

The Image of Children in the Novels and Short Stories by Graham Greene

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Abstract:

“For writers it is always said that first twenty years of life contain the whole of experience – the rest is observation – but I think it is equally true of us all” (Greene 1976:61). Graham Greene was aware of the fact that a person’s character is shaped from their early childhood. One’s childhood determines the whole personality and moral attitudes. That is why the failure or moral decline of Greene’s characters has its roots in their unsatisfactory or sometimes even horrifying childhood. My paper attempts to show how the experience of childhood corresponds with the tension between the dream and reality in the novels and short stories by Graham Greene.

I. Introduction

Child characters hold a special place in Graham Greene’s books. Studying the human personality for his entire life, Greene was equally interested in adult and child characters and was well aware that one’s personality is shaped mainly in his or her childhood. Therefore, Greene returns to the childhood of many of his characters, which has a dominant significance in the formation of the characters’ moral profiles. Truly specific is Greene’s depiction of children’s innocence and the virgin soul on the one hand and their cruelty, often verging on brutality with elements of pure evil, on the other hand. Greene’s books frequently incorporate the subject of a helpless child, who becomes the victim of its closest environment, in particular the family, shaping the child’s future fate. Nor does the author ignore the issue of children suffering from physical or mental deprivation or misused for power interests.

II. Brighton Rock

Pinkie, nicknamed “the Boy,” from *Brighton Rock* (1938) appears to be Greene’s character most stigmatised by his childhood. As the nickname implies, Pinkie – almost full-aged – never matures, remaining an eternal boy trapped in the cage of his tragic childhood. This takes him to the head of a Brighton gang, where circumstances even make him a killer. Pinkie never felt any positive attitudes. His horror-like childhood crept behind him like a nightmare. No one gave him a chance; he was always the bad one:

His cells were formed of the cement school-playground; the dead fire and the dying man in the St Pancras waiting-room, his bed at Franks and his parents’ bed. An awful resentment stirred in him - why shouldn’t he have had his chance like all the rest, seen his glimpse of heaven if it was only a crack between the Brighton walls [...] (Greene 1980a:228).

Therefore he decided to show the world: “There was poison in his veins, though he grinned and bore it. He had been insulted, he was going to show the world. They thought because he was only seventeen

[...]” (Greene 1980a:68). Pinkie’s evil is deeply rooted in his childhood; his memories of the childhood are as follows:

‘Saturday,’ he thought, ‘today’s Saturday,’ remembering the room at home, the frightening weekly exercise of his parents which he watched from his single bed. That was what they expected of you, every polony you met had her eye on the bed: his virginity straightened in him like sex (Greene 1980a:90).

Such associations make Pinkie absolutely unable to feel a positive emotional relationship, including love. Pinkie’s attitude to love is singular:

and the boy laughed again at the fine words people gave to a dirty act: love, beauty [...] All his pride coiled like a watch spring round the thought that he wasn’t deceived, that he wasn’t going to give himself up, to marriage and the birth of children (Greene 1980a:92).

When going to see the house he had lived in with his parents, Pinkie found only rubble, which aroused strongly negative feelings in him as well:

His home was gone: a flat place among the rubble may have marked its hearth; the room at the bend of the stairs where the Saturday night exercise had taken place was now just air. He wondered with horror whether it all had to be built again for him; it looked better as air (Greene 1980a:141).

Pinkie’s visit to Nelson Place, his home neighbourhood, includes a very interesting passage of Pinkie seeing some children:

A child with its leg in an iron brace limped blindly into him; he pushed it off, someone said in a high treble ‘stick ‘em up.’ They took his mind back and he hated them for it; it was like the dreadful appeal of innocence, but there was not innocence; you had to go back a long way further before you got innocence; innocence was a slobbering mouth, a toothless gum pulling at the teats; perhaps not even that; innocence was the ugly cry of birth (Greene 1980a:141).

Pinkie is often believed to be Greene’s blackest character, a personification of pure evil. I do not quite agree, inclining to share the view of the author himself, who – many years after the publication of the book – said in an interview: “I don’t think that Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were not committed in defiance of God, but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born” (Sherry 1989:638).

Similarly, a poor, sixteen-year-old waitress, Rosa, had a family background similar to Pinkie’s. She suspects Pinkie of a murder. In order to prevent her from giving evidence against him, Pinkie decides to marry her. However, he first has to obtain her parents’ consent. This very scene uncovers Rosa’s childhood and parents. They converted her value into money, trying to “squeeze” out of Pinkie as much money as possible. Finally, the parents “sell” Rosa at a price of fifteen guineas. While Pinkie has built a defence shell to protect him against love, Rosa – never feeling any affection as a child either – falls in love with Pinkie: “I love you, Pinkie. I don’t care what you do. I love you for ever. You’ve been good to me. Wherever you go, I’ll go too” (Greene 1980a:188).

However, her love is not a true one. It is her gratefulness for being handled as a human being; it is a compensation for all she should have got long ago but has never enjoyed. Her desire for attachment, love and understanding is so strong that it will push aside Rosa’s system of values and moral restraints.

