

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE POWER AND THE GLORY: A SOURCE OF GRAHAM GREENE'S NOVELISTIC IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

Graham Greene is one of the most marvellous and meditative novelists of the twentieth century. He is not only a playwright, poet, critic, essayist, but a short story writer also. Although he wrote 2 collections of short stories, 2 travel books, 7 plays, 2 biographies, 2 autobiographies and 25 novels, his name and fame is highlighted under the glory of his religio-political novel — *The Power and the Glory*. This paper, basically, aims at Greene's novelistic identity and his religio-political views which are intertwined in his most celebrated and renowned novel — *The Power and the Glory*. The protagonist of the novel is a whisky-priest that is the representative of the spiritual power while the antagonist is a lieutenant that is the symbol of political power. There is a continuous clash between these two characters throughout the novel. Finally, it is accurate to argue that the novel — *The Power and the Glory* is based on a religio-political movement that leads Greene to an indelible novelistic identity.

Keywords: God, whisky-priest, lieutenant, totalitarian, damnation, salvation, novelistic and identity.

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Graham Greene was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1904 in a well-to-do English family whose religious affiliation was nominal at best. His father, Charles Henry Greene, was the Headmaster of an English public school at Berkhamsted. Greene was given a conventional middle-class and Anglican upbringing in the confines of his father's school, which he attended as a pupil.

In his early life, Greene suffered from a sense of boredom and disenchantment. He found the world uninteresting and life charmless. Hence, he was sent to a London psychoanalyst, Kenneth Richmond, and the six months Greene spent under Richmond had a profound effect. Richmond and his wife, Zoe, were Jungian psychologists and

spiritualists, involved in the London literary community. They presented Greene with his first experience of a family environment where every issue was open for discussion. Under the Richmonds' influence he explored the spiritual side of human nature and acquired his first literary contacts.

In 1925 he fell in love with nineteen-year-old Vivien Dayrell-Browning, who was handsome, independent and a devout Catholic convert. Greene deluged her with almost 2,000 letters in thirty months. Initially she treated him with reserve, but not surprisingly, her feelings for him gradually warmed, and then she wanted to purge him on a point of Catholic doctrine.

In 1926 he got converted to Roman Catholicism, later explaining that "I had to find a religion... to measure my evil against". Too much importance has been given to his conversion into Catholicism. Nothing, in fact, is known of any type of spiritual conflict that may have provoked Greene to turn to the Catholic Church. All he says is about his intensely dissatisfied mental state in the year 1922 when, at the age of eighteen, he found himself without anchorage.

Perhaps, the real motive lay in his love affair with Vivien Dayrell-Browning with whom he was married at Saint Mary's Church in Holly Place on 15 October 1927. Greene confesses that it was his growing intimacy with Vivien, which induced him to seek Conversion. Besides, from his own remarks it may be inferred that his reception into the Church was the outcome of his intellectual and not emotional involvement, with Catholicism.

After doing graduation from Balliol College, Oxford, Greene was in need of work. Uncertain whether to choose a domestic or a foreign job, he sought employment with the British American Tobacco Company, hoping to leave for China, but the tedium of the work, the crassness of one particular co-worker, and his fear of losing Vivien made his resignation inevitable. He turned to journalism, but, lacking experience, was unable to find a job with any London daily. Instead, he accepted a position as a trainee, sub-editing on the *Nottingham Journal* without salary.

In March 1926, with less than five months' experience on the *Nottingham Journal*, Greene was offered a post as sub-editor with *The Times*. The possibility of unending years of sub-editing at *The Times* gave impetus to his literary efforts. Consequently, he later shaped his first novel — *The Man Within*, and became an independent writer.

Its successors — *The Name of Action*, *Rumour at Nightfall* and *Stamboul Train* etc. — did not have such power and creative energy as they could become a source of his novelistic identity. Undoubtedly, it is *The Power and the Glory* that takes Greene into the territory of the novelistic height.

Graham Greene was authorized to visit Mexico in 1938. The aim and objective of Greene's journey was to study religious persecution in the

remote southern states of Tabasco and Chiapas in Mexico where churches had been closed down, even destroyed, and religious services prohibited. Greene was appalled by the physical and moral climate—heat, desolation, squalor, cruelty and corruption—in Mexico. But in the midst of all the squalor and violence, Greene found faith in the hearts of the people. In the Cathedral at San Luis Potosi, Greene saw peasants attending the Mass. It convinced him of their need for faith. As a result, he wrote *The Lawless Roads* in 1939 and, later, in 1940, his most famous novel *The Power and the Glory* that is known as a blossomed source of his novelistic identity.

*The Power and the Glory* sketches the jeopardies of a Roman Catholic priest who carries on his appointed task of spreading the message of Christ. The setting of the novel is a Mexican State where, after a revolution, a totalitarian government has established itself. The new government has introduced prohibition and abolished religion. The priests have been outlawed, with the result that most of them have fled to other countries and some have renounced their vocation in order to fall in line with the secular principles of the new government. For instance, Padre Jose has given up his profession, got married in violation of his vow of celibacy and settled down as a layman. But the whisky-priest, the protagonist of the novel, remains unnamed throughout the novel, and he is the sole representative of the existing church.

