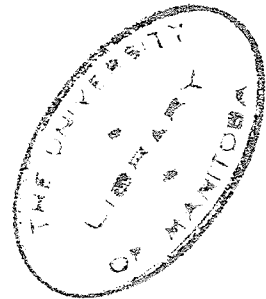


THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE NOVELS OF GRAHAM GREENE

by

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Initially, two connotations of the problem of evil are noted in this thesis. The most common meaning is the theological problem: the problem of reconciling the evil in the world with a just and all-powerful God. The other meaning has been called, in this thesis, the literary problem of evil; this is the problem which confronts each individual, to varying degrees: shall I choose the good or the evil? The literary problem is of the greatest importance to the novelist. It provides dramatic conflict within the individual. Both the theological and the literary problems of evil are considered and utilized by Greene, but his emphasis, as is the emphasis in this thesis, is on the latter problem.

I have pointed out in the first chapter that a novelist's importance in the twentieth century depends, technical abilities being equal, upon the attitude he takes to the problem of evil. Three principal attitudes to evil are considered. Somerset Maugham is used to illustrate the first, and least significant, type of writer: the one who is aware of but is indifferent to evil. Aldous Huxley represents the second group: this type of writer is aware of evil and critical of it, but is unable to offer a solution to the problem. The third group has Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene as its central figures: they write from the standpoint of christian morality and offer a solution and a hope to man.

Greene shows a slight development in his four main novels. The first is Brighton Rock, where evil is the keynote all the

way through, and damnation seems the ultimate end for the protagonist. Greene progresses from this black picture to the grey ones of The Power and the Glory, The Heart of the Matter, and The End of the Affair. In these novels, Greene shows that man is a complex of good and evil tendencies and that though he cannot win, usually, in the struggle with evil, he can attain a spiritual awareness and eventually salvation because of the very struggle which seems to drag him down.

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# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE NOVELS OF GRAHAM GREENE

## CHAPTER I

### The Problem of Evil

I suppose it would be generally acceptable to say that a great many people lose their faith in the Christian religion because of the problem of evil. It is important to note this fact, because it indicates, if nothing else, that for a great number of people there is a difficulty involved in accounting for the evil in the world. The problem simply stated is this: "Why does God permit suffering, mental and physical, and the moral evil of sin, in this world which He has created and governs?"<sup>1</sup> In other words, many people are bewildered as to how a merciful and just God can permit sin and suffering in a world over which He has absolute control. This problem is the stumbling block which prevents so many from retaining an ordered picture of the universe.

I shall attempt, in the body of this thesis, to show Graham Greene's vivid awareness of evil and the problem that this evil presents. The solution that Greene indicates to this problem I shall also attempt to reveal. Before doing this, however, some preliminary definitions and distinctions must be made, in order that my terms may be understood. In this first chapter the predominance of evil in the modern world and its impingement on some twentieth century novelists will also be shown. An examination of their reaction to evil will lead us to Greene's particular handling of the theme and

his significance as a novelist.

St. Thomas Aquinas once said: "One opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence, also what evil is must be known from the nature of good."<sup>2</sup> Following this analogy, darkness is an absence of light; therefore, evil must be an absence of good. More specifically, evil is not something positive, nor is it absolutely nothing; it is a lack of good, the absence of a perfection which should be had by a particular nature. St. Thomas calls evil a 'privation'. Of course, to be evil the privation must be of something that is due to the particular nature involved: a man without a tail is not suffering an evil because of this limitation, but a man without an eye certainly is.

A distinction must be made between physical and moral evil. Physical evil is the privation of a physical perfection which the subject should have: a man should have an eye, trees should have leaves. Moral evil deprives a rational creature of the proper order to the end. Moral evil is, therefore also a privation; not, however, a privation in the physical order, but in the moral, the order of the end. Moral evil and physical evil can both refer to the privation or to what causes the privation.

