

## SOCIAL COMMITMENT IN GRAHAM GREENE

The aim of this study is, as the title suggests, to show the works of Graham Greene from a somewhat unusual angle. It endeavours to outline the development of his approach to some important questions as this is reflected in his work. Stress is laid on his social criticism, on his struggle against fascism, on his interest in the third world, on the necessity of commitment in the world of conflicts and on other related aspects. Special interest attaches to the changes which may be observed in his works since the fifties; on the other hand comparatively little attention is paid in this study to the so-called Catholic novels which have been sufficiently analyzed in the past. It is mainly the novels that are dealt with but in separate chapters Greene's essays, dramas, and short stories are also treated. Although such an approach might be considered onesided, nevertheless, it can be useful in helping to correct the traditional picture of Graham Greene.

The first chapter, *Biography and Autobiography*, is devoted to the problem of autobiographical elements in Graham Greene's work. After a brief outline of Greene's life (and his extensive travels and some aspects of his character) the book *A Sort of Life* (1971) and other at least partly autobiographical works are discussed. Further attention is paid to autobiographical elements in Greene's fiction. (Parallels between some motives and personages in Greene's fiction and some facts from his own life, his childhood memories and some recurrent situations are examined.) In spite of all this one must be always on guard against Greene's pseudoautobiographical constructions, as we know very well the sort of practical joker Greene is.

The second chapter, *Literary Beginnings*, examines Greene's first published books, the main aim being to show many of the ideas or attitudes, typical for his later works, in germinal form. In *Babbling April* (1925) some later significant themes or attitudes are demonstrated: suicidal games, a tragicomic approach to the world, the problem of commitment, the necessity of a personal decision: either art for art's sake or active life. The first novel, *The Man Within* (1929), already displays some features common in Greene's mature works (a hunted hero, the importance of childhood experience, the quest for an ideal father, the problem of responsibility and conscience). Similar features may be found in the two rather manneristic novels, later rejected by Greene: *The Name of Action* (1930) and *Rumour at Nightfall* (1931). Especially the first of these, which is based on Greene's own experience, shows many later very well known characteristics: an Englishman abroad, taking part in an uprising, his love to a woman playing an important role in his motivation, etc. In *Lord Rochester's Monkey* (finished 1932) Greene identifies himself in many respects with his hero and thus some quite obvious characteristics of his work may be observed: life on the boundary between religion and atheism, boredom, practical jokes, an Aretinolike predilection for sex, antipathy to hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness, interest in parody.

The next chapter, *Social and Political Aspects in Greene's Works of the Thirties*, deals with the political situation in the thirties (world-wide depression, fascism, civil war in Spain) and its reflection in Greene's fiction. Another important impulse for Greene was his journey to Africa which strengthened his critical attitude towards contemporary European civilization. Greene's humanism, which had been rather abstract in the previous decade, acquires now, under the influence of the above-mentioned conflicts, more concrete features.

The novel *Stamboul Train* (1932) shows some prominent contradictions of a bourgeois civilization but the main characteristic of this world for Greene is chaos. In the next novel, *It's a Battlefield* (1934), this chaos is even worse and the lot of the industrial workers savours strongly of hell. There seems to be no solution to this situation. *England Made Me* (1935) shows this world from another point of view: moral changes in the present world are of such a nature, that only quite ruthless heroes like Krogh can succeed, people like Anthony Farrant are too old-fashioned and too human and naïve to be able to compete with them successfully. The world in the last three novels is more sombre than before. In *Gun for Sale* (1936) the murderer Raven is shown as a product of environment, of poverty; the dark tone is sometimes balanced by grotesque situations. *Brighton Rock* (1938) has many features in common with the preceding novel, the rejection of contemporary civilization is even stronger, and at the same time the social roots of fascism are outlined. This rejection of bourgeois civilization recurs again in *The Confidential Agent* (1939) and any other social formation seems to be better than the present state.

In comparison with the twenties Greene is now well aware of the hard lot of the working-class, of the growing polarization of society and of the social roots of fascism. But he sees no solution, no outcome of the general chaos, his only positive programme being the necessity of the struggle against fascism.

In the chapter *The War and after the War* Greene's novels of the religious period are only briefly reviewed. In *The Power and the Glory* (1940) the social problems remain the same as in the late thirties but some sort of a solution has been found. Both the Lieutenant and the Priest are well aware of the hard conditions of the poor, for both of them children represent the greatest value but the Lieutenant, who tries to help the poor, is a cosmic pessimist while the Priest, who has now Greene's sympathies, sees the only hope in salvation after death. The next novel *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) is aimed directly against fascism and with its grotesque and bizarre comic scenes the situation does not seem to be so precarious. In *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The Third Man* (1950), and *The End of the Affair* (1951) a preoccupation with the supernatural still prevails, although everything is more balanced and the tone is not so sombre.

