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"A Burntout Case" By Graham Greene: An Analysis

Dr. Sujit Tripathi
I/C Principal
K. C. Sheth Arts College Birpur
Mahisagar, Gujarat (India)

"A Burnt Out Case was first published in 1961. It deals with the complex and tortured journey undertaken by a character, but the end of that journey is left unclear, We have here another religious novel with a marked difference of outlook and emphasis.

Belief, half belief and non-belief are dramaitsed in the novel through Qurerry's character and his relations with other characters who offer different interpretation of his condition. In Querry's (the name is suggestive of a question mark) various traits in Greene's earlier protagonists combine to produce a personality that remains ambiguous.

In the dedicatory note to "A Burnt Out Case", Greene remarks:

> "This is not a roman a' clef, but an attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief and non-belief, in the kind of setting, removed from world politics and household preoccupation, where such differences are full of acutely and find expression."

Querry has come to the leproserie because he has nowhere to go, he has reached the end of the line as it were when Dr. Colin enquires id he is going to stop there, Querry replies laconically: 'the boat goes no further'. He is a Catholic architect and as a lover, Querry's life had all the appearances of success and prosperity, but he realised that he had been a failure, a sham, a man motivated by nothing better than egotistic self-regard. When he designed a building or made love to a woman, he did it not for the sake of others but for self-expression. He says to Dr. Colin, "Self expression is a hard and selfish thing; It eats everything, even the self. At the end you find you haven't even got a self to express. I have no interest in anything anymore, doctor." A sense of revolution has driven him to the remote Leper-colony where no new building or woman would remind him that there was time when he was alive 'with a vocation and a capacity to love – if it was a love'. Querry's condition, therefore, can be equated to that of leper in whom his disease has burnt itself out; a leper who has lost everything that can be eaten away before being cured Querry is one of the mutilated and he wants to retire 'out of sight'.

Querry arrives at the leproserie in a state of indifference and abandonment, a man bereft of any association or emotion. In a dream (always significant in Greene's novels), he tells a girl he had once loved, "I am sorry, I am leper." 3 Dr. Collin, who understands and sympathises with Querry's condition more than anyone else in the novel, observes that Querry is trying an impossible experiment, 'A man can't live with nothing but himself.' The novel is an ironic illustration of his truth. Querry has fled from the comfort and adulation of the civilised life to a primitive land where 'there would be enough pain and enough fear to distract....' Querry's search is for a childhood myth, the 'Pendele'. It is a name uttered by his servant Deogratias (who is a leper and whose physical mutilation matters Querry's spiritual condition) in the darkness of the forest where Querry finds him caught in a shallow marsh. 'Pendele' a childhood world of signing and dancing and games and prayers, becomes Querry's obsession. He seeks to know more about it from Deo Gratias whose adult memory has only dimly retained the features of the Eden of childhood. It appeals to Querry's longing for peace and innocence. He talks about it with the superior who remarks, 'people have to grow up. We are called to more complicated things than that,' Querry's reply is significant. He tells the superior that 'there's also something about having to be as little children if we are to inherit... We've grown up rather badly. The complications have become complex. If your god, wanted an adult brain."4 This protest against the anomalies of human life is not a new element in Greene's fiction. What is new in the urgency with which Greene suggests divine responsibility for the loss of innocence and happiness? Listening to the chant of the Africans in an unintelligible language, Querry is reminded of ancestral voices, the memories of childhood, and he feels happy in a sort of psychological representation to a life without though or belief.

Querry begins a slow and painful recovery of his self-amid the squalor and suffering at leproserie. He feels happy in a sort of psychological regression to a life without thought or belief.

Querry begins a slow and painful recovery of his self amid the squalor and suffering at the leproserie. He feels drawn out of himself by a reawakening of his interest in others. The first sign of the stirring neeliw life is when he goes to the forest to look for his servant DeoGratias and rescues him after staying with him all night. For a man who declared that human beings are not my country, it surely betokens a resurgence of human feeling to take interest in what Dr. Colin does for his parents. There is also a return of usefulness when Querry is persuaded to design the building of the new hospital. In more ways than one, perceptibly,

Querry gets interested and involved. He learns to laugh (though it is an odd laugh) and to feel responsible for others. He is thus able to recover a measure of happiness through communion. He is conscious of the change which has come over him.

"Querry remembered an occasion months ago a night at a seminary on the river, when the priests cheated over their cards. He had walked out into the bush unable to bear their laughter and their infantility. How was it that he could sit here now and smile with them."

