Chapter 3

Manifestations of Behaviour: Obsessions and Reflections

A creative writer has to handle his resources carefully. He has to make use of every scrap of useful material that comes his way of experience. Greene himself has testified to the truth of this statement in his book, *In Search of a Character*. According to him, a creative writer is like “a careful housewife, who is unwilling to throw away anything that might perhaps serve its turn” (Greene, 1961, p.17). Very few English writers have shown such remarkable imagination and commercial husbandry as Greene. Looking at the thumb nail picture of Greene in the previous chapter, one can detect that various umbilical cords connect Greene’s real life experience and his fictional world. *Obsessions* and their *reflections* are very common in Greene. Given below are a few:
1. Betrayal

“The misery of life” (Greene, 1971, p.11) started for Greene at Berkhamsted school, a public boarding school of which his father was the headmaster. Despite Greene’s assertion that when we try to reconstruct our childhood, all that is most important escapes us, innumerable references appear and re-appear in his work which graphically illustrate his childhood experience. His experience as a boarder made him feel that he had been betrayed by his parents. Young as he was for his age, he felt abandoned to the care of a few school masters, while his parents enjoyed a reasonably free and protective environment a short distance away. The betrayal theme of many of his novels might have had its roots in this experience.

2. Lost childhood

As an introduction to the first volume of his autobiography Greene quotes Kierkegaard’s famous words:

Only robbers and gypsies say that one must never return where one has once been.

Childhood being an obsession with Greene, he constantly returns and remembers a lot of that country called his childhood, in most
of his works. As Carolyn D. Scott has pointed out rightly, "No critic can escape the childhood theme in Greene, for it is the one obsession out of which his tragedies grow" (Scott, cited in Kulsrestha, 1978, p. 8).

This lost childhood takes two forms in his writing. First, it involves children deprived of happiness or innocence, because they have been prematurely shoved off into the world of adult experience. Second, it involves the recollection of adults whose memories of childhood happiness and innocence are juxtaposed against the joyless conditions of their adult lives.

The first case is more common, and these lost children become psychological grotesques and their theme merges with concerns of social justice and anti-social personality types. Philip Lane of The Basement Room, James Raven of A Gun for Sale and Pinkie Brown of Brighton Rock are examples. Both Pinkie and Raven are victims of childhood trauma, and they display a horror of life which is transmitted into hatred and aggression. An example of the second form can be found in Arthur Rowe, the protagonist of The Ministry of Fear. His childhood memories are of mothers and aunts, garden teas and church bazaars, – all
peaceful images, set against the horror of adult life in which he is *guilty of murder*. All these point to the uncomfortable suggestion that growing up may be only worse than not growing up at all.

3. Spying

It is impossible to make any sense of the life and works of Greene unless one realises his devotion to spying. Even when he was at school, he was a quisling¹. His headmaster father's Old Testament-prophet-like exhortations regarding bodily purity, and unending vigilance to check all types of sexual vices among his charges, put the young Greene at once in complicity with the authorities, and allegiance to those under subjugation. As he himself has stated later, these double allegiances and double suspicions, were his first introductions to the ambiguities of life as a secret agent. Later in his life Greene became a professional spy, and like all good spies he had a marvellous facility for covering up his tracks. The extent of his ability was such that even 'grey hound critics' could not catch this 'electric hare' at his tricks.

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¹ Quisling was a Norwegian politician whose name became synonymous with collaborator and traitor during the Second World War. Quisling was sentenced to death on 17 September 1945 by a Norwegian Court and executed in Oslo on 24 October 1945.
(Sackville-West, 1951). His genes, and the ‘memes’\(^2\) (Zubaty, 1993) he had imbibed, carried the imprints of an inveterate spy.

4. Homosexuality and promiscuity

Greene’s leaning towards *homosexuality* and *promiscuity* with women, can also be traced back to his school days. His headmaster father was obsessed with the idea that boys were looking for opportunities to foul the temple of the body by *masturbating* or doing something worse. To deter boys from any affair with women, a dark warning was often given: “There is a whole army of women living on the lusts of men” (cited in Shelden, 1995, p.21). All this had a negative impact on Greene. May be because of this experience, the subject of homosexuality is an intrinsic part of his work. *The Man Within, The Heart of the Matter, The End of the Affair*, and the short story *May We Borrow Your Husband*, all are examples.

About Greene’s attachment to women, nothing more need be said than that according to Greene’s own private reckoning he had

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\(^2\) British biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 coined the word meme in analogy to the word ‘gene’. According to him a meme is a self replicating information pattern that uses minds to get itself reproduced Zubaty, 1993, p.70.
developed some sort of relationship with no less than forty-seven prostitutes during 1920s and 1930s (Shelden, 1995, p.114). The mistresses he had, outnumber the harem of many an emperor.

