1

Graham Greene, Writer and Man

The Writer

With the exception of money earned as an occasional spy, journalist or editor, Graham Greene was that rare breed of writer who lived entirely off book advances, royalties, and payments for commissioned articles. Unlike many prominent twentieth-century authors, he never served as visiting professor of literature or creative writing. If he had failed to become a writer, Greene said, he would have been happy running a used bookshop. He even visited them in his dreams in search of elusive tomes (Greene 1990, p. 323). One of the justifications for the present metafictional study is that Greene wrote so much about authorship and creation. Perhaps his most famous work, *The End of the Affair* (1951), concerns a novelist's affair with a woman who wants to become Catholic. Sarah dies before she can complete the process, then the writer learns that she was Catholic all along. As an infant, her mother had her baptized in secret, hoping that 'it would "take." Like vaccination' (1951, p. 136). Greene himself joined the Church after graduating from Oxford, though he reverted to an agnostic position for the last 20 years of his life. If religion never completely took, literature did. He fell in love with adventure novels as a boy and much of his adult life reads like one. For decades, he travelled the world, returning home to write novels set in the exotic locales he had visited. In the final years of his life, his travelling days behind him, he wrote one last book, *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988), a version of a boys' adventure novel complete with smugglers, secret codes, hidden gold, and disguised identities.

Greene was a prolific writer who adhered to the same strict writing regime ascribed to two of his fictional novelists, Maurice Bendrix from *The End of the Affair* and Argentine Jorge Julio Saavedra in *The Honorary Consul* (1973). He aimed to write 500 words per day. If he was on a roll, he sometimes exceeded 1000 words, but he was just as likely to stop in mid-sentence once he had reached his

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goal (Sherry 1989, p. 308). Almost every morning by 6:30, he was poised over lined foolscap, Parker 51 fountain pen in hand. Two hours later, he counted the words, scribbled the total in the margin and went on with his day, returning to his desk in the late afternoon to edit his work. He resisted using a typewriter because writing, he said, 'is tied up with the hand' (Greene 1990, p. 323), though he did exchange the Parker for a Dictaphone in the early 1950s. Otherwise, the regimen changed very little between 1929 and 1988 (Greene R. 2020, p. 266). During that time, he wrote more than 25 novels, hundreds of book and movie reviews, political journalism, plays, short stories, children's literature, and film scripts.

Early on Greene struggled to make it as a writer. He tried too hard to churn out best-sellers until, after 10 years of hits and misses, he got things right in *Brighton Rock* (1938), a tightly written thriller with a focus on evil. He initially called it an 'entertainment', though he dropped the tag during composition, as he found the novel taking a serious turn. In a March 1985 letter, he explained why he labelled some of his books as entertainments, then stopped the practice:

> I thought some of my books were more adventure stories and less serious than the others. I found more and more that the distinction was a bad one and that the two types of book came closer and closer to each other. I abandoned the distinction altogether in the case of *Travels with My Aunt*, which I thought was on one side quite a funny book and could be described as an entertainment but on the other hand it was a book that described old age and death.
>
> (Greene R. 2007, p. 385)

The whole idea, he concluded, had been a mistake which he was happy to correct. In a postscript to the above letter, Greene revealed that he had wanted to use a pseudonym, Hilary Trench (alternatively spelled Tench),[1] for *A Gun for Sale* (1936), a thriller completed two years before *Brighton Rock*. When Heinemann informed him that the largest advance a 'new' author could receive was £50, he opted to publish the book under his own name, subtitling it 'an entertainment' (Greene R. 2007, pp. 385–386; Allain 1983, p. 148). For a writer dependent upon advances, it made more sense to divide his books into separate categories than to use a pseudonym. Many writers have chosen the other route, including contemporary British novelist Julian Barnes, who created an alter ego, Dan Kavanagh, for a series of dark detective works. Perhaps he was trying to discourage readers from associating him with Duffy, his brutal, bisexual detective, or he wanted to protect his reputation as a highbrow literary novelist. We may never know, as Barnes has yet to publicly acknowledge the pseudonym (Dugdale 2014).