"A Burnt Out Case" was first published in 1961. It deals with the complex and tortured journey undertaken by a character, but the end of that journey is left unclear. We have here another religious novel with a marked difference of outlook and emphasis. The doubts and questionings in the mind of Bendrix seemed to indicated the end of the certainties which characterised the relation between man and God in the previous novels. In " A Burnt Out Case", these doubts and questioning grow more insistent and the here Querry, rejects belief though ultimately his lack of belief is made out to be a sign of faith.

In the 'Cango Journal', Greene records his visit to a leproserie in the Belgian Congo in 1959. He went there with a story already beginning to form in his mind – 'a stranger who turns up in a remote leper colony.' Although not as exhaustive as his earlier travel books, this journal is a curtain-raiser for "A Burnt Out Case" as much as 'The Lawless Roads" was for "The Power and the Glory". It makes fascinating reading for the glimpses it affords into a writer's mind as he struggles to create a character and his environment. Details of setting, incidents and the medical background of the leproserie in the journal find their way into the novel. The exotic world described in the journal has always fascinated Greene, it stands in his private mythology for the world of childhood, the childhood of mankind. He is obsessed with its seediness and hidden terrors. Translated into fiction in "A Burnt Out Case" it is the already familiar world of Greene's imagination. The mis-en-scene characterised by heat and squator, disease and death, superstition and fear, is undoubtedly a region of 'Greeneland'. Much of the imagery – 'The bandaged feet lay in the straw like wrapped packages of meat' – is also familiar.

Querry has found not Pendele but a home where in spite of squalor and misery, he can say, 'I have been happy here'.

But Querry is not left alone: he has fled the world but the world has not yet done with him. He is hunted and hemmed in (metaphorically, it not literally) by its representatives, the pious, the ignorant, the innocent, the stupid self-seekers, until he turns at Bay. Father Thomas, a priest at the leproserie and Rycker a Colon, impelled by their own fears and neuroses try to carve him in the image of a theologian or a saint. Querry, a typical Greene protagonist, wary, polite, highly intelligent and desperately tired, sees through their spiritual blackmail, and fends off their importunities and their prying into his motives. Father Thomas, whose scruples and anxieties make him use Querry to buttress his own faith, insists that Querry is a hero, a saint in the making, who is going through a period of aridity. He says to Querry: "Perhaps, even now you are walking in the footsteps of St. John of the Cross, the 'noche oscura'. Nothing that Querry say can convince Father Thomas that he is not the kind of man the priest thinks he is. The Superior's warning against recognising Querry as a living saint has an ominous ring.'

'But don't let's recognise them before the Church does. We shall be saved a lot of disappointment that way.

Querry is exacerbated even more by Rycker's latching on to him. Rycker, the manager of a factory, acts as a veritable tracker. Having found Querry, he imposes himself upon the famous man. Once a seminarist, now a 'pious imbecile', Rycker inflicts his spiritual problems on Querry and seeks solace for his own frustrated vanity and lust. It is Rycker who publicises Querry's presence at the leproserie and sets the journalist Parkinson on his trail. With Parkinson's arrival at the leprosorie, the great, the great world catches of with Querry and destroys his dream of Pendile. Querry recognises in Parkinson's corruption on affinity with himself. The doppelganger motif, suggested earlier in the relationship between Scobie and Yusef, is hinted at in this novel too. As Querry realises that Parkinson and he are 'two of a kind', he loses his reticence though not his fear of the fat journalist. He says: "You are my looking glass. I can talk to a looking-glass but one can be a little afraid of one too. It returns such a straight image." Querry talks to him about his past, his affairs with women, his pride and success, and hollowness of his achievements. He unburdens himself as if he were in a confessional. But truth and falsehood are all one to Parkinson. He is out to get a story, to build Querry up as 'an architect of souls'. 'The Hermit of the Congo' the publication of his first article with its lies and half-first article with its lies and half-truths (making Rycker out to be Querry's more intimate friend) and the promise of a second one, 'A saints past Redemption by suffering' drives Querry to desperation. The precariously built structure of his new life is threatened. 'My life is here. It's all I have', he says to the uncomprehending Father Thomas, I've come a long way'.

The pious humbugs and meddlers are, as usual, treated by Greene with unconcealed scorn and exasperation. The Dickensian traits in Parkinson do not make him any the more likeable than the other two. As though these three are not enough to nail Querry, there is Merie Rycker, child like and innocent, the female fatale of Greene's fiction. Querry's compassion for this immature wife of Rycker leads to his involvement with her and thus the novel's denouement. Greene has always looked upon innocence as a deadly trap and Querry, like Scobie in "The Heart of the Matter", is caught in it. Marie Rycker with her pretty unformed face, her guilt and boredom and her longing for freedom moves Querry's heart by her unhappiness, though Querry's experience has taught him that unhappiness was like a hungry animal waiting beside the track for any victim. Despite danger signals, he finds it impossible not to treat her as a child.