5. Suicide

Only very few English writers had as much desire for self annihilation as Greene had. Tempted and tested beyond his endurance at the schoolhouse, Graham wanted to escape it all by resorting to suicide; his earliest attempts at it belong to his school years. In the first volume of his autobiography Greene tells us about his trying to saw open his knee with a dull pen knife, drinking hypo under the false impression that it was poisonous, draining a glass of hay-fever drops, eating a bunch of deadly nightshade, and swallowing twenty aspirin tablets before swimming in the empty school pond (Greene, 1971, p.64).

Though each instance had its effect, none succeeded in killing him. He categorically stated later: “a successful suicide is often only a cry for help which hasn't been heard in time” (Greene, 1971, p.62). He gratefully remembered in his autobiography one of his matrons at school who understood that even a child reached at a certain moment a psychological limit for enduring hardship.
This desire of Greene to embrace Thanatos,3 was frequently overtaken by the God of Love, Eros,4 in his later life, thanks to the services of the women he came into contact with. Had it not been for these women, the Eros in Greene would have been fast asleep and his drive for sex, and all pleasurable experience, would have remained numb.

6. Mental instability

There was a record of mental instability in Greene’s family and its echoes and reverberation are profusely found in his fiction and life. Greene’s self-evaluation can be found in the first volume of his autobiography: “A manic-depressive, like my Grand-father – that would be the verdict on me today . . .” (Greene, 1971, p.92).

According to Michael Shelden, a sharp biographer of Greene, Greene’s despatch to London when he was only sixteen to board with Kenneth Richmond, a man who practiced his own version of psychoanalysis was to avoid a scandal that would have forced Charles Greene to resign his position as headmaster. Greene’s

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3 Thanatos – The Greek god of Death. In Freud’s usage, Thanatos refers to the theoretical generalized instinct for death as expressed in such behaviours as denial, rejection and the turning away from pleasure.

boarding with this quack left him many sweet memories – "perhaps the happiest six months of my life" (Greene, 1971, p.72), Greene remembers. There may have been plenty of reasons for this kind of remembrance. One of them seems to be that Kenneth Richmond stood for almost everything that Charles Greene was opposed to. Another was that Graham was given freedom to do whatever he liked for much of each day. A third seems to be Kenneth Richmond's wife Zoe, who afforded the young Greene deep breasted motherly protection.

If what Freud wrote, "much is won if we succeed in transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness" (cited in Greene, 1971, p.71) is still true, Greene's life with Richmond did him a world of good. He returned to school transformed a great deal, having been a voyager in very distant seas. According to Greene's own account,

I had left for London a timid boy, anti-social, farouche: when I came back I must have seemed vain and knowing. Who among my fellows in 1921 knew anything of Freud or Jung? (Greene, 1971, p.77).

Whatever may have been the immediate effect of the psychoanalysis, the outcome of this analysis by a non professional,
according to Greene’s own statement, ‘pursued’ him all his life. Evidence of it can be found in Greene’s life and writings.

7. Fear of boredom

The next is the most important trait of Greene’s writings – fear of boredom. He himself wrote:

Boredom seemed to swell like a balloon inside the head; it became a pressure inside the skull: sometimes I feared the balloon would burst and I would lose my reason (Greene, 1971, p.86).

Quoting W.H. Auden, Greene remarked in the preface to the second volume of his autobiography that man needed escape as much as he needed food and sleep. Even while he was a lad, Greene felt life to be monotonous, dry and dragging. To escape it all, he attempted suicide several times and even practiced a kind of Russian roulette for some time. In the preface to Ways of Escape Greene looking back at his career wrote, “I can see now that my travel, as much as the act of writing were ways of escape” (Greene, 1980).

There is hardly an English writer who tried his hand at different kind of writings as Greene: poems, plays, short stories, novels, entertainments, film reviews and scripts, essays, book reviews, journalism, and lengthy articles on contemporary issues.
Referring to the four hundred and more film reviews he made during the nineteen thirties Greene noted:

Those films were an escape – escape from that hellish problem of construction in Chapter Six, from the secondary character who obstinately refused to come alive, escape for an hour and a half from the melancholy which falls inexorably round the novelist when he has lived for too many months on end in his private world (Greene, 1980, p.58).

In the first volume of his autobiography referring to his wide ranging travels Greene recalled:

... it was the fear of boredom which took me to Tabasco during the religious prosecution, to a léoproserie in the Congo, to the Kikuyu reserve during the Mau-Mau insurrection, to the emergency in Malaya and to the French war in Vietnam (Greene, 1971, pp.95-96).

