The Persistent Superior: Symbolism in Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case*

Alexander Tung

Today it is all but amusing to see Dickens undiscerningly attack those Victorian British people who, like Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, were overzealous in philanthropic schemes for the benefit of such "backward" people as the African Borrioboola-Gha natives. For, with the publication of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we have become fully aware of the aggressive implications lurking behind the white men's zeal in Africa; we have come to believe that most of the Europeans who went to the great wilderness of Africa only pretended to bring good to the aborigines while they themselves were ever-aggravatingly corrupted there like Kurtz in the "heart of darkness." Indeed, Conrad's story with its symbolic locale and symbolic action, has made Africa a land more horrible and mysterious than where Faulkner's bear looms big or Melville's whale appears white.

But has Conrad struck the final note and said the final word about the "invaders" of Africa? No. Some sixty years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*¹, Graham Greene in his *A Burnt-Out Case* has—not unconsciously, I believe—taken over Conrad's setting, the Belgian Congo, and told quite a different story. Instead of sending an innocent Marlow on an enlightening voyage to find a demoralized Kurtz, Greene has sent a certain heart-already-darkened Quarry—"a successful man who has come to the end of success... the victim of a terrible attack of indifference... a sensualist for whom pleasure has gone stale, an artist for whom art has lost its meaning"²—to that part of the Congo where "the boat goes no further" (16)³, where he regains his feeling for people and things though he ironically gets killed thereafter. So, basically, one might assert, Greene's novel can be a parody of Conrad's: the one has made Africa a moral asylum while the other has made it an infectious area.

Aside from the basic difference, Greene also differs from Conrad...
in manipulating symbols in his novel. Whereas Conrad mainly makes use of the setting and action of his story for symbolism, Greene mainly contrives to develop the theme of his story by symbolic characters. It is true that in *Heart of Darkness* we also find such symbolic characters as the three Fate-like women in the office of the steamship company or Kurtz's "barbarous and superb" woman in the dark jungle. Yet, such characters tend "not to be well rounded nor to carry on long conversations, "but each of them" tends rather to be a character seen briefly and significantly — more an inanimate portrait than a person." In other words, Conrad's symbolic characters are common ones, more easily recognized and more easily interpreted than Green's. In *A Burnt-Out Case*, there surely is an evident symbolic character—namely, Query's servant Deo Gratias, a leper in whom the disease has run its course, having eroded in this instance all the fingers and toes. For, as many critics point out, his physical handicap matches Query's spiritual mutilation; they are two burnt-out cases in different senses. And as A. A. DeVitis further suggests, Query comes to Congo in search of "a return to usefulness and integrity," and this search for usefulness and integrity "is symbolized by Pendélé, a place of contentment that Deo Gratias remembers from childhood."

However, other symbolic characters in *A Burnt-Out Case* are not so distinct and understandable though they can be symbols. The reason is: unlike Conrad's Fate-like women, they are portrayed more like real persons, hence as often as not evading the reader's symbol-hunting eyes. For instance, the preposterous and snobbish Rycker, the cynical and sensational Parkinson, and the insensitive and self-seeking Father Thomas have been each of them a different looking-glass which returns such a straight image of Query's past self as makes him afraid. They are like Deo Gratias in that they hint at Query's life. Only they do not so clearly indicate their function.

In his study of Graham Greene, David Lodge calls our attention to the novelist's words in the Dedication: "This is not a *roman à clef*, but an attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief and non-belief." Indeed, all other characters in *A Burnt-Out Case*, including the above-mentioned three, stand for the "various types of belief, half-belief and non-belief," while Query may be said to have gone through all the three stages of faith
and cease to exist in our world exactly when he comes back from non-belief to belief. And if "Colin is easily the most sympathetic nonbeliever in Greene's work,"\(^9\) the Superior, I believe, is easily the most sympathetic believer. In the meantime, I believe he is another success of Greene's in creating symbolic characters.

As the only character without a personal name in \textit{A Burnt-Out Case}, the Superior, however, assumes quite a personal character throughout the novel. And this personal character of his is best defined, though indirectly and with some inevitable ambiguity, by his "close friend," (17) Doctor Colin, as "persistent" (247). He is persistent in smoking the cheroot, and he is persistent in many other things. And as will be discussed below, all his persistent characteristics have their functions in the novel as a whole.

As the head of the leprosy-treating center, for one thing, the Superior first of all impressed us with his hospitality towards Query, the visitor. He asked Query if he wanted anything, told him the brown water was quite clean, and "lifted the lid of a soap dish to assure himself that the soap had not been forgotten" (11). Later he also applied the same hospitality to other visitors or new-comers. For example, he offered to give Mme. Rycker a cup of coffee or a glass of beer, and asked Father Thomas if his chair was uncomfortable and if he slept well. Indeed, he was always very kind towards visitors and new-comers. And this kind of hospitality at least made sure Query's stay in the leprosarium.