Carrying out his religious duties secretly and successfully, the whisky-priest keeps on wandering here and there and getting shelter in a number of villages. Indeed, it seems that he has a spiritual power that has always been fighting with the political forces so that the principles of catholicity and Christianity may flourish in the regions of the totalitarian government.

Loitering here and there, the priest reaches a deserted village where he comes across a native woman whose child has been seriously wounded by a bullet fired by either the American gangster who is at large like the priest or by the soldiers searching for that American gangster. The woman who is a Christian by faith, desperately wants to take the child to some church so that the child could be sanctified. The child dies, but the

mother still insists on taking it to the church. As there is no church nearby, the woman straps the child to her back and both of them start a trek in search of one. After sometime, they search a Christian graveyard and the woman kneels by the side of a grave with a cross on it. She puts the child there and the priest goes to the village where his six-year-old daughter Brigitta lives with his mother Maria. He is received kindly by the villagers. Maria offers him some brandy which she had secretly been keeping in case he might one day need it. In the village the priest hears confessions and says Mass, but he has hardly completed the necessary rituals when the lieutenant arrives there with his police squad searching for the priest. The lieutenant interrogates all the men one by one, including the priest, but fails to identify the priest because Maria comes to his rescue by declaring that he is her husband. (Since a Roman Catholic priest is not expected or allowed to marry, the lieutenant does not suspect the man Maria claims to her husband.) The lieutenant then takes a hostage from the village, just as he has been taking hostages from other villages, and leaves. After some time, the priest also departs from the village.

The everlasting power of Catholicism and Christianity is also implicit in the manner in which the simple villagers continue to welcome the priest amidst them, despite the state's orders abolishing churches and outlawing religious practices. In the lack of churches, they are perfectly willing to say their prayers and their confessions in their own humble cottages, when the priest visits them secretly and holds religious meetings under the cover of darkness. The villagers sacrifice themselves for the whisky-priest, not because of the priest's personal charm, but because of their abiding faith in religion, and their instinctive desire to submit to God's will that is always ready to filter the evils of the human race.

Indeed, the whisky-priest gets heavenly pleasure in the every possible state of suffering as it is explicit in a sermon to the villagers when he exalts pain and suffering, the manifestation of evil, as parts of God's plan or purpose:

"That is why I tell you that heaven is here: This is a part of heaven just as pain is a part of pleasure.... Pray that you will suffer more and more

and more. Never get tired of suffering. The police watching you, the soldiers gathering taxes, the beating you always get from the jefe because you are too poor to pay, small pox and fever, hunger... that is all part of heaven—the preparation."<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary, the lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory* has faith in the authoritarian system of government which tolerates only one political party and wants to remove everything that brings poverty, superstition and corruption in the state as he advises the poor people of the village: "You're fools if you still believe what the priests tell you. All they want is your money." (PAG, 70-71.) He, further, suggests them that they must not have faith in the priests who do not help them and long to get enough food and talk about heaven. He thinks that the world would be a better place to live in, if all the priests are driven beyond the boundaries of the state.

Ultimately, the priest arrives in a village which is situated in another state. It is inhabited by the people who are Christians by faith. The priest has crossed the frontier without being aware of it. He is now safe because he is in a different state, where he has not been declared an outlaw. In this village the priest is a guest of a German-American, Mr. Lehr, and his sister, Miss Lehr. He enjoys their hospitality and baptises a number of children, hears confessions and conducts Mass in compliance with the villagers' wishes. Then he gets ready to proceed to a town called Las Casas.

When he is about to start, the mestizo appears and informs the priest that he is wanted by the American gangster who has seriously been wounded by the police in an encounter. He lies dying and wants to make a confession. Fully realising that it is a trap laid for him by the mestizo who would eventually hand him over to the police, the priest turns back. Instead of heading for Las Casas, he accompanies the mestizo into the territory from where he has escaped earlier. If someone is dying and wants a priest to make a confession, he reasons, the priest must answer the call of duty and responsibility.

On reaching there, he finds that the American gangster has certainly been seriously wounded, and now lies dying in a hut. But he doesn't wish to make any confession. He repeatedly

asks the priest to "beat it". The priest doesn't realise the true import of the gangster's warning till it is too late, but he has the satisfaction that he has carried out his responsibility.

Soon after the American gangster's breathing his last, the police lieutenant steps into the hut. The priest is arrested and taken to the city. The lieutenant is obviously impressed by the priest's sincerity, and goodness of heart in holding his faith. He asks the priest if he can do anything for him before he is tried and sentenced to death by the court. The priest says that he would like to make a confession before he dies. Since there is no priest available to hear his confession, he is taken to the ex-priest—Padre Jose who refuses to hear the priest's confession. So this desire of the priest remains vacant.

