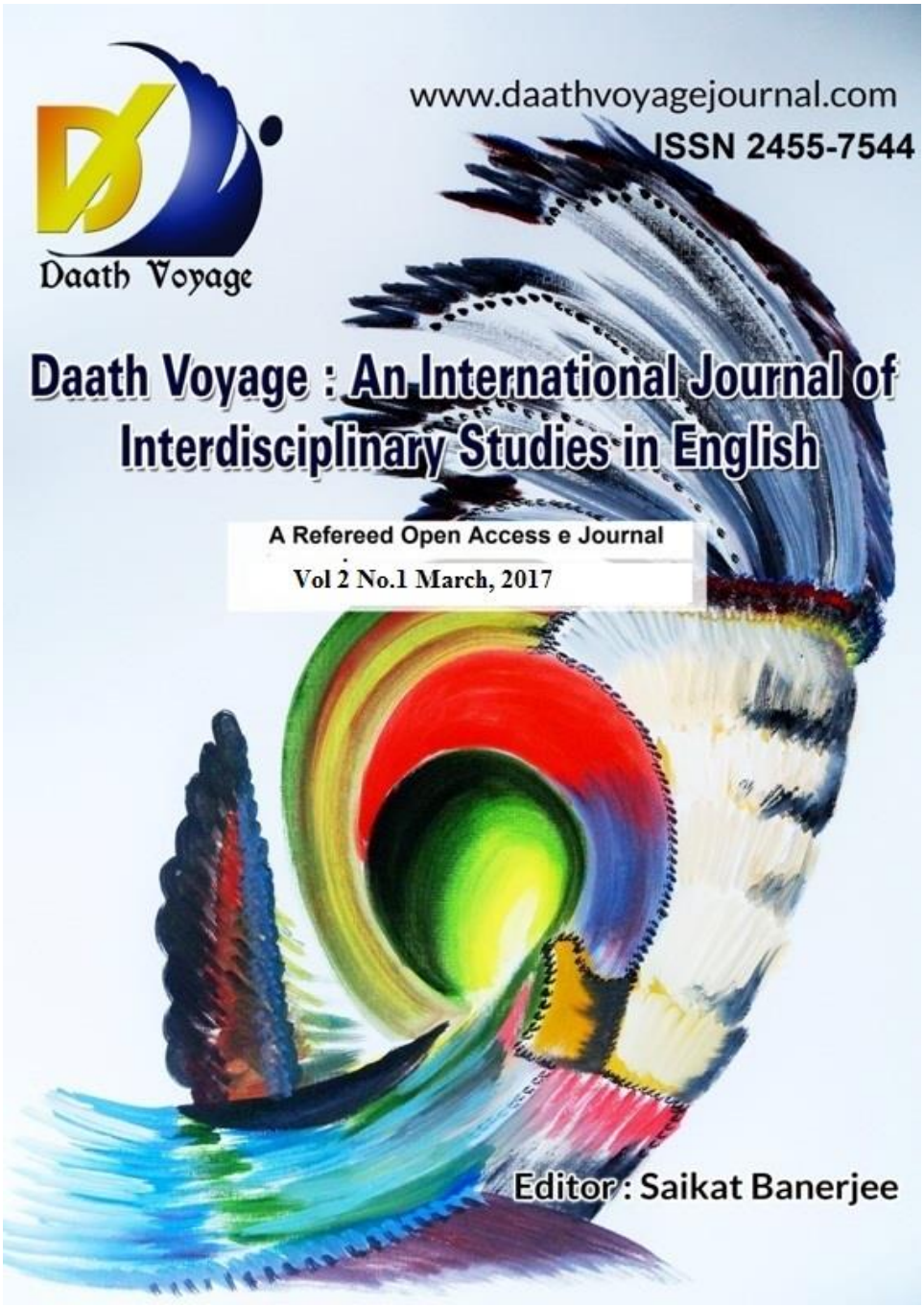

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Revisiting a Classic: Major Scobie's 'Life-lie' in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract Major Scobie is a responsible police officer, father, husband and lover. However, his sense of responsibility for the happiness of others, particularly Lousie and Helen, his wife and the woman he forms a relationship with, impinges upon his existence to such an extent that pity and responsibility become the dominant strain of his character to the extent of making Scobie unavailable for any interpersonal relationship. He is unable to love either Lousie, to whom he is bound by the sacrament of marriage, or Helen, who initially reminds him of his dead daughter and later becomes his lover. Unable to resolve the conflict arising out of his sense of responsibility for the happiness of both these women, Scobie silently sacrifices his own life. He feigns that he is suffering from angina and takes an overdose of medicine to end his own life in order to relieve both Lousie and Helen from the burden of unproductive relationship with him. The paper makes use concepts and formulations of existential philosophy and analytical psychology, particularly Alfred Adler's concept of "life-lie" to analyse Scobie's life and death.

