. He is married, but he still doesn’t look old enough to buy a drink. Later on as Pinkie and Rose sit in a cheesy movie, Pinkie begins to realize the weight of his deeds: “He felt constriction and saw—hopelessly out of reach—a limitless freedom: no fear, no hatred, no envy. It was as if he were dead and were remembering the effect of a good confession, the words of absolution: but being dead it was a memory only—he couldn’t experience contrition—the ribs of his body were like steel bands which held him down to eternal unrepentance” (Greene, *Brighton* 198). The knowledge that Pinkie is in mortal sin is crippling. Though he is fairly apathetic to the prospect

of damnation until this point, after the marriage, he now realizes the full weight of his deeds. At some level, for Greene, transgressive sex for Catholics is worse than murder.

After Pinkie and Rose consummate their sacrilegious marriage, Pinkie wakes up and realizes that Rose knows all about him. He can never escape her: “The truth came home to him with horror that he had got to keep her love for a lifetime; he would never be able to discard her...the registry office marriage was as irrevocable as a sacrament. Only death could ever set him free” (Greene, *Brighton* 203). Pinkie realizes that he has tied himself to Rose for life. In strict Catholic tradition, once two people have sexual intercourse, they are bound together forever. Divorce and separation are meaningless in the eyes of God. The only way they can ever be separated is through death. So that’s what Pinkie chooses.

Pinkie convinces Rose to perform a double suicide with him—the ultimate sin. But, he doesn’t intend to kill himself. Instead, he plans to trick Rose into killing herself, then escape. Little does Pinkie know that Rose is onto his plan. She comes close to running away, but her devotion to Pinkie keeps her from stopping him. “What will he do, she thought, if I don’t...shoot. Would he shoot himself alone, without her? Then he would be damned, and she wouldn’t have a chance of being damned too, of showing Them they couldn’t pick and choose...to throw away the gun was a betrayal; it would be an act of cowardice: it would mean that she chose never to see him again for ever” (Greene, *Brighton* 262-263). The “Them” that Rose references could be a number of people or institutions—her abusive parents, society, or people who treat her and Pinkie like the children they are. Thankfully, Rose doesn’t have the chance to prove herself to “Them” and commit the unforgivable sin—Ida, Dallow, and a policeman arrive just in time. Pinkie tries to splash them with his vitriol, but instead covers his own face with the acid. Rose “saw his face—steam. He screamed and screamed, with his hand

up to his eyes; he turned and ran; she saw a police baton at his feet and broken glass. He looked half his size, doubling up in appalling agony: it was as if the flames had literally got him and he shrank..." (Greene, *Brighton* 264). Pinkie, who believes that his Catholicism gives him knowledge inaccessible to others and makes him larger than life, shrinks as he is splashed with his own acid. The flames of Hell begin to lap at his soul, and he runs off a cliff in his tortured confusion. Rose escapes, and Pinkie returns to the "annihilating eternity from which he had come" (Greene, *Brighton* 20).

One would expect Rose to be happy that she escapes alive. But when she sits in confession in the novel's final chapter, she claims that she regrets "[n]ot going with him" (Greene, *Brighton* 267). Rose feels as though she betrayed Pinkie. She didn't run after him over the cliff, to be damned alongside her husband. Now she is left with her previous life, living with her abusive parents and working her waitressing job, "just as if [Pinkie] had never existed at all" (Greene, *Brighton* 269). The novel ends with her in the profoundest naïveté. She leaves the confessional with "a sudden conviction that she carried life," that she is pregnant with Pinkie's baby. She is proud to bear the child of this sinner. She walks off toward Pinkie's old room to retrieve the recording of Pinkie in order to spite her parents: "There was something to be salvaged from that house and room, something else they wouldn't be able to get over—his voice speaking a message to her: if there was a child, speaking to the child. 'If he loved you,' the priest had said, 'that shows...' She walked rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all" (Greene, *Brighton* 269). Of course, that horror is that Pinkie didn't love her—that he despised her. Instead of leaving a caring message, he let her know that he resents her very existence. Rose's faith in Pinkie and God is leading her to a despair greater than anything she could imagine: mothering the child of a little devil who never loved her.

Greene is not endorsing either moral framework—good vs. evil or right vs. wrong—over the other. He merely shows the reader that the earthly right vs. wrong is more superficial than good vs. evil. We're not meant to admire Ida—we're meant to see her as obtuse, without access to the kinds of knowledge that Pinkie and Rose have. At the end of the novel, we're left wondering exactly what the "appalling...strangeness of the mercy of God" is (Greene, *Brighton* 268). We question why the innocent Rose has been swept up by such an appalling romantic partner. We ask why she was left with his child. We ask why he was taken away from her. We ask what Rose has to do to be saved. Greene doesn't provide an answer.

CH 2: LUCIFERIAN PRIDE IN *THE HEART OF THE MATTER*

Both *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* are variations on a savior narrative—stories based on a character who strives to rescue others from problems in their life. The key difference between the two is that the whiskey priest has no pride, and dies feeling that he has failed. In contrast, Major Scobie actively sees himself as a messiah. Like Pinkie of *Brighton Rock*, Scobie's pride is his downfall. Scobie's pride is manifest in his intense pity for others. Characterizing pity as a flaw may seem counterintuitive, but it's important to distinguish Scobie's pity from empathy. Empathy is fellow-feeling—truly understanding and experiencing another's emotions. Scobie's pity is an inverted pride and a kind of projected self-pity. It's paternalistic and patronizing. It stays under control when the only person he feels intense pity for is his wife, but Scobie's problems quickly escalate when he meets his future mistress, Helen. When he fears that Louise has been informed of his affair, he believes that his only solution is suicide, to save both Louise and Helen from himself. James Wood aptly states in the intro to the Penguin edition, "this hypertrophied sense of religious obligation...leads Scobie, logically enough, toward the extraordinary idea that he is a kind of Christ, who might be able to offer himself as a sacrifice for the peace of Helen and Louise" (Wood xiv). But as Scobie collapses after his suicidal dose of evipan, he falls, not as a Christ-like martyr, but as a prideful Luciferian analog. His refusal to submit to God's superiority, his audacity in comparing himself to God, is what causes his demise.

