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Epidemics, Leprosy, and Hope in Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case*

HAWK CHANG
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
htcchang@eduhk.hk

ABSTRACT

Graham Greene is a critically acclaimed British novelist in twentieth-century literature. In his epidemic narrative A Burnt-Out Case (1977), Querry, a world-famous European architect, loses his faith in work and the Catholic religion and escapes to the leprosy-infected Congo. Querry's ennui makes him a de facto spiritual leper. Such an analogy often demonizes disease and normalizes people's perception of epidemics, simultaneously misrepresenting patients' various experiences. Nonetheless, the traditional stigmatization imposed on the Other, such as lepers in the Congo, does not merely necessitate the agony of the infected. Rather, epidemics often entail the victim's epiphany and turn the sufferers' pain into pleasure and their desperation into inspiration. Querry's retrieval of faith in life and humanity illustrates this empowerment. This paper argues that epidemics and people's responses to them alert us to a deconstructive power inherent in contagion. Epidemics are threatening and fearful, but they also enable humans to reexamine their lives and refresh their sympathetic understanding of human suffering. G. Greene's (1977) A Burnt-Out Case brings forth a timely version of people's regained humanity through suffering and disease, something urgently needed in the (post-)COVID-19 era.

Keywords: epidemic narrative; disease; leprosy; Graham Greene; A Burnt-Out Case

INTRODUCTION

In most research discussions, academics examine the depiction of Greene's Catholic faith and associated moral issues in his fictional works, such as *The Power of the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *A Burnt-Out Case* (Brennan, 2010, pp. 114-17; Chang, 2018, pp. 381-391; Goodheart, 1990, pp. 38-46; Gordon, 1997, pp. 45-47). Many scholars highlight Greene's unusual depiction of disbelief and religious doubt in his novels. Some critics attend to the stereotypical subordination of Africans in the "Greeneland" and highlight a mentality of white superiority typical of First World writers in Western literature. *A Burnt-Out Case* seems to illustrate this biased mindset. As Peter Mudford argues, "Though his [Greene's] novels were set in many different countries, his attitudes and beliefs were like those of his contemporaries, Eurocentric" (1996, p. 12). David Clark echoes Mudford's proposition that Greene's novels are narrated from a prejudiced Western perspective and explained as follows: "To be fair, Western literature is not uniformly colonial, but Greene's position of eminence gives his thinking an undeniable weight" (2003, p. 2). Greene admitted that Western writers imagined the African Congo in his prose work *Ways of Escape*, where he revealed his plan to visit the Congo to find reference materials for *A Burnt-Out Case* and noted that "the Congo was a geographical term invented by the white colonists" (1980, p.37). Greene's condescending attitude toward Africans appears to be conspicuous.

However, this emphasis on the white colonists' condescension toward Africans becomes untenable from the lens of epidemics and the metaphorical implications of *A Burnt-Out Case*. In this fiction, a world-famous architect has seemingly lost faith in love, work, humans, and God. Unable to live the false life surrounded by those who misunderstand him, Querry despondently escapes from Europe to the Congo, a remote land where he hopes to be free from molestation.

Mary Ann Melfi maintains that Querry's spiritual emptiness manifests in the leper colony: "The leper's grotesque disfigurements serve as symbolic reminders of Querry's immaturity and spiritual maiming" (Melfi, 2015, p. 181). In other words, Querry is a de facto leper in spiritual terms.

