Chapter II

The Impact of Small Wars
Art has only one origin — experience, and it is in the light of this experience that an artist creates. Sometimes this experience is so deep, so disturbing, and so powerful that it dominates the artist’s psyche and manifests itself in one form or the other in what he creates. This is particularly true of the experience entering into him during his childhood, adolescence, and early youth. Long after the stage of actual experience incubated in the depths of one’s being, the sub-conscious, which is its host now, marvels at the way it keeps peeping out.

Graham Greene’s early experiences have had a profound impact on his novels, whether major or minor. This impact is as considerable as that of his acceptance of Roman Catholic faith. Time and again, certain images, motifs, patterns of existence and situations emerge into his fiction which in their recurrence can only be explained with reference to his early experiences.
Graham Greene (born 1904) was the son of Charles Henry Greene, Head Master of the school at Berkhamsted, twenty-six miles north-west of London. He attended his father's school and did not like it. A highly sensitive and moody boy who feared and hated his rough school-fellows, Greene would escape to the neighbouring forests whenever he could. Very often he felt unaccountably bored and depressed and, according to an autobiographical essay, "The revolver and the corner cupboard", he made several determined efforts at suicide before he was fourteen.

There had been, for example, perhaps five or six years before, the disappointing morning in the dark room by the linen cupboard on the eve of term when I had patiently drunk a quantity of hypo under the impression that it was poisonous; on another occasion the blue glass bottle of hay fever lotion which as it contained a small quantity of cocaine had probably been good for my mood; the bunch of deadly nightshade that I had eaten with only a slight narcotic effect; the twenty aspirins I had taken before swimming in the empty out-of-term school baths (I can still remember the

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1. The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, P. 21
curious sensations of swimming through wool); these acts may have removed all sense of strangeness as I slipped a bullet into a chamber and, holding the revolver behind my back, spun the chambers round.

Two years later, at sixteen, he tried to leave home, was brought back and sent to London to be psycho-analysed:

The psycho-analysis that followed my act of rebellion had fixed the boredom as hypo fixes the image on the negative. I emerged from those delightful months in London spent at my analyst's house ... correctly oriented ... but wrong dry. For years, it seems to me, I could take no aesthetic interest in any visual thing at all; staring at a sight that others assured me was beautiful, I would feel nothing. I was fixed in my boredom.

A year later, at seventeen, he attempted suicide six more times by playing Russian roulette, about which he had recently read an account by a Russian writer:

The White Russian officers, condemned

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1 The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, p. 203

2 Ibid., p. 202
to inaction in South Russia at the
trail-end of the counter-revolutionary
war, used to invent hazards with which
to escape boredom. One man would slip
a charge into a revolver and turn the
chambers at random, and his companion
would put the revolver to his head and
pull the trigger. The chance, of
course, was six to one in favour of
life.1

Persistent boredom soon bred despair and
brought in a sense of failure.

I was seventeen and terribly bored
and in love with my sister's governess —
one of those miserable, hopeless,
Romantic loves of adolescence that set
in many minds the idea that love and
desperation are inextricable and that
successful love hardly deserves the
name. at that age one may fall
irrevocably in love with failure, and
success of any kind loses half its
savour before it is experienced such
a love is surrendered once and for all
to the singer at the pavement's edge,
the bankrupt, the old school friend
who wants to touch you for a dollar.
Perhaps in many so conditioned it is the
love for God that mainly survives,
because in his eyes they can imagine
themselves remaining always abashed, seedy,
unsuccessful, and therefore worthy
of notice. 2

1  The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, pp. 201-2

2 Ibid., p. 201
Speaking of his escape to the Ashridge beeches with his brother’s revolver for playing Russian roulette, Greene says: “Perhaps before I had made the discovery, boredom had already reached an intolerable depth.” Boredom with a consequent despair and a sense of failure, was such a strong reality of his childhood experiences that he refers to it time and again, as if it excluded every other memory:

