
*The Construction of Anti-heroes: An Exploration of Abused
Childhood and its repercussions in the Early Fiction of Graham
Greene*

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Abstract:

Graham Greene was a most prolific writer of his times. He is most popularly known for his singular perspective on religion. In most of his novels, he questioned the religious dogma and proffered his own views about sin and redemption. He was also a very topical author, choosing to describe the present world in his novels. He presents a very stark and real picture of the society of his times. In his earlier novels, Greene presents anti-heroes. He traces their villainy to their childhood and strives to say that his villains are constructs of society and culture. On this basis, contending that it is not their fault that they are what they are, Greene also offers the hope for redemption for his villains. It is the aim of this paper to examine the violence ridden childhood of his characters and how it has contributed in making them anti-heroes.

‘...spies, and murders, and violence...that’s real life: it’s what we’ve made of the world...’ (57). This is the sentiment echoed by Arthur Rowe in *The Ministry of Fear*. It is an interesting comment upon the world by Greene who portrayed his immediate world with brutal honesty. The relation between society and man has always been a mutual one, where one affects the other. If it is true that we have made the world, it is equally true that we have been, in turn, shaped by the world. If the world is rife with violence and murder, human beings are not only the victims but perpetrators also. From this perspective we are all socio-cultural constructs, mirrors of society. It is an interesting fact that the earlier novels of Graham Greene have not heroes but actually villains as the main characters. He chose to present villains like Raven and Pinkie as the main characters, where the former is a hired

assassin in *A Gun for Sale* and the latter a gangster in *Brighton Rock*. Andrews in Greene's first novel, *The Man Within*, is a smuggler on the run after having betrayed his fellow smugglers. Grahame Smith notes that Greene's novels depict 'an encounter between two states of mind, the characters' and that of the physical setting he explores.' (5). Deviance, for such characters, is natural for them, a way of life. But even as Greene describes their violence, he juxtaposes it with a picture of their childhood. He shows that these characters suffer from a violent childhood.

It is Greene's contention that their abused childhood has scarred them for life and shaped their characters. In these and many other novels Greene portrays 'an anti-pastoral and un-Romantic world in which lost innocence can never be recaptured' (Hoskins 34). In *The Man Within*, Greene describes, through Andrews, his childhood and the violence that was an inherent part of it. Andrews is a victim of his father's violence whom he describes as 'unwieldy altogether, large, clumsy, bearded, but with a quick cunning brain and small eyes' (72). Andrews' descriptions of his father liken him to a wild animal who does not know love or affection. He remembers him as 'domineering, brutal, a conscious master, not chary of blows to either child or wife' (37). These passages amply demonstrate that there is no love in Andrews' childhood. He tells Elizabeth that he was sometimes beaten for no reason or fault as his father thought that 'it would put courage into me' (73). When Elizabeth chides him for his weakness, he protests 'My father and mother made me. I didn't make myself' (52).

This argument is important because it shows Andrews' and Greene's own consciousness about the importance of childhood in one's life. Greene attributed much importance to childhood and the role it played in defining the character and the man. He says that 'It is in those early years that I would look for the crisis, the moment when life took a new start in its journey towards death' (13). This violence affects Andrews' character. He is a neurotic who jumps at the smallest innocuous sounds, prone to making much of his condition. He consciously imbues his situation with much melodrama. He is also a victim of ambivalence. Greene seems to suggest that all the weaknesses of Andrews' character, his lack of courage or morality are because of the treatment meted out to him during his childhood. West contends that such an abused child would 'be in a state of neurotic conflict...He feels neurotic symptoms, anxiety, depression, irrational fears, and so forth...' (174). It can be seen that throughout the novel Andrews is in a state of constant conflict. Neurotic anxiety, one of the neurotic symptoms, is an inherent part of his behavior and it is 'said to develop often out

of early childhood experience in which parental training and behavior is harsh and/or uncaring' (Hall & Gardener 41).