A Burnt-Out Case is packed with a range of snobbish Westerners, such as Rycker (owner of a palm factory), Parkinson (a journalist), and Father Thomas, who remain indifferent to the local community and African culture. Querry differs from these Westerners in his interactions with the alien culture in the leprosarium. His contact with the lepers transforms him from a spiritual leper into a revitalized architect. Leprosy enables Querry to revisit his spiritual conundrums and find a way out. Paradoxically, Querry's ennui at the beginning of the book allows him to be open-minded to the lepers' suffering and facilitates his easy access to the Other's culture in the Congo. As Beatriz Valverde Jiménez suggests, Querry, together with Father Superior and Dr. Colin, "bring together the European and the native culture and make possible the contact between them, becoming cultural translators" (Jiménez, 2018, p. 121). Thus, Querry's firsthand encounters with the leprosy-inflicted Congo enable his spiritual rehabilitation and regeneration. Like many 19th-century British novels set in Africa, Greene's fiction delineates the main character's physical and "interior journey of self-discovery" (Jiménez, 2015, p. 158). However, although studies have widely discussed Querry's religious awakening, how leprosy impacts Africans in the Congo and contributes to the protagonist's interaction with Others has not been thoroughly investigated. Derrida's concept of *pharmakon* helps illustrate the coexistence of essentially conflicting elements in one entity, which is a paradox in line with the duality of plagues. For example, leprosy reflects Querry's spiritual paralysis in *A Burnt-Out Case*. His rehabilitation and revival would have been impossible without the experience with lepers in the Congo. Notably, *A Burnt-Out Case* brings forth a timely version of the humanities of care, compassion, and collaboration urgently needed in the post-COVID-19 era, while Derrida's theory of the *pharmakon* specifies the ambiguity of relevant polarities and foreshadows an insight into the way of the world after the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critics have examined *A Burnt-Out Case* from various perspectives, ranging from the dark Congo (Youngs, 2002, pp. 156-173), the missionary in the Congo (Roos, 2009, pp. 59-65), naming (Pisano, 1991, pp. 177-180), dialectics (Salván, 2011, pp. 301-309), physicians (Surawicz & Jacobson, 2009, pp. 144-145), spiritual transformation (Melfi, 2015, pp. 181-194), to illness and suffering (Yanagiya, 2019, pp. 5-15), semiotics and semispheres (Jiménez, 2015, pp. 152-161), and burnt-out in association with exhaustion (Padoa Schioppa et al., 2021, pp. 5-7; Schaffner, 2016, pp. 223-226). Several researchers emphasize the melancholic overtone typical of Greene's novels. For example, Ayobami Kehinde construed *A Burnt-Out Case* as a dystopian novel and reiterated that "human beings in the modern world are encumbered with problems of dissonance and pain" (2009, p. 75). Despite the suffering pervasive in the novel, Querry does not lose his faith, as evidenced by his incessant attempts to realign himself with the world in the leper-inflicted community. Similar complexities of literature are evident in N. Hejaz and Singh's study of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, wherein they highlight a "constructivist theory of knowledge in literature where individuals and collectives… participate in making up meaningful presents and livable futures" (2020, p. 175).

This paper investigates the therapeutic power of human suffering during contagion. I argue that Querry's venture into the leprosarium alerts him to the inevitability of suffering, entails his regeneration, and attests to the sustaining empowerment of epidemics. This reconciliation is similar to Dr Colin's case in the fiction: "Dr Colin's dedication stems from some kind of stubbornness rather than heroism and idealism . . . [it is] not an act of compassion, but an extension of his malaise in the emptiness of his bleak existence" (Surawicz & Jacobson, 2009, p. 145). By scrutinizing the commonsensical perception of leprosy and the different scenarios with an entanglement of disease and religion in Querry's case, Greene's knowledge of leprosy and his creation of a maimed but reinvigorated leper in *A Burnt-Out Case* will be brought to light. This new perspective helps reveal a contradictory characteristic of epidemics and how such a duality illustrates Querry's agony and his later metamorphosis. Additionally, it further explicates an encouraging message of implied remedies and resilience under the surface of catastrophes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Epidemic narratives are not only about medicine and disease but valuable accounts closely associated with critical and cultural discourses. A further investigation of disease narratives helps untangle the complexities of politics and religion embedded in them. It facilitates our better understanding of epidemic narratives and relevant political and religious constructions. As D. A. Herring and Swedlund argue, conventional discussions of epidemics often "homogenize, erase, and belie the diversity of experiences" for people plagued by infectious diseases (2010, p. 4). This variety of epidemics and people's varied responses to plagues is evident in Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case*, demonstrating that the traditional stigmatization imposed on the Other, such as the lepers in the Congo, does not necessitate the agony of the underprivileged. Rather, epidemics often entail people's epiphany, transforming pain into pleasure and hell into heaven. In other words, epidemics and people's responses to them alert us to a deconstructive power inherent in contagion. According to A. Bashford and Hooker (2001), contagion is threatening because it "implie[s] absorption, invasion, vulnerability, the breaking of a boundary imagined as secure, in which the other becomes part of the self" (Bashford & Hooker, 2001, p. 2). Intriguingly, such a boundary-crossing characteristic not only incurs fear but facilitates people's sympathetic understanding of human suffering. As a consequence, Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case* presents a timely version of the humanities of care, compassion, and collaboration urgently needed in the post-COVID-19 era. In addition, this medical perspective is significant because, as Franco-Paredes and Tuells (2023) note, the contemporary conception of burnout, closely associated with "emotional numbness and psychological depletion," stems from Greene's *A Burnt-out Case*, preceding psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger's initial story of the mental problem in the 1970s (Franco-Paredes & Tuells, 2023, p. 87).

