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The Ambivalence of Faith: Sanctification, Religious Mitigation, and the Ethics of Suffering in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract

Greene was born on October 2, 1904. His father served as the headmaster at Berkhamsted School, where Greene received his early education before attending Balliol College, Oxford. Greene found school life difficult and monotonous, leading to a period of depression that eventually required psychoanalytic intervention. In his essay *The Revolver in the Cupboard* (1946) and his autobiography *A Sort of Life* (1971), Greene articulates the profound sense of despair he experienced during his school years. Oxford did little to alleviate his psychological distress, and he became increasingly aware of what he perceived as the futility and moral ambiguity of human existence. Although not naturally inclined toward scholarship, Greene aspired to academic achievement and ultimately earned a degree in modern history. In *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), the character Scobie is not a Catholic by birth but converts at the time of marriage. While Scobie regards his faith more as a habitual practice than a passionate conviction, it nonetheless transforms his life. He becomes one among many churchgoers, treating prayer as a formal obligation akin to maintaining a diary.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Ethics of Suffering, Faith; Graham Greene, Religious Mitigation

Introduction

Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* explores themes of faith, moral responsibility, guilt, and human suffering through the framework of Catholic Christianity. Set in colonial Sierra Leone during World War II, the novel centers on Major Henry Scobie, a committed yet conflicted police officer. Scobie's internal struggle between religious convictions and compassion for others underscores the novel's ethical ambiguity. Greene depicts faith as neither a simple route to salvation nor a rigid set of rules. The narrative investigates the relationship between suffering and holiness, observing that while Catholicism interprets suffering as spiritually meaningful when accepted as part of God's plan, Greene

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 3 (July 2026)

complicates this perspective by presenting suffering as both harmful and potentially redemptive. Scobie's readiness to endure suffering for others initiates a cycle of self-sacrifice, and his compassion, though initially selfless, compels him toward actions that conflict with his faith. The novel interrogates whether violating religious doctrine can arise from benevolent intentions.

This ambiguity is fundamental to Greene's portrayal of Catholicism, where human imperfection coexists with the possibility of grace. The novel offers a nuanced moral landscape rather than a definitive ethical framework. Through Scobie's conflicts between compassion and doctrine, self-sacrifice and self-destruction, and human duty and divine judgment, Greene blurs the distinction between sin and virtue. Ultimately, the novel suggests that suffering holds multiple ethical and religious meanings, including love, moral failure, and self-reproach. Greene's achievement lies in maintaining this uncertainty, prompting readers to reflect on how good intentions can coexist with, or even lead to, profound spiritual and moral error.

During this period, Greene met Vivien Dayrell-Browning, an attractive Roman Catholic, whom he married in October 1927. The couple had a son and a daughter, but their relationship eventually became distant, leading to a separation, although they maintained amicable relations. Prior to his marriage, Greene sought adventure, wealth, and personal fulfillment in the East after leaving Oxford. He accepted a position with a tobacco company that promised three years in China, but the experience proved unfulfilling. He also worked as a tutor for a young boy, a role he found unsatisfying, as he later remarked, "I don't particularly like small boys and I had forgotten all my Latin" (154).

Greene subsequently accepted a position at a journal, motivated more by the desire for experience than financial gain. During this time, he became acquainted with Father Trollope, a Roman Catholic priest whose influence led Greene to convert to Roman Catholicism in February 1926. This conversion significantly shaped his intellectual and literary development. Although Greene was generally reticent about discussing his conversion, the Catholic faith left a discernible mark on his writings. He developed a particular interest in journalism, which led to employment at *The Times*, where he eventually became a sub-editor in the letters department and a regular contributor. Greene remained in this role until 1930 and later worked as a film critic from 1935 to 1939.

Beginning in 1941, Greene served as a literary editor for *The Spectator*. That same year, he joined the British Government's foreign office, where he remained until the conclusion of the Second World War, including a posting in Sierra Leone from 1941 to 1943. Greene's first book, *Babbling April*, was published in 1925 during his time at Oxford. This poetry collection, dedicated to his parents, contains several works that reflect his somber outlook on life. Notably, both the first and last poems allude to moments when the young author contemplated suicide. His pessimistic attitude is reflected. Graham Greene has divided his fictional work into. However, this small volume reveals the poet's bitter view of life's dinginess.

