Graham Greene’s: “The Comedians” An Overview

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ABSTRACT

‘The Comedians’ published in 1966, deals with contemporary political situation. The horror of existence unredeemed by any faith, forces men and women into role playing for their very survival. Respectable or shady, they are all alike in their inability to commit themselves to any significant course of action, political or moral, in the face of evil. One of these is Monsieur Brown is narrator and protagonist in this novel. The story moves round the city Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti.

The scene is Haiti under Doctor Duvalier. A contemporary setting has the advantage of immediacy. It is a land of ugliness and squalor, ignorance and abject poverty, rules by Papa Doc and his bogeyman Tontos Maconte. Papa Doc is Baron Samedi, the big voodoo man who keeps zombies in his palace. In this dash republic ‘violent deaths are natural deaths’ and ‘only the nightmares are real’.

Monsieur Brown is the owner of Hotel Trianon at Port-au-Prince. In the beginning of the novel, he is returning to Haiti, ‘with out much hope to a country of fear and frustration’, after the failure of his attempt to sell the hotel, to someone in the United States.

Brown goes over his recent past in Haiti. He stands near the memorial stone where his friend Jone’s body had been buried in the north to Monte Christi. Then Brown remembers his past life and the story goes into flashback.

It’s a sullen August morning. Brown is returning from his native place New York to Port-au-Prince where he owns a large hotel. He is travelling by ‘Media’ a Cargo ship of Royal Netherlands Steamship Company, bound for Haiti and Port-au-Prince from Philadelphia and New York. Brown belongs nowhere except Haiti and Haiti could hardly be called a home. There are many fellow passengers travelling in the same ship. Mr. Smith of Wisconsin is travelling in the same ship. He was presidential candidate in 1948 in USA. He is a devoted follower of vegetarianism and is an idealist. He was President Truman’s opponent. Similarly his wife Mrs. Smith is a true follower of his ideas and is a brave lady. Another person Major Jones is a humorous person and is a British citizen. William Abel Smith polled ten thousand votes in Presidential elections in 1948. All the passengers gather at the dining table and in the evening while having a drink. Brown tells Mr. Smith that he owns a hotel in Port-au-Prince which is empty for months due to the lack of the tourists. Mr. Smith decides to stay in Brown’s hotel ‘Trianon’ during their stay in Haiti. Major also takes the same decision. Brown stays ‘with three guests I shall be most envied hotelier in Port-au-Prince’. Mr. Smith was going to establish a project of his vegetarian centre in Haiti. He was carrying a letter addressed to the Minister of Social Welfare of Haiti.

The captain says the passengers that he received a cable from his office in Philadelphia about Major Jones. They wished him to report by cable when and where he lands.

Brown reaches Port-au-Prince with his fellow passengers. He meets a journalist Petil Pierre on the port who tells him that he could not get any buyer of his hotel because American military mission was expelled from Haiti. American recalled their ambassador. Petil Pierre informs Brown that Doctor Philipot, the minister social welfare missing from work and is supported by a journalist. Petil Pierre goes to find out Smiths while Brown sends his luggage to his hotel Trianon and drops near Columbus stature. He tells him that he could not get any buyer of his hotel because American military mission was expelled from Haiti. American recalled their ambassador. Petil Pierre informs Brown that Doctor Philipot, the minister social welfare missing from work and is supported by a journalist. Petil Pierre goes to find out Smiths while Brown sends his luggage to his hotel Trianon and drops near Columbus stature. He looks Martha’s car who is his beloved. Martha is surprised to see Brown and expresses his happiness but Brown suspects if she has taken another lover. Martha assures him that she can be a sage for a few months except in dreams. Then Brown makes her love in her car.

All that Brown can do is to play the ‘confused comedy’ of his private life in which love, action or belief are at a discount. Nowhere is this so evident as his love affair with Martha, the wife of South American Ambassador Luis. She has a Child Angel by him and has reached the dead end of her marriage. A bit of lust and a bit of curiosity on
Brown’s part and a desire for new experience on Martha’s bring them together. The affair begins casually enough and from the beginning Brown is jealous and resentful of the diamonds of others on Martha. There is also a sense of guilt which makes them feel like ‘fellow conspirators’ tied together in the confession of a crime.’ Their love is blighted by Brown’s limitations. He cannot convince himself that Martha loves him; he cannot believe in fidelity. Martha has greater capacity for love, directness and sincerely but these only fuel Brown’s suspicion and jealously and he responds with anger to her tenderness.

