The Unhappy Childhood and the Lost Adolescence

What seems to be the most striking feature of Graham Greene is his intense preoccupation with evil. In fact Greene tries to externalize the eternal cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil that goes on in the human mind. But the evil which shuts up the world within a veil of invulnerable darkness seems to emerge stronger than the good. And the root cause of Greene's precocious awareness of evil may be traced back to his burden of childhood and lost adolescence. Thus the formulation of "Greenland" – the imaginative universe of Graham Greene – a world essentially corrupted and pervaded by evil started its odyssey from a very early period of Greene's life.

While endeavours to pick up the salient features of his kind of writers and identifying the psychic depth of his awareness of the "immense problem of evil" Greene makes a brilliant expression of his belief in the continuity of consciousness in an essay entitled 'The Young Dickens':
The creative writer perceives the 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 (Greene, *Collected Essays* 106).

This theory again illuminates Greene’s conception of what he called the “Judas Complex” – the idea that the genesis of cruelty, vice and other different manifestations of evil in the adult lives may be traced back to the defenseless period of early childhood. In fact Greene was one of those writers who was unable to “shake off the burden of their childhood”, i.e., “those months or years of unhappiness” (Greene, *Collected Essays* 127). Wormold, the protagonist of Greene’s *Our Man in Havana* presents the same view in a simplier way:

> Childhood was the germ of all mistrust. You are cruelly joked upon and then you cruelly joked. (32)

Thus Greene's two most vicious protagonists Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* and Raven in *A Gun for Sale* are the victims of unhappy childhood. They can only think of happiness as something forever unattainable in the past. They are the peculiar version of Peterpan.
the juvenile adults in the sense that they never grow up, as they remain forever trapped within adolescence and its immediate aftermath and as a result fail to find out a satisfying way out into the adult life. Thus Pinkie, the most powerful embodiment of evil in Greene's novels, is depicted as the "red toothed adolescence with hardly a dab of childhood blue to soften it, a slum. carter with no holds barred"(Spurling 23). Thus in the words of John Atkins the terrible truth is "if the childhood fails the whole life may follow it into hell" (119). The same theme recurs once again in Greene's autobiographical essay "The Lost Childhood" where he quotes from a poem by A. E.:

In ancient shadows and twilights
Where childhood had strayed,
The World's great sorrows were born
And its heroes were made.
In the lost boyhood of Judas
Christ was betrayed.

Our point of discussion in this chapter is how Greene, a sensitive and imaginative child became precociously aware of evil as a result of this
Judas Complex though he himself did not turn out to be an incarnation of evil.

"The Berkhamsted Gazette" and "Hemel Hempstead observer" of 8th October, 1904 inform us the following: "On October 2 at St. John's Berkhamsted, the wife of Charles H. Greene [was delivered] of a son". This son, Graham Greene was the fourth child of Charles Henry Greene and his wife Marion Raymond Greene. His father, C. H. Greene was the Headmaster of the Berkhamsted School from where Greene received his early education.

Comfort (with its related security) and fear (with its related terror) are two diametrically opposite aspects that characterize a child's existence – the comfort and security of nursery and drawing room, the fear and terror of the dark stairs and dark bedroom. But to Greene comfort and its subsequent sense of security were not an important part of his existential reality. What affected him most are the horrible images of childhood fears as he records it in an interview at the age of 20:

Comfort is not reality. The real things are terrible things.
The stairs to bed, the empty cupboards on the landing.
and the witch with white puffed hands and the fleshy face, who waits always round the corner" (qtd. in Sherry 12).

With a mind so sensitive and introvert and an imagination so vivid child Greene suffered from a number of fears including the fear of darkness, the fear of death, the fear of witch, the fear of birds and bats etc.