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"It was absurd to consider that anyone so immature could be in any way a danger." Querry is thus led into the very complications he has sought to avoid.

At the least of the novel is the story which Querry tells Marie Rycker in the hotel room at Luc. It is the story of his own life thinly disguised as the parable of a famous jeweller who made beautiful jewels in honour of the great King. The hero of this parable had once proved the existence of the King, by historical, logical, philosophical and etymological methods. One day, he suddenly realised how bored he was with his worldly success. He found his heart 'callous with pride and success'. He ceased to believe in work or love and discovered that the king he had believed in did not exist. With this came the realisation that 'anything that he had ever done must have been done for love of himself.' Hence there was not point 'any longer in making jewels or making love for his own solitary pleasure. This is Querry's confession of how he came to the end of everything. It gives him a sense of freedom and realise like that of a prisoner who at last 'comes clean'. The parable is clearly intended as a revelation of the perplexities of an artist's life in relation to his art and belief and the obtuseness of public interpretations. There is no doubt that Greene does not achieve the necessary 'psychic interpretations'. There is no doubt that Greene, does not achieve the necessary 'psychic distance' from Querry/jeweller, and Frank Kermode equates him with Querry and therefore with the jeweller, certain facets of Greene's own sensibility suggest a few parallels with Querry, but to equate them would lead us to the embarrassing conclusion that Greene himself is a burnt-out case'. Greene's disenchantment with success (he is on record as having said that there is no such thing as success for an author), his such thing as success for an author), his nagging suspicion of, and contempt for, the values of modern civilisation are allegorical in the parable. And so, too, is Greene's awareness of the unpredictability of divine intervention which thwarts man's instincts and aspirations, causing an agonising tension in his life. Kermode points out the significance of the symbolism of the eggs and the crosses in Querry's tale:

"On the world of natural generations is stuck, incongruous, the heraldic device of God."

Querry may be seen, according to Kermode, another victim of God, who emerges as the enemy of the natural man. Querry's hero sometimes wondered 'if his unbelief were not after all a final and conclusive proof of the King's existence. The total vacancy might be his punishment for the rules he had wilfully broken.' 180 Querry himself is aware that there may be a spiritual explanation for his condition. He is acutely aware of having missed grace; he dreams of a lost priesthood and a search for sacramental wine. Dr. Colin is led to remark: "You're too troubled by your lack of faith, Querry. You keep on fingering it like a sore you want to get rid of'. Querry is thus caught in a struggle between belief and non-belief. The whisky-priest and Scobie are believers pursued by the Hound of Heaven. Sarah heard this footsteps and yielded to belief. Bendrix heard the call but resisted belief. In Querry all these stances are merged. He, a believer has lost his belief and feels the loss acutely. He resists belief and yet cannot get rid of it. On this view, it would follows that his presentations of unbelief represent his vain flight from God. They are a symptom of his weariness in the face of a relentless pursuer.

But, for the first time in Greene's fiction, the religious interpretation of the protagonist's situation is seriously challenged by a rational and secular point of view, represented by an atheist, Dr. Collin, who unlike most of Greene's earlier believers is drawn with sympathy and understanding. As against Father Thomas version of Querry as deserving of grace on account of his good works (evidence of belief), there is a constant counter weight, Dr. Colin's insistence on Querry's lack of belief.

'A man can belief for half his life on insufficient reason, and then he discovers his mistake.'291

The priest's notion of Querry's aridity is counted by Dr. Collin's view that Querry is a burnt-out case in whom 'the disease has run its course'. The doctor sees Querry as a victim of his own success. On one occasion, Querry tells him that he had to chose between his art and his belief and the kind of life he had lived destroyed both vocations.

"It needs a very strong vocation to withstand success. The popular priest and the popular architect – their talents can be killed easily by disgust."

Querry has been driven by the Ryckers of the world to seek a new life and vocation in a remote primitive land. In Africa, knowing the worst, he learns to suffer and serve. He has perhaps found a country and a life, a new myth to replace the old myth of the King. At the end of the scene with Marie Rycker in the hotel, Querry reflects: "The King is dead, long live the King.'

The bifocal presentation of Querry's predicament forms the crux of the action which deals with the problem of his rehabilitation in the eyes of God and/or in the world of men. The process is almost complete when the catastrophe occurs and Querry is revealed as yet another victim caught in a pattern of events as inexorable as in Greene's earlier novels. The denouement leading to his death is swift and profoundly ironic. While staying at Luc, Querry runs first into Parkinson and then into Rycker just when he feels as though he were on the verge of acceptance into a new country. Following a scene in which the outraged husband confronts the lover (who is innocent of sexual guilt), Querry feels 'an extraordinary weariness'. He is being caught up in the trammles of the world from the thought he had escaped.

