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## ***Graham Greene in a ménage à trois: God against man***

### ***Ménage à trois w twórczości Grahama Greene'a: Bóg przeciwko człowiekowi***

Sharaf Rehman

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

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#### **Keywords**

infidelity; interpersonal relationships; love-triangle; Graham Greene; Catholic novel

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

niewierność; relacje interpersonalne; trójkąt miłosny; Graham Greene; powieść katolicka

#### **Abstract**

Using textual analysis, this paper discusses the Catholic novels by Graham Greene and his use of a common literary device, “the love triangle”, employed in *The End of the Affair* (1951), a partially autobiographical novel. The first section provides a short biographical sketch of the author, his faith, his work, and his writings. The second section discusses his four Catholic novels – their themes and devices. The third section explores Greene’s twist on the love-triangle where the three corners become – man, woman, and God.

#### **Abstrakt**

Stosując analizę tekstową, niniejszy artykuł omawia katolickie powieści Grahama Greene’a, w sposób szczególny koncentrując się na *The End of the Affair* (1951), utworu częściowo biograficznego, w którym Greene wykorzystuje motyw „trójkąta miłosnego”. Pierwsza część artykułu to krótki szkic biograficzny przedstawiający Greene’a, jego wiarę i jej wpływ na twórczość pisarza. Druga część omawia cztery katolickie powieści Greene’a – ich tematy oraz wykorzystane środki literackie. Trzecia część analizuje specyficzne wykorzystanie przez pisarza motywu trójkąta miłosnego. U Greene’a trójkąt ten stworzony jest przez – mężczyznę, kobietę i Boga.

## Graham Greene in a *ménage à trois*: God against man

### Introduction

The seventh commandment states: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” As a safety measure, the tenth commandment reminds us again, “Thou shalt not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” Despite these recaps, the human histories, and literature, from Cain and Abel to Othello, from Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina to Lady Chatterley’s Lover, are laden with tales of adultery and infidelity (Black 1975; Armstrong 1976; Tanner 1979; Abbott 2011).

Marriage is a social arrangement on which societies rely. As such, social and economic institutions, e.g., family, marriage, and property ownership impose monogamous behavior. Human nature, through history, has, however, made a mockery of the notion of one-man-one-woman. Not only does literature bear witness to the popularity and acceptance of infidelity, contemporary mass media, popular music, popular fiction, television, and films thrive on these themes. Adultery can be bad for a marriage, but the literature seems to benefit from it.

As far as the fiction dealing with infidelity is concerned, readers shift their sympathy midstream. As two people meet and are drawn to each other, readers root for the potential lovers. Readers, as well as the film audience, want to see/read how the two overcome all the hurdles and fall into each other’s arms. Illicit as it may be, the readers wish to see that love conquers everything (Iser 1978, 34-35). However, as soon as the act is committed, the readers’ ethical and social values are threatened. The lovers transform into wrongdoers and sinners. The readers wish to see the pair punished. The consequences of most of the tales of adultery are humiliation, abandonment, or death of one or both partners.

In Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951), initially, the attraction of two lovers culminates in a satisfying outcome. Repeatedly. However, Greene rewards his readers by bringing humiliation and abandonment to both parties in adultery and eventually, death to one of the partners in this tale of infidelity and the love triangle. Greene’s real love triangle is not the conventional one consisting of a husband, a wife, and a lover. Instead, the three corners are the man, woman, and God.

Greene is one of the most cinematic of twentieth-century writers (McGowin 1991; Graham 2016). Of his own writing, Greene said, “When I describe a scene... I capture it with the moving eye of the cine-camera rather than with the photographer’s eye--which leaves it frozen. In this precise domain, I think the cinema has influenced me” (Sinyard 2003: 42). Since, by his own admission, Greene approached his writing with a cinematic style, it’s only fitting to compare his imagery of faith, belief, and love with their cinematic interpretations in the filmed versions of his writings.