Brown and Martha reach their hotel Trianon. They find their servant Joseph who is a blackman. He says to Brown that there were no customers during their months and only Doctor Philipot has come four days earlier. Brown and Joseph find Doctor Philipot dead in the swimming pool. He had to go with Martha to send her home. He also asks him to send Doctor Magiet to the hotel Trianon. Mr. & Mrs. Smith, who are staying in the hotel Trianon do not know about this. While waiting for Doctor Magiet, the communist, Brown reflects about his earlier life. He was born in Monaco of a British father and a mother of dubious nationality. They abandoned him to a life marked by transience. “He had last seen his mother when she was dying in Port-au-Prince. Her name was Contessa-de-Lascot-Villiers. His mother had been employed in 1934 in hotel Trianon. Its owner transferred this property to Ms. Maggie Brown, Brown’s mother to save his taxes. After some time he died and Mrs. Maggie Brown became the true owner of the hotel. Brown reflects: “I should never have come to this country, I was a stranger. My mother had taken a black lover, she had been involved but somewhere years ago I had forgotten how to be involved in anything. Somehow, somewhere, I had lost completely the capacity to be concerned.” I Her mother left her property for him. He became acquainted with Martha when once she came to his hotel with her husband Pineda and later that they began love affair.

Then Brown wakes up from his trance when Doctor Magiet comes to his hotel. He takes the dead body of Doctor Philipot. They hide the dead body behind a bush in the hill where no one could see it. After doing this, they return. Brown washes the blood in the pool. In the morning he explains Mr. Smith that it was a beggar in the night and he provided him sufficiently.

Major Jones, who has scraped through troubles in various parts of the world, such as Brown and the Congo, come to Haiti, wearing his ambiguity ‘like a loud suit’. Brown wonders how easily a rogue like Jones makes friends with good people.

Brown and Mrs. Smith get the news from Petit Pierre that Major Jones has been arrested by Tontons Macoute (the Secret Police) for some irregularities. Mr. Smith goes to the Secretary of State to help Jones to become free. Somehow they manage to meet Jones in Prison. Jones gives a note to Brown for giving it to Tontons Macoute.

Brown goes with Smiths to attend the funeral of Doctor Philipot. They reach near the hill where the coffin is attached to a cart. Tontons Macoute stops them to give Doctor Philipot a proper funeral. They lift the coffin out of the hearse and carry it to the car. They wedge it into the boot, but it strikes several feet out, so they tie it securely with a piece of rope, taking their time. All stand as spectators and only Mrs. Smith asseyes violence – goes over to the Cadillac and pleads with them to take her too. The Tontons Macoute push her and they tale the dead body away.

Brown goes to the embassy to meet Martha. But Ambassador is present there and he greets Brown. Then a Syrian names as Henry Hamit comes to meet the ambassador. Late Doctor Philipot’s nephew also arrives there. Earlier ambassador Pineda reveals the fact to Brown that Martha’s father was handed in the American zone during the occupation. Brown meets Martha and her child Angel. They want to make love but due to fear they drop the idea. Brown returns back with the promise of next meeting.

At the same night, Brown goes to Mere Catherine’s brothel. He asks for his favourite girl TinTin but Mere Catherine tells that she is busy with another customer. Brown finds Captain Cancasseur there. He tells Brown that TinTin is busy with an important foreigner. Later Brown finds that she was busy with Major Jones who gets VIP treatment from Cancasseur. TinTin says to Jones that she has become very happy with him.

In the second part of the book, Mr. Smith and the Minister of Social Welfare go to Duvalierville to see a site for Mr. Smith’s Vegetarian Centre. There, Mr. Smith buys a statue from an artist who looks like a beggar. Mr. Smith wants to pay him but Minister stops him to do so telling that the government pays him. Mr. Smith sees the injustice with the poor. He becomes full of disgust and drops the idea of establishing Vegetarian Centre. He tells the Minister that he would reconsider the whole project.