In this volume, Greene's pessimistic worldview is evident in his early poetry and later in his fiction. He categorized his fictional works into 'Entertainments' and 'Novels,' a distinction he made for various reasons. The 'Entertainments' typically consisted of crime stories written quickly, while the 'Novels' were developed more slowly and often reflected deeper psychological or philosophical concerns. However, Greene did not claim that the novels were inherently Catholic or that the entertainments were secular. The rationale behind this division has been questioned, and it may be more appropriate to consider all his works as novels. In the course of such adventures, the hero comes across a woman who feels pity and love for him. But he betrays her. After he has betrayed her, he himself is

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 3 (July 2026)

destroyed by the capitalist, accepting his death as inevitable and even just. But these principal characters are neither heroes nor villains in the traditional sense.

In fact, life has outmaneuvered them. They are friendless, living in depressing surroundings and usually suffer from such maladies as indigestion. The stories of these entertainments follow a formula, but Greene handles these men and women expertly. There is a brisk succession of incidents. The style is taut and sometimes gives the impression of being nervous. The trend Greene set in writing these accomplished entertainments became highly popular. But the usefulness of the division between entertainments and novels has often been questioned. It was a formality, not because he felt himself free from various sins but because it had never occurred to him that his life was important enough one way or the other. Although Scobie goes to confession every month, it leaves him with only a feeling of emptiness, a routine that no longer makes sense. "I'm not sure that I believe even," (15) Scobie confesses to Father Rank. Louise, whose conformity once provided him with support, has departed, precipitating a crisis in which Scobie succumbs to temptation and commits adultery. This act engenders a profound sense of betrayal and abandonment, yet his faith proves insufficient to withstand the resulting turmoil. *The Heart of the Matter* reflects Greene's deep engagement with Roman Catholicism. Like Greene himself, Major Scobie converts to Catholicism to marry Louise. Adherence to the Roman Catholic faith in the novel is characterized by regular confession and attendance at mass.

There has been a distinction between 'Entertainments' and 'Novels' in Greene's work, which has generated considerable ambiguity. For instance, *Brighton Rock* (1938), initially published as a novel, was later released in America and England under the 'entertainment' label, only to be reclassified as a novel in subsequent editions. Similarly, *The Quiet American* (1955), which lacks the narrative cohesion of earlier novels, is nonetheless categorized as a novel. Greene's use of these labels has been criticised for potentially influencing readers' responses, when ideally, the author's intentions should remain unobtrusive. Notably, some of Greene's most acclaimed works, such as *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), *The Third Man* (1950), and *Our Man in Havana* (1958), are classified as 'Entertainments' and distinguished by suspenseful elements reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's style. Greene's integration of suspense heightens readers' awareness, while his humour, rooted in the absurdity of life, coexists with more serious themes. This perception of the absurd is central to his thrillers, providing both comic relief and the shocks essential to the genre. Greene's novels are characterised by a religious tone that differs from conventional approaches, emphasising the significance of human actions. For Greene, creative art is an expression of the religious mind. Although his work does not offer comfort or affirmation to religious readers, it is not anti-religious; rather, it imbues his fiction with a sense of religiosity.

The Matter is mainly a story about a man named Henry Scobie and two women, Louise and Helen. The novel is set in a West African colony during World War II. Mr Scobie is the Deputy Commissioner of police deputed in the port town. The commissioner of police is quite satisfied with Scobie's character and work, but Scobie's promotion to the post of commissioner of police is set aside for unknown reasons. At this time, Scobie's wife, Louise, is sorely dissatisfied. Louise is a snobbish, socially conscious woman; she feels deeply disheartened. Moreover, she is not very popular with the white community of the town, which consists chiefly of the government offices. The community's senior officers have a club, but Louise is not popular here. Obviously, she does not feel happy in the club.

A feeling of isolation always hovers over her mind. It is a colony of mixed population. Besides the white officers, there are black people in the town. There are some Syria Louise is persistently troubled by a sense of isolation. The colony itself is ethnically diverse, comprising white officers, black

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 3 (July 2026)

residents, and Syrian traders engaged in various commercial activities, including diamond smuggling. Two prominent traders, Yusef (a Muslim) and Tallif (a Christian), are embroiled in a bitter rivalry. Scobie's assignment to the town is largely due to the prevalence of illicit trade. Despite conducting thorough searches of incoming ships, Scobie is unable to uncover any contraband because the traders have established effective relationships with local police officers. He has decided to go to South Africa, where she feels she will be able to live more happily than here.