The fear of the darkness left a lasting impression on Greene’s mind. Thus he recollects how with the coming of evening a fear of darkness seemed to engulf his sensitive psyche and made him terror stricken: “Then darkness came down like the wings of a bat and settled in the landing” and there was “no night lights to make a blessed breach” (Sherry 66). The experience of Philip Lane in “The Basement Room”, his short story, is crucial to our understanding of the terrible possibilities that were raised up in Greene’s mind in the darkness of the bedtime:

.... the inevitable terrors of sleep came round him: a man with a tri-colour hat beat at the door on his Majesty’s service, a bleeding head lay on the kitchen table in a basket, and the Siberian wolves crept closer. He was bound hand and foot and could not move; they leapt
round him breathing heavily' (Greene, *Collected Essays* 476).

Greene also recalls in *A Sort of Life* how “the whole room seemed suddenly to darken and he had the impression of a great bird swooping” (37).

Here the fear of birds and bats is a pertinent manifestation of his fear of darkness at the bed time when “all the nerves (were) a jump” (Sherry 37) with horror. In the darkness the footsteps of strangers were followed by a rapid beating of Greene’s heart and he felt “a sick empty sensation in the stomach” (Sherry 66). And to get rid of his sense of fear and insecurity he used to take “a multitude of soft animals” (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 30) to bed with him.

The fear of witch made a significant impact on Greene’s psyche. When he was nearly seven a witch haunted Greene in many of his nightmares. Greene was terrified at the thought that the witch, lurking on the nursery, “would leap on my back and dig long mandarin finger nails into my shoulders” (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 30).

The fear of death in the form of the fear of drowning also haunted the child Greene’s imagination. This fear of drowning “probably originated in an early attack of hay fever brought on by
playing in a haystack. He lay awake coughing and gasping for breath all night” (Sherry 12). Greene recalls in A Sort of Life: “…….perhaps during that night I evolved my fear of drowning – I was able to imagine the lungs filling with water” (36).

A man is said to be the product of his environment. And the child Greene proved no exception. Thus two objects of his natural surroundings, a canal and the Crooked Billet, [an inn] by virtue of the legends associated with them made him aware of something uncanny and sinister hovering over the world. Thus Greene reflects in A Sort of Life:

If a sinister atmosphere lay in my mind around the Crooked Billet, a sense of immediate danger was conveyed by the canal – the menace of insulting words from strange brutal canal workers and blackened faces like miners, with their gypsy wives and ragged children at the sight of middle class children carefully dressed and shepherded. (13-14)

Canal also came to be associated in Greene’s mind with the “danger … of death from drowning” because “the story that any one who fell into a lock was beyond rescue was not contradicted in our
imagination by the life belt which hung on the wall of each lock house” (13-14). The fear of drowning made a significant impact on Greene's mind which even in his later life he was found unable to overcome:

I can not even to this day peer down into a lock, down the sheer wet walls, without a sense of trepidation and many of early dreams were of death by drowning, of being drowned magnetically towards the water's edge (13-14).

And the Crooked Billet whose very name possesses a sinister ring and where Greene was sure that some travellers were put to death turned the whole North Church Village into a kingdom of fear. Thus to Greene it was "a region where nightmare might easily become a reality" (13).

At the age of six Greene had the frightful experience of seeing a man rushing out of a cottage near the canal bridge. "He had a knife in his hand; people ran after him shouting; he wanted to kill himself (Greene, A Journey 36).

The horrid incident about a young boy of twenty and a girl of fifteen, lying headless on a railway track of which he came to know also left a psychological scar on his mind. Thus after his capture in
the hands of the lieutenant the priest of *The Power and the Glory* does not fail to recall the excruciating experience of loving: "a girl puts her head under water or a child strangled ", (199). The powerful experiences of blood and death thus seared Greene's childhood and started a fear psychosis in his mind.

In this way we find that like Francis, the hero of his short story "End of the party", Greene also was a victim of a number of fears. And the impression which we may derive from this phenomenon is that of a child sensitive, complex, imaginative, often withdrawn and fearful of many things. The questions which naturally come uppermost in our mind is whether Greene was able to share his deepest concerns with his parents and whether his parents were interested to comfort and console his fear stricken psyche, to provide him with an emotional and psychological safeguard against the horrors of the world.

