

A Burnt-Out Case

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Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-Out Case* was published first in Sweden in 1960, and in England and America the following year.¹ Greene decided to set this novel in Africa, and although he had been to Liberia in 1935 and Sierra Leone during World War II, decided to go to the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) to research the situation at a leper colony. Greene kept a notebook of this trip, which was published as *In Search of a Character* in 1961. Greene describes the circumstances:

I went to the Belgian Congo in January 1959 with a novel already beginning to form in my head by way of a situation - a stranger who turns up in a remote leper-colony. I am not as a rule a note-taker, except in the case of travel books, but on this occasion I was bound to take notes so as to establish an authentic medical background.²

LEPROSY

When Greene arrived in the Congo, he was met by a Dr. Lechat, the medical director of a clinic for lepers and was taken for a tour of the complex located in the small town of Yonda. Greene learned of the scientific progress that had been made in treating and curing leprosy. He also learned that the social stigma attached to those cured of

leprosy had not changed much over the years and so lepers continued to live at the clinic, even though they were cured and not contagious. Greene came up with the title for his book on this visit :

Leprosy cases whose disease has been arrested and cured only after the loss of fingers or toes are known as burnt-out cases. This is the parallel I have been seeking between my character X and the lepers. Psychologically and morally he has been burnt-out.³

LEPROPHILIA

While most people were afraid to touch a leper or anything a leper had touched, Greene learned that some people were actually attracted to lepers. In his notebook, Greene made mention of “ [t] he case of the leprophiles- -many volunteer workers but also many victims. The case of a European who contracted it very mildly, but because he boasted of it had to be transferredThe vanity of being something special- -even in disease.”⁴ In the novel, Greene has the doctor and the head priest discuss the reasons why Querry, the main character, has come to the leper colony :

“Few people would choose a leproserie as a holiday resort....I was afraid for a moment that we might have a leprophil on our hands.”

“A leprophil? Am I a leprophil?”

“No, father. You are here under obedience. But you know very well that leprophils exist, though I daresay they are more often

women than men. Schweitzer seems to attract them. They would rather wash the feet with their hair like the woman in the gospel than clean them with something more antiseptic. Sometimes I wonder whether Damien was a leprophil. There was no need for him to become a leper in order to serve them well. A few elementary precautions- - I wouldn't be a better doctor without my fingers, would I?"⁵

Father Damien was a Belgian missionary who spent his life at a leper colony in Hawaii. He died of leprosy there in 1889 because he refused all treatment for the disease. Marie-Francoise Allain asked Greene about his feelings about the leper colony he had visited :

Were you not suspected of leprophilia ? What a bizarre subject it must have been....

I had prepared myself for the worst. As a rule I am very distressed by illness or infirmity. In the Congo I certainly expected to be horrified, but the day I arrived, Michel Lechat, the doctor of the leper colony, knew exactly how to handle me....[H]e handed me a little bottle of ether and said, 'If you feel a bit awkward...breathe some.'

...The visible signs of the disease were not very shocking....I seldom felt embarrassed in the presence of a leper. I think, anyway, that in *A Burnt-Out Case* I don't overdo the leprosy which is not, after all, what the novel's about so much as about what goes on in the minds of the characters.⁶

QUERRY AND RYCKER

The main character in the novel is Querry, a Belgian architect world famous for his cathedrals and other buildings. Querry has become tired and bored with his life, finding no satisfaction in either his work or his love life. In an effort to escape "the world" he goes to the most remote area he can think of - Central Africa. At a leper colony he tries to be anonymous, but soon the local Europeans find out who he is. They bother him with their fawning obsequiousness and jealous resentment and seek his advice and try to bask in his fame. Rycker, a local businessman latches on to Querry, who tries to avoid talking to him :

A voice said, "You are Querry, aren't you?"

He turned. The man who spoke to him was tall, stooping, and overgrown. He was like the kind of plant people put in bathrooms, reared on humidity, shooting too high. He had a small black moustache like a smear of city soot and his face was narrow and flat and endless, like an illustration of the law that two parallel lines never meet....

"My name is Rycker. I missed you the other day....This is a very provincial town. Nothing here to interest a man like you. You are *the* Querry, aren't you?" and Rycker's mouth shut trapwise, while his eyes gleamed roguishly like a detective's.⁷

Rycker proceeds to spread gossip among the small community that

Query is on a selfless mission to help the lepers and that Rycker has become Query's close friend and confidant. Query just finds Rycker a pest and tries to avoid him as much as possible.

FATHER THOMAS

At the leper colony itself the mission priests also treat Query like a great man who is there to solve their problems. One priest, Father Thomas expects Query to help him with his spiritual problems, even though Query disclaims any insights or understanding of problems of faith :

Father Thomas's long narrow nose was oddly twisted at the end ; it gave him the effect of smelling sideways at some elusive odour. "Time is needed to settle in a place like this." He laughed nervously. "I'm not sure that I'm settled myself yet."

"I can understand that," Query said mechanically for want of anything better to say, but the bromide was swallowed like wine by Father Thomas.