The therapeutic, transformative power of disease and suffering finds a potent theoretical scaffold in Jacques Derrida's philosophy. In his essay "The Pharmakon," collected in *Dissemination*, Derrida presents his interpretation of Plato's *pharmakon*, which means both poison and remedy in Greek, and explains the epistemologically entwined scenario of epidemics. By referring to the word *pharmakon* metaphorically, Derrida accentuates the dualities, such as good/evil and remedy/poison, inherent to writing. Writing provides an illusion of truth, not truth itself; therefore, it is detrimental to the pursuit of truth. Nonetheless, despite the drawback, writing contributes to disseminating truth by serving as a substitute for speech. As Derrida notes in "The

Pharmakon,"

> For two different reasons and at two different depths. First of all, because the beneficial essence or virtue of a pharmakon does not prevent it from hurting. The Protagoras classes the *pharmakon* among the things that can be both good (*agatha*) and painful (*aniara*)…. This type of painful pleasure, linked as much to the malady as to its treatment, is a *pharmakon* in itself. It partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and the disagreeable.
>
> (Derrida, 1981, p. 99)

In line with his typical deconstructive reinterpretations of binary oppositions, Derrida alerts people to the double and contradictory nature of writing and medicine as a remedy and drug. His analysis unravels the elusive characteristic of *pharmakon*, blurring the clear-cut distinction between pleasure and pain.

The ambiguity of the *pharmakon* destabilizes fixed oppositions, such as "good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance" (Derrida, 1981, p. 103). It also inspires people about the positive as well as negative aspects of medicine, disease, and death, as exemplified in *A Burnt-Out Case*. According to Derrida (1981), the notion of *pharmakon* yields a range of binary oppositions in Western traditions (e.g., good/evil, speech/writing, and cure/poison) and testifies to the uncertainty and ambiguity of conventional certitude (Derrida, 1981, p. 103). As Derrida contends,

> The ceremonial of the pharmakos is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside…. the pharmakos represent evil, both introjected and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures—and for that, venerated and cared for—harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil—and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Scared and accursed.
>
> (Derrida, 1981, 134)

Derrida highlights the ambivalence of the Greek word *pharmakon*, illuminating the multiplicity of meanings and the contradictory but generative power of disease. As Matthew Sharpe notes, Derrida dwells on the "multiple, multiply ambiguous uses of the signifier 'pharmakon' in the Platonic oeuvre" (2021, p. 160). Such a concept of *pharmakon* helps illustrate the coexistence of essentially conflicting elements in one entity, which is a paradox in line with the duality of plagues. For example, leprosy reflects Querry's spiritual paralysis in *A Burnt-Out Case*. However, Querry's rehabilitation and revival are impossible without his experience with lepers and leprosy in the Congo. A disaster in appearance and illness contributes to Querry's reawakening in his confrontations with leprosy in the Congo. In a nutshell, Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case* is inherently interconnected with Derrida's deconstructive philosophy and innately appropriate for overthrowing the established notions of disease and human suffering embedded in Greene's fiction.

LEPROSY AND MEMORY

Querry's failure to be free from suffering is closely related to his being a leper. According to Stegenga (2018, p. 98), traditional diseases, such as obesity, sexually transmitted illness, and leprosy, are often stigmatized. Unable to feel anything, such as love, hatred, or religion, Querry has come to Africa to escape, but in vain. During his stay in the Congo, Querry endeavours to find peace, but people keep disturbing his life. To Querry's chagrin, Rycker, a bizarre and pietistic

colonial merchant, stubbornly looks upon him as a desert father who retreats from the world to seek sanctity in the leprosaria (leper colony). Father Thomas, one of the more naïve priests at the leproserie, endorses this view. In addition, Rycker succeeds in bringing Parkinson, a journalist who proceeds to write a fantastic but fake story about Querry's conversion, to the Congo. Querry's world is empty, meaningless, and miserable. Without any resources to rely on, he is lost in the desolate and painful emptiness because he refuses to believe in the false image admirers impose on him. Querry's stasis mainly derives from his being a leper. As he tells journalist Parkinson, he is "one of the burnt-out cases," meaning "the lepers who lose everything that can be eaten before they are cured" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 403).

Querry does everything only for his pleasure, so he is troubled by the loss of sensibility to humans and religion and irritated by his admirers' superficial compliments of his alleged devotion and achievements. When building houses, his main concern is "space, light, proportion," not the glorification of God's greatness (G. Greene, 1977, p. 360). However, many outsiders regard him as a "great Catholic architect" working only for God (G. Greene, 1977, p. 360). This false image of a religious saint makes Querry feel repugnant because he is not in the least religious. For example, Queery admits that he seldom prays: "I gave it up a long time ago. Even in the days when I believed, I seldom prayed" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 361). Apathetic about mundane troubles, he prefers to live in an "empty space" without intrusions from the outside world (G. Greene, 1977, p. 361). Therefore, he escapes to the Congo, but his awful experience in the leproserie disappoints him. On his way to the leper colony, Querry puts down a parody of Descartes, saying, "I feel discomfort; therefore, I am alive" (G. Greene, 1977, ~~1977,~~ p. 337).