A morally evil act is one which tends to lead a man away from his final end. However, man can never choose this moral evil as such. He always chooses the apparent good in the evil; it is the aspect of good in the thing, that he

chooses, not the evil aspect. For example, if I choose to steal some money, I do not steal it because it is a contravention of God's commandment, but because the money can bring me physical pleasure.

One more distinction should be made in order that my terms may be understood. It is the distinction between the literary and the theological problems of evil. The problem of evil, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, is primarily a theological one. There is, nonetheless, a literary problem of evil, which supplies the subject matter for some of the greatest novels. We have seen at the beginning of this chapter a statement of the theological problem, which involved the reconciling of evil in the world with a just God. The problem of evil in the literary sense is not a search for a teleological explanation of the presence of evil in the world. The literary world assumes the existence of evil and deals with the struggle in the human heart, between good and evil. The literary problem of evil is that which every individual has in varying degrees: shall I choose this (the real good) or that (the apparent good, i.e. evil)? In other words, the literary problem is really the moral or psychological problem, where the individual is confronted with two alternatives, one good and one evil. This problem of the individual, which involves the most profound drama and conflict, is utilized by the novelist. He shows how a certain man copes with the problem. This man's success or failure, his happiness or misery depend, to a great extent, on his solution of the problem. But, in any event, it is the struggle

that is usually important to the novelist.

That evil abounds in the world today, few will be so foolish as to deny. Evil, as it presented itself to the twentieth century novelist, assumed a particularly blatant form. In our era there has been violence in many forms: violent peace, violent wars and violent change, and all this violence has impinged on the twentieth century writer. The violence of war and the evils implied by violence are immediately realized when we think of such things as the prison camps of Dachau and Buchenwald, where the gas chambers put thousands to death. If one feels inclined to toss this off as an isolated incident, the work of the evil rabble-rouser Hitler, these words of Arnold Toynbee should be heeded:

It is no more possible for the West to disclaim responsibility for Hitler, or, indeed, responsibility for Marx, than it is for it to claim, as its perquisite, the merits of christianity. ...If an Englishman, Frenchman, or American thanks God that he has not committed atrocities like those Germans, he is not exculpating himself, but is convicting himself of being a Pharisee. For us non-German Westerners, the true moral of Hitlerism is: This is what any of the rest of us might have done and may still do, but for the grace of God. This is what the children of our Western Civilization are capable of, when they abandon the worship of the God who is love.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious from this passage that there is something wrong with man, and something particularly wrong with the world of the twentieth century; something that affects everyone and for which we are all in part responsible. The turning point in recent history for our twentieth century society seems to have been the First World War.

Writers, especially English writers, were particularly



sensitive to the unpleasant features of this period because of the era of facile optimism and prosperity that had preceded it. The pre-war era from the turn of the century to 1912 was an era of the greatest hope: there was economic prosperity, expanding opportunity and an increased faith in humanity and its capacity for progress. There had been a hundred years since the last major European conflict (the Napoleonic wars), and prospects were bright for an era of unprecedented peace and progress. The seeds of reaction to this attitude are present in its very nature. The main flaw is obvious: a faith in man instead of a faith in God.

Christian humanists would do well to remember that Christ's chosen leader on earth, his chief disciple, Peter, even he denied Christ three times before the crucifixion. The moral of this incident has been repeated endlessly throughout history: put your faith in man with his fallen nature and he will let you down every time. In the same essay from which I quoted above, Toynbee says: "I have declared my belief that man-worship...is a bad religion in itself and is also one that will never satisfy Mankind's spiritual needs."<sup>4</sup>

Suffice it to say that after the war there was a reaction against the humanistic liberalism of the preceding era. This reaction entered into every phase of life. People were disappointed that the promised opportunities did not materialize, the war austerity seemed to linger on in the economic field, and there was a spiritual decadence caused in large part because an ideal had been temporarily abandoned and no sub-

stitute appeared to fill the vacancy. Here is H. V. Routh on this subject:

As the problems of the first war had not been solved, a second war seemed inevitable, and this prospect favored a continuance of war morality. The burden of the age was insecurity. If public men made hay while the sun shone, the pleasure-seekers, like soldiers on leave from the front, followed their example. Why take thought for the morrow? It was not an agreeable subject for meditation. It was quicker and more spectacular to possess a motor-car (then first becoming fashionable) than to possess oneself. So the Smart Set, like Galsworthy's white monkey, sucked the orange dry and flung it away, mocking and jazzing.<sup>5</sup>

I have tried to indicate in the last few paragraphs the moral climate which prevailed in England during the post-war period, and to point out a few of its causes. It is true, although a little facile, to say that this was a period of depression and disillusionment. This is the environment in which 'the twentieth century writers' lived and wrote. Let us turn, then, to the literature of the period where we shall see the conditions and the conduct of this society clearly portrayed. And the literature of this period shows that moral and physical evil, whether recognized as such by the writers or not, were present in abundance, as they are still today.

The great test of a writer during this period, technical abilities being equal, is largely to what degree of penetration and understanding he can attain in presenting contemporary violence and evil and their effect on the people of the time. All the great writers of this period, Huxley, Forster, James, Joyce, Eliot and Lawrence have shown an awareness of this violent change and eruption, and their subsequent evils.

It will be part of my purpose, later in this thesis, to show that Greene, through his keen awareness of evil and his handling of it, has added something significant to the literature of our time. Perhaps the lesser writers have failed to achieve a place in the literary tradition of the language because of a failure to recognize a veritable 'wasteland' in regard to the world of the spirit. In the last analysis, this is the age of unsurpassed material progress and spiritual regress, and by not realizing this, a writer is doomed to oblivion.

This disillusionment, abandonment, and lack of principle was reflected, and often reacted against, in the literature of the time. Many important writers had something to say about the deplorable state of man; few of them, however, had anything significant to offer in the way of relief. Two volumes of the time exemplify this mood of antipathy. One was The Wasteland of T. S. Eliot, which pointed out, among other things, the spiritual desert through which civilization was travelling. This poem was followed - seven or eight years later, in the late twenties - by the other volume, the novel Point Counterpoint. In this work, Aldous Huxley showed the futility and pointlessness of various existences in particular, and the 'cul de sac' for which society in general was headed.

In the remainder of this opening chapter I propose to look into, very briefly, some work of the following writers: Huxley, Maugham, and Waugh. From looking into these authors I hope to establish the fact that there are three predominant

attitudes to evil taken by leading literary figures of our day. I also hope to establish, although this point will be more fully treated later, that the quality of work of the individual author depends, technical ability being equal, on the attitude to evil that he takes.

Of the three attitudes to evil that I mentioned, the first, to begin at the lowest level, is that of Somerset Maugham. Maugham's writing indicates a negative attitude to evil; or worse, an indifferent acceptance of it. Maugham has professed on many occasions to be interested primarily in telling a 'rattling good tale', and surely his ability to do so is his main claim to fame. He often draws vivid and accurate pictures of our times and our society; such as he does, for example, in Of Human Bondage and The Moon and Sixpence. The central character in each of these novels is striving for some unknown quantity; usually it is a search for a norm or meaning for life. However, this norm, if found, is a materialistic one; life is either just a mystical attempt on the part of the individual to achieve a vague Oneness, or it is a futile pattern, which can be beautiful, but is always meaningless. Thus, Maugham, speaking in The Moon and Sixpence about the artist laying himself bare before his audience, says: "To pursue his secret has something of the fascination of a detective story. It is a riddle which shares with the universe the merit of having no answer."<sup>6</sup> Moral evil, as such, is not recognized; it is merely portrayed as an integrant part of the twentieth century whirl, and, therefore, fair game for the

novelist. To Maugham's characters, such as Philip Carey and George Strickland, existence is often painful, but it is a mysterious painfulness that is not explored by Maugham. Further, the immorality that is rampant throughout his novels is not presented as a blot on human lives or an impediment to the individual's fulfilment, but rather as a means of sensationalism and cheap sentiment in the novel. H. V. Routh says of Maugham:

His protagonists are not sordid or subhuman, but apparently insensible to any motive but their own inclinations and otherwise as good as you and I. Nor does he conceal that his adventurers, sensualists, and law-breakers are playing with fire. One feels that the ghost of tragedy is lurking somewhere behind the scenes, waiting for the cue, which does not come, because there is no eternal law to vindicate. There is only the artist's ability to manoeuvre events and sustain interest through craftsmanship.<sup>7</sup>

This, I suspect, is the last word on Maugham as a novelist: a fine craftsman, a good story-teller, but a man lacking the ability to see the underlying reality of things and their significance, and therefore losing the sense of the real tragedy of human life. We shall see what Maugham has missed when we look at the third type of writer. Maugham, then, is an example of the first, and as I suggested, lowest, type of twentieth century novelist. (I am of course speaking only of those novelists who are considered literary artists.) Writers of this type are faithful chroniclers of the manners, life and perhaps the morals of the age, but they are not interpreters of the age. Nor do they perceive the implications of people's actions; usually, they are content to exploit a loose and wild-

living character for the sensationalism and narrative effectiveness. Maugham, in no sense original, is a noted writer because a superb craftsman; he falls short of greatness in spite, or perhaps because of, this fact.

The second type of novelist is exemplified by Aldous Huxley. This is far and away the largest of the three groups that I intend to mention. Needless to say, many other writers besides Huxley could have been used to exemplify it. Franz Kafka would have served admirably, but I have chosen Huxley as I am a little more familiar with his work, and furthermore, Huxley's work is not allegorical (as Kafka's is) and is more easily understood.

This second group of novelists is far more perceptive than the first. Evil to them is a fact and a fearful blight on man's existence. They are aware of the insidious and destructive nature of evil and of the firmness with which it has gripped our society. They portray evil for what it is: a sure means to the downfall of man and his world. There is, however, a dimension lacking in the characters they portray, and seemingly, therefore, in themselves. Very few, if any, of their characters 'know' or 'realize' in the sense of these words which I shall later point out. B. Ifor Evans hints at what is missing when he says:

If unity is to be discovered in the varied work within the period (that is, the inter-war period) it will be found in an increasing recognition of the degree to which civilization has been disrupted. Few of the genuinely creative minds offer any complete or satisfying solution of the dilemma. They are able to diagnose the disease of their age without the strength to heal it.<sup>8</sup>

This then is what is lacking in these writers: there is an absence of a solid standpoint from which to criticize. They criticize the age, realizing in part what is wrong, but are unable to show the deeper reason for their disgust, and cannot suggest a remedy for the ills they depict.

I think this fact can be illustrated by a cursory look at Huxley's Point Counterpoint. After reading this novel I suppose one would be inclined to say that Huxley thinks of himself as a man with a mission. What else is indicated by the ferocity of his criticism, the disdain with which he portrays his generation? It must be concluded too, from the tone of the novel in general and the character of Mark Rampion in particular, that Huxley has hopes for a better world, possibly partly through his own writing. So often throughout this book there is a pronouncement either from the omniscient author, or in a dialogue of some characters, that has the tone of a message for society. This aspect of the novel is particularly evident in the diatribes of Mark Rampion. Rampion, the only character in the book not frowned upon by the author, presumably speaks for Huxley. In most of the book Rampion is exhorting everyone within earshot 'to be a perfect animal and a perfect human'; he complains about people who "could have been perfectly decent human beings if they'd just gone about behaving naturally, in accordance with their instincts";<sup>9</sup> and another time he says, "Nobody's asking you to be anything but a man. A man, mind you, not an angel or a devil."<sup>10</sup> And this is really all that Rampion says.