Scobie's Benevolent Flaw

There is no doubt that Scobie's wife, Louise, deserves pity. She is stuck in a miserable, damp colony, and has so few friends that she covers her dressing table with pictures of her and

other people, “as if she were accumulating evidence that she had friends” (Greene, *Heart* 13). By the time the novel begins, Scobie has long ago lost his romantic love for his wife, but his intense pity drives him to continue supporting her. One scene at the beginning of the novel emphasizes his lack of attraction and intense pity. As he comes home and sees Louise sleeping unattractively under her mosquito net, with “matted” hair “which had once been the color of bottled honey” but was now “dark and stringy with sweat,” Scobie thinks deeply to himself, “These were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion” (Greene, *Heart* 13). Greene’s description of Louise is not the least bit flattering. The mosquito net and sweaty hair reflect the undesirable conditions Louise is forced to endure. Taking care of someone so pitiful is exhausting. Yet Scobie feels that, no matter how miserable Louise makes him, he has a duty to protect her. He is “bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness” (Greene, *Heart* 19). Louise’s unattractiveness evokes a sense of pity in Scobie, which in turn attracts him to her, instead of pushing him away. Scobie is literally attracted to Louise’s unattractiveness—her vulnerability magnetizes him.

Intense pity for one’s wife in isolation can be problematic, but not fatal. It becomes dangerous when one begins to feel pity for everyone and everything. In his essay “The Sanctified Sinner,” George Orwell argues that *The Heart of the Matter* “might as well be happening in a London suburb” because the “Africans exist only as an occasionally mentioned background” (Orwell 106). Orwell makes a valid point, but he fails to mention that the setting is a key factor in driving Scobie’s sense of pity beyond his wife. The qualities of the colony lead Scobie to develop more than pity—he begins to develop a sense of superiority. In an introspective moment, Scobie wonders to himself why he enjoys living in the colony so much when everyone else wants nothing more than to leave:

Is it because here human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself? Nobody here could ever talk about heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst... (Greene, *Heart* 26).

There are parts of Scobie's statement that make sense. It's much harder for people to put up a façade in the colony—supposedly modeled after Sierra Leone, where he spent time during WWII as an MI6 British Intelligence agent (Sherry, vol. 2 113). It's rough, with few comforts other than the officer's club. People live in rat-infested houses with tin roofs and water that only runs for parts of the year. Social mores are not as strict, and a more primal human nature shows through. Where Scobie oversteps his bounds is when he states that one can experience the perspective of God in the colony. He fails to see the danger in claiming that he has the capacity to love like God. This fatal flaw is Scobie's first step down the path of Luciferian pride. It's his first step toward his fall.

Unlike Pinkie, Scobie's intentions are not bad. He doesn't see himself as evil—he just wants to help others. At some points, his pity is manifest not quite as empathy but as compassion. One salient instance of Scobie's compassion is in a hospital tent, when he comforts a small girl, recently shipwrecked. The child is delirious, and Scobie prays for her: “‘Father,’ he prayed, ‘give her peace. Take away my peace for ever, but give her peace’” (Greene, *Heart* 112). Scobie has no relation to or investment in this little girl, yet he still prays intensely for her. He begs God to save the child and sacrifice him. Though it seems that Scobie's prayers fall on deaf ears, the little girl hears the word “Father” and believes that Scobie is her father. Because of the girl's condition, Scobie plays along and tries to lull her to sleep: “‘Yes, dear. Don't speak, I'm

here'...A memory that he had carefully buried returned and taking out his handkerchief he made the shadow of a rabbit's head fall on the pillow beside her. 'There's your rabbit,' he said, 'to go to sleep with. It will stay until you sleep...' (Greene, *Heart* 112). Praying to God, Scobie addresses him as "Father." Scobie then quickly makes the transition to "Father" himself as he comforts the girl. Though one may be inclined to think that this is an instance of Scobie playing God, I think that it's a true moment of compassion. Scobie loses his own child to sickness a few years before the novel begins. Here, he is reassuming the role of a father, uncovering a ritual from his time with his own late daughter. Sadly, just as Scobie thinks that he has successfully lulled the child to sleep, the nurse "harshly" accosts him and informs him, "the child's dead" (Greene, *Heart* 113). This moment should be a moment of reflection for Scobie, a reminder that he can't save everyone. But Scobie simply moves on to his other duties.

Enter Helen—the Problem

On the same boat as the little girl is Scobie's future mistress, Helen. From the moment he first sees Helen, he feels protective of her. The narrator notes that "Scobie always remembered how she was carried into his life on a stretcher grasping a stamp-album with her eyes fast shut" (Greene, *Heart* 109). Helen is in a vulnerable position when Scobie sees her. She is dependent on others for her survival. Furthermore, the stamp-album in her hand is a symbol of her youth—collecting stamps is a child's pastime. Her "passport says she is nineteen"—certainly young enough to be Scobie's child (Greene, *Heart* 108). Scobie initially establishes a paternal role in his relationship with Helen. After Scobie and Helen finish their first long conversation, the narrator notes that the two "had an immense sense of security: they were friends who could never be anything else than friends—they were safely divided by a dead husband, a living wife, a father who was a clergyman, a games mistress called Helen, and years and years of experience.

They hadn't got to worry about what they should say to each other" (Greene, *Heart* 127). These factors, from spouses to age differences to religious restrictions, should keep Scobie and Helen from having a romantic relationship. Initially, they do—the relationship starts as one between mentor and mentee, the comforter and the comforted. However, the security they feel is false, and short-lived.

As Scobie and Helen spend more time together, they grow closer. Eventually, they break down and kiss. The security they felt with one another "proved to have been the camouflage of an enemy which works in terms of friendship, trust, and pity," just as Scobie's pride camouflages itself as pity (Greene, *Heart* 147). The enemy is sexual temptation—which they give in to. After the act, Scobie leaves Helen's house in deep and remorseful thought:

He had sworn to preserve Louise's happiness and now he had accepted another and contradictory responsibility. He felt tired by all the lies he would some time have to tell; he felt the wounds of those victims who had not yet bled. Lying back on the pillow he stared sleeplessly out towards the gray early morning tide. Somewhere on the face of those obscure waters moved the sense of yet another wrong and another victim, not Louise, nor Helen" (Greene, *Heart* 149).