There was hardly any animosity between Greene and his parents but a "remoteness" (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 17) or a "lack of intimacy" (27) always characterized their relationship. And this may have originated in the difference of personality. Thus Greene reminisces : "As a headmaster he [his father] was even more distant
than our aloof mother” as (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 25). His mother who “paid occasional state visit to the nursery” (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 17) was not only indifferent to her children but also showed a “wonderful lack of possessive instinct” (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 27).

As a result Greene was unable to confide his feelings to his detached parents. Thus the tragic drama of childhood was enacted against the background of the indifference of the parents and the terrifying images of childhood fears reigned Greene’s psyche. Thus Greene was gripped by a peculiar fear psychosis which gradually gave birth to his awareness of the existence of evil, he found so central to his imagination.

For thirteen years Greene enjoyed a life of abundance and material comforts at home. It was a social and comfortable life, a life in “a place of safety, of the confidence that accompanied shared ideals of tradition, loyalty and social responsibility” (Adamson 44). “However occupied the parents might be, in a family of six children” (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 70) loneliness was not felt terribly as there was a lot of toys and books and a small group of servants to cater his needs. Thus, he recalls in *A Sort of Life*, his autobiography:
There was no loneliness to be experienced .... The six birthdays, the Christmas play, the Easter and the summer seaside, all arrived like planets in their due season, unaffected by war. (70)

From this we can easily trace his childhood agony at the prospect of joining the senior school. Thus he reminisces:

Only in the clouds ahead I could see that there was no luminosity at all. Yet anything, I felt, any thing, even a romantic death, might happen to save me before my 13th year struck." (Greene, A Sort of Life 70)

True to his expectations Greene's experience in the senior school was not a pleasant one as it was characterized by loneliness, squalor, loss of identity, a feeling of having been alienated abandoned and betrayed and a predominating mental agony of conflicting loyalties. In fact two diametrically opposite worlds of home and school existed side by side but cherished altogether different values of life and Greene recalls how a Greene baize door by the side of his father's study came to symbolize the sharp line of demarcation that separated these contrasting environments, one characterized by the "smell of books fruit and eau-de-cologne" and
the other by the "odour of iodine from the matron’s room." (Adamson 44):

Two countries just here by side by side ... you had to step carefully: the border was close beside your gravel path ... If you pushed open a green baize door in a passage by my father's study you entered another passage deceptively similar, but none the less you were on alien ground ... How can life on a border be other than restless. You are pulled by different ties of love and hate. (Greene, The Lawless Roads 13)

Thus Judith Adamson in her book Graham Greene: The Dangerous Edge depicts how the two adjacent realms of home and school came to be crucial in concretising the concept of heaven and hell in Greene's mind:

Some people, Greene thought, might find solace in the Anglican Church but even as a child he had found its symbols remote in comparison to the images of heaven and hell offered on opposite sides of the green baize door. The Christian story had only begun to come alive for
him in Nottingham in 1926 when he exchanged the Anglican symbols with which he had grown up for the older and more dramatic catholic ones. (Adamson 45)

Thus Greene’s expulsion from “the heaven of the family croquet lawn into the hell of boarding school” (Gorra 122) left a profound impact on his adolescent mind. His sense of security fostered in the stable social environment of his home was the first casualty. He had been transferred into “a new world of violence and social chaos”, (Adamson 44) featuring rampant social irresponsibility. Greene recalls his terrible experience at boarding school while he was being interviewed by Marie Francoise Allain in 1979: “But it was horrible ... The promiscuity, the total absence of solitude, there was the horror.” (qtd. In Sherry I :69). This mental agony was also accompanied by his sense of loneliness and a feeling of having been abandoned and betrayed by his parents. He had to face the darker side of his existential reality and to fight his own battle while his parents enjoyed and led a reasonably comfortable life in an atmosphere, very close to his school. How terrifying must have been the secret agony of his soul! And this was enhanced by other emotional conflicts.
Greene was the headmaster's son who was to be disliked, distrusted and whose loyalties were to be suspected. Thus A Sort of Life records his dreadful existence in "a world of moral chaos, lies, brutality (and) complete inhumanity" (qtd. In Shensi : 67):

I had left civilization behind and entered a savage country of strange customs and inexplicable cruelties: a country in which I was a foreigner and a suspect, quite literally a haunted creature, known to have dubious associates.