But this fear of boredom according to Cedric Watts simplifies a mixture of his motives:

One motive was romantic: emulation of the heroes he has read about in childhood ... Another was emulation of Conrad, the voyager-novelist. Another motive was the search for source materials for fiction. And another was his astute recognition that a travelling writer might be paid at least thrice in succession ... A fascination by espionge, whether amateur or professional, [also] played its part (Watts, 1997, pp.13-14).
8. Womanizing and misogyny

Paradoxical it may seem; but it is true of Greene. He himself furnishes a glimpse of his mental make up regarding women even when he was only a boy of seven, in the first volume of his autobiography. On his seventh birthday, he took a piece of his birthday cake to Miss Wills, one of the matrons of the school. She kissed him and the embarrassment she caused was such that the young Greene “returned to the family circle, angry and shattered” (Greene, 1971, p.46). In the School House Gazette of the time, Greene had in answer to a questionnaire stated that the quality he admired most in women was cleanliness. In A Sort of Life he further states that he had a good deal of undeserved contempt for his elder sister Molly, and for girls in general. “’You are silly, Molly. Girls are so silly’. ’Girls wouldn’t know. They know nuffing’ ‘Girls are always slow and always last’”, Greene used to say (Greene, 1971, p.44).

By the time of puberty there was much change in body and mind. He turned to women and love with a special kind of enthusiasm. It continued for some time and the love letters he addressed to his wife-to-be, were so enchanting that she loved the
letters much more than the letter writer. But the spell was not to last long. A 'splinter of ice' (Greene, 1971, p.134) entered his heart, and he began looking at women under a new revelation. This splinter enabled and emboldened him to speak about women with great enthusiasm. What a procession of women issued from his brain! Almost all appear like 'ghosts' (Spurling, 1983, p.21) who beckon men to their doom and total despair.

9. Revenge

While at St. John's, Greene read the novel *Foe-Farrel* and it sowed the seeds of revenge in his mind. According to Greene, "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives . . . like the fortune teller who sees a long journey in the cards or death by water they influence the future . . ." (Greene, 1962, p.11). The book had a very moral story, but it was not the moral which interested him; simple revenge was all he wanted.

At school Greene was tormented by two boys – Carter, and Watson. Carter was malicious but honest; Watson's crime was more heinous – he betrayed Greene: "I never seriously in later years desired revenge on Carter. But Watson was another matter" (Greene, 1971, p.60). Many years after leaving school Greene
wrote that he "found the desire for revenge alive like a creature under a stone." The only change was that he looked under the stone less and less often. He began to write, and the past lost some of its power; he wrote it out of him. "But still every few years a scent, a stretch of wall, a book in a shelf, a name in a newspaper," would remind him to "lift the stone and watch the creature move its head towards the light" (Greene, 1971, p.60). He met Watson thirty years later in 1951 at Kuala Lumpur and he writes about the encounter thus:

I wondered all the way back to my hotel if I would ever have written a book had it not been for Watson or the dead Carter, if those years of humiliation has not given me an excessive desire to prove that I was good at something, however long the effort might prove. Was that a reason to be grateful to Watson, or the reverse ? (Greene, 1971, p.61).

Thus all Greene's writings, according to his own estimate were aimed at proving that he was good at something. And, what a body of writing has Greene left behind to prove that he was good at taking revenge for the injury he had suffered! He even felt that "revenge was good for the character", because out of it "grew forgiveness" (Greene, 1948, p.34). The 'wicked wasp of
Twickenham’⁵, the most powerful of English satirical poets, pale into insignificance before this ‘electric hare’ whom the ‘grey hound’ critics (Sackville-West, 1951) couldn’t catch during his life time. One who has examined Greene’s writings with reference to his life would stagger at the number of people against whom he had turned the torpedoes of his revenge.

Like his mentor, Henry James, Greene marvelously covered up his tracks, and patrolled the perimeter fence of his privacy with astounding vigilance. His *art of deception* was such that even Norman Sherry, his official biographer, found it difficult to retrace Greene’s step. Writing about it, Michael Shelden speaks about the novelist David Lodge’s visit to the grand old man in 1985. According to Lodge, Shelden quotes, Greene “seemed to derive a mischievous glee from the tribulation that poor Norman Sherry . suffered” (Shelden, 1995, p.16).

This nurtured *ambiguity* on the part of Greene was not without any effect: his theology, religion, philosophy, intentions,

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⁵ Wicked wasp of Twickenham: Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744). Pope was the greatest of English poets between Dryden and the Romantics, and his poetry is the epitome of the Neo-classicism of 18th century England. Pope was crippled, he was only 4’ 6” tall, and his Roman Catholicism barred him from the universities. This combination so soured his disposition that he earned the epithet the “wicked wasp of Twickenham” (his home). Hornstein, 1973.
politics, grammar, all were subject matters for hot disputes. To
cap it all, the Nobel Prize Committee 'doubted' even his popularity
(Baumann, 1991). The weaknesses of the man may not however
be allowed to overshadow the merits of his work. A cunning
manipulator of his own public image, Graham Greene could create
works of art which transcend all his shortcomings. They reflect his
life as well as his passion for women, and can exist on their own
terms, as well.
References