I think the boredom was far deeper than love. It had always been a feature of childhood; it would set in on the second day of the school holidays. The first day was all happiness and, after the horrible confinement and publicity of school, seemed to consist of light, space and silence, but a prison conditions its inhabitants. I never wanted to return to it (and finally expressed my rebellion by the simple act of running away), but yet I was so conditioned that freedom bored me unutterably. 2

Then again —

had I romantic thoughts about the governess? undoubtedly I must have

1 The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, p. 202
2 Ibid.
bad, but I think that at the most they simply eased the medicine down. Boredom, avidity, those were the main emotions. 1

when the thrill and excitement of playing Russian roulette wore off and it no longer acted as a 'drug' on him, he decided against any more attempt at suicide — "but the war against boredom had got to go on." 2

These unhappy memories of childhood, of boredom, despair, failures and attempts at suicide, had a very strong and enduring effect on Graham Greene's mind. They appear again and again in character, theme, and setting of his fiction. Their influence is wide and deep.

Despair and failure, for instance, are the hallmarks of most of his major and better-known characters: the whisky-priest in The Power and the Glory, Major Scobie in The Heart of the Matter, Mr. Czinner in The Third Man, Anthony in

1 The Lost Childhood and other Essays, p. 204
2 Ibid., p. 205
England say me, Conrad in *It's a Battlefield*, Francis Andrews in *The Day Without a Man* in *The Day Without a Man*, have in *A Gun for Sale*, and Archer now in *The Ministry of Fear*.

Despair and failure leading to suicide also figure very prominently in Graham Greene's fiction. Sinkle in *Brighton Rock*, Major Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, Francis Andrews and Elizabeth in *The Day Without a Man* are not the only ones who kill themselves. There are others like the whisky-priest and Mr. Czinner whose deaths are virtual suicides since they decide to return to the scene where they knew they would meet with certain death. In addition, there are suicides in almost all the plays Graham Greene has written - one in *The Living Room*, two attempts in *The Rotters' Club*, the suspicion of one in *The Complaisant Lover* and a threatened suicide in *Carving a Statue*.

The bitter memories of Greene's school life, 'the horrible confinement', the prison life conditions, the 'ardency' are reflected in his characters: Francis Andrews, Conrad Grover, Anthony Farrant and Mitty. They all carry about them painful memories of their school life and each
one of them was a failure at school. Minta suffers from a sense of inferiority born of bullying and contempt at Harrow in much the same way as Greene himself suffered at the hands of rougher boys at school and "The school and he were joined by a painful reluctant colition, a passionless colition that leaves everything to regret, nothing to love, everything to hate, but cannot destroy the idea we are one body."

Francis Andrews, like Greene, hates his school and leaves it as Greene had tried to leave his. Anthony found in his school-life "something too tragic or too questionable" and speaks of it as "thirteen weeks of overcrowding, tedium and fear." The only memories that he retains of his school-days are:

Anthony learning (the beating in the nursery, the tears before the boarding-school) to keep a stiff upper lip; Anthony learning (the beating in the study when he brought home the smelly

1 Andrew ade, p. 105
2 Ibid., p. 62
book with the pretty pictures) that you must honour other men's sisters.

There are occasional glimpses, in his novels, of his school building, his home and the surroundings — of "the common", "the gorse bushes", "the cracked bell" and "the green baize door".

skinning a rabbit among the gorse bushes on the common, I shut my eyes for a moment ... pale-green dormitory walls and the cracked bell ringing for tea. 2

A significant remark made by Greene about Dickens confirms us in the belief that his vision of a dark, seedy and ugly world dominated by violence, pain, and suffering was, indeed, formed during his childhood and adolescent years. This is what he says: 3

... the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share. 3

1 *England, Jude* ed. p. 79
2 Ibíd., p. 14
3 *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*, p. 59
This is further confirmed through a character called Brown, in one of his later novels, *The Guardians* (1966). He says:

> For the writers it is always said that the first twenty years of life contain the whole experience — the rest is observation, but I think it is equally true of all of us. 1