Key Terms: Catholicism, sacraments, animosity, archetype, life-lie.

Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1969) is localized in a West African British colony during World War II. It is the story of Major Scobie, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, who has been serving there for fifteen years. His daughter Catherine has died before the novel opens and he can no longer love his wife, Lousie, who is faded and exhausted, although he feels responsible for her happiness. In Lousie's absence, Scobie comes across a child-widow, Helen Rolt, who is the victim of a torpedoed ship. Scobie feels

attracted towards Helen out of pity for her and the two become friends immediately. The two share their pasts with each other. Even though Scobie is much older than Helen and he is also a responsible police officer, the two suddenly find them in the act of making love. This proves to be a climactic act in Scobie's life and determines the course of his life henceforth and leads him to commit suicide. This paper seeks to analyse Scobie's dilemma vis-à-vis his relationship with the two women, the resulting despair and his suicide in terms of concepts and formulations of existential philosophy and analytical psychology, particularly with regards to Alfred Adler's concept of "life-lie".

Scobie's relationship with Lousie has degenerated into a mechanical, anxiety-ridden one. Whenever he returned home from work, Scobie called out to Lousie. This was a habit he had formed in the early days of their relationship. But now, Lousie had become a mere fixture, "as much a fixture as the handcuffs on the nails" (Greene 1969: 15) in his office. "The less he needed Lousie the more conscious he became of the responsibility for her happiness" (21). There were "times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of passion (21).Thus, Scobie's sense of responsibility towards Lousie has a touch of sentimentality to it. He remembers the vow he had made to keep her happy at the time of their marriage as "awful".

Ironically, if Scobie is bound to Lousie out of a feeling of responsibility and pathos, it is pathos which takes Scobie to Helen. When he first sees Helen, she is clutching a stamp album in her hand. In fact, there is nothing attractive about Helen when she is rescued. Her young face is worn out and the hair has gone dead. Scobie first conceives Helen as a helpless child and wonders: "How could a child like that act the part of a woman whose husband had been drowned more or less before her eyes?" (131). His thoughts about Helen continue to revolve around the child-concept. Ever since he saw Helen for the first time, "It was the stamp album and not the face that haunted his memory, for no reason he could understand, and the wedding ring on her finger, as though a child had dressed up" (117). Scobie wonders what Helen would do when she returned home. He feels anxious when Helen says that probably she would be conscripted. "He thought: if my child lived, she too would have been

conscripted, flung into some grim dormitory, to find her own way" (150). One agrees with John Spurling therefore when he remarks that "Although Scobie's child is dead before *The Heart of the Matter* opens, and his life with Lousie is that of a childless marriage, he is pre-eminently a father figure" (Spurling 1983: 40). There are several episodes in the narrative which support this view. [For instance, Scobie plays the part of a surrogate father to a dying girl in the hospital.]

As such, driven by his loneliness on account of the death of his daughter and his failed relationship with Lousie, "Scobie extends himself in sympathy and compassion towards Helen. . . . Scobie feels drawn to her by her loneliness and innocence."(Kulshrestha 1977: 101).Scobie opens out to share the secrets of his heart with Helen, who reciprocates by sharing her own past with the Major. Scobie notices that Helen has removed the wedding ring that was hanging loose in her finger and asks her about her husband. He assures Helen that "It's easier to get over a thing if you talk about it" (147), but he is startled by Helen's reply: "He's been dead – how long – is it eight weeks yet? -- and he's so dead, so completely dead" (147). Scobie too relates to Helen the episode of his daughter's death: how unsure and muddled he felt when he received the cable about Catherine's death first followed by the one about her sickness. "He had never mentioned this before to anyone. Now he brought out the exact words of each cable carefully" (148). Scobie is surprised to realise how easily they had come over two deaths without being unnecessarily sentimental or pathetic. He begins to suspect that his feeling of ease with Helen, like he did with Lousie in their younger days, might not be the camouflage "of an enemy who works in terms of friendship, trust and pity" (153). Although the major tries to ward off his suspicion on account of the difference in their age, but true to his premonition, Scobie and Helen find themselves in the act of making love, their passions orchestrated by the noise of the rain falling regularly on the tin roof.