Scobie has certainly done wrong in committing adultery—in fact, he has committed a mortal sin. But to paint himself as a bleeding heart immediately after his transgression is overly melodramatic. Moreover, the unnamed victim Scobie refers to may well be Christ. The aforementioned wounds might be those he imagines his earthly actions will inflict on Christ. He overestimates the harm his infidelity will cause, and he underestimates what he can do to remedy the problem. To insinuate that he feels "the wounds of those victims who had not yet bled" is prideful, and is a breach of the barrier between human and divine empathy.

The Solution

When Scobie receives a telegram from Louise informing him she is returning from South Africa, he panics. He believes that, somehow, she has discovered his affair. He decides that he needs to find a solution to the problem that his adultery has caused—he needs to find a way to pacify both Louise and Helen. Instead of coming clean and admitting his wrongdoing, Scobie looks for another way out. He tries to pray, but “[t]he Lord’s prayer lay as dead on his tongue as a legal document: it wasn’t his daily bread that he wanted but so much more. He wanted happiness for others and solitude and peace for himself” (Greene, *Heart* 174). The part of The Lord’s Prayer that Scobie references reads: “Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Scobie wants more than forgiveness from God. He wants peace and for others around him to be happy. Scobie wants to be both a good man and a sinner. He wants both Helen and Louise to be happy—but he can’t love them both at the same time. He eventually finds a solution to his dilemma. He says aloud, “They wouldn’t need me if I were dead. No one needs the dead. The dead can be forgotten. O God, give me death before I give them unhappiness” (Greene, *Heart* 174). Scobie prays for God to strike him down to relieve his burden and to save Louise and Helen. When he realizes that his wish will not be granted, he contemplates more drastic measures.

He decides that suicide is the only way to save both Helen and Louise from the misery he causes them. Perhaps he is right; perhaps they both would be better off without him in their lives. If Scobie had stopped at this thought, even if he had killed himself at this point without any further justification, he might have been saved from damnation. Sadly, he justifies his plan by equating himself to God:

The priests told one that it was the unforgivable sin, the final expression of an unrepentant despair, and of course one accepted the Church's teaching. But they taught also that God had sometimes broken his own laws, and was it less possible for him to put out a hand of forgiveness into the suicidal darkness than to have woken himself in the tomb, behind the stone? Christ had not been murdered—you couldn't murder God. Christ had killed himself: he had hung himself on the cross...(Greene, *Heart* 174).

Scobie's argument is an interesting one. He is right in stating that Christ submitted to crucifixion. In the Gospel of Matthew, as Pilate's men come to take Christ away, one of the disciples attempts to intervene and slices off one of the men's ears, to which Christ responds: "Put up again thy sword into its place: for all that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot ask my father, and he will give me presently more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that so it must be done?" (Matthew 26: 52-54 DV). Christ fully recognizes that if God intended, he could obliterate Pilate's army with divine intervention. But that's not God's intent. He sent his only son to earth to die for mankind so that Original Sin could be forgiven. So, the issue with Scobie's statement is not the claim that "Christ had not been murdered." The issue is that he equates his own suicide with Christ's sacrifice. With this second instance of Luciferian pride, Scobie moves closer to his fall.

Scobie continues to slip into his state of mortal sin when Louise returns. Louise pretends that she doesn't know about the affair, and Scobie believes her. The reader only finds out after Scobie's death that she knew all the time. To maintain his secret, Scobie attends mass and receives communion in his state of mortal sin—another grave transgression. As he sits in mass he compares his receiving the host without confession to fallen priests "who presided at a Black Mass, consecrating the Host over the naked body of a woman, consuming God in an absurd and

horrifying ritual, [who] were at least performing the act of damnation with an emotion larger than human love...He was desecrating God because he loved a woman—was it even love, or was it just a feeling of pity and responsibility?” (Greene, *Heart* 207). What Scobie doesn’t understand is that love, pity, and responsibility are inseparable for him. His love is manifest in pity and responsibility. What he does recognize, though, is that his own reason for committing yet another mortal sin is profoundly human. He is committing a sin because of his human emotions. As father Rank comes nearer to Scobie with the host, “he made one last attempt at prayer, ‘O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them,’ and was aware of the pale papery taste of an eternal sentence on the tongue” (Greene, *Heart* 209). For Catholics, the host is transubstantiated at communion—what was before a mere wafer literally becomes the body of Christ. Greene, in emphasizing the artificial taste of the wafer as it enters Scobie’s mouth, asserts that Scobie is without God, that he is merely consuming a cracker. Moreover, Scobie’s own awareness of this taste is a realization that he has given into his pity and desire to keep both Louise and Helen pacified. He is without God.

The Fall

Scobie begins his process of losing the requisite respect for and terror of God when he meets with Father Rank to confess his sins. Scobie reveals to the priest, “I’ve tried to love God, but...I’m not sure that I even believe...I feel—empty. Empty” (Greene, *Heart* 140). Scobie doesn’t feel the blinding awe in the face of the power of God that a good Catholic should. Instead, as he kneels to do his penance, he thinks a damning thought: “It seemed to him for a moment that God was too accessible. There was no difficulty in approaching Him. Like a popular demagogue He was open to the least of His followers at any hour. Looking up at the

cross he thought, He even suffers in public” (Greene, *Heart* 141). Scobie does not give God the reverence He deserves. He mistakes the accessibility he perceives he has to God for weakness.

