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PITY: THE OBSESSIONAL THEME A STUDY OF GRAHAM GREENE'S THE HEART OF THE MATTER

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Abstract:

Graham Greene in his novel The Heart of the Matter deals with the theme of pity. He has given us one of the most intuitive analysis of the emotion of pity as an obsession in the portrayal of Scobie. Scobie's relationships are all based on pity. He is a weak man with good intentions doomed by his big sense of pity. Each character in the novel, be it Scobie or Wilson, fails in their ultimate goals by the end of the book. Scobie's ultimate sacrifice, suicide, fails to bring the expected happiness he imagines it will to his wife. The Heart of the Matter is not just about failure, but about the price we all pay for our individualism and the impossibility of truly understanding another person.

KEY WORDS:

Graham Greene, The Heart of the Matter, Pity.

INTRODUCTION

The Heart of the Matter is pre-eminently the story of corruption settling on one man - Henry Scobie, the Deputy Commissioner of Police. Scobie is undoubtedly a good man, an honest man who is corrupted not by money or power but by sentiment and a sense of responsibility for the happiness of others. The Commissioner tells him affectionately "Scobie the Just".¹(p.18).He is an able man and strong Catholic .He has a fatal flaw: but it is not arrogance or any normal form of pride; Scobie calls down ruin on himself, plainly and articulately, but not through hybris. His flaw is an excess of the quality Greene calls pity - an inability to watch disappointment or suffering in others and feels peculiarly incumbent upon himself to relieve the pain.

Graham Greene has said in Ways of Escape: "The character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride. But I found the effect on readers was quite different. To them Scobie was exonerated, Scobie was 'a good man', he was hunted by his doom by the harshness of his wife."²

That Scobie, the late Deputy Commissioner of police, had made an appalling mess of things cannot be denied. The Heart of the Matter is a progressive account of it, from the first moment when he is passed over for promotion to the rank of Commissioner, to the disappointment of his restless, vaguely artistic wife - a disappointment so great that Scobie in his guilt makes a dubious if not illegal transaction with the diamond smuggler Yusuf to get money to send her on a trip to South Africa; to the adulterous affair with the school-girlish widow, Helen Rolt, on which he embarks during his wife's absence; to the now rapid deterioration of his public and private life; to the agony - for a Catholic of his temperament - of receiving the sacrament in a condition of mortal sin: to the still graver sin of despair and suicide by which Scobie ends his

career.

Scobie has something of both Pinkie and the whisky-priest in his character. He is, like Pinkie, involved in crime and he has, like the whisky-priest, a plodding desire to do good and an innate love of God which means, as Edward Sackville West puts it, "the love of one's fellow men raised to the highest power, at which every man assumes the form of Christ crucified, which is one aspect of the Incarnation."³ Pinkie, the whisky-priest and Scobie represent, according to R. W. B. Lewis, the murderer, the priest and the policeman, 'the dramatis personae of Greene's recurring drama and of his troubled universe.'⁴ Scobie, like the other two, always seems to move on a religious plane and has the air of a man possessed. Such a man is capable of Good as well as of Evil. The sinner and the saint meet in him and sometimes it is impossible to tell one from the other. The ambiguity of such a character is clearly suggested by the epigraph to *The Heart of the Matter*, taken from Peguy.⁵

When the novel opens, Scobie's honesty as a police officer is not at all in doubt, but he has been passed over for promotion. This hurts his wife, Louise, who has social and vaguely artistic ambitions and for whom failure to get promotion means the loss of face at the club. Scobie betrays a sense of guilt and failure in his relationship with his wife because of his inability to love her and to make her happy. She resolves to go to South Africa but Scobie tries to soothe her nerves: "It's the war", (p.25) the war within and war without give a special poignancy to Scobie's desire to keep his wife happy: "It had always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved" (p.25-26). This triggers off the chain of events which carries Scobie to his doom. So overpowering is the sense of pity in Scobie that he would have made the promise for arranging the passage money even if he had foreseen the terrible consequence. This is the heart of the matter so far as the unhappy life and death of Major Henry Scobie are concerned. He is a good man betrayed into evil by an obsession, 'the horrible and horrifying emotion of pity', which imposes contradictory obligations on him and brings him to an impasse.

Under the stress of circumstances and sway of pity Scobie forgets what his experience has taught him, 'that no human being can really understand another, and no one can arrange another's happiness'. He also knows that it is absurd to expect happiness in a world so full of misery. This clear-sightedness, however, does not relieve him of the haunting sense of responsibility. Scobie has to offer pity for everything, everywhere. At times it reaches universal proportions: "If one knew, be wondered, the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?" (p. 125). Scobie is too ready to play the part of pseudo-providence.