"Yes, you have great understanding. I sometimes think a layman has more capacity for understanding than a priest. Sometimes," he added, "more faith."

"That's certainly not true in my case," Query said.⁸

Father Thomas continues to pour out his problems while Query denies that he has any answers. Father Thomas ignores these protests and insists that Query is a man of humility. No matter how much Query

tries to rebut Father Thomas, he can make no dent in Father Thomas's adoration of him. Father Thomas interprets Querry's words to buttress his own preconceived notions that Querry is some kind of selfless saint.

PARKINSON

A British journalist named Parkinson, covering the then current anti-colonial movements and violence in Central Africa turns up at the leper colony. Finding out that Querry is there, Parkinson writes an article for a European magazine building up Querry as a modern day Schweitzer. When it is pointed out that Parkinson's article is full of inaccuracies and outright lies, Parkinson defends his writings to Father Thomas :

“Tell him it's more than the truth,” Parkinson said. “It's a page of modern history. Do you really believe Caesar said “Et tu, Brute”? It's what he ought to have said and someone on the spot -old Herodotus, no, he was the Greek, wasn't he, it must have been someone else, Suetonius perhaps, spotted what was needed. The truth is always forgotten. Pitt on his deathbed asked for Bellamy's Pork Pies, but history altered that.”⁹

Father Thomas lets himself be swayed by thoughts of the good publicity this article may give the leper colony. If people in Europe are favorably impressed, they may contribute money for the work of the clinic and mission. Querry himself can do nothing about the way everyone wants to use him and begins to take a bemused and cynical

attitude about it. However, things take a tragic turn when Query gets involved with Rycker's young wife.

MARIE RYCKER

Rycker' wife, young enough to be his daughter, is a timid woman completely under her husband's thumb. Rycker's attitude is shown when she is introduced to Query for the first time :

"I am very glad to meet you," she said. "We will try to make you comfortable." Query had the impression that she had learnt such occasional speeches by heart from her governess or from a book of etiquette. Now she had said her piece she disappeared as suddenly as she had come ; perhaps the school-bell had rung for class.

"Sit down," Rycker said. "Marie is fixing the drinks. You can see I've trained her to know what a man needs."

"...Of course I know you are thinking that she is very young for me. But I look ahead. If you believe in marriage you have to look to the future. I've still got twenty years of- -let's call it active life ahead of me, and what would a woman of thirty be like in twenty years? A man keeps better in the tropics. Don't you agree?"¹⁰

Marie finds a way to escape her husband and her dismal life in Africa by accusing Query of getting her pregnant. She feels sure that her husband would be so humiliated and angry that he would divorce her

and she would be able to go back to Europe. When Rycker confronts Query with his wife's accusation, Query laughs at the ridiculousness of the claim. Rycker thinks that Query is contemptuously laughing at him and he pulls out a gun and shoots Query dead. From being erroneously considered a saint by all those around him, Query now is universally hated as an arrogant seducer of other men's wives. At the end of the novel those around Query are still using him for their own purposes and disregarding the truth that Query was neither a particularly good man nor a particularly bad man.

REACTION TO THE NOVEL

Greene had long been known for his novels of Catholics who struggle with their loss of faith in God, but critics and readers were shocked at the portrait of corrupt and self-serving Catholics in the novel as well as the fact that the main character appeared to have lost his faith completely and died without regaining it. Greene admitted in his introduction (written twelve years after the novel for a new edition of his collected novels) that *A Burnt-Out Case* was a turning point for him in his life as a writer. While still feeling that faith in God was central to life, Greene was beginning to see the comic as well as tragic sides of life. The grasping and self-deceived characters in the book were based on people that Greene was increasingly coming in contact with. Having become known to his readers as an "expert" in matters of the Catholic faith through his novels, Greene was besieged with people asking him for religious and spiritual advice :

...I felt myself used and exhausted by the victims of religion. The vision of faith as an untroubled sea was lost for ever....my own course of life gave me no confidence in any aid I might proffer. I had no apostolic mission, and the cries for spiritual assistance maddened me because of my impotence....I was like a man without medical knowledge in a village struck with plague. It was in those years, I think, that Querry was born, and Father Thomas too. He had often sat in that chair of mine, and he had worn many faces.¹¹

With this novel, Greene began to explore the comic absurdity of life and the difficulty of keeping faith in an apparently meaningless universe. However, as Querry's life showed in the novel, the fact that Querry was disturbed over his lack of faith showed that the matter of faith is still a central concern of life.

NOTES

- 1 Brian Thomas, *An Underground Fate: The Idiom of Romance in the Later Novels of Graham Greene* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 64.
- 2 Graham Greene, *In Search of a Character* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 7.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
- 5 Graham Greene, *A Burnt-Out Case* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 22.
- 6 Marie-Francoise Allain, *Conversations With Graham Greene*

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(London : Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 63-64.

7 *A Burnt-Out Case*, pp. 33-34.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

11 Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London : Penguin Books, 1981), p. 194.