In *A Gun For Sale*, Raven, a hired killer, is the main character. David Lodge labels Andrews an 'anti-hero' (10) but like Andrews, Raven too conforms to the epithet. Raven is an assassin without a conscience. He does not have faith or belief in anyone or anything. Thus, it can be said that he is without a moral consciousness. Greene introduces him in the novel in very bleak tones: 'Murder didn't mean much to Raven. It was just a new job. You had to be careful. You had to use your brains. It was not a question of hatred' (5). Hired to kill a War Minister, Raven finishes his job and has two murders on his hand – the minister's and his secretary's – with little emotion. He goes about the world feeling 'no pain at the chip of ice in his breast' (11). Raven, like Andrews, is friendless and lonely. His hare lip is a serious disadvantage in his profession and marks him for unhappiness in personal life as it triggers disgust and pity in others. But reactions to his deformity have stopped making any difference to him for 'he had been fed the poison from boyhood drop by drop: he hardly noticed its bitterness now' (15). Once again Greene makes an oblique reference to a disturbed childhood. Like Andrews, Raven too is a victim of dislike, hate and pity. He is an alien to society as it has been unkind to him. This alienation makes K.W. Grandsen note that 'Indeed in *A Gun for Sale...* and *The Confidential Agent*, Greene exploits a common theme: the contrast between a sick and isolated central figure and the rest of the world' (55).

The abused childhood makes its presence and effect felt in mature years also. The poison that has come Raven's way since boyhood has inured him. He feels no kinship with society or people. The element of alienation is stronger in this novel, for society and culture both have deteriorated. His perception of the situation is wholly personal and concerned with only the self. He thinks that the war the world is concerned about can be no worse than the one he has been waging since childhood. His attitude is not unusual for as Raven himself claims 'There's always been a war for me' (47). This admission speaks volumes about Raven's life and the violence and hate he has had to face. Raven's inhumanity and lack of sympathy and utter indifference to any cause is attributed to the society he lives in. Borne by parents who had little interest in his welfare or upbringing, the indifference has planted that 'chip of ice in his breast' (11). Referring to the place and importance of society in a person's life, A.A. DeVitis observes that 'The similarity between Pinkie Brown, the central character in *Brighton Rock*, and Raven, is their common betrayal by society. They both know the

poverty and squalor of the slums and their innocence has been destroyed by it' (217). The indifference of his parents shines through this passage: 'His mother had borne him while his father was in goal, and six years later when his father was hanged for another crime, she had cut her own throat with a kitchen knife, afterwards there had been the home' (66).

There is an inherent irony in the use of the word 'home'. For the bitter Raven, home means neither love nor understanding. For him, it is the cruel world where there's, 'solitary confinement for a kid that's caught talking in the chapel and the birch for almost anything you do' (121). The world described by Greene in *A Gun for Sale* is a bleak, dark world with no hope of love or compassion. Since people are only constructs of society and culture, this bleakness forms a part of the characters also. Raven is a socio-cultural construction of his times and his consciousness is dark and bitter like society itself. He is conscious of the fact that one is made as much by one's parents in childhood as by society as Greene tells us that he 'had been made by hatred; it had constructed him into this thin smoky murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly...He had never felt the least tenderness for anyone; he was made in this image...' (66).

The influence of the formative childhood years appears to be Greene's way of showing the cause behind the deterioration of values and moral scruples in the modern world. It is a world where everyone is an alien; there is no sense of brotherhood or kindness. It is hardly any wonder then that Raven tells Anne that, 'This is not the world I would bring children into' (21). He understands that if society has made him a cold and cruel monster, it will do the same to other children. Raven's cold and pitiless hate is his way of taking revenge upon the malicious people living in society. And even though he is an assassin and has committed horrible crimes, he cannot match the horror inflicted upon himself during his tender years by his own mother. He remembers

The kitchen in the basement and the first thing very nearly he could remember, his mother bleeding across the table. She hadn't even troubled to lock the door: that was all she cared about him. He'd done some ugly things in his time... but he'd never been able to equal that ugliness. Some day he would (101).

It is little surprise that Raven wants to take revenge from the cruel society and the cause is 'the lost childhood'. He has known hate all his life because 'it begins at school. It begins before that' (44). Most of Greene's characters – Andrews, Raven and Pinkie - are scarred by

a violent childhood where they found neither love nor companionship, not even in their own family. Due to their miserable childhoods, both Andrews and Raven possess an ‘unhappy consciousness’ as delineated by Hegel.