F.N. Lees brings to light the moral weakness in Scobie's nature: The personality presented is, in fact, a curiosity egotistic, blind one, insensitive to the fullness of others' existence, prone to sentimentality self-deceived in its very self-knowledge, and lacking in real moral courage."⁶

Scobie's overwhelming sense of pity poses threat to his professional integrity when he destroys the letter found concealed in the Captain's cabin on a Portuguese ship. He thus feels that he has joined the ranks of corrupt police officers: "They had been corrupted by money, and he had been corrupted by sentiment" (p. 54). Scobie feels deeply the incomprehensibility and the heartlessness of the scheme of things. At Pende, he is moved with an overwhelming pity on seeing the suffering of the child rescued from the torpedoed ship. Unable to bear the suffering of the dying child, he strikes a bargain with God: "Take away my peace for ever, but give her peace" (p.125). He wonders how so much of suffering and evil could co-exist with the infinite mercy and love of God. Greene has fully developed the themes of pity, fear, love and despair in this novel. God seems to answer Scobie's prayer and his troubles begin almost immediately. Helen Rolt a nineteen year old widow, who unwittingly provokes a crisis in his relations both with his wife and his Church. She comes into his life "on a stretcher grasping a stamp-album with her eyes shut fast" (p.148), thus marks a turning-point in his life. The act of love with Helen opens a decisive phase in Scobie's life. Driven by his own loneliness, Scobie extends himself in sympathy and compassion towards Helen. He thinks that he has been again handcuffed with responsibility.

Scobie is already on the horns of a dilemma. He can neither leave Louise nor marry Helen. The real test comes when Louise returns and presses him to take Communion. Scobie shudders at the idea of taking the Sacrament in a state of mortal sin, but is ultimately forced into it. "O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them." (p.225) As a Catholic, Scobie is damned by his knowledge: "O God, I am the only guilty one because I've known all 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 sufferings. I can only imagine it But there are limits to what I can do you or them" (p.258). The result is the tragic deadlock:

"You see it is an impasse, God, an impasse --" (259). So Major Scobie ends the deadlock by committing the act of ultimate despair - suicide. Scobie's sense of pity leads him not only to despair but to conscious blasphemy. In a note to Helen, Scobie says he loves her more than he loves God and goes to Communion in a state of mortal sin in order to protect Louise from the truth. The blasphemous note is the first sign of Scobie's spiritual corruption. Louise uses Sacrament as a weapon: either he will confess his sin

to the priest and give up his affair or will be forced to make an open declaration but he does neither. Scobie is aware of the terrible pain he is inflicting on God by his spiritual degradation. He feels as though "he had exiled himself so deeply in the desert that his skin had taken on the colour of the sand (p. 226).

Frank Kermode considers Scobie "a classic case of victimage" and says that the main issue of the book is that "Scobie's intolerable position is plotted by God: He demands more pity and love than anybody else and ought not to get them."⁷

Scobie's predicament: he is tormented by his love of God because he cannot reconcile it with his love of human beings. The only way out for him is to kill himself. But as a Catholic he cannot do it without wounding God. Scobie's love of God is inspired by the same pity which inspires his love of Louise or Helen. There is bitterness between him and God and he could speak to Him only as one speaks to an enemy'. Scobie seems to hear God's voice trying to refrain him from committing the desperate act of suicide, urging him to live, to give up either Louise or Helen and to trust them to His mercy, but caught in the conflicting tides of love he cannot but go down. He cannot transfer to God his burden of responsibility. His exaggerated sense of responsibility towards Louise, Helen, Wilson, Yusuf, his employers or even God – springs from his desire to protect others from pain that they suffers. Scobie's pity is a measure of his inhuman humility. Human relations cannot be based on one sided responsibility. Scobie attempts to do that and ends up with pitying those when he wants to love. "It had always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved" (p 25-26).

Conclusions: Greene has given us one of the most intuitive analysis of the emotion of pity as an obsession in the portrayal of Scobie. Scobie's relationships are all based on pity. As Marcel More says, Scobie is too weak to endure the sight of another's suffering. Greene points out that pity can not be a substitute for love. When separated from love, it is ultimately destructive. Pity is only an escape for the weak and the sentimental. It is the sentimental pity which leads Major Scobie from dishonesty to adultery, from adultery to sacrilegious communions and finally to suicide.

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