The Man

Henry Graham Greene was born on 8 October 1904 in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, 30 miles northwest of London. His father, Charles Greene, a schoolmaster, has been described as shy and gentle; his mother, Marion Raymond Greene—Charles's first cousin and a relative of Robert Louis Stevenson—distant and imperious (Sherry 1989, p. 39). The fourth of five children, Graham lived largely in his imagination as a child, preferring to read about adventures rather than have them. He disliked sports, going to great lengths to avoid playing them, which made it difficult to engage fully in the life at Berkhamsted School where his father was headmaster. Much has been made of the door separating Charles Greene's study from the school as a division between enemy camps. Was the headmaster's son on the side of the boys or the authorities? Greene recalled his father's appearance in work clothes 'on the home side of the green baize door' as 'a breach of neutrality' (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 1971, p. 28). This division contributed to the creation of a writer who liked to straddle the text so that he could step inside when he wanted to offer his own commentary. Learning to hedge his bets and play for both sides also helped him later in life as a spy and in dealings with political strongmen.

When Greene was a teenager, he was tormented by two fellow pupils, leading him to self-harm and the consideration of suicide. His alarmed parents sent him to London to live with amateur psychoanalyst Kenneth Richmond for a six-month period during which he recovered his equilibrium while discovering the magic of writing. Following Richmond's instructions, he recorded his dreams each morning, then read them aloud. His psychological troubles never disappeared, and 30 years later he requested shock therapy to counter bouts of depression. His doctor demurred, advising him to dig into his childhood memories and record the results. Some of those early remembrances appear in the opening chapter of *A Sort of Life*.[2] The dreams, meanwhile, seeped into the fiction. Greene often incorporated detailed dreams revelatory of characters' psychological states and his own obsessions. In *A Gun for Sale* (1936), the villain Raven takes a chorus girl hostage. By coincidence, her fiancé is the detective searching for him. She recognizes Raven as a troubled soul, commiserates, and tells him a story to take his mind off dark dreams. In the story, a fox mocks a cat for only having a single skill—tree-climbing—to help him escape from dogs, while the fox has a whole bag of tricks. Just then a hunter appears with hounds, seizing the fox before he has time to open his bag as the cat climbs to safety (p. 154). Raven claims not to know any stories, though he's 'educated all right' and has read 'something about psicko', presumably psychoanalysis. 'I couldn't understand it all', he admits,

> but it seems if you told your dreams . . . It was like you carry a load around you; you are born with some of it because of what your father and mother were and their fathers . . . seems as if it goes right back, like it says in the Bible about the sins being visited. Then when you're a kid the load gets bigger; all the things you need to do and can't; and then all the things you do. They get you either way. (p. 160)

According to Raven, telling one's dreams is a form of confession, though 'when you've confessed you go and do it all over again. I mean you tell these doctors everything, every dream you have, and afterwards you don't want to do it. But you have to tell them everything' (p. 160). Greene too found that recording his dreams helped relieve an anxious mind and heart, a function Catholicism also served for many years.

Something else that Greene's London adventure taught him was that running away could be an effective means of dealing with problems, as the title of his second memoir, *Ways of Escape* (1980), suggests. Alcohol and adultery helped too but when he needed a release, he would remove himself from the situation for days, weeks, and even months. Ironically, his protagonists are never let off so easily, as guilt prevents them from enjoying their escape. This idea is expressed in *The Tenth Man* (1985),[3] a forgotten Greene novella from World War II about a French prisoner of war chosen by lot to be sacrificed so that nine other men will be spared. Unwilling to accept his fate, Chavel convinces Janvier to take his place in return for all of his property. After Janvier dies, his relatives find themselves well off, while Chavel's desire to be punished for cowardice grows stronger by the day. Early in 1922, Greene returned to Berkhamsted from London without any desire for punishment, finding his situation vastly improved. His principal tormenter, Carter, had left the school and Greene was allowed to live at home instead of as a boarder (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 1980, p. 78). In 1986, Greene seemed to recognize that this predilection for running away was not necessarily a positive character trait. He explained that he had chosen Thomas as his baptismal name both because the saint was a doubter, like himself, and because he had said, 'Let's go up to Jerusalem and die with Him' (Greene 2019, p. 35). In other words, the name was supposed to serve as a reminder to embrace fate instead of avoiding it.