After being betrayed by Dr. Yogel, Raven goes ‘downstairs in a dark loneliness of spirit’ (29). Greene’s characters are conscious of their own alienation, of the world’s rejection. In spite of their childhoods and hared, it is their unconscious aim to find acceptance in a cold, indifferent world. In *Our Man in Havana*, Greene remarks that ‘Childhood was the germ of all mistrust’ (31). If Raven is cruel and pitiless, it is only because his society has made him such. Samuel Hynes notes that ‘the meanness of the spirit’ (44) that Greene describes in *A Gun for Sale* achieves ‘a kind of symbolic resonance’ (6) for it shows that ‘the human lives lived there are like that scene, casualties of war..(6). The victims are of both the war *and* society. ‘War, gas-masks, munitions [are] the concerns of the novel [and the central character] and Anne [present] the fears of the age in a nutshell’ (Maleda 311). No one in this world is safe. The primary concern is for the self and not anyone else. Raven, too, does not trust anyone but he holds firm to the idea of honour among thieves. He reassures Dr. Yogel, ‘You are safe with me. I don’t go back on a fellow who treats me right’ (28). It is remarkable that Raven, the hunted and tormented, offers the idea of safety to someone. This deposition of trust is a hint of the innocence that is still, astonishingly, lurking somewhere in Raven’s consciousness. In spite of all the hate he has borne, there is a part of him that wants to believe that there is trust and faith somewhere. In the dream that Raven shares with Anne, he is ‘a child with a catapult in his hands’ and when encouraged to shoot he ‘wept and wouldn’t shoot’ (123). This dream is of great significance as it shows Raven’s exploitation during childhood. The Minister in the dream can be said to represent society and his encouragement to Raven to shoot indicative of the vicious influence society has on a child. It is society that puts weapons (the catapult in the dream and gun in real life) into an unwilling child’s hand who weeps at the cruelty society expects from him. That the minister in the dream calls him ‘child’ is equally representative of what Raven was constructed into as a child. If he can shoot society, as personified in the form of the minister, they can go ‘home together’. And the home this time will be without cruelty and hate, just the one Raven longs for. The decision to pick up a gun is taken after deliberation over what society and culture mean in a particular time. In Raven’s case, both society and culture have betrayed his trust and innocence.

Keeping the cruelty of those times in mind, it is understandable that Raven seeks protection from the viciousness of society with a gun.

Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* is the first and only Greeneian character who is totally evil and has consciously damned himself for ever. He has chosen his own life, his own way, making his own set of rules and follows them to the last. His rejection of society's mores is a conscious decision. Pinkie is horror struck by the depravity that has surrounded him since childhood. This immorality has taken him young and shaped his psyche forever. Greene tells us that 'Hell lay about him in his infancy' (68) and it is this Hell to which Pinkie has subscribed to. Bereft of pity, or in fact any ordinary human emotions, Pinkie is a cold, heartless character and 'his grey eyes had an effect of heartlessness, like an old man's in which human feeling has died' (8). But cold and cruel as he is, he again is a socio-cultural construct. If he is made in this way, it is only because this is what he has seen; this is what has come his way all his life. Life and society have been cruel to him and he returns this cruelty with equal ferocity because 'man is made by the places in which he lives' (37). His world is a world of sin and corruption and decadence. In the underworld that he is a part of, betrayal, murder and razor blades are an every-day occurrence. Pinkie is the vicious culmination of previous characters like Andrews and Raven. In these three novels, published in this sequence, Greene's portrayal of society becomes progressively violent.

Tennyson's remark 'for knowledge is of things we see' (1228) holds true for Andrews, Raven and Pinkie. Pinkie cannot conceive of a world where there is no violence or hatred or disgust. Born and brought up amidst violence Pinkie is a firm believer in Hell. His belief makes him tell Rose, 'Of course, there's Hell' (52). But when Rose asks him about Heaven, he cannot imagine a world of peace where everything and everyone is at peace and gives a vague, 'Maybe, maybe' (52) because 'A brain was only capable of what it could conceive, and it couldn't conceive what it had never experienced' (228). His firm acceptance of hell is a telling comment about Pinkie's world and his psyche that has been wrought by the society and culture he moves in because according to him and his appalling circumstances 'it's the only thing that fits... Flames and damnation' (52). 'The only thing that fits' his vicious environment is hate and suffering. He derives pleasure and satisfaction from the slashes and pain he wreaks upon others for 'what would be the fun if people didn't squeal?' (51)