Besides, there is little love left between her and Scobie. Scobie has, in fact ceased to love Louise. His attitude towards her is now more of pity than of love. He still has a sense of responsibility towards her. She herself has become a bit indifferent to Scobie, seeing his attitude towards her. In these circumstances, she has decided to go to South Africa for a long period. But there is a difficulty: Scobie does not have the money to cover Louise's passage expenses. He needs at least 150 pounds for this purpose. He fails to obtain a loan from the bank because, due to the war conditions, banks have stopped granting overdraft facilities. Scobie, however, tries to keep Louise happy. Therefore, he tries his best to arrange for money. As an honest officer, he cannot accept bribes. Once, during his search for a Portuguese ship called the "Esperanca", he was offered a bribe of 100 pounds by the ship's captain, but Scobie refused. Now he feels repentant for not accepting the bribe.

However, he decides to take a loan of the required amount from the Syrian trader Yusef. He takes this money strictly as a loan at the rate of four per cent interest. He intends to inform his commissioner, but fails to do so. He knows that it is quite improper for a high-ranking police official to engage in such financial transactions with local traders like Yusef. Scobie ultimately succeeds in sending Louise to South Africa. Before her departure, Louise warns Scobie to avoid contact with Edward Wilson, whom she considers insincere. Wilson, recently appointed as an accountant at the U. A. C., is in fact a British government spy tasked with monitoring senior officials. At a club gathering, Louise meets Wilson and is drawn to him due to their shared interest in poetry, though she rebuffs his romantic advances and agrees to remain friends.

Meanwhile, Yusef, an astute trader, seeks to exploit Scobie's position by presenting himself as a friend and offering information that could help Scobie apprehend a smuggler. Although Scobie is aware of Yusef's unreliability, he chooses to act on the information: a cousin of Tallif is expected to board the next Portuguese ship with a parrot. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Louise believes her husband is spiritually lost, but Father Rank, serving as Greene's spokesperson, offers a different perspective: "For goodness translates. Mrs Scobie, don't imagine you or I know a thing. The church knows all the rules. But it is about God's mercy, who knows what goes on in a single human heart" (296). Again, it sounds like a strange paradox that we should masochistically invite suffering to gain beatitude. But Greene's baize-door factor from childhood places suffering and God realisation at the point of help, to unearth a man's despair and failures. It is, therefore, an acknowledgement of one's sins.

This paradoxical approach recurs throughout *The Heart of the Matter*, the eyes of the higher officers. Scobie comes into contact with a woman named Helen Rolt, a young widow who has landed in this colony with a group of survivors from a British ship torpedoed by a German submarine. When she was first recovered, Helen's condition was bad, but now she is better. She has been lodged by the authorities in a hut meant for junior government officials. It is a meeting of two realities: suffering notes the workings of conscience and spiritual guilt, which the humility of this attitude makes the soul empty of its ego. The notion that suffering is deliberately embraced to attain spiritual fulfillment appears paradoxical. However, Greene's perspective, shaped by formative experiences, positions suffering and the quest for divine realization as catalysts for confronting personal despair and failure. This process

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 3 (July 2026)

involves acknowledging one's sins and reconciling two realities, "Suffering reveals the operations of conscience and spiritual guilt, while humility purges the soul of egotism, rendering it receptive to divine grace. Conversely, individuals who are complacent or self-satisfied are considered unfit to receive spiritual insight" (27). This accommodation is near Scobie's house. Both Scobie and Helen come into contact and develop a liking for each other.

This liking turns into love, though Scobie tries his best to keep this affair a secret. He visits Helen's hut in the darkness of night. But this affair gets wind, and one day Wilson himself notices Scobie coming out of her house. However, Helen is not happy with Scobie's precautions about their love affair. She also does not want him to meet her in the dingy hut. She is irritated that Scobie never writes her a letter. But Scobie tells her that he is trying to protect her reputation. He makes it clear that he cannot marry Helen because, as a Roman Catholic, he cannot forsake his wife Louise. But Helen is not convinced by this argument. It appears strange to her that as a Roman catholic he can sleep with her but cannot marry her. She feels that Scobie is trying to get rid of her. But when Scobie returns home, he writes a letter to Helen and goes to her house in the darkness of night. But anyway, this letter falls into the hands of Helen's boy servant, who is a spy for Yusef, and ultimately reaches Yusef. The following night, however, Scobie meets Helen and asks her about the letter. He assures her that he would not give her an opportunity to complain. Their quarrel is thus made up for the time. There is a sudden change in the course of events. Scobie receives a telegram from Louise informing him that she is soon returning from South Africa. In fact, one Mrs Johnson had informed her about Scobie's love affair with Helen. Hence Louise decided to return at one and save her marriage. Louise's return becomes a source of worry for Scobie because he would then be unable to continue his love affair with his mistress. He tells Helen about the telegram. She offers to withdraw from his life, but Scobie refuses.

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