Scobie’s pride reaches its peak toward the end of the novel. It builds throughout, as he has begun to equate himself to God. He moves into a state of unforgivable pride when he concludes that his actions are harming God. He sits on All Souls’ Night, thinking about the fact that he will have to take communion on All Saints’ Day, still in his state of mortal sin. Pondering his impending damnation, Scobie “had a sudden picture before his eyes of a bleeding face, of eyes closed by the continuous shower of blows: the punch-drunk head of God reeling sideways...’ You have only to say the word,’ he addressed God, ‘and legions of angels...’ and he struck with his ringed hand under the eye and saw the bruised skin break” (Greene, *Heart* 221). Scobie literally envisions himself beating the pulp out of God with his actions. The fact that Scobie imagines that his deeds have this kind of impact on the creator of the universe is a death sentence. Greene directly references the aforementioned scene from Matthew, and in this case, God does not send angels to save Himself from Scobie. It seems God is too weak. Scobie’s perverted ego leads him to believe that he is greater than God.

The night of his suicide, Scobie again sits deep in thought. He prays: “O God, I am the only guilty one because I’ve known the answers all the time. I’ve preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can’t observe your suffering...They are ill with me and I can cure them. And you too, God are ill with me...you’ll be at peace when I am out of your reach...You’ll be able to forget me, God, for eternity” (Greene, *Heart* 241). Scobie’s pride gets the best of him. He tells God, “I know what I’m doing,” in his quest to remove himself from the lives of everyone around him.

To Scobie's surprise, whether it is actually God or merely an echo returning from the void of his own emotional despair, he hears a response: "You say you love me and yet you'll do this to me—rob me of you for ever. I made you with love...I planted in you this longing for peace only so that one day I could satisfy your longing and watch your happiness" (Greene, *Heart* 242). The voice's response—I hesitate to call the voice God because at this point, it's not clear whether this is divine speech or Scobie's imagination—tries to remind him that he is not God, that this world is not the end, and he will live in eternal bliss if he can endure. The voice then moves into one Scobie wants to hear—one that brings him closer to God:

There are no capital letters to separate us when we talk together. I am not Thou but simply you, when you speak to me; I am humble as any other beggar. Can't you trust me as you'd trust a faithful dog? I have been faithful to you for two thousand years. All you have to do is go into a box, confess...the repentance is already there, straining at your heart. It's not repentance you lack, just a few simple actions (Greene, *Heart* 242).

At this point, the reader can ascertain that this is not truly the voice of God but merely Scobie's imagination. The ease with which the voice suggests repentance can be achieved is a manifestation of Scobie's ego and pride. He places himself above God in his imagination—the voice comes down to Scobie's level, even below him, comparing itself to a dog and a beggar.

Scobie responds to his own thought, damning himself again in the process: "I don't trust you. I've never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I've always carried about like a sack of bricks. I'm not a policeman for nothing--responsible for order, for seeing justice is done...I can't shift my responsibility to you...I can't make one of them suffer so as to save myself. I'm responsible and see it through the only way I can" (Greene, *Heart* 242). Scobie's pride leads him to take up the sacrificial mantle of suffering—to take the

Godly role of sacrifice. Scobie feels that he knows better than God. He feels that he is God.

When Scobie takes his fatal dose of the evipan prescribed to him for symptoms of angina, he tries to pray during his last moments, but “the Hail Mary evaded him.” As he hits the floor, a the saint’s medal he received from the grateful captain of the *Esperança* “span like a coin under the ice box—the saint whose name nobody could remember” (Greene, *Heart* 249). Scobie dies not as a hero or saint like he imagines, but falling to the floor, like Lucifer fell from heaven.

Bathos

Louise’s reaction to Scobie’s death isn’t nearly as strong as one would expect. She says to Wilson, her pseudo-lover “[i]t’s odd how easily I can talk about him...now that he’s gone. Yet I did love him, Wilson. I did love him, but he seems so very very gone...They didn’t kiss; it was too soon for that but they sat in the hollow room, holding hands, listening to the vultures clambering on the iron roof” (Greene, *Heart* 251). Scobie has only been dead three days, and yet his wife seems fine. The vultures have no heartbroken lovers to gnaw on—just dead Scobie. Louise is already holding hands with Wilson, who has tried to court her throughout the novel, and the implication is that they will soon begin a romantic relationship. Helen soon forgets about Scobie too. When Bagster, a man who has been trying to have sex with her throughout the whole novel finally succeeds, he asks her if she still loves Scobie. Helen responds, ““I don’t love anyone... You can’t love the dead, can you? They don’t exist, do they? It would be like loving the dodo, wouldn’t it?”” (Greene, *Heart* 253). Helen is sad, but she is not mortified. She isn’t suffering the pain of a mourning lover.

The end of the novel and the significance of Scobie’s suicide are difficult to dissect. On one hand, Scobie has relieved some of Helen and Louise’s suffering. They aren’t nearly as stressed as they were when he was alive. Yet his death is a kind of bathos. The suicide he has

carefully planned and executed to save his lovers leads to an anticlimactic ending. In the middle of the novel, Scobie ponders what it would be like to be omniscient: “If one knew, he wondered, the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? if one reached what they called the heart of the matter?” (Greene, *Heart* 111). Scobie’s desire is to reach the heart of the matter. He desires omniscience—something that is only accessible to God. He wants this omniscience so he can feel pity for everyone and everything. His downfall is in this desire. It’s not humanity’s role to know the heart of the matter. It’s up to God. When one tries to play God, one ends up like Scobie—falling, to the floor, unremarkable, unremembered.

CH 3: CUCKOLDED BY GOD: BENDRIX'S STRUGGLE WITH THE DIVINE IN *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*

A dedicated novelist and serial philanderer, Maurice Bendrix, the protagonist of *The End of the Affair*, is a lot like Greene. In fact, Bendrix's story closely parallels an affair that Greene had with a woman named Catherine Walston (Shelden 357). Greene substitutes Bendrix for himself, and the character Sarah Miles for Catherine. Moreover, Greene's brutal caricature of Catherine's husband, Harry—called Henry in the novel—is a civil servant with the sexual prowess of a pre-pubescent boy. Throughout the novel, Bendrix is cruel to Sarah's husband. He also demonstrates a strong desire to dominate Sarah—which he has no need to do, as she loves Bendrix dearly. Ultimately though, Bendrix's constant disparagement of Henry, attempts to dominate Sarah, and the love he and Sarah share aren't enough to hold his relationship together. In a time of need, Sarah looks beyond the human, and asks for help from a greater entity: God. In its latter half, the novel becomes a meditation on faith, destiny, and the insignificance of humankind in the face of the Almighty.