Was not my father the headmaster? I was like the son of a Quisling in a country under occupation. (72)

In fact his father wanted him not only to be an obedient pupil but also to play an effective role, the role of an agent or a spy in his surveillance network. Thus, Michael Sheldon, one of his biographers observes: "The son gave the father an extra pair of eyes in the relentless battle to thwart the growth of vice" (22). But it made the things worst for him since "it was a battle that could end only in defeat for the son. If he reported misdeeds to the headmaster the boys would hate him. If he kept silent he would be disobeying his father. On both sides of the green baize door – the border between home and school – his loyalty was suspect" (22). To escape from this
intolerable situation he would act as a double agent setting one side against the other there by pretending to serve the both sides. But at the same time a sense of failure engulfed his psyche since he was the son who was unable to deal successfully with his father's ideals. Thus Norman Sherry, one of his biographers, comments:

His sense of failure in coping with the institution and its standard – which were those of his father – must have been strong, and in a way a further betrayal. (I : 71)

When he could not further put up with this unbearable situation he was allowed to spend every Sunday at home but that only confirmed the belief that he was not "a member of the resistance" but a "Quisling's son" (Greene, A Sort of Life 58-59) – an agent of his father and so the pupil felt more inclined to trouble him. Thus to Greene it was a world of violence and cruelty, a world inhabited by the enemies and the strangers. Thirty years later A Sort of Life, his autobiography reflects the same feeling:

Years later when I read the sermon on hell in Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist" I recognised the land I had inhabited. (72)
Thus this sense of loneliness accompanied by a feeling of insecurity and being betrayed or abandoned in a hellish brutal world of moral chaos and complete inhumanity came to strengthen his belief in and obsession with evil.

At school Greene was subjected to mental torture rather than the physical torture. Thus he recalls in A Sort of Life: "Though children can be abominably cruel no physical tortures were inflicted on me" (72). In fact he came across many characters who made him aware of the very presence of evil. Thus in an emotive language he tries to give us a vivid impression of "the whole dark side of childhood" (qtd. In Sherry I: 67) in The Lawless Roads:

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 practised 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 Collifox, who practiced torments with dividers. Mr. Cranden with three grim chins, a dusty gown, a kind of demoniac sensuality. From these heights evil declined towards Parlow, whose
desk was filled with minute photographs – advertisements of art photos. Hell lay about them in their infancy. (14)

This trinity according to Norman Sherry, one of his biographers, was for Graham an apt representation of “the descending order of evil” (I: 72). The genesis of Carter, a fictional character may easily be traced back to Greene's one time classmate Carter who “perfected during my [his] 14th and 15th year a system of mental torture based on my [his] difficult situation” (Greene, A Sort of Life 79). Carter along with a boy called Watson who again, “‘deserted me (Greene) for Carter’ (Greene, A Sort of Life 80) made Greene feel the all pervasive presence of evil. Carter having an adult imagination could easily understand Greene’s problem of conflicting loyalties. He never seemed tired of inflicting mental tortures on Greene and “derived special pleasure from teasing him about his love of poetry” (sheldop 64). Carter invented various nicknames about which Greene remarks: “The sneering nicknames were inserted like splinters under the nails” (Greene, A Sort of Life 80). He also endeavoured to persuade Greene to join the “forces of resistance” (Greene, A Sort of Life 72) – the school boys, thereby to betray his own family for the sake of general acceptance and popularity. Carter always placed this
temptation with offers of friendship which, Greene recalls were “snatched away like a sweet, but leaving the impression that somewhere, sometime the torture would end while Watson imitated him only at a blundering unimaginative level” (Greene, A Sort of Life, 80). Thus the genesis of the unfaithful wife who deceives her husband with another person in Carribean in Greene's short story “Cheap in August” may be traced back to Watson on whom Greene wanted to take revenge “for with his defection my (his) isolation had become completed (Greene, A Sort of Life, 80). Wilson, the spy employed by the government who cuckold and keeps a secret watch on Major Scobie in The Heart of the Matter also bears the mark of the Watson's character. Once again we can detect Carter in the villain of the Greene's novel Our Man in Havana who is clever and inclined to murder but pathetic and murdered in the end.