At the earlier stage of his stay in the Congo, Querry is so perplexed with his false image in Europe that he is overridden with discomfort and anxiety. Not knowing what to do with the hypocrisy and falsehood, he feels pain and restlessness. Consequently, disquiet becomes the only reality of his existence. Due to the trouble before he arrives in the Congo, Querry refuses to be involved in any form of feeling. His extreme sense of loss leads him to an ennui: "Nothing, I want nothing. That is my trouble" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 341). He explains his conundrum: "I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to the end of all that too" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 342). In the wake of this despair, Querry claims he does not suffer anymore and knows nothing about suffering (G. Greene, 1977, p. 342). However, despite his claim to be immune from emotions, Querry cannot but perceive his distorted images incessantly, just as lepers are always aware of their physical deformations. As Dr Colin notes, "For the burnt-out cases, life outside isn't easy. They carry the stigma of leprosy. People are apt to think once a leper, always a leper" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 413). By the same token, Querry cannot change his distorted image as a saintly Catholic architect. Therefore, notwithstanding his unwillingness to face hypocrisy, Querry suffers in the remote land of Africa.

Querry's despair deteriorates because he has been surrounded and irritated by admirers from Europe and Father Thomas in the leproserie. Rycker, the manager of a palm oil plantation, mistakes him as a saint who buries himself in the leproserie for "self-sacrifice" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 372). Moreover, Father Thomas labels Querry as a Catholic saint. He is molested by Father Thomas's insistence that he is a "man of humility" and, therefore, an example of Christian virtue (G. Greene, 1977, p. 391). Ironically, Father Thomas, a priest of weak faith, approaches Querry to reinforce his religious belief. However, Querry proclaims that he does not want to believe because he is "cured" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 392). In other words, he is plunged into a dilemma—refusing faith but forced to reevaluate his refusal constantly. Therefore, he feels discomfort and suffers in the Congo.

Querry is also a victim of Parkinson, a hack journalist committed to portraying him as a Catholic saint—a well-known architect who gives up splendid cathedrals in Europe to work with the lepers in the Congo. Querry is a disillusioned man without any faith, but for Parkinson, he is another Albert Schweitzer. Quoting Marie Rycker's words, Parkinson regards Querry as one who has a "completely selfless love without the barrier of colour or class. I [Parkinson] have never known a man more deeply instructed in faith" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 419). Parkinson's sanctification is another maddeningly ironic misrepresentation of reality.

The distorted life in Europe and Africa results in Querry's endless torment. Since he cannot tolerate the falsely carved saint-like image in Europe, Querry feels despondent about humans, love, and faith, so he escapes to the Congo for peace and rest. Nonetheless, his atheism—disbelieving in the existence of God–leaves him no way out, no way from the absurd condition of human misery. The first epigram of the novel illuminates Querry's mentality: "I did not die, yet nothing of life remained" (G. Greene, 1977, front page). Due to the lack of faith or anything religious, Querry falls into despair when he realizes the lunacy of human life. He is a lifeless life-in-death who is entirely lost in this relentless world. In a similar vein, the second epigraph of the fiction discloses the impossibility of Querry's recovery from mental injury.

> Though with time, he [a leper] becomes reconciled to his deformities, it is only at the conscious level. His subconscious mind, which continues to bear the mark of injury, brings about certain changes in his whole personality, making him suspicious of society.
>
> (G. Greene, 1977, front page)

Leper victims' problems explicate Querry's conundrum. As a mental leper, he can only keep in harmony with others at the conscious level. Deep down, Querry knows well that he is already a burnt-out case and will be one forever, especially when the continuous disturbances of Rycker, Father Thomas, Parkinson, and Marie Rycker remind him of the trauma he once suffered.

Querry's assumption that, as long as he leaves Europe, where he is mistaken for a pious Catholic architect, peace will befall him proves to be his wishful thinking. His attempts to have tranquillity fail. He feels discomfort not because men are doomed to suffer but because they cannot shun misery without any human or religious connections. Despite his refusal to believe in God, Querry's desire for a world of eternal beatitude, which his servant Deo Gratias names Pendélé, never vanishes (G. Greene, 1977, p. 369). Nonetheless, these attempts are futile as they are only vaguely conceived and are not well supported by his insistent efforts to be aligned with the outside world. Querry experiences and finally comprehends human suffering from his falsely misrepresented life in Europe, the spiritually empty life in the Congo, and his mistaken relationship with Marie Rycker. Ironically, he gropes for peace in this world, but only to find peace somewhere else, coming only with his death (G. Greene, 1977, pp. 461-462). Before Query's final epiphany—his awareness that God exists somewhere beyond this human world—we witness a man who suffers for long with very little affirmation of religious faith. He is a spiritual leper estranged from any feeling of love and religion—an actual burnt-out case worthy of the name.