The fifties are for Greene *The Period of Transition* in many respects. Religious questions successively lose their dominant position or are dealt with in another manner. The atmosphere of détente in Europe, the inner changes in the Catholic church and the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin seem to be the main factors in this development. It is at this time that the interest in the third world becomes stronger as do the comic and absurd elements in his works. After the light novel *Loser Takes All* (1955) *The Quiet American* (1955), published in the same year, is more important in many respects. It is situated in Vietnam where the long colonial war was in progress and the novelist shows increasing sympathies towards the insurgents and at the same time great antipathy against the Americans. Whether commitment is necessary if one is to remain humane is the central question posed by the novel. The hitherto underestimated novel *Our Man in Havana* (1958) is important because of the crazy view of the world, including politics. Under the disguise of the crazy and absurd humour some significant ideas appear for the first time in Greene. *A Burnt-Out Case* (1961) is impressive for its clear rejection of religious doctrinarism and hypocrisy. Here the necessity of the collaboration of all men of

good will for the well-being of mankind is proclaimed, the necessity of collaboration of Christians and atheists.

The chapter *The Perspective of the Last Novels* deals with the last five novels so far published. Common to all of them seems to be the understanding of life as a comedy; recognition and depiction of the true nature of liberation movements in the third world play here a great role.

In the first of these novels, *The Comedians* (1966), Haiti under the dictatorship of Papa Doc is a symbol of the contemporary world of violence, against which only Christians and Marxists fight. The picaresque lighter novel *Travels With My Aunt* (1969) takes up some comic points of the preceding novel again while *The Honorary Consul* (1973), a treatment of different forms of love, seems to be the most important novel of this last period. A cursory comparison with *The Power and the Glory* shows clearly the line of Greene's development: while in *The Power and the Glory* a priest is persecuted by an atheist state, in *The Honorary Consul* a priest is a leader of a guerilla group that fights against a dictator who is supported by the official Church, represented by the local archbishop. The guerilla-priest cooperates with Marxists and at the end dies by a police bullet. *The Human Factor* (1978) is again devoted to the recurrent question of social commitment illustrated this time by the problem of apartheid and its NATO allies. The main hero risks everything, even the happiness of his family, in order to thwart a western plan „Uncle Remus“, whose aim is to prolong the white rule in South Africa. The last novel *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or the Bomb Party* (1980) has some features of a morality. It describes and criticizes the greediness of the very rich and their desire for power, in rather sombre tones.

In the foregoing chapters attention was concentrated mainly on the novels. In the following three the author of the study is concerned with the remaining genres used by Greene (essays, dramas, short stories), which have hitherto been rather neglected.

In any attempt, aimed at tracing Greene's intellectual development *Essays* are very significant. In them many of the influences that had formed him, the sources of some of his ideas and obsessions and also his attitudes towards reality are manifest. In connection with childhood influences, especially books, the problem of evil is discussed. It is obvious that his conversion to Catholicism was the result of his previous views and not the cause of them. Clearly visible is Greene's negative attitude towards all doctrinaire systems, against which he always defends the rights of individuals. His strong social feeling is probably the main motive of his anticonservative and openly progressive position both in politics and the world of ideas. Most of the essays in *Collected Essays* (1969) are, however, of an older date and do not reflect the changes in Greene's development in the last decades so intensively as his fiction.

Greene's *Short Stories* are followed from the beginnings up to the present day the stress being laid on his post-war works. In the thirties, childhood impressions and social criticism are the prevailing themes (the dividing line between childhood and maturity and between different social and intellectual milieus plays often a great role). After the war comic elements and absurd humour become successively stronger, prevailing in the last collection of short stories. The stories *Under the Garden* and *A Discovery in the Woods* are analyzed in detail.

In the chapter *Dramas* five plays by Greene are analyzed, the parallels to other works, mainly novels, being stressed. From the point of view of social commitment especially two plays seem to be relevant: *The Living Room* (1953) for its criticism of sterile religious dogmatism and hypocrisy and *Carving a Statue* (1964) for its rejection of barren and egoistic artists.

The last part, *Experiencing Africa*, treats summarily Greene's works dealing with Africa — travel books, essays, and fiction, and shows how Greene's approach to

this continent changed, from the early childhood impressions gained from fiction to the works of the last decade. Original romantic admiration gives way to a more realistic approach in the post-war period, the critique of the effects of civilization in Africa develops successively into a direct critique of colonialism.

In the *Conclusion*, some of the main tendencies observed in Greene are summarized.