The dream of Pendele is finally shattered ironically enough, when Querry learns to feels compassion for human suffering and realises the necessity of involvement. Querry has victimised women all his life and now he is victimised by one of them. Seeking

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to escape from her insufferable husband, Marie Rycker claims that Querry is the father of the child she is carrying. Querry has no defence against such innocence. "God preserve us from all innocence. At least the guilty know what they are about.

The same realisation has come to Scobie and Fowler. Querry is 'confronted by egoism as absolute as his own.' Marie will not let go the opportunity to escape from Rycker and Africa. 'You've borned the only home I have', Querry tells her in despair.

Querry has now reached the end of the road. The situation as it develops has, as one of the priest's remarks, a touch of Palais Royal farce. A rain-soaked Rycker, feeling betrayed by a man to whom he 'opened his soul', comes to the leproserie, looking frantically for Querry while the priests are celebrating the erection of the roof tree. Amid thunder and lightening, he shoots Querry, who dies amused at the absurdity of his end. His last words – 'This is absurd or else ....' are as ambiguous as he himself was in life. The catastrophe has an air of inevitability because as Dr. Colin says, success is bound to attract interfering fools and Querry has reached a point of no return. Moreover, Querry has to die because, as Greene says in the 'Congo Journal', 'an element of insoluble mystery in his character has to remain'.

In the concluding scene of the novel, Greene uses two of the characters for contrasted interpretations of Querry's life and death. Greene's admiration for the rationalist Dr. Collin's dedication to his work is obvious. For once, he uses an atheist to restore the balance. Dr. Collin sums up Querry's malaise:

> "He (Querry) said that he always went through the motions of love efficiently even towards God in the days when he believed, but when he found that the love wasn't really there for anything except his work so in the end he gave up the motions. And afterwards, when he couldn't even pretend that what he felt was love, the motives for work failed him. That was like, the crisis of a sickness – when the patient has crisis of a sickness – when the patient has crisis of a sickness – when the patient has no more interest in life at all." The superior attempts to fit Querry into a religious pattern of love and faith are shyly and tentatively made, a far cry from the finally with which Father rank made his pronouncement on Scobie's life and death.

The views of Querry are left un-reconciled at the end. It is, however, not impossible to reconcile them with the help of Greene's view on the recovery of self or indentify through suffering which is at the heart of his religious novels. In 'A Burnt Out Case', it is, curiously enough, Dr. Collin who talks about the value of suffering. He says: "Sometimes I think that the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering are the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition. With suffering we become part of the Christian myth." This seems to be a prognosis of Querry's quest for suffering that will make him come alive. Querry learns to suffer, to become part of the Christian myth and thus to recover a measure of peace and happiness. Moreover, it is through the poor suffering humanity that he has an awareness of God not only in his transcendence but also in his immanence. In this context, Querry's death is not absurd and it implies recognition of a divinity that shapes our ends. 'A Burnt Out Case' therefore is a novel in which the ideas arise naturally from Greene's earlier religious novels. But a new influence seems to be at work in Greene's fiction. In one of his conversations with Querry, Dr. Collin propounds a theory of evolution to explain or justify his vocation as a non-believer dedicated to the task of alleviating pain and suffering. This theory in its optimistic view of human progress, in spite of blind starts and wrong turnings, towards Christian love runs counter to the view of life that informs Greene's earlier novels. At a late stage in his life, Greene has been impressed deeply by the philosophical arguments of Teilhard de Chardin's "The Phenomenon of Man" and has acknowledged its influence on 'A Burnt Out Case'. This may account for the identity of secular and religious vocations, hitherto poles as under and inimical to each other that Dr. Collins seeks to establish in this novel by his view of the Christian myth, which he sees as a part of evolution, perhaps its most valuable part. Whatever convictions might have been shaped in Greene's mind by his reading of Chardlin's book, there is certainly book, there is certainly a change in Greene's religious stance in 'A Burnt out Case', where the question of the end of the hero's journey, the eschatological dimension, remains debatable. Unlike Scobie and Sarah, Querry is not driven to suicide or a suicidal end. For them death implied the end of misery in this world and the possibility, even promise, on happiness in this next. Querry's death puts an end to the happiness he was beginning to find here and it carries no-hint of glory in the world to come. Greene seems to have lost the assurance that helped him to be so clear about the ultimate destinies of Pinkie, the whisky priest, Scobie and Sarah." 25 If none but God can know whether a man is saved or damned, it is surely not for a novelist to arrogate to himself the right to such knowledge. 'A Burnt Out Case' seems to be based on this realisation. It prepares the way for the succeeding novels in which the relationship between man and God either does not figure at all, or if it does, figures only marginally.

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