FAITH AND HOPE REGAINED VIA EPIDEMICS

Querry suffers from a loss of love and faith at the earlier stages of his life in the Congo, but his new life in the leprosaria teaches him to lead a charitable life. Although he still questions the existence of God, he treats others in the way of God. He experiences the misery of human life, but

simultaneously, he comes closer to God when he learns to serve others in the Congo. Querry's willingness to build a hospital for the lepers indicates his revived feeling and empathy. This transformation mainly comes from the stimulation and encouragement of Dr. Colin, an altruistic atheist committed to serving leper patients. At first, Querry refuses to build the hospital due to his numbness and disappointment at humans' hypocrisy. He tells Dr. Colin: "I haven't enough feeling left for human beings to do anything for them out of pity…. What I have built, I have always built for myself, not for the glory of God or the pleasure of a purchaser" (364). Dr. Colin's reply, "Who cares? Who cares?" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 365), alerts Querry that the doctor is more interested in helping the lepers resist the disease and cure them than detecting Querry's past. Dr. Colin, who lost his religious faith long ago, changes Querry's notion that people approach him only because he is a legendary Catholic architect (G. Greene, 1977, p. 344). Instead, the doctor is so devoted to his service to the lepers that he disregards Querry's past, a significant factor that changes Querry's mind about building the hospital. Querry's inspiration from Dr. Colin and his subsequent transformation demonstrates that he is willing to regain his lost self. Most importantly, his interactions with Dr Colin and the priests in the leprosaria enable him to comprehend the nexus between individuals and society and the difference between egotism and altruism. Previously, Querry thought he only worked due to his self-interest rather than his love of others. Nevertheless, Dr. Colin's selfless devotion tells him that he has to step out of his self-absorption and learn to devote himself to the goodness of his fellow creatures.

In addition, the Catholic priests also contribute to Querry's spiritual metamorphosis. They inspire Querry because they are "more interested in electricity and building than in questions of faith" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 357). Except for Father Thomas, the Catholic priests are preoccupied with caring for the lepers, insomuch that they dismiss the question of Querry's identity or motivation in the leprosaria. They even set aside any thought of God, which paradoxically demonstrates their genuine love of God. According to the narrator, "The fathers were too busy to bother themselves with what the Church considered sin (moral theology was the subject they were least concerned with)" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 411). In other words, these priests, who are less concerned about morality than providing help for those in need, are a paragon of altruistic love and the culmination of God's love. Their examples alert Querry that he is similarly capable of serving others.

Querry's transformation also materializes in the looking for his leper servant, Deo Gratias, a fingerless, toeless, burnt-out case who mysteriously disappears into the forest one night. Out of his concern about this servant, Querry enters the jungle after him. After overcoming various difficulties, Querry finds Deo Gratias fallen "into a shallow overgrown marsh" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 368). Knowing that his servant is panicked with fear, Querry takes his hand "to reassure him" and remains with him to comfort him during the night (368). This episode showcases Querry's selfless love for others, though he denies that this action derives from his love. It reveals Querry's change from case to cure. Using self-sacrifice and love, Querry acquires "his restoration of the whole humanity after having been so long himself a burnt-out case" (Stratford, 1964, pp. 26-27). Querry's exploration into the jungle to help his servant signals his devotion and love. Instead of being a depleted mental leper, he is alive with sympathy. Significantly, Querry regains his feelings via his empathy for people who suffer. His transformation from passivity to animation derives from his leper servant's inspiration. As Padoa Schioppa et al. (2021, p. 6) note, Deo Gratias is Querry's alter ego because both characters "constitute the multiple conditions of burnout understood as loss, consumption and bewilderment". During his stay with Deo Gratias, the leper servant only utters the word "Pendélé," which suggests to him a "place—somewhere in the forest,