Bendrix's Sexuality

Many of Greene's men want nothing to do with the intimate aspects of sex. Pinkie, of *Brighton Rock*, is repulsed by the very idea of intercourse. It disgusts him to his core. Even Greene's other men who engage in sexual activities aren't floored by the idea of seduction and courtship. George Orwell notes that the men of Greeneland meet women and they "go to bed together almost at sight and with no apparent pleasure to either party" (Orwell 109). In contrast, Bendrix is invigorated by the intimacy of sexual experiences—he doesn't just care about the act, he cares about the foreplay and the secrecy associated with an affair. He relishes the thought of seducing a woman, and casually throws around phrases like, "we would make love between the

green-grocers and the butchers” (Greene, *Affair* 25). Pinkie, the whiskey priest, or Major Scobie wouldn’t even so much as think of calling sex “making love”—let alone sex in a dirty alleyway. Bendrix’s powerful sexual desire separates him from the other men, who either view sex as unimportant or view it in a negative light.

Bendrix’s sexuality and overall personality is like Pinkie’s in one way, though: both Bendrix and Pinkie desire to dominate their lovers. Manipulating Rose like a marionette gives Pinkie the greatest of pleasures. Bendrix only dreams of having that kind of control over Sarah. As he muses at his writing desk, he notes that, “[f]or one thing, she was beautiful, and beautiful women, especially if they are intelligent also, stir some deep feeling of inferiority in me...I have always found it hard to feel sexual desire without some sense of superiority, mental or physical” (Greene, *Affair* 17). Bendrix’s sexual attraction is partially contingent on his perception of superiority over his lover. His relationship with Sarah defies this trend—she is both beautiful and intelligent. In fact, the first time he is intimate with Sarah—in her own living room—he immediately realizes that she is a far more competent covert lover than he is:

In the living room, we held our hands against each other’s bodies, unable to let go. ‘He’ll be coming up,’ I said, ‘at any moment.’

‘We can hear him,’ she said, and she added with horrifying lucidity, ‘There’s one stair that always squeaks’ (Greene, *Affair* 34).

Bendrix quickly realizes that this is not Sarah’s first extramarital relationship. She knows exactly how to keep her affairs secret from Henry. Bendrix feels inferior, but is relentless, and he continually tries to gain the upper hand in the relationship. He recalls that, “In the days when we were in love, I would try to get her to say more than the truth—that our affair would never end, that one day we should marry. I wouldn’t have believed her, but I would have liked to hear the

words on her tongue, perhaps only to give me the satisfaction of rejecting them myself” (Greene, *Affair* 21). But Sarah never bends. She never tells Bendrix that she will marry him or leave Henry. Bendrix compensates for his feeling of inferiority by belittling Henry. The fact that he is having sex with Henry’s wife right under his nose—and on his couch—gives Bendrix enough of a buzz to satisfy his urge for superiority. Bendrix’s continual displays of dominance over Henry are still not enough to keep his anxiety at bay. At heart, he knows that his affair with Sarah will eventually end. What he doesn’t realize is that the lover who will take Sarah away from him is far from human.

Divine Intervention

The End of the Affair takes place during World War II in London. For most of the novel, the war is barely mentioned, but its effects are felt at the turning point of the plot. Bendrix and Sarah are sleeping together one night in 1944 when a German V-1 air raid starts, continuing until dawn. Bendrix goes downstairs to check if it is safe for them to move to the basement. Unfortunately, just as he reaches the bottom of the stairs, a bomb detonates right in front of his door. When he regains consciousness, he walks upstairs to find Sarah on her knees. He knows she is not a religious person, so he is surprised to find her in a position rarely used for anything other than prayer. He cracks a joke as he walks in the door, has a brief discussion with Sarah, and she leaves. She doesn’t return his calls for two years. Bendrix finally finds out why Sarah has ignored him when he reads her diary. It turns out that Sarah went downstairs to find Bendrix lying under a door, and thought him dead. A woman who had never developed any relationship with the divine then knelt to pray. She recalls in her diary,

I said, I love him and I’ll do anything if you’ll make him alive, I said very slowly, I’ll give him up for ever, only let him be alive with a chance, and I pressed and pressed [my

fingernails into my palms] and I could feel the skin break, and I said, people can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in at the door and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead under the door (Greene, *Affair* 76).

The polysyndeton—and...and...and...and—throughout this passage illustrates Sarah's building anxiety as she prays harder and harder. The fallen door is a metaphor that represents the end of one part of Sarah's life (her relationship with Bendrix) and the beginning of another (her relationship with God). She prays to believe in God, and she finally makes what, to her, is the ultimate sacrifice. As Bendrix walks in the door, miraculously unscathed, the vow is sealed. Sarah knows that she must lead a life of agony without Bendrix. She gives herself to God. In the process, Bendrix's life is saved—whether by coincidence or divine intervention—and he loses his lover.

It is at this point that Both Bendrix and Sarah begin their relationships with the divine. Sarah starts by her own choice when she prays for Bendrix's life, but Bendrix's relationship is not consensual. He has no desire to allow God into his life. Furthermore, he does not consent to his loss of Sarah. Sarah has betrayed her husband and other lovers many times—she is a serial adulteress. But this time, the transfer of her affection and devotion is not from man to man, but from man to God. This is the instant in the novel where Sarah's allegiance moves from Bendrix to God. She immediately regrets her decision, but she has no choice but to follow through with her bond. Moreover, it is when God's power over mankind begins to show through.

