

The Death of Children  
in  
Graham Greene and W. Wordsworth

Isao SEO

I

There are so many scenes of “the death of children” in works of Graham Greene. It is not too much to say that “the death of children” appears in most of Greene’s important writings. To take some examples, in *The Power and the Glory* the whiskey priest often dreams of the terrible scene, where his own child, Brigitta is dying. Furthermore, he is faced with the death of his innocent spiritual daughter, Coral, who offered the refuge to him in making his escape from the lieutenant in pursuit of him. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie, not confronting the death of his own daughter, Catherine, is forced to attend the death of a girl who was saved from a wrecked ship. Thus these scenes of the death of children are sure to make an enduring impression on the readers. Carolyn D. Scott notes the important role of children in Greene's works: “no critic can escape the childhood theme in Greene, for it is one obsession out of which his tragedies grow.”<sup>(1)</sup> So it is very interesting to examine the theme of the death of children.

But this literary subject of the death of children is not original in Greene, but a very significant theme in traditional and modern literature. Indeed, in the Old Testament Pharaoh gave a strict order to midwives, “As you aid the Hebrew women in childbirth, watch them closely on the birthstool; if it is a son, kill him (Exodus 1 : 15-16),” and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from

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(1) “The Witch at the Corner: Notes on Greene’s Mythology”, *Graham Greene* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1963), p. 232.

the first born of Pharaoh on his throne to the first born of the slave girl... (Exodus 11: 5), and at God's command, "offer your only son, Isaac, up as a burnt-sacrifice." Abraham took hold of the knife to slay his son, but the Angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay hands on the lad (Genesis 22: 1-12). And in the New Testament when Herod grew aware that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious and sent a detachment to murder all the boy babies in Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 16).

To turn our eyes from the Holy Bible to the modern English literature, it is not until the beginning of the Victorian Age that the death of children began to appear in literary works. For example, Legh Richmond published *The Dairyman's Daughter* (1813), which tells us about the child, who believes and praises God on her deathbed. Mrs. Sherwood depicted the lamentable death of the devout Christian boy, Charles, in *The Fairchild Family* (1847). These books impressed so many people and were selling well at that time, because the people of the Victorian Age were more religious and preferred to read these books to others, but, at the same time we cannot ignore the serious social fact that the death rate of children were very high at the Victorian Age.<sup>(2)</sup> In fact, many parents of the day had to face the tragic fate that their children lost their lives in very early childhood. That's why, Mr. Saijo says, parents, who could not find enough consolation in the church or religious words, wanted to think that their children's short lives had to have some profound and positive meaning, not some negative meaning.<sup>(3)</sup> Paradoxically, the child, however young, always dies to keep his innocence, divinity and immortality.

## II

According to Peter Coveney, the Romantic concept of the child's nature is

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(2) On this subject see *The Image of the Child (Kodomo no Imeiji, in Japanese)*, (Eihosha, 1992), p. 40 and for further details of this point see *Ministering Angel: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Writings of Children* (England: Five Owls Press, 1979)

(3) *The Image of the Child* (Eihosha), p. 41.

much opposed to the Christian tradition of Original Sin. Coveney says :

The concept of the child's nature which informed the work of Blake, Wordsworth and others was of original innocence. Stemming most forcefully from Rousseau, and in contradiction to the long Christian tradition of original sin, it was this which gave the weight and edge to the general commentary of these authors as they expressed it through the symbol of the innocent child.<sup>(4)</sup>

In a word, Rousseau's idea that the child has original innocence develops to the "Romantic Child" of William Blake, William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, that is, the Romantic image of the child with innocent and immortal spirit. Before Rousseau, people thought even the child could not be free from Original Sin and was in the Christian "fallen state." James Janeway says, "They (Children) are not too little to die, not too little to go to hell."<sup>(5)</sup> But the greatest Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Blake, denied such solemn and substantial conception of the Christian "fallen state" and tried to give the positive value of innocence and immortality to the child. This new concept is one of the most important and literary achievements of Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets. In this sense, it can be said that they wrote, in essence, the literature of human salvation.

Considered in this light, the child can be distinguished from the grown-up person, in order to redeem the child from "the fallen state" and to find out "innocence" in the child himself. For example, a single glance at the angelic smile of an infant can show easily to us that a little child is identical with innocence or immortality. Even if we feel the same infant sorrow or death in a newly-born baby's smile as Blake did, this is an exceptional case, or the paradoxical expressions of Blake.