Pinkie's thwarted emotions can be attributed to his childhood that was devoid of compassion or companionship. Even his parents separated the growing child from their own adult world. Pinkie is haunted by memories of his parents having sex. For him there is no love in the act. He views it as 'the frightening weekly exercise of his parents which he watched from his single bed' (90). The phrase 'single bed' is important because it hints at the exclusion that is Pinkie's terrible fate. He is secluded from all and by all. If there's no love or care at home, society is equally hostile. It lends its darkest image to him, making him resort to the razor as his weapon against harm and pain. 'The razor is for him an instinctive means of defense against a society from whose normal emotions he feels himself excluded' (Traversi 27). He kills Fred Hale to send the message of his growing power to Colleoni, the Don of the underworld. Later he kills Spicer, his 'acknowledged' friend, when he feels the threat looming of getting caught through him. Spicer has no inkling of Pinkie's intentions. Greene once again refers to the childhood world of cruelty when Pinkie 'put his hand with spurious affection on Spicer's arm' (101). In doing so he becomes 'like a cruel child who hides the dividers behind him' (101). This reference to childhood shows again that Pinkie has learned his cruelty from society that excluded him, the culture that was self-oriented.

The moral glimmering that secures Andrews and Raven's redemption evades Pinkie. Even though he tries hard, he is unable to shake off the fetters imposed upon him by society. It is impossible for him to break the mould into which he has been cast by society and the vicious culture.

His cells were formed of the cement school-playground, the dead fire and the dying man in the St Pancras waiting-room, his bed at Frank's and his parents' bed. An awful resentment stirred in him – why shouldn't he have had his chance like all the rest, seen his glimpse of heaven if it was only a crack between the Brighton walls...(228).

The last words 'Brighton walls' resonate with the idea of what a society can do to a child's innocent psyche. Through its disinterestedness, metaphysical monsters like Pinkie can be created. The Brighton walls that confine him, denying him his glimpse of heaven, are so strong and tall that even when 'tenderness came up to the very window and looked in' (237) he cannot help but ignore it. Brought up in squalor, belonging to the devil's side, he cannot suddenly fathom a heaven, peace or eternal rest.

Pinkie's consciousness about the devastating effect of society upon an individual, its corrupting reach is similar to Raven's when he says that 'it begins at school. It begins before that' (44). Pinkie also blames society and the prevailing culture for corrupting the innocent, and he has been corrupted deeply for he has spent his life amid this anarchy. When Pinkie chances upon a 'broken rocking horse', 'a pram which had been converted into a wheelbarrow' and 'a doll with one glass eye and a dress soiled with mould' (108) he is overwhelmed with anger. These all are relics of childhood and their derelict state suggests society's disinterestedness in preserving childhood and its innocence. The doll with 'a dress soiled with mould' is also suggestive of a corrupted childhood where the 'mould' can be seen as representing society's corruption. Society, and its cruel culture, has shown its disinterestedness towards childhood by ignoring this crucial phase. The pram which has been converted into a wheelbarrow shows that it is a practical world where selfishness reigns and all gives way to practical utility. He does not know the owner of these relics but finds himself hating the 'nameless, faceless' (108) person. This nameless, faceless person can be seen as society itself, which is nameless, faceless but is existent; its force can be felt upon all. The hate he harbours for his world and society bears similitude to Raven's disgust.

It would appear that such villainous characters who indulge in violence and commit murders and seek pleasure out of it are beyond the scope of redemption. But Greene has always been known for offering the hope of salvation to his errant characters. In all these three novels, Greene forwards the idea that with love and compassion these villains can be transformed into sort of heroes. It is in this changed psyche that their hope for salvation lies. All Andrews' efforts are directed towards forging an identity for himself. He wants to make a man of himself. He knows that this is possible only through love and trust. He laments at being friendless. He says 'All I want is a little sympathy. I could be made into a man if anyone chose to be interested – if someone believed in me' (24). Both Carlyon and Elizabeth offer him their love and trust. But Andrews' psyche is so scarred by his childhood that he himself fails to invest the same love and trust in his relationships. At the crucial time, he fails himself and the people who believe in him. This is in concordance with the idea forwarded by Elizabeth Morley when she says that 'the reparative attempt may at any time be thwarted by the re-emergence of this defensiveness. Attachment may yet again give way to detachment; the relationship may be subject to instability and disruption' (10). If Andrews is a failure at

relationships, this can be attributed to the fact that the violence in his childhood makes him distrust all people and all relationships.