near water, where something of great importance to him [Deo Gratias] was happening" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 369). Pendélé appears to be an ideal world, a paradise-like sanctuary where "there had been singing and dancing and games and prayers" in the servant's memory (G. Greene, 1977, p. 369). Crucially, Querry's search for peace and happiness parallels his servant's pursuit of Pendélé. Just as Deo Gratias fancies a place free from pain and disease, Querry mythologies the Congo as a new heaven. However, as Querry acknowledges later, "[i]t looks as though I shall get no nearer to Pendélé than Deo Gratias did" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 454). Despite longing for peace, Querry fails repeatedly due to his lack of faith. Turned down by his servant after asking him about the details of Pendélé many times, Querry is even jealous of Deo Gratias's unwavering faith in something up in heaven. Consequently, Deo Gratias becomes Querry's tutor, instructing him to reflect on his suffering. His rejection of human and religious connections cannot eliminate his desire to hold on to something secure and comforting. Wittingly or unwittingly, he is capable of refreshing his faith in God, though he rejects any form of divinity in public. This experience reignites the spiritual leper's emotions in the Congo. Consequently, the disappearance of Deo Gratias reignites Querry's inanimate life, motivating "his sleeping mind and body, and as a result, becom[ing] a trigger to awaken his emotions, sensations, and thoughts again" (Yanagiya, 2019, p. 10).

Greene's different conception of lepers and leprosy is manifest in *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters,* which records his correspondence with Dr. Michel Lechat, a leprologist in the Congo, who provides professional advice on leprosy-related issues for Greene. Crucially, unlike the typical stigmatization of disease, as Susan Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, ~~R.~~ Greene (R. Greene 2007, p. 34) plans to visit the Congo to "see things as they are". He upholds a progressive interpretation of leprosy due to Dr. Lechat's influence (Rasokat, 2017, p. 243). The stigmatizing of disease is often coupled with intricate entanglement of race and power; as Christopher Gradmann contends, "[t]he fundamentals of the orderly microscopic world, which the bacteriologist imagined were mirrored in the microscopic world of Africa ... where nature had not yet been tamed by civilization and hygiene" (Gradmann, 2013, p. 79). Greene's enhanced knowledge of leprosy as a curable and less threatening disease helps illustrate Querry's conundrum. Notwithstanding his spiritual paralysis, Querry can interact and laugh with others. He is a de facto spiritual leper who used to go astray but is now on the right track through his direct interactions with disease and patients. In other words, due to the new knowledge from his mental disease, Queery turns out to be a sadder but wiser protagonist transformed from paralysis to animation, from illness to immunity, and from selfishness to charity.

Although Querry cannot find his Pendélé due to his feeble religious faith, his charitable deeds persist during his stay in the Congo. In addition to helping build the hospital for lepers and finding and protecting Deo Gratias, Querry sympathizes with the innocent-looking Marie Rycker, who accompanies her to a hospital. He never complains about Marie's lie that he has impregnated her but faces up to the misunderstanding caused. Aware of the absurdity of the lie, Querry chooses to deal with rather than shun the problem. His behaviours call into question the over-dominance of religion. In a discussion with the Superior, Querry argues that not all virtues derive from religion: "Gentleness isn't Christian, self-sacrifice isn't Christian, charity isn't…" (Gordon, 1997, p. 381). While the Superior associates all goodness with Christianity, Queery opines that kindness, devotion, mercy, and love come less from religion than from people's sympathetic understanding of their peers' suffering, which is humanity by nature. As Anne T. Salvatore contends, in the Congo, Querry transforms from a misanthropic and insensitive character to a cheerful helper (1988, p. 95). Salvatore's proposition highlights Querry's situation—an atheist endowed with the ability to pity

and love his neighbours. His charity for the lepers and Marie Rycker embodies Christian virtue in its highest form. Notably, via the service to his fellow creatures, Queery regains his humanity and is led to the right track step by step. Although this spiritual leper has lost faith in humans and religion, his life in the Congo motivates him to work for others out of charity and love. In comparison, Father Thomas, a clergyman, is constantly troubled by his feeble faith and strives hard to cram his religious void with metaphysical messages. Whereas Querry conducts his divine loving service tacitly, Father Thomas is obsessed with abstract, rigid dogmas of the Church. Ostensibly, Father Thomas is an admirer of Querry, but he abandons and distrusts him when hearing about the rumoured adultery of Queery and Marie. Intriguingly, Querry, a non-believer, is more religious than the priest. Such a deconstruction of believer and non-believer, as evidenced by Querry and Father Thomas, signals the spiritual leper's potential for regeneration. The possibility of Querry's rebirth is further indicated in a dream Querry once had. In the dream,

> He [Querry] thought he was with the Superior on the boat…. It went down the narrowing river into the denser forest, and it was now the Bishop's boat. A corpse lay in the Bishop's cabin, and the two of them were taking it to Pendélé for burial. It surprised him to think that he had been so misled as to believe that the boat had reached the furthest point of his journey into the interior when it reached the leprosaria. Now, he was in motion again, going deeper.
>
> (G. Greene, 1977, p. 47)

Thinking that the Congo is the remotest point he can reach, Querry is bewildered that he should be able to go deeper down into the heart of nature. Additionally, this senseless, atheistic spiritual leper is accompanied by the Superior, representative of the Church, to the ideally happy land, Pendélé. The corpse to be buried indicates that Querry's decadent past will be burnt off, and subsequently, a brand new life is to be reborn.