The mental torture to which Greene was subjected in the school can easily be understood from his presentation of the classroom situation in Prologue to Pilgrimage: (Here Anthony aptly represents the mental make up of adolescent Greene and Webber is similar to Carter in respect of the mental torture, he inflicts).
Slowly Anthony [felt] an arm creeping behind his back. There was jerk and a muttered exclamation from Hardy. The hand withdrew itself and Anthony saw that Webber had been using a pair of dividers... A quarter of an hour later once again came the disturbed flurry behind his back. Furiously he seized his own box of Geometry instruments and prepared to retaliate. Then caution predominated again in his brain... But he was too late to disguise the first aggressive movement. Webber had noticed it and Anthony felt a small warning prick in his calf... Webber was subtle. He half realized Anthony's character, his fear of precipitating an unnecessary struggle, his passionate desire to be left in peace... three or four times during every future evening, Anthony's dreams would be broken by that warning prick... Webber did realize the existence of two methods of torture, the physical and the mental... to Anthony the last was the most terrible. (80-81) (qtd. In Sherry I: 67)

Here "more than human evil" of a sadistic child is presented with quite a shocking mastery. In this connection Norman Sherry aptly remarks:
It is possible that Carter with his inexplicable cruelties, his nihilism, his ability to feign innocence, put Greene on to his fundamental theme, the nature of good and evil and the conflict between them. (1: 81)

Being cramped by a life of isolation, and humiliation and subjected to torment, betrayal and homesickness Greene fell prey to intense despair and boredom. Thus he remembers in A Sort Life:

Unhappiness in a child accumulates because he sees no end to the dark tunnel. The thirteen weeks of a term might just as well be thirteen years. The unexpected never happens. Unhappiness is a daily routine. I imagine that a man condemned to a long prison sentence feels much the same. (78)

This ultimately led to Greene's rebellion against all the prison-like accompaniments of loneliness, squalor and loss of identity which entailed in an English public school as he puts it:

I can not remember what particular item in the routine of a boarding school roused this first act of rebellion — loneliness, the struggle of conflicting loyalties, the sense
of continuous grind, of unlocked lavatory doors, the odour of farts. Or was it just then that I had suffered from what seemed to me a great betrayal? This story at least was to have satisfactory though remote ending. (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 78-79)

He attempted different forms of escape including suicide, truancy and running away from school. Once he wounded his knee with a pen knife. He also drank a quantity of hypo as he thought it to be poisonous. One day he swallowed twenty aspirins and swam in the school baths. Greene reminisces in *A Sort of Life* : “I can still remember the curious sensation of swimming through cotton wool” (86).