Anne's entry into Raven's world proves to be the turning point in his life. She offers promises of friendship and trust that has not come his way since childhood; does not betray him at the first opportunity; and does not find his lip repulsive. She represents all that Raven has always longed for. He finds himself thrust 'finally into other people's lives', breaking 'the world in which he walked alone' (41). Just like Elizabeth before her, Anne offers her trust and faith to Raven. In the embrace of her trust, Raven becomes almost human. With Anne, he learns to trust and have faith in another fellow human being. She kindles the long-frozen coldness in his heart. About himself he observes that 'He was cold through and through except in the one spot that had lain frozen all his life. That dagger of ice was melting with great pain' (66). His hate relents a little in Anne's presence. Her solidarity stirs his humanity. 'For the first time since his mother died he was afraid for someone else...' (92). This consciousness is reminiscent of Andrews in *The Man Within* who also shares the same emotion when 'for the first time a sense reached him of an unhappiness which was not his own' (75). Thus, it can be said that Raven, like Andrews, is treading an unfamiliar path under the encouragement, love and trust of Anne. His concern for the other points to his larger consciousness which suggests that redemption for a hardened criminal is also possible as David Lodge says 'a certain pity and understanding is solicited for the criminal hero by recapitulating his appalling social background' (22).

Since Greene succeeds in making the reader empathize with a character like Raven, one feels that he is set for redemption also. From personal fear, like Francis Andrews, Raven moves to concern and fear for another, in the form of Anne. In acting thus, he acts like Andrews who admits guilt for the murder of Elizabeth so that Carlyon can be free. They both now are in the capacity to exercise their free wills and exhibit a conscious enhanced from the personal to the social. Their acts of personal vengeance move from being just a personal score to an act of supreme nobility as they sacrifice their lives for the sake of another. Although one is likely to condemn Raven for his evil deeds and root for Anne and Mather, it is Raven in the end who has absolute trust and faith because 'When it comes to the test of trusting another person, it is Raven who can take the leap [as compared to people like Davis or Sir Marcus] like the character who is saved [and] can take leap into faith' (Jones 63).

Just as Elizabeth and Anne change Andrews and Raven's private world, Rose enters Pinkie's hell. His consciousness of the scope and requirement for redemption shines better when he has her in his life. Even as he feels that the two are meant for each other, he feels the stirring of emotion in his dark heart. After their sexual union, he feels her commitment as never before. 'A faint feeling of tenderness woke for his partner in the act. He put out a hand and pinched the lobe of her ear' (181-2). This is the closest he has ever come to true affection and it is all Rose's doing. This would suggest that there is hope for his redemption also, as there was for Andrews and Raven, who in the end managed to nullify their darkness with the righteous act. In a conversation with Marie Francoise Allain, Greene expresses a different opinion about Pinkie's fate. 'I don't think Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were committed not in defiance of God but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born' (158-9). This is a more compassionate perception than the one forwarded by him earlier. Many critics have also recognized the veracity behind this idea and express their acceptance of Greene's views about the role of society and culture in one's making. Baldrige states that 'Greene has apparently come up with a scholastic argument against the existence of hell that, when applied with an eye towards Pinkie's social deprivation, seems to get the Boy off the hook' (132). David Lodge, Baldrige and Greene himself appear to be focusing more on the geographic hell to which deprived characters like Pinkie and Raven are born and fated to fester there than to the theological hell. This surrounding Hell, more real and frightening than the theological one, abstract and removed from immediate touch, is responsible for Raven and Pinkie's terrible actions. The role of the 'other' is very significant in these three novels. Through Elizabeth, Anne and Rose, Greene brings about the idea of the 'other' as delineated by Sartre. These three characters, by virtue of love and trust, are completely the 'other' of the villains. The anti-heroes, when pitted against their virtue, experience shame because it is 'by nature recognition...' and they are 'as the Other sees [them]' (Sartre 247). These women manage to kindle emotions in their cold hearts, making them almost human in the process. Greene seems to offer that if someone can offer them trust and love, which was missing from their childhoods, their psyche can be changed. Against this backdrop, they are all willing to accede the hope for redemption of these sinners provided they are given another chance to make themselves all over again, to begin again with love, compassion and understanding.

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