Querry's stasis as a spiritual leper and his revitalization as an average person are also embodied by laughter as a symbol in the fiction. Laughter, normally an indication of people's gaiety and light-heartedness, illustrates Querry's evolving mentality. On his arrival in the Congo, Querry detests laughter "like a bad smell" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 341). As Graham Smith argues, at this stage, Querry is "physically incapable of laughing or even smiling," so his "feeling is frozen" (1987, p. 160). As a discouraged architect escaping to the leproserie for peace, Querry, in the earlier period of the Congo days, is insensitive to jokes because he feels "taunted by the innocence of the laughter others make (G. Greene, 1977, p. 341). In a conversation, Dr. Colin feels that Querry will laugh, so he seeks a smile, but there is none on Querry's face (G. Greene, 1977, p. 349). However, near the end of Part Two, Querry startlingly plays a joke on Dr. Colin: "An unexpected sound made the doctor look up; Querry's face was twisted into the rictus of a laugh" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 370). In other words, in contrast to the once spiritual leper reluctant to reveal his emotions, Querry has learned to express himself through a mild smile. His spiritual rehabilitation culminates in his retrieving the ability to laugh at the way of the world. Once, while Rycker is sick, he gives Marie a ride to the hospital; they are forced to stay overnight in adjoining rooms to wait for the result of her pregnancy test. Enraged at his wife's stay with Querry and suspicious of his being cuckolded, Rycker comes to Querry for revenge. Querry laughs at his stupidity for being an "innocent adulterer," an act that further irritates Rycker: "He laughed at me. How dare he laughed at me" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 459-460). As Paul O'Prey notes, Querry "had been laughing at himself, at life, perhaps at the cold shower, but not at Rycker" (1988, p. 101).

The narrator's comment on Querry's last laugh is self-explanatory: "Absurd, this is absurd or else… but what alternative, philosophical or psychological, he had in mind, they never knew" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 460). Death comes soon alongside the third laugh when Rycker, mad at Querry's suspected mockery, shoots at him. The third distorted laugh suggests Querry's cry in the face of the absurdity of human life, his impotence to overcome the absurdity of the whole misunderstanding, and his disappointment at the miserable human world. Querry's final laughs herald his recovery from apathy and lifelessness. As Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan suggests, Querry, a spiritual leper, has "reached the end of his journey; he has learned to serve other people and regained humanity" (1988, p. 73). Additionally, according to Mary Ann Melfi, although Rycker outrageously kills Querry in the end, it "bring[s] Querry 'home' spiritually, a kind of bizarre reward for his insights" (Melfi, 2015, p. 193). This optimism about human suffering distinguishes Greene's novel from the pessimism about black Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Melfi, 2015, p. 194). In other words, paradoxically, Querry's revival culminates in his mistaken death.

Querry's realization of human misery and spontaneous love for other humans highlight a peculiar Christian spirit. On one occasion, Dr Colin tells Querry that "the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering is the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition. With suffering, we become part of the Christian myth" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 412). Crucially, Querry's suffering in the mundane world enables him to sympathize with his fellow creatures, sacrifice without self-interest, and dispense his mercy and charity. Such a combination of humility and charity exemplifies the core of Christian virtue. Suffering becomes a necessary evil for humans. As Brian T. Thomas maintains, Querry's former suffering is inevitable for his final salvation: "In order to come to life, Querry must first recover the power of feeling, which in this novel means the capacity for feeling pain: he must in a sense be capable of genuinely dying before he can be genuinely reborn" (1988, p. 89). People who never suffer do not know the truth of happiness. Only through his desperate experience of pain can Querry find this lost feeling and faith, which will hopefully generate his rebirth. Significantly, impacted by Dr Colin, Querry better understands the necessity of torment because "the search for suffering and the resemblance of suffering is the only means to remain in touch with the whole human condition" (Surawicz & Jacobson, 2009, p. 145). This hard-won knowledge inspires not only the spiritual leper but people who are intimidated and, therefore, suffer during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Querry's transformation from disease to revival is manifest. As a spiritual leper, he suffers from the bitterness of human misery, an experience that makes him see through the heart of humanity. Later, his acts of love and charity for others bring him redemption. As a charity doer, Querry is moved to regain his true feelings, serve his fellows, and finally reaffirm his faith in the divine. The Superior's comment near the end illustrates Querry's potential change: "You remember what Pascal said, that a man who starts looking for God has already found him. The same may be true of love—when we look for it, perhaps we have found it" (G. Greene, 1977, p. 462). In other words, this once spiritually mutilated leper has been revitalized in the Congo. As George M. A. Gaston notes, "the shots which kill him [Querry] actually trigger an epiphany which comes at the end of a long journey into the darkness of a self-discovery. That he dies able to laugh at himself is, as we are led to recognize, the sign that he has finally found himself" (Gaston, 1984, p. 75). In a nutshell, Querry starts from despair, moving through a sympathetic sharing with other lepers and people around them to his restoration to the whole of humanity after his having been a burnt-out case for long. This view echoes Henriette Roos's contention that Querry's rebirth originates from his interactions with the outer world, including the impaired black servant Deo

