



## Pity and Responsibility in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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**Abstract:** *It is thus because Scobie has a conscience that he experiences despair because he knows the gravity of his sin unlike the evil man who is without conscience and always has the hope that sin has no consequence, it is Scobie's conscience as a man of faith that convinces him of his damnation because of his acute sense of guilt from sinning while the evil man is always convinced of his flawlessness and never experiences any sense of failure because he does not have a moral bearing or ideals which he holds dear to him or a capacity for something greater, so it is Scobie's goodwill and conscience which damns him and convinces him that his adultery will never be absolved by God.*

**Keywords:** Greene; Pity; Responsibility; Sin; Adultery; Suicide

*Why [...] do I love this place so much? Is it because here human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself? Nobody here could ever talk about a heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, while on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst: you didn't love a pose, a pretty dress, a sentiment artfully assumed.*

Book 1, Part 1, ch 1, sect. 5

Scobie thus loves Sierra Leone for what it is in all its fallen-ness and mean-ness and imperfection. Heaven remains firmly on the other side of death while Sierra Leone was fallen, inadequate, imperfect, but which Scobie loved anyway because it was so honest and without pretense.

*Against the beautiful and the clever and the successful, one can wage a pitiless war, but not against the unattractive: then the millstone weighs on the breast.*

Book 1, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 2

In this passage Scobie describes his feelings of pity and responsibility for his wife Louise, she is not perfect and she is unattractive, it is this unattractive nature of hers that stirs pity and responsibility in Scobie though he has long ceased loving her, he feels enough responsibility toward her to borrow money from Yusef to send her to South Africa after which he begins his doomed affair with Helen Rolt whom he falls in love with again out of pity because she is recently widowed and she reminds him of his daughter, eventually the sense of pity and responsibility towards both Helen Rolt and Louise will lead him to take his life as he cannot bring himself out of adultery and cannot bring himself to divorce Louise as it is a fatal sin for a Catholic like himself.

*Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgivable sin, but it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practises. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing-point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of goodwill carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation.*

Book 1, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 4

It is thus because Scobie has a conscience that he experiences despair because he knows the gravity of his sin unlike the evil man who is without conscience and always has the hope that sin has no consequence, it is Scobie's conscience as a man of faith that convinces him of his damnation because of his acute sense of guilt from sinning



while the evil man is always convinced of his flawlessness and never experiences any sense of failure because he does not have a moral bearing or ideals which he holds dear to him or a capacity for something greater, so it is Scobie's goodwill and conscience which damns him and convinces him that his adultery will never be absolved by God.

*The truth, he thought, has never been of any real value to any human being - it is a symbol for mathematicians and the philosophers to pursue. In human relations kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths.*

Book 1, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 4

It is thus Scobie's kindness towards others as towards Louise he wishes to spare her from the truth that he no longer loves her, as he wishes to spare Helen Rolt from the truth that he cannot bring himself to divorce Louise and start again with her because it is a fatal sin for him as a Catholic to divorce. Thus he is entrapped in a deepening web of lies from which only suicide can set him free as his pity and responsibility towards both Louise and Helen Rolt makes it such that he cannot bring himself to hurt either or choose between the two and bring one of them to despair. He would rather sacrifice his own life like Christ than bring one of them to despair.

*Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either extreme egotism, evil - or else an absolute ignorance.*

Book 2, Part 1, ch. 1, sect. 3

Scobie thus rationalizes that it is only extreme egotism that convinces a man he is without sin and thus happy or absolute ignorance like the evil man who is without conscience and thus lives without awareness of his sin and a fear of damnation that comes out of the consequences of sin.

*People talk about the courage of condemned men walking to the place of execution: sometimes it needs as much courage to walk with any kind of bearing towards another person's habitual misery.*

Book 2, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 3

Again it is Scobie's sense of pity and responsibility that leads him to view himself as a penitent savior for Louise and Helen Rolt's misery, it is his sense of pity for Louise's misery that makes him stay in the marriage, it is pity for Helen Rolt's loneliness as a widow that leads him to begin his affair with her it takes courage on his part to constantly feel the need to engage and remove the misery of others from this terrible sense of pity he feels towards Louise and Helen Rolt.

*"Pity smouldered like decay at his heart. He would never rid himself of it. He knew from experience how passion died away and how love went, but pity always stayed. Nothing ever diminished pity. The conditions of life nurtured it. There was only a single person in the world who was unpitiable, oneself."*

Book 2, Part 3, ch. 1, sect.

The fatal flaw of Scobie is thus pity, he cannot bring himself to rid himself of pity towards Helen Rolt and Louise and the accompanying sense of responsibility which comes with it with which he can only envision suicide as an escape because he cannot bear to let either woman down.

*He whispered, 'Oh God, I have deserted you. Do not desert me.'*

Book 2, Part 3, ch. 1, sect. 1

Scobie thus feels a terrible sense of guilt from his adultery and feels that he has deserted God but feels in turn that God might not desert him out of the same kind of pity he demonstrates towards Louise and Helen Rolt.

*God can wait, he thought: how can one love God at the expense of one of his creatures? Would a woman accept the love for which a child had to be sacrificed?*

Book 2, Part 3, ch. 1, sect. 3

Scobie thus rationalizes his sin of adultery – God would not allow him to love him at the expense of Helen Rolt like a mother loves a child to be sacrificed, this is again a terrible rationalization of his adultery just like he rationalized Christ's



atoning death was a suicide to comfort himself of committing the mortal sin of suicide.

*He entered the territory of lies without a passport for return.*

Book 2, Part 3, ch. 2, sect. 1

Scobie is caught between two women whom he feels a deep sense of pity and responsibility towards and finds himself tangled in lies which he cannot absolve himself of and thus sees the need to escape the life of lies and acting through his suicide.

*One must be reasonable, he told himself, and recognize that despair doesn't last (is that true?), that love doesn't last (but isn't that the very reason that despair does?) [...]*

Book 3, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 2

Scobie again tries to rationalize that his despair towards offending God with his adultery will not last as love does not last either. Perhaps despair lasts only because love does not, because love towards a fellow human being is transient while despair towards separation from God is eternal.

*You can look after yourself. You survive the cross every day. You can only suffer. You can never be lost. Admit that you must come second to these others.' And myself, he thought, [...] I must come last.*

Book 3, Part 1, ch. 2, sect. 2

Scobie rationalizes again that God can take care of himself from the crucifixions that occur to him daily and this somehow makes God in a subordinate position to sin. Clearly this is a nonsensical rationalization as was his rationalization that Christ's death was a suicide to spare himself the guilt of his suicide.

Scobie thus commits suicide out of despair that he has let God down and that he wants to spare God from himself as well as the act that he cannot bring himself to let either Louise or Helen Rolt down. In the end Father Rank hints that though Scobie's death was a suicide, his love of God that led him to commit suicide is what may eventually spare him from the wrath and damnation of God as it was a genuine desire to spare God from himself that leads him to kill himself.

Works cited:

Greene, Graham. *The Heart of the Matter*. Vintage, London. 2004.