### **Graham Greene, his faith, and his writing**

Graham Greene was born in 1904 in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire. He attended Balliol College, Oxford and studied modern history. Early in his career, he worked as a journalist, as a sub-editor, and as a film critic. In his later years, he traveled to some of the most dangerous places such as Kenya, during the Mau rebellion, to Cuba during the rise of Fidel Castro, and the Soviet Union just before its fall (Diederich 2012). Greene worked for MI6 under Kim Philby, who, in later years, was exposed as a Soviet spy (Finn 1990). Greene wrote the introduction to Philby’s memoirs, *My Silent War* (1968). Greene’s biographer, Sherry (2004) claims that Greene continued to submit reports to British intelligence until the end of his life. One can’t help but wonder if Graham Greene, the novelist, was also a spy or was his lifelong literary career the perfect cover?

However, by any measure, Greene had an impressive literary career. He published 50 books over a span of 70 years. Nineteen of Greene’s 26 novels have been adapted as films.

A recent television documentary, “Dangerous Edge: A Life of Graham Greene”, (Director O’Connor 2013) reports that more than 100 of his stories have been adapted for television, stage, and cinema. His novels, *Brighton Rock*, *The Quiet American*, and *The End of the Affair* have been filmed twice. His books have been translated into 27 languages and more than 20 million copies have been sold worldwide. In 1961, he was a runner-up for the Nobel Prize in literature; it went to Yugoslav novelist Ivo Andri. He was shortlisted in 1967; the prize was given to the Guatemalan poet, Miguel Ángel Asturias (Steensma 1997).

### **Greene’s Catholic novels**

Greene grouped his own novels into two categories. The entertainment novels and Catholic novels. The former group includes works such as *Stamboul Train* (1932), *A Gun for Sale* (1936), *The Confidential Agent*

(1939), *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), *The Third Man* (1949), and *Our Man in Havana* (1958). These are narratives of espionage and international politics. Undoubtedly, his work for MI6 and travels to war-torn and politically unstable lands became the material for his entertainment novels.

His Catholic novels are *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951). It is upon these novels, that his literary reputation rests (Finn 1990; Short 2005; Edward 2007). Themes that Greene has visited repeatedly in both categories include religion, politics, love, loyalty, and betrayal.

In both strands of his writings, it is difficult to separate the artist from his work. His entertainment novels anchored in espionage, politics of the Third World nations and the Cold War are drawn from his travels and involvement with MI6. His Catholic novels came about from his converting to Catholicism in 1926 after having met his soon-to-be-wife, Vivian Dayrell-Browning. They married in 1927 and had two children. The first child, Lucy, was born in 1933, and the second, Francis, in 1936. The couple separated in 1947. In accordance with the Catholic faith, they never divorced -- an experience that influenced his novel *The End of the Affair*. Greene's attraction to his wife, Vivian, however, was not his only reason for his fascination with Catholicism. The first half of the twentieth century was the heyday of the Catholic literary revival (Bosco 2005). Writers such as R.R. Tolkien, Muriel Spark, and Evelyn Waugh were among some of the other prominent literary figures that converted to Catholicism in England and authors such as Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and J. F. Powers were the literary converts in the United States.

Greene wrote his four Catholic novels between 1938 and 1951. The last one, *The End of the Affair* (1951) is not only a comment on marriage but also on his internal conflict with spirituality and God. Having wavered from his faith, in his later years, Greene referred to himself as a "Catholic agnostic" and "Catholic atheist." The modern Catholic novel, as opposed to the classic literary Catholic writings that emphasize the doctrines of the Catholic faith, is a personal vision of human life infused with spiritual ideas. Using this criterion, Sabău and Dima-Laza (2012) place contemporary writers such as Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, and Graham Greene as modern Catholic novelists.