Ties with Greene

One must be very careful when making inferences about an author's life based on his fiction. *The End of the Affair* is not a diary, nor is it an autobiography. Nevertheless, its parallels with Greene's own life are striking. For one, he dedicated the book "TO C." his mistress. This, along with other details in the novel, suggests that Greene may have been struggling in his relationship with God during the time he wrote it. The details of his relationship with Catherine buttress this theory. Sherry notes that Greene was more than just a lover to Catherine—he was her godfather. In an interview with Sherry, Greene's wife Vivien explains: "Mrs. Walston wrote to Graham to say that his books had so influenced her that she was going to become a Catholic...I reported to Graham that Mrs. Walston had telephoned to me asking him to be her godfather because he had brought her into the church..." (Sherry 226). From their first interaction, Greene and Catherine's relationship involved Catholicism. In a letter to Catherine, he once wrote, "I'm not even a Catholic properly away from you...It's odd how little I get out of Mass except when you're around. I'm a much better Catholic in mortal sin!" (Sherry 257). It seems that Greene's fascination with sin in the real world was reflected in his writings. Though Greene slept with dozens of women during their marriage, he did not want to divorce Vivien for fear of going against Catholic dogma and, perhaps more importantly, for fear of losing his emotional fallback once he decided to end his relationships with other women. According to his own Catholic belief system, as an adulterer, he lived in a constant state of mortal sin.

Bendrix's Conversion

Though Bendrix himself is not married or religious, and doesn't feel guilty about his relationship with Sarah, he nonetheless still has a troubled relationship with God. As a rejecter of God, he speaks to the divine toward end of the novel: "I don't want Your peace and I don't want

Your love. I wanted something very simple and very easy: I wanted Sarah for a lifetime and You took her away. With Your great schemes You ruin our happiness like a harvester ruins a mouse's nest: I hate You, God, I hate You as though You existed" (Greene, *Affair* 159). Bendrix is troubled, to say the least. He doesn't want to believe in God, but he also can't discount His existence entirely. Whether he is angry at the existence of a God and how devotion to Him took Sarah away, or whether he believes in the deity Himself remains ambiguous. The way Bendrix feels towards God, however, is not. Bendrix exits the novel in agony and prays: "O God, You've done enough, You've robbed me of enough, I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever" (Greene, *Affair* 160). He is in a constant struggle with God. On one hand, he doesn't want God to exist. Or perhaps he does want God to exist—at least then, he knows he has lost Sarah to something real. He struggles with the idea that something, whether it is the psychology of faith in the absence of a greater being or whether it is the existence of a greater being, can pull an individual away from such a passionate love. If God is real in this novel, His mercy truly is appalling. To save Bendrix only to have him lose Sarah and simultaneously lose his desire to love anyone else is worse than death. But neither the reader nor Bendrix is given the satisfaction of finding out whether God exists or not.

Yet, even though Bendrix fights the existence of a God, it is unclear whether he is saved or damned. He is in a unique situation when compared to the three other subjects of this thesis—at the end of the novel, he is not dead. He lacks Catholic faith and therefore lacks profound knowledge. He is barred from the "high-class night club" mentioned in the first chapter, "entry to which is reserved for Catholics only." Perhaps at this point in his life, he is "too ignorant to be held guilty" (Orwell 107).

CH 4: LOVING THE PRODUCT OF SIN: PIETY VS COMPASSION IN *THE POWER* *AND THE GLORY*

Greene investigates the value—or lack thereof—of piety and adherence to Catholic tradition in *The Power and the Glory*. The novel is set in an unnamed Mexican state (though most critics agree that this is Tabasco) in the late 1930s. Catholicism—along with alcohol—has been banned by the government. Any Catholic relics or Bibles are considered contraband, and all the priests have either been systematically hunted down and executed or worse—they’ve been forced to renounce their religion and marry. The novel is fundamentally a retelling of the Passion of Christ. The protagonist and Christ-figure, the whiskey priest, is the last surviving priest in the state. He’s on the run from the Red Shirts, a government force led by the Pontius Pilate-figure, the Lieutenant. The whiskey priest is not a good priest by traditional standards. He’s an alcoholic and a father to an illegitimate child. Greene utilizes the whiskey priest; a pious but rigid woman the whiskey priest meets in jail; a “half-caste” Judas figure who betrays the whiskey priest; and Padre José, an ex-priest who chose to give up his vocation to avoid execution, to investigate whether the key to salvation is piety and strict adherence to Catholic dogma and secular laws, or compassion and bravery. The whiskey priest comes last in this thesis, because of all the 4 male protagonists of Greene’s Catholic novels, he is the only one who is saved. This novel guides the reader to conclude that blind adherence to laws, whether they are religious or not, in the absence of compassion is much worse than compassion in the absence of conventional piety.

The Pious Prisoner

Early in the novel, the priest is captured and sent to jail for alcohol possession. While sitting cramped in the dark, putrid cell, where “the stench poured up his nostrils,” the priest finds himself surrounded by fellow criminals (Greene, *Power* 123). These outlaws have been

incarcerated for various reasons, from petty theft to murder. None in particular seems more revolting than a woman who was apprehended for having “good books in [her] house” (Greene, *Power* 131). After one of the inmates expresses his disdain for the clergy, the pious woman explains the source of his sentiment: “They took the child away from [the inmate]...It was a bastard. They acted quite correctly” (Greene, *Power* 126). She believes that removing a child from its parents because of its illegitimate conception is justified.

According to Catholic dogma, she is right—sex outside of marriage is a mortal sin, and the parents deserved to be punished. The priest, father to an illegitimate child himself, feels quite differently: “At the word ‘bastard’ his heart moved painfully, as when a man in love hears a stranger name a flower which is also the name of his woman. ‘Bastard!’ the word filled him with miserable happiness. It brought his own child nearer...” (Greene, *Power* 127). The priest is obviously conflicted in his opinion of extramarital sex, particularly in his role as a priest. He is a father to both members of the church *and* his daughter. The paradox of the miserable happiness is that he knows he has sinned, but he doesn’t regret it. He feels nothing but love for his daughter—the product of his sin—when he should be repenting. The pious woman believes that the other inmate’s premarital sex was a worse act than the priests removing the child from its parents. She is completely without compassion. The priest, however, stands in solidarity with the man whose child was taken away. He understands the pain that the other priests’ adherence to tradition and laws caused the man. He explains: “They were bad priests to do a thing like that. The sin was over. It was their duty to teach—well, love” (Greene, *Power* 127). The priest is on his way to realizing that blindly following religious laws may not be what God intends. He is discovering that compassion is the key to salvation.