Next day Young Philipot comes to Brown’s hotel and tells him that he needs a weapon ‘Breu’ to make a revolution against the government and after this he returns.

Next Doctor Magiot comes to the hotel Trianon to dine with the Smiths and Brown. They talk on different topics. Doctor Magiot says that USA has a great influence in the Western hemisphere. He says that the American Marines tried to destroy Voodoo and the Jesuits also tried. But the celebrations go on yet and a man can be found rich enough to pay the priest and the religious tax.

Next morning Captain Cancasseur comes with his party to hotel Trianon. He searches for Joseph and asks Brown about him. He also asks about young Philipot. He tortures and beats Brown and asks him forcibly about Joseph and Philipot. At the mean time, Mrs. Smith comes and saves Brown from captain Cancasseur and he returns. Mrs. Smith says that she will talk Mr. Jones that his friend treated Brown very badly. That afternoon, Martha comes to hotel Trianon and looks after Brown. Brown says that he has received a letter of apology from Jones. They make love and Martha goes back to her home. Smiths call Brown a to their room and Mrs. Smith tells him that they have dropped the idea of the vegetarian centre and have decided to return to their country. He says that they are going to fly to Santo Domingo.
the next day and they would stay there for a few days because Mrs. Smith wants to see Columbus’s tomb. Mr. Smith has genuine goodness and represents an ideal, a father like figure for both Jones and Brown who have no clear memory of their fathers.

Other day, Brown sees off the Smiths at the airport and then goes to Jones who stays in government rest house. Jones offers to make him partner in his project without telling about the project. He offers Brown a quarter million dollar if he becomes partner in his project. Jones tells Brown about his dream that when he would earn millions, he would make it true. He will build a good house and a golf club.

Brown goes to a casino where he meets the purser of the ship ‘Media’ and an Italian engineer Leugi is also present. Brown tells the purser about Jones that he had offered him a quarter million dollar for one of his enterprise.

Mr. Smith in all modesty disclaims the heroic mould but his dedication to a cause brings him closer to Dr. Magiot, the negro communist, who has the same stubbornness and courage of conviction. The other comedians have no such dedications, though Brown has his hotel and Jones his dream of Sahib House on a desert island. They do not live or die for a cause or faith, they are not called upon to choose between good and evil. They do not knew failure or despair. They are, according to Greene uncommitted (or men committed to everything which means nothing). Brown reflects on their predicament.

“The rootless have experienced, like all the others, the temptation of sharing the security of a religious creed or a political faith, and for some reason we have turned the temptation down. We are the faithless: We admire the dedicated, the Doctor Magiots and the Mr. Smiths for their courage and their integrity, for their fidelity to a cause, but through timidity, or through lack of sufficient zest, we find ourselves the only ones truly committed, - committed to the whole world of evil and of good, to the wise and to the foolish, to the indifferent and to the mistaken. We have chosen nothing except to go on living, ‘rolled round on Earth’s diurnal course with rocks and stones and trees.” 2

In the third part of the book, we see that Brown finds difficulty in sleeping. The lightning flashes on and off as irregularly as Papa Doc’s publicity in the part. It is raining outside. Presently round the corner of the house and into the circle, comes Jones. He says to Brown, “Everything has gone. Finished.” He says that Tontons Macoutes are searching him and he wants to go out of Haiti. Brown goes to the ship ‘Media’ with Jones and asks captain to provide James a cabin in his ship. The captain expresses his unwillingness to provide a cabin for Jones in his ship because Jones neither has a ticket nor an exit visa. At the meantime a police officer wants to see the captain. Captain asks Jones to hide in the bath room when the police officer comes and asks the captain about Jones and wants to make a search. Captain denies Jones’ presence and tells that it is his territory and he cannot search his ship. He assures the officer that he would check his ship. He assured the officer that he would check his ship and would hand over any person who will be found to travel illegally. Jones returns with Brown in the disguise of a girl for which the purser provides him the clothes. Jones denies going to the British Embassy due to the fear of Tanton Macoutes’s presence at the embassy. They go to South American embassy where Senor Pineda is introduced with Jones. Jones wants to live in the embassy as a refugee. Brown returns to his hotel leaving Jones there. A police officer is present at his hotel and asks him about Jones. After searching his hotel, being convinced that Jones is not there, he allows Brown to enter the hotel and he goes back.