### ***Brighton Rock* (1938)**

Of the four Catholic novels by Greene, the first, *Brighton Rock*, was published in 1938. It was made into a film in 1947 and again in 2004. The main

character in the story is a merciless, would-be gangster, Pinkie – a Roman Catholic. Already at the age of 17, he is the leader of a mob that controls the slot machines in the seaside resort of Brighton. Pinkie is a troubled youth who is simultaneously enthralled and deterred by sex and female companionship. His mistrust in an older mobster, Hale, who had betrayed his previous boss, leads Pinkie to murder Hale. Pinkie has one alibi, a poor and naïve waitress, Rose, also a Roman Catholic. He marries her to keep her from being able to give implicating evidence against him. Another kind-hearted woman, Ida, decides to save Rose from her self-destruction. Ida, playing a detective, tries to bring justice to Hale. On the surface, the book is an underworld murder story and its undercurrents explore the Roman Catholic values concerning the nature of sin and morality. The beliefs of Pinkie and Rose are pitched against Ida's strong non-religious moral sensibility. Reviewing the book for *The New York Times*, Southron (1938) said:

This is no book for those who would turn delicate noses away from the gutters and sewers of life, but there is nothing that could give the faintest gratification to snickerers. If it is as downright as surgery, it is, also, as clean as a clinic. There is not an entirely admirable character in it; but there is not one that can, by any chance, be forgotten nor one that could be set aside as untrue to life.

Greene was too young to have participated in WWI. However, he witnessed the social and political problems caused by it. During wartime, the value of human life is cast aside and mass destruction of enemy soldiers is condoned. Killing the enemy is no longer murder. In peacetime, the same brutality of the war turns into merciless criminal behavior. In *Brighton Rock*, Greene explores not only why Pinkie acts as he does, but also when he went astray and turned a blind eye to the most sacred notion in the Roman Catholic faith: the value of human life. Pinkie is possessed by evil and in his own eyes is going to be condemned to hell.

### *The Power and the Glory* (1940)

Greene's second Catholic novel is *The Power and the Glory* (1940). Named as one of the 100 best novels of the 20th century by *Time* magazine, it is Greene's *magnum opus*. It tells the story of a nameless Catholic priest (whiskey priest) on the run in the southern Mexican state of Tabasco during an anti-Catholic purge. The Mexican army is persecuting the priests and their followers. The priest's past affairs, an illegitimate child, and his wavering morals haunt him as he tries to escape his pursuers. He is torn between the bottle and the Bible, is tempted to renounce his faith and yet is unable to abandon the higher

calling that he chose to answer. At play are the tensions between faith, fidelity, and disloyalty mixed in equal portions, creating a story of spiritual and physical survival. Greene visited Mexico during the times when the Catholic suppression and persecution were going on. Although the novel presents a fictional priest, the dystopian government and its social policies described in the novel are real. Not intended as historically 'accurate', the book poses a timeless question: What does it mean to be a saint? Whiskey priest declares that sin is real, and it leads to atonement; that suffering can lead to salvation and redemption; that freedom is to submit to the will of God.

The priest continues to perform religious services, being fully aware that doing such jeopardizes his own safety. On one occasion, he baptizes a child who was fathered by a policeman who persecuted the Catholic people. The priest eventually manages to escape the police state but learns that a criminal is mortally wounded and wants the last rites. The priest returns to the village and performs a final act of charity, as the soldiers close in on him. He is caught, tried, sentenced to death, and killed by a firing squad. In this book, since the masses that were led by the priests faced dire consequences, many Catholics felt that the priests were depicted as the cause of people's misery.

On its publication in 1940, *The Power and the Glory* was branded as controversial, and the Holy Office condemned it. The Pope (Paul VI) assured him that he had read the novel and liked it. The Pope reminded Greene that parts of his novels would always offend some Catholics, but he should not bother about those opinions (*The New York Times* 1991). The novel was adapted for the screen by Dudley Nichols and directed by John Ford as *The Fugitive* (1947). Being praised as a film of monolithic beauty (Crowther 1947), the film received the prize of the International Catholic Organization for Cinema (OCIC) at the Venice Film Festival in 1948 where it was hailed as a film contributing to the revival of moral and spiritual values of humanity.