In the fall of 1922, Greene entered Oxford University's Balliol College where he established a behaviour pattern that continued for the rest of his life.[4] He developed a taste for alcohol by spending an entire term 'drunk from breakfast till bed' (p. 118), played Russian roulette and engaged in reckless adventures to combat depression (pp. 130–131), and offered to spy for Germany in the hopes of being 'repaid with excitement and a little risk' (p. 141). 'I was', admits Greene, 'ready to wear any mask to escape from myself' (p. 146). The spy plan came to nothing, though he went abroad to two trouble spots, Ireland and Germany, with his friend

Claud Cockburn. For the better part of 60 years, he would go just about anywhere on behalf of MI6, or newspapers and magazines, provided his expenses were paid and there was a hint of danger (Sherry 1989, pp. 137–140). In this way, he was able to fend off depression while acquiring characters, settings, and situations for his novels.

After graduating from Oxford, Greene accepted a position as newspaper sub-editor in Nottingham in November 1925. He lasted four miserable months before taking a similar position in London at *The Times*, where he remained for four years. His unhappiness in Nottingham seems to have been the fault of a dismal boarding house and his pet dog, Paddy, whom he likened to a nervous, independent, 'difficult child'. Eventually, Paddy was returned to Berkhamsted and Greene's mother, who generally disliked dogs but got on well with this one (Greene 1971, p. 125). Greene's lifelong failure to take a regular part in any domestic situation is borne out by the absence of beloved pets and children from his fiction. Although he had a daughter and son, their upbringing was left to his wife. As for pets, when one considers that Greene's earliest memory was the discovery of a dead dog in his pram (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 1980, p. 13), perhaps he can be forgiven for turning them into a source of black comedy in his fiction.[5] In *The Power and the Glory*, a starving dog fights the whisky priest for the raw meat left on a filthy bone, leading the narrator to comment: 'Hope is an instinct only the reasoning human mind can kill. An animal never knows despair' (1940, p. 165). Pyle in *The Quiet American* has a black dog with a tongue like a burnt pancake, an unflattering description that reminds us of the author's antipathy towards all things American. Although Pyle repeatedly asks Fowler to call him by his first name, the Englishman prefers the surname because of 'associations' (1955, p. 67). From Fowler's perspective, both the man and his dog are pains, like haemorrhoids, and the author condemns them to miserable deaths. A dog is the accidental victim of a poisoning plot in *Our Man in Havana* (1958), with the situation reversed in the short story 'Across the Bridge', when a car carrying detectives on the trail of Calloway swerves to avoid his ugly dog, running over the owner (Greene 1995). Buller, the cat-killing boxer in *The Human Factor* (1978), is shot by his owner, though he must have had some redeeming characteristics as Kim Philby and Harold Acton claimed him as their favourite character in the novel (Greene 2019, p. 8). And, finally, canine irony surfaces in *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988) with the death of an unpleasant aunt: 'She was a bitch to the last. She left you nothing—nor me either. Everything went to a home for stray dogs' (1988, p. 97).

Just before Greene acquired Paddy, he authored the article 'The Average Film' in which he mentioned the worship of the Virgin Mary. It caught the eye of Basil Blackwell's personal secretary, Vivienne (later Vivien) Dayrell-Browning, who wrote to the newspaper to correct his word choice. The proper expression, she said, was 'hyperdulia', or veneration, since Catholics worshipped God alone.