As if explaining a somewhat too intense a projection of his early years in his novels, we find him repeating the same views in another essay:

> There are certain writers, as different as Dickens from Kipling, who never shake off the burden of childhood. ... All later experience seems to have been related to those months or years of unhappiness. Life which turns its cruel side to most of us at an age when we have begun to learn the arts of self-protection took these two writers by surprise during the defencelessness of early childhood. 2

Unfortunately our knowledge about Graham Greene is limited, as it is almost always bound to be in the case of a living writer. Hardy does a

1 *The Guardians*, p. 67

2 *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*, p. 61
living writer allow too many inroads on his privacy. We know only as much as Greene himself wants us to know, and this is confined to a book of essays called The Lost Childhood, his autobiography, A Sort of Life, and two records of his travels, Journey without Maps, and The Lawless Roads. And the cumulative impression created by these records is of a tortured and very unhappy childhood and adolescence, of "flight, rebellion and misery during those first sixteen years when the novelist is formed". The prologue to The Lawless Roads provides us with valuable clues to the understanding of Greene's vision of human life as the point of intersection of heaven and hell and to the recurrence of certain images. Describing his father's school as a place where two worlds met, the school dormitories and the family rooms, he says:

one was an inhabitant of both countries; on Saturday and Sunday afternoons of one side of the Saize

1 A Sort of Life, p. 147
door, the rest of the week of the
other. How can life on a border be
other than restless? You are
pulled by different ties of hate
and love. For hate is quite as
powerful a tie; it demands allegiance.
In the land of the skyscrapers, of
stone stairs and cracked bells ringing
early, one was aware of fear and
hate, a kind of lawlessness — appalling
cruelties could be practiced without
a second thought; one met for the
first time characters, adult and
adolescent, who bore about them the
genuine quality of evil. There was
Collifax, who practiced torments
with dividers; Mr. Granden with
three grim chins, a dusty gown,
a kind of demonic sensuality; from
these heights evil declined towards
Turley, whose desk was filled with
minute photographs — advertisements
of art photos. Hell lay about them
in their infancy.

The restlessness of existence on the
border of two worlds, awareness of fear and
hate, 'a kind of lawlessness', 'appalling
cruelties', meeting with characters 'who bore
about them the genuine quality of evil',
'demonic sensuality', the loss of innocence —
these are what deeply affected Graham Greene's
sensibility; and their recurrence in his

1 The Lawless Roads, p. 4
autobiographical writings points to an obsession —
 obsession with evil, cruelty, violence, suffering
 and ugliness. The obsession grew with his later
 experiences in the countries of the 'dark continent',
 i.e. exotic Mexico, Vietnam and Haiti. His later
 experiences, instead of modifying his sensibility,
 got curiously related to his earlier experiences,
 and made his obsessions more intense.

 All that he saw in Liberia, Sierra Leone,
 Mexico and Vietnam was hunger, terror, disease,
 suffering, filth and squalor.

 The 'evil' which entered Greene's psyche
 so early in life does not appear to have retreated
 ever. It seems to have set his sights for him.
 He dwelt and lingered on objects, scenes and
 events of a particular nature. In the prologue
 to The Lawless Roads he records them — his
 "flowers of evil," as it were —

 ... a man running furiously ... he
 looked very angry about something ... he
 was going to cut his throat with a
 knife if he could get away from his
 neighbours, "having no hope, and
 without God in the world".

 1 The Lawless Roads, p. 6
... small groups of youth hovered round the traffic lights, while the Irish servant girls crept out of back doors in the early dark. ... They couldn’t be kept in at night. They would return with the milk in a stranger’s car. The youths with smeared and scented hair and bitten cigarettes greeted them by the traffic lights with careless roughness. ... sexual experience had come to them too early and too easily.

A boy of twenty and a girl of fifteen had been found headless on the railway line. They had lain down together with their necks on the rails. She was expecting a child—her second. Her first had been born when she was thirteen ... her parents had been unable to fix responsibility among fourteen youths.