Enter Judas

The “half-caste” Judas figure is another striking instance of an individual who does not understand the importance of questioning the morality of authority figures and thinking beyond one’s own personal benefit. Greene intentionally designates the Judas figure as a mixed-race character, possibly alluding to the common stereotype of racial hybrids as inherently evil. The identifier “half-caste” is in quotes to remind the reader that the rhetoric is Greene’s and not my own. The “half-caste’s” intentions are thinly veiled. Within a few hours of meeting the toothless, dirty man, the priest notes that “he was in the presence of Judas” (Greene, *Power* 94). The “half-caste” recognizes the whiskey priest as the fugitive with a seven-hundred-peso bounty on his head. Eventually, the “half-caste” turns the priest in to the authorities to collect the bounty.

Just as Judas Iscariot, the apostle who betrayed Christ, was following the law, the “half-caste’s” actions are well within the bounds of legality. Though they both betray the messiah figure in their respective stories, they respond differently when they recognize the result of their deeds. Once Judas realizes what he has done, he is devastated: “Then Judas, who betrayed him, seeing that he [Jesus] was condemned, repenting himself, brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and ancients, Saying: I have sinned in betraying innocent blood...And casting down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed: and went and hanged himself with an (sic) halter” (Matthew 27:3-5 DV). Judas understands that his actions, while in line with the law of the land, have been solely for his own benefit. When he comes to realize that he betrayed Christ, he feels so unfit to live that he kills himself. One would expect the “half-caste” to respond in a similar way—he too has betrayed innocent blood for personal gain. But instead, he refuses to admit his wrongdoing and asks the priest to pray for him. He tries to convince the priest, and himself, that he hasn’t committed any wrongs. He says to the priest, “you’re a good man,

father...but you think the worst of people. I just want your blessing, that's all" (Greene, *Power* 198). It's as if, by not acknowledging his sins to the priest, the half-caste somehow thinks that they will go unnoticed. But the priest rebukes him: "You think my blessing will be like a blinker over God's eyes. I can't stop Him knowing about it. Much better to go home and pray. Then if He gives you grace to feel sorry, give away the money" (Greene, *Power* 198). The priest suggests that the "half-caste" repent like Judas and give the money away. But the half-caste just rides off into the distance, with pesos jingling in his pocket. There is nothing redeeming about the "half-caste." He is so focused on the idea of following the law—and acquiring wealth—that he fails to carry out the most important aspect of his religion: compassion toward others.

The Fallen Priest

A third individual who draws no sympathy from Greene or the reader is Padre José. José was a priest before the Red Shirts came into power, but he chose to marry a woman over facing death. He is relentlessly mocked throughout the novel, and is painted as a horrible coward. One evening, as he is walking through the town's graveyard, he accidentally comes upon a burial for a small girl. As Padre José realizes that the family recognizes him, he "duck[s] and dodge[s] away from them," attempting to avoid a request to say a prayer over her grave (Greene, *Power* 50). The family members of the deceased catch him and beg him to pray, hungry for the presence of God. But all Padre José can muster is "It's impossible...I am sorry...It is against the law" (Greene, *Power* 50). He is too cowardly to say a prayer in an empty graveyard. He is afraid to do his duty as a priest and comfort the family of a recently deceased child. He can't muster the strength or courage.

Toward the end of the book, Padre José has a chance to redeem himself. After the whiskey priest is condemned to be executed, the Lieutenant makes a special exception and

allows the priest a confession. As Padre José is the only living priest in the state, the Lieutenant goes to his house to request his services and explains that he will not be persecuted. José's wife is concerned that the rest of the town will find out about José administering the confession. She explains, "[w]hy, it will be all over town. Look at those children there. They never leave José alone... There'll be no end of it—everybody will be wanting to confess, and the Governor will hear of it, and the pension will be stopped" (Greene, *Power* 205). José's wife is concerned that their reputation will be tarnished. Perhaps more importantly, she is worried that their pension will be cut off. Her materialism is the antithesis of spirituality. José feebly argues and reminds his wife that he is a priest, but his wife's rebuttal shuts him down: "You aren't a priest any more... you're my husband... That's your duty now" (Greene, *Power* 205). José concedes. He refuses to accompany the lieutenant back to the whiskey priest's cell and in turn relinquishes any hope he ever had of salvation. Without a doubt, he will die without God.

The Saint and His Bastard

The whiskey priest is certainly a flawed individual, but not one of the other characters approaches his saintliness. He is the only character in the book who recognizes his own sins. His gravest transgression, sex with Maria and the resulting conception of their child, Brigitta, brings about a number of questions. For one, the reader must ask whether Greene thinks that this act is actually immoral or not. According to Catholic ideology, the priest has committed a grave sin. No priest is ever supposed to marry, let alone have sex. Yet Greene gives the mother a very important name: Maria. The woman with whom the priest committed mortal sin bears the name of the mother of Christ. Unlike Christ, Brigitta is a miserable little child. She is beyond horrible to the priest. Greene describes her as "one who had been sharpened by hunger into an appearance of devilry and malice beyond her age" (Greene, *Power* 70). She refuses to be polite toward the

priest, and instead teases him. Brigitta's personality complicates the situation. The product of the priest's sin is a horrible little beast. What's more is that he and Maria did not have a meaningful romantic relationship prior to Brigitta's conception: "They had spent no love in her conception: just fear and despair and half a bottle of brandy and the sense of loneliness had driven him to an act which horrified him—and this scared shame-faced overpowering love was the result" (Greene, *Power* 69). Though the intercourse that led to her conception was without much meaning—like the sex between Pinkie and Rose—the priest still loves his daughter dearly. The fact that he still loves the girl, even though she is a little devil, is saintly. He tries to overcome sin with love, as God intends.