Soon after his cohabitation with Helen, Scobie's old, lurking sense of pity and responsibility, which is the bane of his relationship with Lousie, creeps in to spoil the joy of his togetherness with Helen. His sense of responsibility is now coupled with a feeling of guilt as well. Scobie had believed that in the hot and humid West African climate his body had

"lost the sense of lust" (151). The enormity of Scobie's guilt at the sudden, unexpected twist in his relationship with Helen has been expressed by Greene in the following terms:

> Was it a butterfly that died in the act of love? But human beings were condemned to consequences. The responsibility as well as the guilt was his . . . he knew what he was about. He had sworn to preserve Lousie's happiness, and now he had accepted another and contradictory responsibility. He felt tired by all the lies he would sometimes have to tell: he felt the wounds of those victims who had not yet bled." (154)

Scobie holds that Helen, being a child, could not be held responsible for anything. It is he who has to think and plan for both of them and shoulder the responsibility for their future. Scobie "embarked for the first time in his life on the long legalistic arguments of deceit" (154). He understands well enough that he has exchanged future sadness in return of his compassion for Helen.Although Scobie's experience has also taught him that "no human being can really understand another, and no one can arrange other's happiness" (31), he once again endeavours to accept the responsibility for Helen's wellbeing and happiness.

The difference between Lousie and Helen soon dwindles into a similarity that detracts Scobie by its mundane aspect. Helen now taunts and coaxes Scobie in the same manner as Lousie did. Scobie now goes to meet Helen only after it is dark. Helen tells him that she has become tired of his caution: "You come here after dark and you go after dark. It's so-so ignoble" (170). Their love making also develops into a routine and Helen frets about it as well: "We always make love here. Among the junior officials furniture. I don't believe we'll know how to do it anywhere else" (170). Hearing Helen talk like this, Scobie is at once reminded of Lousie. He writes a letter to Helen declaring how much he loved her: "I love you more than myself, more than my wife, more than God, I think. . . . I want more than anything in the world to make you happy" (173). This desperate promise to Helen constituted yet another oath "as ineffaceable as the vow by the Ealing altar" (181). By making such a promise, Scobie hopes to earn at least some measure of peace and solicitude for himself.

The ironic difference between Scobie's conception of himself as a responsible man and his attempt to evade the crisis in his life by making promises that he might not be able to

fulfil provides an insight into his precarious situation at this stage. As Scobie carries the letter to Helen's lodging, he feels that he carried "a sense of corruption" (173) with him. Scobie's inability to respond fully and positively to his relationship with either Lousie or Helen is perhaps due to a pervasive narcissistic strain in his character. This is suggested by his readiness to pity the people who are associated with him or be responsible for their lives. That Scobie cannot love others is obliquely pointed out by Lousie when she says, "Do you love anybody, Tikki, except yourself!" (24). His obsession with being a responsible and kind man is also hinted at in Helen's ironical remark at a party: "He was so kind to me in hospital at Pende, but I think he only likes the sick" (184). Scobie himself wonders whether he really loves either of the women in his life: "Do I, in my heart, love either of them, or is it that the automatic, terrible pity goes out to any human need?" (98).

Erich Fromm explains that the ability to love depends not only on one's willingness to emerge from narcissism, "it depends on our capacity to grow, to develop a productive orientation towards the world and ourselves" (Fromm 1958: 121). This process of development "requires one quality as a necessary condition: *Faith*" (Fromm 121). Faith in one's self is the condition of our ability to make promises to others and to have faith requires courage, the ability to take risk and the readiness to accept pain and disappointment. Scobie initially shows the courage to promise happiness for Lousie and later Helen. But over the years his faith has given way to despair. This is because Scobie is not able to detach himself from the image that he has conceived of himself. Nor is he able to associate responsibility with love and concern. In fact, it is responsibility that he wants to evade. He can find happiness only away from human intimacy. He feels bound to Lousie merely "by the pathos of her unattractiveness" (27). However, he resents so many things about Lousie including her very presence. Most of the time Scobie feels at peace only while he is away from Lousie – in the bathroom or his office. At the same time, as Marcel Morel observes, Scobie is "too weak, psychically speaking, to endure the sight of another's suffering" (Morel 1956: 41). He does not want to hurt either Helen or Lousie.