### *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)

*The Heart of the Matter* (1948) is a Catholic novel written by a Catholic writer about a Catholic character that believes and commits moral sins: adultery and suicide. Here, Greene has made the concept of Catholicism more universal. The character could have been Hindu, Muslim, or of any of the other faiths. Without naming Sierra Leone as its location, the novel tells the story of a British colonial officer, Lieutenant Scobie, who is pulled in two directions: in one, out of pity for his wife and their loveless marriage, and in the second by his carnal desire for his young mistress. Thematically, similar to the whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*, Scobie is a virtuous sinner engrossed in complex relationships with informants, criminals, and his

young mistress. Each of these relationships tests his faith and loyalty to God and humans. As a rogue with sentimental principals, he is unable to break off with his wife or his mistress, as he does not wish to bring unhappiness to either woman. When he fears that one of his servants may blackmail him, he mentions it to a local criminal. The servant is promptly murdered. Scobie feels guilty and responsible for his servant's death. To punish himself as a Catholic, he brings upon himself the punishment of eternal damnation by taking his own life. Scobie fell victim to his own acute kindness, a condition capable of bringing destruction as cruelly and surely as cancer.

According to Pearce (2001),

...the moralist in Graham Greene turns Scobie into the doubter par excellence, as he doubts others, himself, and God. Greene's Catholicism becomes an enigma, a conversation piece – even a gimmick. Yet if his novels owe a debt to doubt, their profundity lies in the ultimate doubt about the doubt. In the end, this ultimate doubt about doubt kept Graham Greene clinging doggedly, desperately – and doubtfully – to his faith.

The novel was made into a film in 1953. It featured Trevor Howard, Elizabeth Allen, and Maria Schell. It was shown at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival.

Both equally bleak, the main difference between the film and the book is in the ending. In the book, Scobie's servant is killed, and Scobie commits suicide. In the film, Scobie wants to kill himself, but a fight breaks out that interrupts his intentions. Scobie tries to stop the fight and is shot in the process. He dies in his servant's arms. A variation that Phillips (1974) asserted undermined the novel's exploration of the moral and religious dilemma.

However, it should be the writers who deserve the final word to plead the case for their characters' faiths, convictions, motives, methods, and madness. The reader is best served by the exchange between Scobie's widow and the priest who comes to console her at the end of the story. This is the finale of *The Heart of the Matter*:

"Do you know all that I know about him?"

"Of course I don't, Mrs. Scobie. You've been his wife, haven't you, for fifteen years. A priest only knows the unimportant things."

"Unimportant."

"Oh, I mean the sins," he said impatiently. "A man doesn't come to us and confess his virtues."

"I expect you know about Mrs. Rolt. Most people did."

"Poor woman."

"I don't see why?"

"I'm sorry for anyone happy and ignorant who gets mixed up in that way with one of us."

"He was a bad Catholic."



"That's the silliest phrase in common use," Father Rank said.

"And in the end, this -- horror. He must have known that he was damning himself."

"Yes, he knew that all right. He never had any trust in mercy -- except for other people."

"It's no good even praying ..."

Father Rank clapped the cover of the diary to and said, furiously, "For goodness' sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you -- or I -- know a thing about God's mercy."

"The Church says ..."

"I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart."

"You think there's some hope, then?" she wearily asked.

"Are you so bitter against him?"

"I haven't any bitterness left."

"And do you think God's likely to be more bitter than a woman?" he said with harsh insistence, but she winced away from the arguments of hope.

"Oh why, why, did he have to make such a mess of things?"

Father Rank said, "It may seem an odd thing to say -- when a man's as wrong as he was -- but I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God."

She had denied just now that she felt any bitterness, but a little more of it drained out now like tears from exhausted ducts. "He certainly loved no one else," she said.