A course of psychoanalysis corrected his orientation but psychoanalytical treatment generated a feeling of intense boredom and as a result he was unable to derive any kind of aesthetic pleasure from visual beauty. And “the horrible three-year experience of life in a world of strangers and enemies remained forever central to his imagination” (Spurling 18). He found no satisfying way out of this terrible experience and it made him acutely conscious of the existence of a dark gloomy world pevaded by evil, the omnipotent.
Greene has always tried to testify the profound influence, the books exert on the child's mind. In his essay "The Lost Childhood" he remarks: "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives". (Collected Essays 13) A Sort of Life, his autobiography puts forward the same thought: "The influence of the early books is profound" (52). In fact Greene believed in the embryonic existence of life in childhood. According to him, the images found innocently and accidentally in one's first reading become the defining images of one's vision of experience" (Hynes 38). "In childhood" Greene observes, in The Ministry of Fear "we live under the brightness of immortality – heaven is as near and actual as the seaside. Behind the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities. God is good, the grownup man or woman knows the answer to every question, there is such a thing as truth, and justice is as measured and faultless as a clock. Our heroes are simple: they are brave, they tell the truth, they are good swordsmen, and they are never in the long run really defeated. That is why no later books satisfy us like those which were read to us in childhood – for those promised a world of great simplicity of which we knew the rules, but
the later books are complicated and contradictory with experience” (102).

In his later life Greene never failed to declare the stupendous impact of the novels of Percy Westerman, Captain Brereton, Stanley Weynan, Anthony Hoe, and Rider Haggard on his adolescent mind. Greene, an introvert child, was profoundly influenced by their works, dealing with romance and adventure. The character of Gagool in Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* left a lasting impression on Greene’s mind and became a ‘permanent part’ of his imagination. But the goodness of Quatermain and Cursis seemed to him “a little too good to be true” (Greene, *Collected Essays* 16) as he was unable to connect it with the real life. Thus he puts it “These men were like Platonic ideas: they were not life like as one had already begun to know it” (Greene, *A Sort of Life* 16).

The child Greene was also deeply impressed by Marjorie Bowen’s “The Viper of Milan”. On the surface “Viper of Milan” is only the story of a war between Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan and Della Scala, Duke of Verona, told with zest and cunning and an amazing pictorial sense (Greene, *Collected Essays* 16) but it is also a tale of “unrelieved treachery” (Atkins 180) that crept in, coloured and
explained “the terrible living world of the stone stairs and the never quiet dormitory” (Greene, *Collected Essays*) which made him acutely conscious of hell and damnation. Thus he reminisces in his essay “The Lost Childhood”:

It was no good in that real world to dream that one would ever be a Sir Henry Curtis, but Della Scala who at last turned from an honesty that never paid and betrayed his friends and died dishonoured and a failure even at treachery – it was easier for a child to escape behind that mask. As for Visconti, with his beauty, his patience and his genius for evil, I had watched him pass by many a time in his black Sunday suit smelling of mothballs ....

Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey. I read all that in ‘The Viper of Milan’ and I looked around and saw that it was so. (*Collected Essays* 16-17)
Greene recalls how this book centring round the story of Visconti, the perfect incarnation of evil and Della Scalla "whose corruption was so accessible" (AtKins 180) opened the floodgates of his creativity:

From that moment I began to write. All other possible futures slid away .... Imitation after imitation of Miss Bowen's magnificent novel went into exercise book .... (They were) stories of sixteenth-century Italy or twelfth century England marked with enormous brutality and despairing romanticism. It was as if I had been supplied once and for all with a subject (Greene, Collected Essays 16).

Thus this novel not only projected the characters whose parallels he could easily discover in the horrible living world of his childhood but also set a pattern in his mind and impelled him to write accordingly. Greene observes in this connection in "The Lost Childhood":

Anyway she [Miss Bowen] had given me my pattern – religion might later explain it to me in other terms, but the pattern was already there – perfect evil walking in the world where perfect good can never walk again, and only
the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done. (17)

In later years Greene once again found his belief confirmed in the works of Henry James who again believed in the existence of the independent evil. According to James human beings never emerge victorious. No matter whether they belong to God’s party or the Devil’s party they are punished in their own way. Greene observes: “James believed in the supernatural, but he saw evil as an equal force with good”. (Greene, Collected Essays 33). In fact the religiousity, we detect in James was a product of his experience: “Experience taught him to believe in supernatural evil, but not in supernatural good” (Greene, Collected Essays 43). No wonder that these formative literary influences along with his unhappy childhood played a major part in creating and strengthening Greene's obsessive preoccupation with sin, evil, salvation and damnation.