III. Short Stories

More frequently than in the novels, children appear in Greene's short stories. It is chiefly in short stories where the author pays attention to evil as the contrast to the traditional concept of children's purity. This is apparent in Greene's short story "The Destructors." The main characters are a bunch of little rascals, who break into a historically valuable house and – led by fifteen-year-old Trevor – start to vandalize it mercilessly. Greene wants to show a genuine metaphysical evil. The children do not get any benefit from their vandalism, which distinguishes their evil from instinctive evil such as a theft or murder for money. The children are obsessed by their behaviour. It is a joy of evil, a joy of destruction. It is evil for evil's sake. Additionally, Greene emphasised the children's destructive obsession by the language he used:

'Good. You've just got to go wandering round now. The kitchen's in the basement. Smash all the china and glass and bottles you can lay hold of. Don't turn on the taps - we don't want a flood - yet. Then go into all the rooms and turn out drawers. If they are locked get one of the others to break them open. Tear up any papers you find and smash all the ornaments. Better take a carving-knife with you from the kitchen. The bedroom's opposite here. Open the pillows and tear up the sheets. That's enough for the moment. And you, Blackie, when you've finished in here crack the plaster in the passage up with your sledge - hammer' (Greene 1974:336).

Trevor – a character, in Nietzsche's words, "beyond good and evil" – is the leader. He feels neither hatred nor mercy, since both of them are weaknesses. His strong personality has already subdued the others. In this the author demonstrates human inclination towards leadership and leaders. A similar situation occurred in the story, "A Discovery in the Woods," where a group of children also gave in to a strong authority. While in the latter short story the authority was mostly positively oriented, in "The Destructors" the children followed their "hero" regardless his and their wickedness, which however children often fail to realize when acting.

IV. Children's Positive and Negative Characteristics

Children are often egocentric and do not hesitate to use any possible means to get what they want. One of such characters is Milly, a daughter of James Wormold in *Our Man in Havana* (1958). Milly sets her heart on having a horse but her father cannot afford one. Milly's wish indirectly forces her father to start working for the British secret service. In fact, Milly was unable to realize the effects of her pressure and what sacrifices parents are able to make to please their children, and her demand was more of a girlish caprice. Her true personality emerges when Milly refuses Captain Segur due to his inhumanity. Even though she enjoys presents and needs money, Molly would not accept anything from Segura because it contradicts her dislike for violence.

Angel from the novel *The Comedians* (1966) is a similar character, a child concentrated on himself. Wishing to be in the centre of everyone's attention, he is selfish and suspicious. He has all the features that adults try to hide. His situation is all the more ironical when the main character, Brown, has an affair with his mother, Martha Pined, and Angel has no choice but to share her love with him. As one scholar puts it, "[I]ronically his chief rival is Martha's child Angel to whom she gives all her care; Angel's bleak gaze suggests that he guesses at something going on and resents the intrusion on his own demanding love for his mother" (Sharrock 1984:228). The situation turns out positively for Angel, Brown giving up his relationship with Martha.

Greene's works portrayed not only negative child characters. His child protagonists with the best personalities certainly include Coral Fellows from *The Power and the Glory* (1940). She is an independent girl, ready to push her luck. Coral does not submit to any dogmas or prejudices. She shows her moral credit when she helps a priest and hides him, putting her life at risk. Coral is based on a girl named Astrid Rasmussen whom Greene met in Mexico.

Just as Fru Rasmussen's elder daughter led Greene to shelter for the night, so Coral Fellows finds shelter for the hunted priest - her independence and courage heightened

for the purposes of the novel, the police lieutenant does not frighten her and she can feel sympathy for the priest's desire for alcohol, bringing him a bottle of Cerveza Moctezuma (Sherry 1989:703).

Coral thus becomes a very positive character, especially thanks to her humanity, thoughtfulness, and questioning dogmas.

V. Autobiographical Elements in Greene's Portraits

As a child, Greene often suffered from emotional puzzlement, which strongly affected his psyche. He never forgot how he had felt and used that experience in his literary works. The author several times observed the fragility of a child's soul and its particularities, showing that it is exposed to a traumatising world, which the child does not fully understand, to its inner confusion and to rational and irrational fears. In the short story "The Basement Room," the main character is Philip, a seven-year-old boy, who stays with servant Baines when his parents have left. The servant takes advantage of his wife's departure and brings home a very young girlfriend of his. However, things go wrong when Baines's despotic wife returns unexpected and Baines accidentally pushes her down the stairs in quarrel. Philip is the only witness. Baines's life depends on him on the one hand and justice on the other hand. Philip is shaken by the situation he has seen. He likes Baines and knows how much his wife tormented him but he also realizes that Baines has committed a crime. Philip is dragged into the adult world, whose laws, intrigues and rules he does not understand.

A kind of embittered happiness and self-pity made him cry; he was lost; there wouldn't be any more secrets to keep; he surrendered responsibility once and for all. Let grown up people keep to their world and he would keep to his, safe in the small garden between the plane-trees (Greene 1974:480).