Scobie has already rejected the Catholic option of giving up Helen after his confession. He had gone to the confession box and told the priest out rightly that he had committed adultery many times. However, his confession does not provide him any solace as he finds it impossible to promise, in the name of God, that he will stop visiting the woman in his life. Even the words of prayer fail him. In fact, Scobie had never been a devout Catholic. In fact, he had converted to Catholicism to marry Lousie. However, Catholicism, particularly the sacrament of marriage, [1]continues to impinge upon his psyche through Lousie. As such, Scobie has the feeling that he is even involving God in his sin: "To take my God in mortal sin" (202). The other option available to him is to let Lousie know the worst. Since Scobie cannot resolve the conflicting claims of Lousie and Helen without causing pain to either one of them, there is no choice left open for him.In terms of existential philosophy, Scobie is driven to a "limit situation". According to Jaspers, ". . . the limit situation is one in which the existent comes to the boundaries of his existence. It may be death, or guilt, or suffering that brings him to this situation. . ." (Jaspers quoted by Macquarrie 1987: 245). Scobie is not able to place faith either in his own wisdom or in his religion. According to Laurence Lerner, Scobie mistrusts God because he cannot shrug off his part in Helen's happiness: ". . . the selfish action and the right action would, in his case, be the same, and he has to do the wrong compassionate action, even if it means giving up salvation" (Lerner 1963: 222).

Thus Scobie decides to die for love which has pushed him into a state of mortal sin. He decides to commit the ultimate sin of despair – suicide. In order to damn himself, Scobie decides to go to the Mass[2] with Lousie which he has earlier evaded by feigning sickness. When the priest comes down the altar bearing the Cross, Scobie makes one last attempt at prayer: "'O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them', and was aware of the pale papery taste of his eternal sentence on the tongue" (217). However, even in sacrificing himself for the sake of others, Scobie is not able to emerge out of his obsession with his own self, whether it be as a responsible policeman, a father, a husband, a lover and now a martyr of sorts. Scobie has always claimed to be a responsible and sober, grown-up man. It appears now that his sense of pity and responsibility reflect his pride – that he can

even die or be damned in order to make others happy[3].This trait of Scobie's character may be understood with reference to Alfred Adler's concept of "life-lie"[4].According to Adler, the concept of life-lie partakes of a situation where a person believes that he is committed to some higher cause and the fulfilment of that cause requires the person to die. However, such a person does not want to claim himself a martyr socially as this would be contrary to his secret but higher purpose. As such, the person pretends to be sick; his sickness grows and becomes fatal resulting in his death. Scobie too plans his suicide very methodically to silently pass out of the reach of Lousie, Helen and God to accord them peace.

Scobie carefully studies all the symptoms of angina, a disease he has read about in a book on medical guidance. Then he begins to pose that he is suffering from severe pain and sleeplessness. Even though the doctor whom Scobie goes to consult does not specify angina as the particular cause of Scobie's trouble, he prescribes Evipan tablets to mitigate the symptoms. While Scobie is planning his suicide thus, he keeps on praying for death: "My God, you'll never have more complete contrition. . . . Kill me. Now. Before I hurt *you* again" (243-4).

As the next step, Scobie tells the Commissioner that he has been diagnosed as a case of angina and he will have to retire. He also begins to record the supposed attacks of pain he has in his diary to authenticate his "life-lie" [as a case in point, his diary entry reads: "6-19 November. . . . Pain has become more frequent. . . . Like a vice. Lasts about one minute. . . . Last night or two have slept badly in spite of Evipan. . .(251-52).]. Meanwhile, he secretly stores the Evipan tablets that he does not consume. The night he is to commit suicide he calls Lousie to bid her goodnight. She kisses him on the forehead and Scobie thinks: "There must be nothing strange on this last night, and nothing she would remember with regret" (255-56). As he swallows the overdose of Evipan tablets, Scobie tries to pray, but he does not know what he should be sorry for. He says aloud, "Dear God, I love. . . ." (257), and then fell down on the ground.

Thus, Scobie's lack of love and faith in his relationship with Lousie leads him to the breach of the sacrament of marriage. Furthermore, his inability to give up Helen and return to

the safer, conventional way of life makes him violate the sacrament of the Holy Communion. Scobie's utter lack of faith in anyone leads him inexorably to death, although given his self-love and his inability to respond resolutely and meaningfully to the crisis in his life, he continues to pose as a silent martyr even in his death.

Notes

[1]Catholic Christianity, both eastern and western, recognizes seven sacraments: Baptism, the Mass, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Penance, Matrimony and, lastly extreme Unction.

[2] The Holy Mass partakes of the symbolism of the broken body and outpoured blood of Christ implying sacrifice. This makes the rite commemorative or representative of the Crucifixion of Christ, which is theologically interpreted as the atoning sacrifice offered for the sins of mankind. Scobie, however, subverts the sacrificial principle by ironically juxtaposing Christ's sacrifice with his suicide.

[3]Graham Green remarks about Scobie elsewhere that his character was intended "to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride" [see Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Bodley Head, 1980), 93-4].

[4]See Alfred Adler, "Life-Lie and responsibility", *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*, trans. P. Radin (1925; rpt. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Turbner& Co.: 1946), 236-45.

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