But, is this truly the paradox, or an exceptional case? The answer is that the child, however innocent and immortal he is, stays on earth after all. So the child is never free from the progress of experience and passage of time. The child, as long as he lives, must die. He is not immortal. Then, is there no way for the

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(4) Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (Penguin Edition, 1967), p. 33.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

child to challenge and overcome time, or death, and to get a perpetual innocence after that?

Here, the special attention should be paid to the retrospect scene of the mother and “the London beautiful boy” in *The Prelude* VII, whom, Wordsworth says, he himself saw in London Theatre in his young days.

To begin with, “the London beautiful boy” is described in various expressions such as “this bright innocence”<sup>(6)</sup>, “a rosy Babe”<sup>(7)</sup>, and “one of those who walked with hair unsinged/Amid the fiery furnace.”<sup>(8)</sup> This kind of expressions means clearly that “the London beautiful boy” in the midst of the “fallen and secular world” of the theatre possesses immortality of the soul. And several years later, this “London beautiful boy” appears again in the poet’s retrospect exactly as in former years.

He hath since

Appear’d to me oft-times as if embalm’d  
By Nature ; through some special privilege,  
Stopp’d at the growth he had ; destined to live,  
To be, to have been, come and go, a Child  
And nothing more, no partner in the years  
That bear us forward to distress and guilt,  
Pain and abasement, beauty in such excess  
Adorn’d him in that miserable place.<sup>(9)</sup>

Here, Wordsworth succeeds in creating the immortal child free from time, or death, and living eternally.

Furthermore, Wordsworth shows the much bolder idea identified by Mr. Kawamura : “Wordsworth seems to prefer the dead and innocent baby, who rests in peace of heaven, to the living child. Wordsworth thinks that as long as he lives, the child is destined to corrupt and die out before long. If so, to prevent

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( 6 ) Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill, eds., *The Prelude* (New York : Norton, 1979), VII, 378.

( 7 ) *Ibid.*, VII, 367.

( 8 ) *Ibid.*, VII, 369-370.

( 9 ) *Ibid.*, VII, 399-407.

the child from growing, experiencing, corrupting and dying, Wordsworth says that it should be permitted to commit infanticide. Thus Wordsworth ventures to write a series of Lucy poems with the death of Lucy.<sup>(10)</sup> Miss Hatsui says more: through her death Lucy continues to live for ever in Wordsworth's memory. To reiterate, here comes the very interesting paradox that Lucy, by losing her life, lives an eternal life as an ideal girl of the poet.<sup>(11)</sup>

So have I thought of him a thousand times,  
 And seldom otherwise. But he perhaps  
 Mary! may now have liv'd till he could look  
 With envy on thy nameless Babe that sleeps  
 Beside the mountain Chapel, undisturb'd !<sup>(12)</sup>

Here Wordsworth gives us the ostensible impression that he consoles Mary in her sorrow for losing her baby, but as a matter of fact Wordsworth concludes that the baby sleeping in the graveyard on the mountain slope should not be lamented over but rather envied, because the early death of Mary's baby protects him from experience, corruption and evil in the fallen grown-up world. Richard Onorato points out "the unconscious desire for early death of Wordsworth" and says as follows :

As an afterthought, his own aversion to the "fallen" world makes Wordsworth imagine that the child grown to manhood in it might prefer the tranquillity of death, were he capable, paradoxically, of a moment of Wordsworthian detachment and vision.<sup>(13)</sup>

Thus it is evident that Wordsworth suggests the theme of an imaginative infanticide.

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(10) *The Image of the Child*, p. 28

(11) *Wordsworth and The Prelude (Wordsworth to Jokyoku, in Japanese)*, (Nanundo, 1994), p. 140.

(12) *The Prelude*, VII, 408-412.

(13) *The Character of the Poet* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 202-203.

## III

Next, let us consider the meaning of the death of children in Greene.

There is no explicit parallel between Greene's image of children and Wordsworth's human cherub. As mentioned before, Wordsworth imagines that the child should have the immortality of the soul and innocence not corrupted or destroyed by experience. As a result, Wordsworth dares to commit infanticide to idealize the arrest of growth in very early childhood.