Fascinated, Greene invited her to tea on 17 March 1925 (Greene R. 2020, p. 54) and fell in love. He and Vivien were born in the same year and had both published slim books of poetry with Blackwell's. Though Greene was ashamed of his book, calling it a 'lamentable volume of verse' (Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 1980, p. 74), hers was equally amateurish. She had converted to Catholicism at 17 and the smitten Greene decided to do the same. At the age of 80, Greene claimed that he had converted to better understand his wife, though the general view has been that he was desperate to sleep with her. At any rate, when Greene told Claud Cockburn about Vivien, his friend jokingly recommended he receive religious instruction (Sherry 1989, p. 193), and he did. This was an about-face for a confirmed atheist and (brief) member of the Communist Party. Greene's dislike for 'the claustrophobic world of traditional English Anglicanism' may have made the pomp and mysticism of Catholicism attractive (Brennan 2010, p. xi), but it also provided a moral framework to apply to his life and fiction. The post-1940 novels include set pieces in which characters engage in arguments over Church doctrine, like the one with Father Talbot recreated in *A Sort of Life*. Seated in the back of a taxi, Greene and the priest responsible for his instruction discuss the question of whether or not the Church allows epileptics to have children. Considering that Greene had been misdiagnosed as epileptic after a fainting spell, the issue was personal rather than intellectual. In other words, he wanted the Church to tell him what to do. The priest refused, saying only that contraception was strictly forbidden though marriage was not, and Greene pressed. Were married couples expected to live together in a sexless state? 'The Church expects you to trust God', replied the priest, 'that's all'. The exchange did not satisfy Greene:

> There was no failure in comprehension. Father Talbot was a man of the greatest human sympathy, but he had no solution for me at all. There was only one hard answer he could honestly give ('the Church knows all the rules', as Father Rank said), while the meter of the taxi ticked away the repetitions of our fruitless argument. It was the Rock of Peter I was aware of in our long drive, and though it repulsed me, I couldn't help admiring its unyielding façade. (p. 138)

For most of his writing life, Greene continued to rail against that Rock, testing hypotheses and challenging doctrines.

After Greene converted in 1925, the wooing of Vivien escalated. His love letters from this period, many of which are reproduced in the first volume of Sherry's biography, make for painful reading. Ultimately, Greene's efforts were rewarded and the couple married on 15 October 1927. In hindsight, it would always have been a difficult match. Vivien was terrified of sex and had contemplated joining a convent (Sherry 1989, p. 292); though Greene had plenty of his own fears, sex was

never one of them. A larger problem related to their religious attitudes and constitutions. Vivien viewed Catholicism as a set of rules to be accepted, not debated. She liked to stay at home, later becoming a dollhouse authority and antique furniture collector (Greene R. 2020, p. 131), while her husband prioritized writing, travel, and the pursuit of other women. Though they never divorced, the marriage was effectively over by the outbreak of World War II.

In order to concentrate on his writing, Greene rented rooms in London where he began an affair in 1939 with Dorothy Glover, his landlady's daughter. She was a set designer who would go on to write and illustrate children's books, at least four of which were completed with his help. Throughout their relationship, he continued to visit prostitutes,[6] making occasional returns to the family home at Clapham Common, about six miles from his lodgings on Gower Street. A measure of his affection for his mistress is found in the dedication of the novel *A Confidential Agent* (1939) to Dorothy Craigie, her pen-name. This affair continued on and off until he became involved with Catherine Walston in 1947. For many years, as Michael Brennan has convincingly argued, the 'intertwining of personal spirituality and sexuality [served] as a catalyst for literary creativity' (2010, p 83). *The End of the Affair* (1951) testifies to the complex, even tortuous, nature of the relationship with Catherine. Biographers had assumed they met after she wrote to his wife Vivien at the end of 1946 asking him to be her godfather. However, Richard Greene has provided evidence that they knew each other as early as the fall of 1945 (2020, p. 231). She may have been the great love of his life, as Norman Sherry was determined to prove (2004, pp. 695–696), for they shared fascinations for mysticism, sex, and alcohol. Though he held out hope that they could divorce their partners and marry each other, there were obstacles on both sides. The angry outbursts, intense passion, and jealous scenes that marred their meetings were wearing. As the years passed, they continued to correspond but met less frequently. Before this obsessive love could destroy Greene, he met Yvonne Cloetta in Cameroon in 1959. She became his final partner, acting as a stabilizing influence for the last 32 years of his life. While remaining married to their spouses, they lived close together in Antibes so that they could meet daily when he was not travelling. In December 1989, with his health failing, Greene went to Vevey, Switzerland, for blood transfusions (Greene R. 2020, p. 692). When his condition failed to improve, he and Yvonne relocated there in the spring of 1990. During the last year of his life, Greene attempted to organize his extensive dream diaries into a book. After he died of leukaemia on 2 April 1991, Yvonne completed the job, editing the diaries so that they could be published as *A World of My Own* (1992).