"And you may be in the right of it there, too," Father Rank replied (Greene 1948: 272-3).

In *Brighton Rock*, Greene introduced us to Pinkie, a criminal with no conscience, a whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*, and Scobie as a Catholic fully aware of the consequence of his suicide in *The Heart of the Matter*. The final book in this group, *The End of the Affair*, presents a 'protestant voice' in a Catholic society (Donaghy 1986: 62). While still married, Greene had an affair with American born Catherine Walston, who at the time was married to a British aristocrat. Fragments of this four-year-long affair found their way into Greene's final Catholic novel, *The End of the Affair*.

### *The end of the affair* (1951)

It is a story of a writer, Maurice Bendrix, his affair with Sarah Miles and his friendship with Sarah's husband, Henry, a civil servant in London during WWII and the air raids. Upon its publication, *Time* magazine ran a cover story. It claimed: "Adultery Can Lead to Sainthood." It is a book that shocks the believer and stimulates the disbeliever (Sinha 2007: 61). Literary critic and scholar, Frank Kermode called it Graham Greene's "masterpiece, his fullest and most completely realized book" (cited in Sinha 2007: 61).

The main character in the story is Sarah Miles. Greene uses the first-person form to tell the story; however, it is not Sarah who is telling her story. It is told by Maurice Bendrix, her lover. Sarah and Maurice are convinced that they are deeply in love. While Maurice's need seems more physical, Sarah believes she has never loved any man as she loves Maurice, nor will she be able to love another. So she thinks. There are several steamy descriptions of their physical encounters, the last one taking place during an afternoon in Maurice's apartment. Maurice thinks he has heard some noise downstairs. He leaves Sarah in bed and goes downstairs. Just then, the building is hit by a bomb. Sarah rushes downstairs and finds Maurice buried under a door. All that's visible to her is his hand. She assumes that under the weight of the door, Maurice has died. She returns to the bedroom upstairs and prays for a miracle, for Maurice's life. She made the following entry in her diary:

Let him be alive, and I will *believe*. Give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I'll believe.... I love him, and I'll do anything if you'll make him alive. I said very slowly, I'll give him up for ever, only let him be alive with a chance.... People can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You (Greene 1951: 95).

God steps in and Maurice is spared. As far as she is concerned, it is due to God performing a miracle that Maurice is alive. Hence, keeping her promise, she must leave Maurice. Being a nonbeliever, Maurice chalks his survival down to chance and coincidence and begins to suspect that Sarah has found another lover. The seed of jealousy is sowed. Sensing that Sarah might be having an affair, the one who becomes jealous is not the husband, Henry, but Maurice, the lover. The husband only considers hiring a detective; the lover engages one without telling the husband. The detective brings Sarah's diary to Maurice. Through it, he realizes that Sarah made a promise to God to end the affair in exchange for his life. It is also revealed that Sarah had been seeing another man, a priest, seeking guidance and counsel. The detective mistook that for another affair. However, God is very much a part of this relationship. He is the third party. Sarah catches pneumonia and dies whereas Maurice is left tending Henry.

### **Graham Greene's threesome – man, woman, God**

During the air raid when Sarah assumes Maurice dead, she prays for his life; Maurice is spared. Herein lays the literary genius of Greene. He has created a situation where Sarah, a nonbeliever, is willing to become a believer if her lover, Maurice, lives. On a deeper level, Greene has created a variation on the traditional dramatic conflicts. It is no longer man against man

(*Brighton Rock*), or man against the state (*The Power and the Glory*), or man against self (*The Heart of the Matter*). Here, Greene has fabricated a triangle between a man, a woman, and God, i.e., a man loves a woman, the woman gives herself to God. God becomes a part of the love triangle.

The man is in conflict with God and Maurice's being a nonbeliever only makes the plot more interesting. How can he be jealous of something or some 'being' that he does not believe in? In a love-triangle against God, humans are bound to lose. As a third party, God can take the man's love interest away by means of death, a device against which man has no recourse or reply. In the end, God takes Sarah away from Maurice through death. She dies; Maurice loses her. The sinners suffer; the moralists among the readers are appeased. God wins.