In the meantime, in Greene's images of the death of children, it is very difficult to find affirmative values like innocence and immortality. In fact, Greene consistently gives negative images such as moral corruption and the loss of innocence to his child. Greene detects fear, corruption and evil in children considered as cherubs on earth from the Wordsworthian view of children.

In *The Basement Room*, seven-year-old Philip is depicted as one of the typical children who lose their innocence and fall into corruption in early childhood. For example, the nursery room upstairs symbolizes the realm of innocent world or heaven, while the basement room suggests the grown-up world or hell. So the image of Philip going down stairs to the basement room hints at the tragic process of losing innocence and falling into corruption. Thus Philip becomes a very old man, when he is only seven.

"In the lost childhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed"; you could almost see the small unformed face hardening into the deep dilettante selfishness of age.<sup>(14)</sup>

*The Power and the Glory* contains a series of images of such a corrupt child.

... the word 'play' had no meaning to her at all—the whole of life was adult... of childhood she had never really been conscious.<sup>(15)</sup>

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(14) *Twenty-one Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1970). p. 24

(15) *The Power and the Glory* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 60.

... she had been like a rag doll with a wrinkled aged face.<sup>(16)</sup>

The child suddenly laughed again knowingly. The seven-year-old body was like a dwarf's : it disguised an ugly maturity.<sup>(17)</sup>

Clearly, Greene's Roman Catholic understanding of Original Sin produces the image of corrupt children. Francis Kunkel comments on Greene's keen appreciation of Original Sin.

"Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there," Greene writes. . . The ease with which "evil can always find a home" in the human body is due to original sin.<sup>(18)</sup>

Carolyn D. Scott adds, "Greene does not see in childhood the clouds of glory which surround the child of *The Prelude*."<sup>(19)</sup>

#### IV

Greene sees corruption and evil in childhood. But, it is also possible to find a little bit of Wordsworthian innocence in Greene's notion of the death of children.

Catherine Hughes comments on this subject: "Greene's view of childhood has been thought to include a Wordsworthian innocence."<sup>(20)</sup> *The Innocent* seems to support Hughes's opinion.

The narrator comes back to his native place after thirty years' absence, and suddenly recollects the small girl whom he loved in boyhood. Furthermore, the

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(16) *Ibid.*, p. 76.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 78.

(18) "The Theme of Sin and Grace," *Graham Greene* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1963), p. 53.

(19) *Graham Greene* (Univ. of Kentucky Press), p. 235.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 232.

narrator also remembers that he wrote a passionate message to her and slipped it into a hole in the woodwork of the gate. Then he asked her to put in her fingers and find the message. Half in fun, half out of sweet memories, the narrator searches the hole of the gate and is very surprised to find that the scrap of message paper still rests there in its safe shelter from the seasons and the thirty years. Then, to his great shock, the narrator sees a picture of crude obscenity, or the childish inaccurate sketch of a man and a woman in the diminutive flame of a match. The narrator feels at first as if he was betrayed. But later at that night the narrator begins to realize the deep innocence of that drawing.

I [the narrator] had believed I was drawing something with a meaning unique and beautiful ; it was only now after thirty years of life that the picture seemed obscene.<sup>(21)</sup>

Clearly Greene firmly believes in the innocence of childhood, not yet corrupted by sordid experiences and evil circumstances. That is why at the end of *The Innocent* the narrator speaks his mind emphatically : “There is something about innocence one is never quite resigned to lose.”<sup>(22)</sup> John Atkins also explains much the same thing :

Childhood is capable of more than suffering. It has the blessed gift of innocence, denied to adults, a gift that transmutes even the most sordid experiences and circumstances.<sup>(23)</sup>

Greene feels a great longing for innocence and he recognizes the precious value of childhood. Hence Greene never denigrates the innocence of childhood. To protect the pure, divine and permanent innocence of childhood from sordid experiences and corruption, Greene must follow the same way as that of

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(21) *Twenty-one Stories*, p. 56

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 55

(23) *Graham Greene* (London : Calder and Boyars, 1966), pp. 186—187.

Wordsworth. This is the reason why sometimes children die at an early age in Greene's writings. Thus the death of children in Greene has some characteristic of Wordsworthian infanticide.

## V

Lastly, to put a conclusion to this essay, the special attention must be devoted to the fact that the infanticide of Greene has the deeper and more religious significance than that of Wordsworth.