At embassy, Martha likes Jones very much because he is humorous person. Brown suspects that she has begun a love affair with Jones also. Her son Angel also likes Jones very much.

Another night, Doctor Magiet visits Brown at his hotel. Petit Pierre also comes who is a journalist. They talk about different matter.

After some days Brown plans to help Jones escape from Haiti. Jones, Young Philipot and servant Joseph are trying to make a revolution against Papa Doc. Brown wants to travel with Jones for this purpose. After completing formalities and having a pass, Brown starts with Jones in his car in a stormy and rainy day, and he passes uninteruptedly. But above the hill, his car breaks down and they both go to the cemetery nearby. There Captain Cancasseur arrests both of them but suddenly Joseph and Young Philipot attack on Cancasseur and his driver. They kill them with the bullet and Jones and Brown go with them.

After some days, we see that Brown goes to Santo Domingo. He wants to get a job and tries to find a job. There he comes to know that Martha’s husband has been transferred to Lima. Martha is also present at Santo Domingo. Brown succeeds to get a job of canteen manager for a fruit company near Monte Christ.

Next day, he starts for Monte Christ in a jeep. On the way he is stopped by the military officer. The officer says that it is not safe to go ahead because there has been a wild firing on the other side of the international road. Brown stays in a nearby camp. Next morning, he is allowed to go ahead. As he is about to start, he sees Young Philipot who is naked to the waist and his arm was broken. He sees dead Joseph lying on a stretcher. Philipot says him that he had no ammunition left. He reveals that Jones has also died in a guerrilla fighting. The officer tells to Philipot that he has made a comfortable camp for the victims near Santo Domingo in an old lunatic asylum.

They hold a Mass for Joseph, other dead man and Jones whose beliefs are not known is also included out of courtesy. Martha also attends it with her son Angel. The funeral is conducted by a Haitian refugee priest. Brown gets the news that Doctor Magiot is killed by Tontons Macoutes. At last in the evening, Brown has a dinner with the Smiths and Mr. Ferandez. He gets a letter from Doctor Magiot, which perhaps he wrote at his last moment. In the struggle waged between the political creeds and institutions, Haiti is a pawn and a bulwark against communism. Dr. Magiot’s last letter to Brown is an appeal for commitment by a man about to die. Dr. Magiot wrote:
“Catholics and Communists have committed great crimes but at last they have not stood aside like an established society, and been indifferent. I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pitake, it implies you if you rise. There is always alienation to the faith we lose or is it same faith under another mast.”3 He wrote Brown not to change religious or political faith. Martha goes away with her husband. At the end of the novel he remains alone. He remains incapable of a leap into faith or commitment. At the end, he is still resigned to his lack of involvement; “There was no heights and no abysses in my world. I saw myself on a great plain an walking on the interminable flats. Once I might have taken a different direction, but it was too late now.”4 This question remains unanswered whether Papa Doc remains in the government or not or what happens next in Haiti.

The novel has a right title “The Comedians”. At one place, Senon Pineda tells Dr. Magiot and Brown, “We mustn’t complain too much of being comedians – it’s an honourable profession. If only we could be good ones, the world might gain at least a sense of style. We have failed that’s all. We are bad comedians, we aren’t bad men.”5

So Brown continues to play the comedian in his role as an undertaker in the Dominican Republic. He can salve his conscience by a certain pride that he helped to raise the modest stone that commemorates Jones.

REFERENCES

[1] Page No: 33 & 34“The Comedians” by Graham Greene (The Bodley Head London) Published 1966
[2] Page No. 304 -----do-----
[3] Page No. 311 & 312 -----do-----
[4] Page No. 312 -----do-----
[5] Page No. 145 & 146 -----do-----