As he sits in prison for the second time, waiting to be executed, he tries to repent: "He said, 'I have committed fornication.' The formal phrase meant nothing at all: it was like a sentence in a newspaper: you couldn't feel repentance over a thing like that" (Greene, *Power* 208). The whiskey priest, though he has sinned according to Catholic tradition, can't feel sorry for his sin. He cannot force himself to honestly confess, because if he is truly honest with himself, he has nothing to confess. He tries again and again, but eventually breaks down: "'Oh God, help her. Damn me, I deserve it, but let her live forever.' This was the love he should have felt for every soul in the world: all the fear and the wish to save concentrated unjustly on the one child. He began to weep; it was as if he had to watch her from the shore drown because he had forgotten how to swim" (Greene, *Power* 208). At this point, the priest truly has a grasp of his own limitations and humanity. His suffering and inability to confess raise an important question. Was the priest's transgression actually a sin? Personally, I think that though the act itself was a sin, the priest is forgiven. Though he did transgress Catholic law, he created something that he loves. He gave life to a child. The fact that he must be sorry for creating someone whom he loves

is paradoxical. It is the priest's acknowledgement of his humanity and his inability to confess that make him so holy. His honest recognition of his own imperfection is far more than any other character in the book can muster.

The Quiet American

The priest fails to acknowledge that he has also made the ultimate sacrifice for the dying American outlaw. The priest is outside of the Lieutenant and the Red Shirts' jurisdiction. He is safe, and ready to escape. When the "half-caste" comes to inform him that the American is dying and in need of a confession, the priest is "quite certain that this was a trap...but it was a fact that the American was there, dying" (Greene, *Power* 182). The priest knows that the "half-caste" is leading him to capture, but he also knows that as a priest, it is his duty to offer a confession, especially to a murderer "with all that on his soul" (Greene, *Power* 182). Even when he reaches the American, who refuses to confess and instead dies "still seeking [his] knife, bent on vicarious violence," the priest does not respond with anger (Greene, *Power* 191). He responds with grace. Instead of cursing the American, he whispers "the words of conditional absolution, in case, for one second, before it crossed the border, the spirit had repented" (Greene, *Power* 191).

Another important point to note is the rhetoric Greene uses when describing the American's final moment. The wounded outlaw's "knees crooked up in an attempt to roll over, and then the whole body gave up the effort, the ghost, everything" (Greene, *Power* 191). This is the same rhetoric that is used to describe Christ's death on the cross in Mark: "And Jesus having cried out with a loud voice, gave up the ghost" (Mark 15:37 DV). Though the priest and the American have committed very different crimes, they are both outlaws in the eyes of the Red Shirts. The priest is able to feel a profound empathy for the American. The priest is supportive of his fellow outlaw and encourages contrition, regardless of the man's crimes.

Crucifixion

As the priest passes his final moments in his cell, he comes close to the realization that he will be saved. He almost breaks through. But he dies with one final thought on his mind: “What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived...he felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all” (Greene, *Power* 211). He doesn’t realize that he will indeed be saved. He recognizes his wrongdoings, and he recognizes the fact that he isn’t sorry, but he doesn’t make the connection that out of his transgression of Catholic law came love. Sanctity is linked with our humanity rather than our efforts to be angelic. Acting in the spirit of the law, providing unconditional love, is important, not following the law to the letter. The saint emerges from the people and is human, imperfect. And so too was Christ. According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Christ died yelling “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 DV). He calls out to God, his father, asking why he has been abandoned. He dies believing he has not been saved. He dies in a state of doubt and fear. For Greene, this is sanctity.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the last few chapters, we've moved from Pinkie, an inverted Catholic; to major Scobie, a pitiful self-proclaimed savior; to Bendrix, an atheist turned resentful believer; and finally to the whiskey priest, a genuinely holy man. We must come back to the two questions I posed at the beginning of the thesis: One, what does it mean to be a good Catholic? Two, how does one achieve salvation? Greene's struggle with these very questions is evident in his own behavior. He was a serial adulterer who nevertheless pursued a devotion to the Catholic church throughout his life. Though there is no ledger in a heavenly book we can reference to confirm whether Greene's characters are saved or damned, we've traced the journeys of these conflicted men and have observed their struggles. Their relationships with God are seldom peaceful—more often, the relationships are agonizing, in both the contemporary and classical senses of the word. Through an analysis of these journeys, we can argue that the whiskey priest is the only one who is truly saved, due to his abjection of himself, his sacrifice of his ego, and his refusal to pursue recognition of any kind. He bears the cross that is the human condition with humility and compassion, and he will be rewarded.

Though religion, and Catholicism specifically, remains an important motif in Greene's later novels, it never again dominates his texts like it does in these four Catholic novels. Greene makes a transition from a Catholic writer to a political commentator. Just as Greeneland is an environment well-suited for an investigation of man's relationship with God, it also lends itself to analyses of race and secular romantic relationships. Moreover, it serves as a literal battlefield, and is an ideal setting for criticism of war. Two later novels come to mind, both of which investigate race, secular romantic relationships, and war. The journalist Thomas Fowler's fight with Howard Pyle over a Vietnamese woman named Phuong in *The Quiet American* shows a

softening in Greene's views on race. Phuong is painted in a much more human light than non-white characters in his earlier novels. *The Quiet American* is also a critique on American involvement in Vietnam, cementing Greene's role as a political writer, and was published in 1955, a year after the end of the First Indochina War. Greene continues to comment on interracial relationships in his 1978 novel *The Human Factor*. He evokes a sense of pity in the reader when discussing how the protagonist, Maurice Castle, is criticized for having a Black South African wife, and is not critical of the relationship himself. Along with this theme, the novel maintains its focus on espionage and the anxieties of the concurrent Cold War. Both novels do contain religious, and even explicitly Catholic, references; however, religion remains secondary to the political and social commentary.

The old priest's line at the end of *Brighton Rock*, "[y]ou can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the...appalling...strangeness of the mercy of God" seems like a throwaway statement in isolation (Greene, *Brighton* 268). Yet, as we can see, it becomes a crucial tool that we can use to dissect Greene's Catholic novels. It becomes a guide for us as we navigate the cold and unforgiving landscape of Greeneland. Man's relationship with God can be an incredibly painful struggle. The earthly human experience can be appalling, and one is left questioning why an omnipotent God would allow such suffering to exist. That is the strangeness of the mystery of faith.

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