But his kindness was not confined to that towards visitors and new-comers. He was so kind to everybody that a small child dared to go unasked to his desk and "pulled out a sweet" (84) from the drawer. He could even "be happy to work with an atheist [Dr. Colin] for a colleague" (99). Indeed, he was so kind that he always managed to "do his best for everybody" (99). He argued for Query that he was not a leprophil, and in turn argued for the leprophil nun that she was only "anxious to do good, to be of use" (20). He tried to keep Query's word and "defended him to the last ditch" (87) from Mme. Rycker's visit, but yielded to her tears and sadness. He defended Marie Akimbu, and consoled Father Thomas. To make the latter have a "more favourable view of the [African] mission" (166), he appointed him as the acting Superior, even though he had been there the shortest time, compared with the other fathers, and he had "the least notion of bookkeeping" (162).
Surely, he had an amiable disposition which tended to "help, never condemn" (103). It is no wonder then that everybody wished him to be present when Rycker came with a gun. For he might have been really able to soften Rycker's temper with his pleasing kindness and words. In fact, when the author chooses to let the killing happen in his absence, he (the author) is skillfully taking away the peace-making character to make the novel more convincing.

Yet, he was, as a kind man often is, not a very intelligent man. "Multiplication with him was an elaborate form of addition and a series of subtractions would take the place of long division" (82). His knowledge was so narrow that he had mistaken a bidet for a new kind of foot bath, and "had never learned that whisky was too strong for the midday sun" (85). His reasoning power was limited, too. So he was inclined to "make superficial judgments" (21). For example, the reasons for his believing that Mme. Rycker loved her husband were, "He's her husband," and "They're both Catholics" (89). And part of his sermon goes thus:

... because Yezu made you, he is in you. When you love, it is Yezu who loves, when you are merciful it is Yezu who is merciful. But when you hate or envy it is not Yezu, ...

(97).

However, this simple mind, so to speak, of his is a good contrast to the intelligent mind of Querry or Doctor Colin. By imparting this simple mind to the Superior, the author has successfully made clear the challenging assertion concerning faith that Querry made in Doctor Colin's face: "it's possible for an intelligent man to make his life without a God" (99).

But simple-minded as he is, he is not without insight into things. In effect, he is unintelligent only when compared with Querry or Colin, and only in the sense that he is too much preoccupied with some a priori ideas. To do him justice, he is intelligent and wise so long as the a priori ideas stand favorable. For instance, there are cases to prove that "it's safer to make superficial judgments" (21). And although his refutation against the idea that "Klistians are all big thieves" (96) left us as well as Doctor Colin enough room to question and appeared to be a hateful simplification to Querry, it was after all a good sermon for the Africans, and the idea
of "crypto-Christian" (99) should not be debased anyhow. Furthermore, we do feel in some cases the Superior's remarks smack of profound philosophy: "Suffering is something which will always be provided when it is required" (12); "When a man has nothing else to be proud of, he is proud of his spiritual problems" (18); "We most of us make our own complications" (90). Above all, he was profound enough to see the death of Query as a happy ending.

In fact, his "a priori intelligence" serves to explain the reason why he has the persistent characteristics mentioned above. With the idea "we are here to help, not condemn" (103) in mind, it is only natural that he would act kindly toward others, especially visitors and new-comers. And if he is simple in mind, it is because his attention is too much focused on his precepts, and thus seldom gives way to free thought and trifles. Under such circumstances, he naturally becomes a fast-holder of his beliefs, a persistent "Christian claimer" who "never lets anyone go" (247), a father who "tries too hard to make a pattern" (247).

And this pattern-making persistency is symbolized by his smoking of the cheroot. The cheroot is said to be something which he "was never without" (17). To be sure, a mere glimpse of the novel will strike any reader with the constant mention of his cheroot. Thus, it should be more than an attendant description of his habit. In fact, there are certain contexts which can justify its aforesaid symbolic meaning. For example, when he was leaving the leprosarium and had no cheroot,

He accepted a cigarette from Query, but he wore it as awkwardly as he would have worn a suit of lay clothes. (159)

[And he] took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it as though he wondered how it had come there. (161)