As mentioned above, Greene does not really deny the innocence of children and he places high value on children's innocence. For example, B. Mesnet notices the words of the Portuguese captain of *The Heart of the Matter*, "A wife shares too much of a man's sin for perfect love ; but a daughter may save him at the last."<sup>(24)</sup> Then Mesnet says :

There lies a hint of an explanation of the horror, of the apparent waste and suffering in the world, and especially of innocent children who play such an important part in the lives of Pinkie, the whisky-priest and Scobie. One soul can atone for another, and by suffering and love lift the load weighing on its freedom.<sup>(25)</sup>

This point is also clearly raised at the end of *Brighton Rock*, when Pinkie dimly perceives that Rose, with her faith in him and her love, might be the means of his salvation. Her sacrifice will not be wasted ; she has claimed her responsibility for Pinkie's soul. Then Rose performs within her body the promise of life. The child she believes she has conceived will atone anew for his father. Rose prayed to God, "With your simplicity and his force. . . Make him a saint—to pray for his father." And at this moment she felt suddenly that great gratitude broke through the pain.

Marcel Moré pays keen attention to the picture of the deceased Catherine

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(24) *The Heart of the Matter* (London : Heinemann, 1959), p. 59.

(25) B. Mesnet, *Graham Greene and the Heart of the Matter* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 105

dressed in a white muslin in *The Heart of the Matter* and suggests that the child, Catherine in the picture, is praying by proxy for her father, Scobie. She in heaven prays for him on earth and shall bring him salvation soon.<sup>(26)</sup>

Furthermore, in *The Power and the Glory* Coral, a young girl from the banana station, plays a significant role, after she died. Coral appeared in the dream of the whiskey priest on the eve of his execution by shooting.

He had a curious dream. He dreamed he was sitting at a café table in front of the high altar of the cathedral. . . But he sat on, just waiting, paying no attention to the God over the altar, as though that were a God for other people and not for him. Then the glass by his plate began to fill with wine, and looking up he saw that the child from the banana station was serving him. She said, "I got it from my father's room."<sup>(27)</sup>

Needless to say, wine symbolizes the blood of Jesus Christ. Coral gives absolution and salvation to the whiskey priest by pouring wine for him before he leaves this world for heaven.

As mentioned above, the dead children of Greene's works play the important role of bringing salvation to heroes. These children suggest the image of the very important person in the Bible.

## VI

It is well-known that Jesus Christ, Christian iconology says, is often depicted as an innocent child in Christian art. For example, Hans Holbein the Elder depicts a child carrying a large cross in 'Christ-child with Cross on Globe.' Lucas Granach the Elder also depicts the child Jesus standing on an open grave holding an orb in his hand in 'Christ-child on Open tomb with orb, angels with Instruments of Passion.' The famous pictures of 'Holy Mother and Child' of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and other artists show that the Virgin holding

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(26) *Graham Greene (Ai to Tsumi no Sakka, Graham Greene, in Japanese)*, (Nansosha, 1966), p. 163.

(27) *The Power and Glory*, pp. 271-272.

the body of Christ on her lap. Christ appears to be no larger than a child because the artists were trying to express that the Virgin once again imagines her crucified son as her infant. The frontispiece of *Songs of Experience* of William Blake, 'Christopher carrying an innocent Christ,' also shows Christ as an innocent child with a young shepherd. Lyrian Brannon pays special attention to the image of Christ-child in Christian iconology and makes interesting comments on the heartbreaking scene of a mother and her dying child in *The Power and the Glory*.

His next encounter is in an abandoned village with a mother and her dying child. This encounter parallels the underlying meaning of the Virgin and the suffering Christ depicted by Christian artists during and after the fifteenth century. These artists often represented the extreme suffering of the crucified Christ by depicting him as a child.<sup>(28)</sup>

The image of the child in Greene's works is to be identified with the image of Christ figure. So, obviously, the child of Greene who dies young is a Christ-child. The death and suffering of children in Greene suggest the death and suffering of Jesus Christ. Here, there appears to be a very good reason that Greene, the Catholic writer, has ventured to commit infanticide in his works. It is not so difficult to study the significance and value of the sufferings of Christ in many Western literatures. This is also true of Greene's works.

When all is said and done, Greene is judged to have tried to commit imaginative infanticides to write the 'Passion play' in contemporary English literature.

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(28) *Iconology of the Child Figure in Graham Greene's Fiction* (Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1979), p. 90.