Huxley spends the rest of his time (in a very long book) drawing caricatures of a twentieth century amoral society, and Rampion's typical utterings above are all he puts forth in the way of a life preserver for a drowning world.

Now it is my opinion that Huxley is dodging the issue. In all his talk about man, how he should behave as a human and an animal, should not be tame, should believe in life, should live, and so forth, Rampion (or rather Huxley) never once ventures to tell us what man is. And before we know what something is essentially, we can never know what is good for that thing. It seems to me that Huxley could have spent his time better, if he was set on correcting his generation, by setting forth explicitly his ideas of the essence of man; knowing this, the course for man to take to perfect himself would be clear.

This second type of novelist, for which Huxley has served as an example, shows society in its true colors. They do perceive the devastating effect of evil in the world. However, like Stephen Spender in The Trial of a Judge or Franz Kafka in The Trial, they paint the picture as almost hopeless, or else, like Huxley, their solution is vague or unsatisfying.

The third group, for which Evelyn Waugh will serve as an example, write from the standpoint of christians surveying a world of evil. This is, of course, the group to which Graham Greene belongs. A fair sprinkling of other writers have written from this christian standpoint in the twentieth century, but their number is not great. T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis are both known to belong to this group to a degree:



Eliot's Ash Wednesday and Lewis' The Screwtape Letters are in the recent christian literary tradition. However, it is the French school of novelists which has the most followers of this tradition: Mauriac, Bernanos and Maurois to name only a few. At any rate, all these writers perceive a more ordered world where the solution to much despair and disillusionment among contemporary writers can be found. Some of the writers in the first two groups realize that western civilization is threatened by its own spiritual weakness. However, their own personal tragedy is that they cannot integrate the christian background into their own lives.

This third type of writer is superior to the other two because he presents a more complete and satisfying picture of life. I think I can illustrate this contention by a brief examination of two novels by Evelyn Waugh, A Handful of Dust and Brideshead Revisited. I wish to show in this comparison of these two novels how the same environment in the two novels, a wealthy family and their family seat, produce similar characters, with this one difference: one novel (A Handful of Dust) leaves the characters either dead or full of the blackest despair, while the other leaves them shaken but with their hope undestroyed. In the former of these novels, Waugh belongs to the second group; in the latter, he belongs to the third group. The difference is the presence of a theological system of reference in Brideshead Revisited.

The theme of A Handful of Dust is the destruction of a simple, dull and honest bore, by his wife, an amoral pleasure-

seeker. Grim events and fatuous lust abound in the novel, but the urbane and witty Waugh is always just around the corner. The final ingeniously devised tragedy of the book occurs when the ill-used hero finds himself trapped in the jungles of South America, doomed to spend the rest of his life in a village of savages, reading the works of Dickens to the white chief. There is a highly developed parallel worked out at the end of the book, showing the similarity of his despair and his jungle trap with the senseless amorality, equal despair and jungle-like atmosphere of his wife's world in London.

In the same year - 1934 - that A Handful of Dust was published, Evelyn Waugh was received into the Roman Catholic Church. This fact, quite naturally, had a great impact on his life and outlook. By this conversion, Waugh seems to have found a philosophical system completely satisfactory to himself, and at the same time an answer to man's despair on earth. With his conversion he seemed to abandon the theme of the deplorable condition of society, as portrayed in A Handful of Dust, and begin to develop the thesis that even that society might be a part of a preparation for man's real fulfilment. In developing this thesis, he tries to show how God is at work, through the medium of actual grace, on the worst sinners, to keep up their hope and draw them to their eternal destiny. This understanding or 'realization' has enabled Waugh to create more rounded personalities, and ones with a deep and abiding conflict in their own breast because of their own 'realization'. Two characters in Brideshead