Sarah's diary reveals that she may have given God her word; she did not love God unconditionally. She wavered (Abbott 2011). A few days before she died, Sarah made an entry, "I want Maurice. I want ordinary corrupt human love" (Greene 1951: 124).

God may have won, the importance of human love, tenderness, and physical love as described in *The End of the Affair* are unmatched. Arguing with a priest after Sarah's passing, Maurice asserts that human sexual love is unique while spiritual love is a poor substitute. Maurice claims, "A great many people loved her." The priest, Father Crompton has nothing but this to offer: "Perhaps not enough." The assumption being that only God is capable of loving enough.

As for describing love among humans, Greene's mastery is best revealed in a passage where Sarah is in bed sick with a condition from which she will not recover. Maurice admits to her,

"I've been a bad lover, Sarah. It was the insecurity that did it. I didn't trust you. I didn't know enough about you. But I'm secure now... I have a cousin in Dorset who has an empty cottage I can use. We'll stay there a few weeks and rest.... We need a rest, both of us. I'm tired and I'm sick to death of being without you, Sarah."

"Me too." She spoke so low that I wouldn't have heard the phrase if I had been a stranger to it, but it was like a signature tune that had echoed through all our relationship... 'me too', for loneliness, griefs, disappointments, pleasures, and despairs – the claim to share everything" (Greene 1991: 129).

In the 1955 film version, the nonbeliever is at the threshold of doubt and surrender. In the final scene, Maurice confesses, "I've fallen into belief the way I fell in love." The 1999 film has Maurice admitting, "I hate you, God. I hate you as though you actually exist."

The doubter in Greene, relying on the Cartesian Doubt, took *cogito ergo sum* on a tangent by having Maurice declare:

“I know Your cunning. It’s You who take us up to a high place and offer us the whole universe. You’re a devil, God, tempting us to leap. But I don’t want Your peace and I don’t want Your love. I wanted something very simple and very easy: I wanted Sarah for a lifetime and You took her away. With Your great schemes You ruin our happiness as a harvester ruins a mouse’s nest. I hate You, God, I hate You as though You exist” (Greene 1951: 191).

In the book, Greene expressed his doubts through Maurice’s final cry of rejection: “... leave me alone forever,” thus bringing the final curtain on his affair with Catholicism and God.

With *The End of the Affair*, Greene created, if not a perfect novel, at least a novel that comes close to one. Not only has he added a new dimension to the man vs God conflict, but he has also created a novel that satisfies all parties. The nonbelievers are offered enough reason to stay mad at God and continue in their disbelief. The believers are satisfied to see that the sinners are punished for their sins; the fact that Sarah Miles attains near-sainthood is an added bonus for the Catholics. The average reader is offered an exciting narrative with three-dimensional characters struggling with beliefs, loyalty, and passion, and finally, the literary critics are appeased by Greene’s blending of the genres of religious novel, romance, and the traditional love triangle with elements of love, hate, and jealousy.

## Conclusion

It was common knowledge that Greene and a Catherine Walston (an American) had a four-year-long affair during which time Greene wrote some poems expressing that Catherine Walston was the love of his life (Hastings 2008). Fragments of the affair and Greene’s disenchantment with Catholicism became the foundation of his last Catholic novel.

The genius of authors is not in their personal lives but in their writing. The personal experiences of artists find their way into their creations; however, the criterion ought not to be how the artists lived their lives but how they infused these experiences into their work. Writers are on their best behavior and most respectful in their books. With their books, they stand in front of us, the readers, as humbly as if standing in front of royalty, awaiting approval and judgment. They ought to be judged not for their deeds but for the words they submit. They ought to be judged for their creations and the destinations they reach, and not their journey. So should be the case with Graham Greene.

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