This not only shows the trouble he had in breaking his habit, but also symbolizes that he felt ill at ease for the loss of a pattern he had been making. When he went to visit the cemetery with Doctor Colin after Query's death, he felt no cheroot in the pocket of his soutane. This further implies that he had lost the pattern he would claim his own. But he still fancied the pattern was there. Hence his reply to Doctor Colin, "But if the pattern's there... You havn't
a cheroot, have you?" (247). This latter part of the reply may even mean that Doctor Colin, being an atheist, does not make any pattern as he does. So, if this novel poses any question of faith at all, it is the Superior's cheroot that symbolizes the pattern of Christian value. And the Superior himself, with his persistent characteristics in thought and action — hospitality, kindness, simple-mindedness, fast-held precepts, and cheroot-smoking — is a good representative of priests, a good contrast to place beside the atheistic Query and Doctor Colin or the "faithful" Rycker, and, above all, a good symbol of the eternal positive value of Christianity.

So far, I have shown how significant a role the Superior, as a symbolic character, plays in the novel when we consider the novel in terms of religion. But as we all know, the novel, as a symbolic novel usually is, is capable of other interpretations. Then comes the question: does the role the Superior plays remain significant in view of different readings? If so, then my argument is strengthened; otherwise, it might be misleading. For a good symbol is usually open to various interpretations.

To clarify this point, let us consider the most popular view that the novel is "a study of indifference," 10 that it shows "the artist's lust for suffering." 11 Indeed, there is ample evidence to show that Greene believes in the life-giving power of suffering, and the unfeeling Query is the character he has been in search of in Africa. 12 For instance, before the novel opens, he quotes Dante's line: "I did not die, yet nothing of life remained," which presumably refers to Query's indifferent state of mind. And as soon as the novel opens, we see Query thus parody Descartes's famous saying in his diary: "I feel discomfort, therefore I am alive." But one may ask: how come Query feels so insipid about life as to long for pain?

Psychologically speaking, it may be true that worldly success may cloy one's appetite for life just as too much rich food leads one to give no thought to eating, especially when one knows, as does Query, that his success only exists in others' eyes. Query, the successful architect, is certainly benumbed by his former "successful" life with regard to fame and women, and his escape to Africa is certainly a sign of his hope for some cure of his sick heart. But the irony is: wherever he goes, there are still people like Rycker, Parkinson and Father Tomas to remind him of his sham past through their
misinterpretations of him. Fortunately, however, his leper servant leads him away from the tawdry, secular, adult world to Pendélé, the "mysterious land of childhood ... where in his dreams he wishes to go after death." 13 His present seems to be full of zest again. Meanwhile, his love for life develops to the extent that he is willing to design a new hospital for the mission and innocently spends the night with Rycker's wife telling her the story of his life, which brings about his death. Towards the end of the novel, Colin says that he has already found "a reason for living" (247) while the Superior thinks that he is "beginning to find his faith again" (247).

Now, we can plainly see that Query has passed from Rycker, Parkinson and Father Thomas's insipid world into Deo Gratias's charming Pendélé through love. This is a spiritual changing process. Colin can never tell what Query's "reason for living" is, for such an atheist doctor as he can only detect physical symptoms of leprosy and cure it physically. To cure a moral leper, one needs a real spiritual physician like the Superior. This does not imply that the Superior has any right to claim Query for his own after his simple sermons. Nevertheless, it should be plain that the values the Superior stands for are here claimed to be the remedy for any spiritual impasse. If such a term as "faith" sounds too religious, suffice it to say that Query has turned more like the Superior at length.

In comparing Greene with Malraux and Conrad, John K. Simon opines that *A Burnt-Out Case* fails because Greene "allows society to re-enter his abstract world and permits direct contact with his hero," 14 whereas Malraux's *La Voie Royale* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* succeed because in their novels "a doubling of the hero permits the reader to accede to this solitary figure only by way of an intermediary, thus preventing full knowledge about him and safeguarding a necessary authenticity concerning his spiritual adventure." 15 I cannot refute Simon's position, but somehow I think Simon fails to see that the various characters circling Query in Greene's novel function as symbolic characters, Deo Gratias indicating Query's present situation while the Superior and the other characters hint at his future and past life. If Greene fails to "pigeonhole his characters and show them as limited and recognizable types," 16 he never curtails the characters' symbolic values. If *A Burnt-Out Case* is not an allegory like *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is a symbolic novel like *Moby Dick*. If Conrad's hero is himself a
mysterious symbol, Greene's hero has got his mystery symbolized by all the other characters surrounding him.

Notes

1. Heart of Darkness was first published in 1902 and A Burnt-Out Case in 1961.


12. Greene published two journals entitled In Search of a Character before and when he went to Africa to find material for A Burnt-Out Case.


Selected Bibliography