Philip is so much bewildered by what has happened that he cannot decide which side to take.

Philip could tell that there was a message he was trying to convey, but he shut his mind to it. He loved Baines, but Baines had involved him in secrets, in fears he didn't understand. That was what happened when you loved - you got involved; and Philip extricated himself from life, from love, from Baines (Greene 1974:486).

At last he says what he saw: "He wasn't going to keep any more secrets: he was going to finish once and for all with everything, with Baines and Mrs. Baines and the grown-up life beyond him" (Greene 1974:488). Interesting is the way the author "deals with" Philip afterwards. Philip retires into his shell, remaining completely alone for all his life, unable to interact with the others. Brigitta, unwanted daughter of a priest who is supposed to be celibate, encounters a similar situation in *The Power and the Glory*:

The child stood there, watching him with acuteness and contempt. 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 1977:754).

Her father is persecuted; her mother regards her as a product of sin. Brigitta thus grows up in a complicated family climate she can hardly understand, which affects her personality: "He caught the look in the child's eyes which frightened him - it was again as if a grown woman was there before her time, making her plans, aware of far too much. It was like seeing his own mortal sin look back at him, without contrition" (Greene 1977:754). Brigitta becomes the victim of the adult world, which - just as well as Philip - she finds confounding and which scars her for life.

Green, as a child frightened by his visions of witches hidden behind the chest of drawers, evil knife killers and other figments of his imagination, always respects the children's world and opposes disparaging or ignoring children's worries. This approach is most apparent in his short story "The End

of the Party.” Two nine-year-old boys – Peter and Francis Morton – are invited to a party where they would play common games, including hide-and-peek, with the other children. Francis is rather mentally labile and playing hide-and-peek in the dark scares him to death. Begging – all day long – for being allowed to stay home, he only gets the following answer from his parents: “Don’t be silly. You must go. We’ve accepted Mrs. Henne-Falcon’s invitation” (Greene 1974:555).

Therefore, the parents’ efforts not to hurt the host’s feelings completely overshadow their interest in what is going on in their own child’s mind. Indeed, hide-and-peek is played at the party. Peter knows where Francis is hidden and wants to calm him down. However when Peter touches him, Francis is so petrified that he dies. Greene gives us to understand that children’s inner world should not be underestimated and children’s problems that we – adults – consider trivial should not be downplayed.

VI. Children as Victims of Political Events

Greene was a sensitive man, unable to stand aside if children were sacrificed for political and power ambitions. In *The Power and the Glory* it is the death of a small Indian, who is accidentally injured in a gunfight and dies. The gruesomeness of the act is emphasised by the fact that the hardly three-year-old boy becomes the victim of ideological contentions.

It was a male child - perhaps three years old: a withered bullet head with a mop of black hair: unconscious, but not dead: he could feel the faintest movement in the breast. He thought of disease again until he took out his hand and found that the child was wet with blood, not sweat. Horror and disgust touched him - violence everywhere: was there no end to violence? (Greene 1977:809)

This motif is further developed in *The Quiet American* (1955). The war that was raging in Indochina left thousands of children as casualties. One day, during the shopping time, i.e., when there is the highest concentration of women and children in the streets, General Thé orders a bomb to be detonated on a Saigon square. The consequences are catastrophic: “A woman sat on the ground with what was left of her baby in her lap; with a kind of modesty she had covered it with her straw peasant hat” (Greene 1955:634). Greene himself had a similar personal experience: “Fifteen miles behind me was the scene of the Lari massacre, where 150 wives and children of the Kikuyu Home Guard were hacked to death” (Greene 1980b:186).

The third child character entangled in a complicated political plot is Sam from *The Human Factor* (1978). His father, secret agent Castle, works for both the parties and is forced to emigrate to the Soviet Union, leaving his wife and son in Britain. Castle’s wife could follow her husband but his son’s departure is forbidden indirectly. Obviously, the wife would not leave without her son and, thus, Sam becomes involved in a loathsome scuffle.

VII. Conclusion

Graham Greene’s child characters are not idealised in any way. On the contrary, the author often highlights the dark side of childhood: “Evil is not necessarily something which comes with age and experience. It exists, it is there at any age” (Sherry 1989:637). The evil present in Greene’s child characters results, in the majority of cases, from the tension arising from an unmanageable contradiction between the reality in which the characters live and their dream lives. No wonder that an author bearing primarily moral aspects in mind was concerned with that discrepancy, trying to analyse the causes of evil. We must realize evil and know its causes before we can handle it. At the same time, the author points out adults’ ignorance of the world of the child. Perhaps this was the reason that Greene and Vivien did not want children and Greene left for Liberia shortly after his son was born. As Greene’s biographer has pointed out, “No doubt also he wanted to escape the tasks of fatherhood” (Sherry 1989:510). However, Greene’s child characters can be pure, acting on the basis of humane principles, refusing prejudices, questioning dogmas and, thus, making a small step forward in changing the world.

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