In the evening paper a woman made a statement to the police. ... I had such a funny feeling. I saw the bread-knife. I sharpened it up. ... My husband was lying on his back. I pulled back the bed clothes, and holding the knife in both hands I made sure to get him in the right place. ... The knife went in as if his body was rotten.

* The Lawless Roads, pp. 7-9
In a shabby little shop there were second-hand copies of *London Life*—articles about high heels and corsets and long hair. *London Life* and the *Nudus Cafe* and the Irish servant girls making their assignations for a ditch. ... Four one-armed men dined together, arranging their seats so that their arms shouldn’t clash.  

The Cairn terrier farm stood on the crest of the hill. The dogs can never have been quiet; masculine voices holding big steel combs strode in tweeds past the kennels. ... a nannyman swept up the beach leaves from the paths --- a losing fight against the woods --- and lamented the waste of it all.  

... and having seen all this, he could not, like Browning’s Ripper, sing that 'All’s well with the world'.  

One may add to these small memories a few more recorded by Graham Greene in his autobiography, such as the following:

*The first thing I remember is sitting in a pram at the top of a hill with a dead dog lying at my feet. 1*

*The Lawless Years, pp. 9-11*

1 *A Sort of Life*, p. 13
an unpleasant memory of those years is of a tin jerry full of blood.¹

Greene's obsession with 'evil' is clearly borne out by the excerpts presented above. And evil is naturally associated with gloom, squallor, violence, ugliness, and betrayal. It causes pain, suffering and despair — and this is the stuff Greene's fiction is made of. The predominating influence on Greene's fiction, thus, can be traced to his obsession with evil which, in its turn, was the outcome of his childhood experiences.

Despite the evidence of his autobiographical records, one is still left to wonder what had gone so wrong with his early life that warped his total vision of human life. The note of despair, leading to a very dismal outlook on life, breaks out, time and again, in his early writings. Babbling April, a volume of poems produced when he was twenty-one, speaks knowingly of death and takes a sour look at life's senator:

1 A sort of Life, p. 15
Then through the crumbling of some bread I'll pourer,
I'll pourer through the scraping of a plate,
How love which should have been a blaze of wonder,
Has been a dusty and untended grate,
With crooked, grime bars twisted assunder,
because its servant rose from sleep too late.

or again,

all nature's wine, they say, and I agree ----
and yet, God knows, I am dissatisfied.

or this one in impatience and irritation,

O damn you, bird, what do you want up there?
it's dirty, and I know it, and I am tired,
but need you speak ....

whatever be our hesitation in connecting
the "man who suffers" and the "artist who creates",
we cannot, with the evidence before us, refuse to
recognise the pervasive influence exerted by his
early life on his fiction, in character, event,
situations and attitudes.

it is easy now to understand Greene's
conversion to roman catholic faith. The vision
of life that emerged through his early experience
had 'evil' at its centre and was thus too gloomy
and oppressive to be endured. at the same time
any system of philosophy or religion that did not
recognise the dominant influence of evil in human
life would not satisfy him. The catholic philosophy
recognised and faced the existence of evil in
the universe, and made it less terrifying to
those who believed in it. With its belief in
redemption through suffering, the Catholic faith
also promised hope to an otherwise dreary existence.
It is this combined belief in the inevitability
of evil and in the redemption through suffering
that is reflected in most of his major and more
significant novels. Greene thus seems to be one
of those modern writers whose life and work exist
"in a synergetic relationship, reinforcing and
fulfilling each other".

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c.f. Tennessee Williams: "Every artist has a basic
premise pervading his whole life, and that
premise can provide the impulse to everything
he writes". (Quoted in Lincoln Barnett;
"Tennessee Williams", LIFE, 484, 12 February 1943)

1 Robert P. Weeks, Introduction to his edn. of
Hemingway (Spectrum series) Prentice Hall,
N.J., 1962, p. 7