BETWEEN MELANCHOLIA AND MANIA: GRAHAM GREENE’S MASTERY OF MELODRAMA

ABSTRACT

Melodrama was one of Graham Greene’s professed “working tools,” a form that was well suited to the expression of his “fixations.” At the same time, he admitted that he was “not deliberately melodramatic,” but wrote in this way because, as he said, “I am what I am.”

And what was Graham Greene? – the victim of a manic-depressive disorder, a man of divided psyche, harassed by intermittent extremes of inert or agitated states of mind; a writer who needed to exorcise those unsettling, internal, often cataclysmic shifts. The research for my book: Graham Greene: Manic-Depressive Dynamics in His Life and Dramaturgy, explores the profound impact of the playwright’s mania and melancholia on seven of his best-known plays. Greene moved with apparent ease between the extremes of tragedy and farce, morbidity and mirth, “the dangerous edge” and outrageous practical joking. In his first two plays, The Living Room and The Potting Shed, a depressive mood dominates; in his third and fourth works, The Complaisant Lover and Carving a Statue, the moods are mixed; and in his last phase, a trilogy: The Return of A. J. Raffles, “Yes and No,” and For Whom the Bell Chimes, Greene abandons himself to wholly manic creations. The critic Eric Bentley criticized the melodramatic vision when he wrote: “It is imaginative but it is not intelligent….It is good ‘up to a point,’ and the point is childhood, neuroticism, primitivity.” From what we know of Graham Greene, he could not deny the injured child, the neurotic, and the primitive within himself; yet he often succeeded in shaping these elements into a mature artistry, earning the title “Master of Melodrama.”

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