Gratias, the atheist Dr. Colin, and the benevolent Mission Superior" (2009, p. 59). Interpersonal interactions and community services help alleviate suffering and facilitate people's recovery from illness and associated discomfort.

It is worth noting that while leprosy has been stigmatized in Western history for centuries, Greene depicts a very different scenario where lepers are not horrible but potentially productive. Leprosy, which first appeared in Western Europe in the sixth century, was a disease closely associated with concepts such as "sin, sexuality, and divine punishment" (Hatty & Hatty, 1999, p. 50). Lepers are regarded as people with unclean, disordered, and deformed bodies that need to be banished, segregated, and kept under surveillance (Hatty & Hatty, 1999, pp. 54-55). Greene's story implies that leprosy is not necessarily lethal; instead, it can be therapeutic and consolatory. Unlike lepers confined and segregated by force, Querry escapes to the Congo voluntarily. In the beginning, his self-enforced banishment and quarantine in the Congo are coupled with fatigue, antipathy, and lethargy. However, his unmediated contact with lepers, medical personnel, and clergy members significantly impacts this spiritual leper. Querry is alerted that he can be committed to charity and care. His endeavour to help and protect Deo Gratias underlines the leper's ability to feel and act, and his fascination with Pendélé suggests that lepers may be physically mutilated, but they are mentally strong and healthy. In addition, his reawakened attempts to laugh at his being misunderstood signal an advanced understanding of the ludicrousness of humanity. Consequently, as Anna Rasokat contends, *A Burnt-out Case* demarcates Greene's scientific reevaluation of the traditionally demonized leprosy, highlighting his "taking sides with a progressive approach to the management of leprosy that was emerging as the new paradigm of public health planning" around the mid-20th century (2017, p. 243).

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact alert humans to the fragility of life and interpersonal bonds. The pandemic and its aftermaths bring us not only disease and death but fear and suspicion. Enforced lockdown, quarantine, and isolation worldwide hamper and slow down human interaction. When aligned with political considerations, disease and relevant resources can be utilized by the authorities to cater to their personal interests. However, epidemics also prompt us to rediscover valuable qualities inherent in our everyday lives despite the many problems. The retrieval of love, emotion, and sacrifice in *A Burnt-Out Case* is an illustration.

Despite his previous status as a spiritual leper, Querry's quest for faith via devotion and charity demonstrates that he is not entirely a burnt-out case. Abandoning all worldly reputation, he remains true to himself, devotes himself to the service of the needy and the suffering, and rediscovers his interest in work, humans, and religion. Notably, it is through leprosy and lepers that Querry becomes rejuvenated. This finding echoes many episodes surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, alerting people to human fragility and accentuating potential scenarios in human society during and after medical catastrophes. Querry dies from people's misunderstanding rather than disease. His antipathy against humans and secular values in the earlier chapters turns out to be an undivided commitment to devotion and charity. This transformation would be impossible without Querry's hard-won awakening inspired by leprosy-related episodes in the Congo. Consequently, just like a double-edged sword that can kill and save people simultaneously, leprosy brings Querry revival as well as misery, serving as a potent testimony to Derrida's interpretation of Plato's *pharmakon* as both poison and remedy. In a

nutshell, while most Greene scholars attend to the fiction's spiritual and religious significance, this paper throws into relief the implication that a silver lining exists even in the most unfortunate times during epidemics. This new finding makes a tangible contribution to the study of literature and medical humanities in contemporary society.

While the post-COVID-19 legacies still overshadow the world, Querry's story provides valuable lessons. It demonstrates that epidemics are dangerous but curable, whereas humans' folly and misunderstanding can be irrevocably disastrous. This finding reminds us to remain undaunted and upbeat in our confrontations with illness and suffering.

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