The priest is tried and sentenced to death, and the lieutenant thinks that the last priest has been eliminated, but another priest arrives in the capital city from somewhere. Thus religion triumphs over atheism and political violence. The priest who was shot is regarded by the author as a hero, a martyr, and even a saint.

The novel prepares us from the very beginning for the spiritual transformation of a sinner into a martyr and a saint. The priest's career presents a contrast to Pinkie's in *Brighton Rock*. While Pinkie descends and is brutalised, the priest ascends and is humanised. His love and *credo unum Deus* set him poles apart from Pinkie with his hate and *credo unum Satanum*. Moving about in a decay-saturated world, Pinkie is appalled and feels murderous, but the priest finds in decay and corruption the image of God and is moved to tenderness.<sup>2</sup>

Besides, Greene's spiritual imagination in the novel strengthens the human values. Marie-Beatrice Mesnet has observed that 'one of the greatest mysteries of the spiritual world is the communion of all men in evil and in good, the communion of saints and sinners—for we are never alone, as the whisky-priest knew. We share responsibility for our sins, as we also share love; our destiny is linked with that of other men....'<sup>3</sup> A progressive realisation of the sense of fellowship in wretchedness marks the sinful career of the priest. In the dark, crowded, stinking prison cell,

surrounded by thieves, criminals and a couple making love with cries of intolerable pleasure, the priest is moved by 'an enormous and irrational affection' for the inhabitants of the prison.

There are two types of humanism in the novel—the first one generated by the priest is confined to the religious scenario and the second one generated by the lieutenant is based on the totalitarian government.

Between the two types of humanism the religio-political force of the novel is generated. Their hostility is based not merely on personalities but on ideas. Their battle is a battle for the minds of men. The third and last confrontation between the priest and the lieutenant occurs when the former is captured. Their recognition is complete and the antithesis of the views which runs through the novel is exposed in the long disputation between the two men:

'Well, we have an idea too', the lieutenant was saying. 'No more money for saying prayers, no more money for building places to say prayers in. We'll give people food instead, teach them to read, give them books. We'll see they don't suffer.'

'But if they want to suffer...'

'A man may want to rape a woman. Are we to allow it because he wants to? Suffering is wrong.' (PAG, 192.)

In fact, the priest and the lieutenant will never agree. Their disagreement about the essence of living defines one of the major conflicts of the twentieth century. Greene has recorded that the secular power is bound to fail against those who carry on the work of God, howsoever blighted by corruption and failure their lives may be.

Greene's commitment to the priest's religious viewpoint is evidenced by the priest's insistence that the lieutenant's world is built on the assumption that there will always be good men to perpetuate his idealism. If such men do not turn up, there is no protection against corruption, distrust, self-interest and persecution which are the corollaries of a godless materialism. The priest's world, however, is built on faith which goes on amid the corruption and temptations of the world. Throughout the long debate, as the two characters argue with all the force of their convictions, the priest seems to grow in stature—as one favoured

by God. Greene does his best to hold the balance.<sup>4</sup>

The extensive detail of the novel reveals the interaction of opposites: the religious versus the political, the saint versus the sinner or dictator. Indeed, *The Power and the Glory* structures the confrontation between social justice and faith in antagonistic terms as Maria Couto has pointed out: "Religion and politics, the Church and the state, are in opposite camps. The priest is a member of the establishment to be wiped out so that social justice can prevail; the lieutenant, member of another establishment, leads the crusade."<sup>5</sup> It must be said that Catholicism for Greene is central to the political landscape of the text not because it offers a superior ideological platform from which to live or govern society but rather because it offers a vision that criticizes any ideology that reduces humanity to a materialist construct. Greene twists the opposition from its usual course by making a whisky-priest, with an illegitimate child, God's representative on earth; and even more than merely representative, the sole representative in the entire state, God's last man to struggle against his earthly enemies. The priest is indeed a frail Jesus among the sinners, a weak and feeble Jesus who must do God's bidding when he is unsure of what he bids for, an anguished Jesus who is as much attracted by the world he opposes as he is attracted by God's volition.

Holding Mass, listening to confessions, consoling his parishioners, giving pious sermons full of homilies and observing fast days and feast days and days of abstinence, the priest leads a spiritual life that is trying to overpower the totalitarian government. It was the advent of the revolutionary government which had spelt his apparent spiritual doom. With the outlawing of religion, the driving away of priests and compelling the remaining ones to renounce their faith and violate their sacramental oaths by settling down in a married life, as had been the case with Padre Jose, the priest had been deprived of the protective screen of brother priests in a position to praise or condemn his activities. But he continued to carry on the task of spreading God's message and offering religious consolation to those who sought it, in spite of the dictates of the state. With the state's anti-religious policy, the priest's spiritual decline

starts. In material terms, the conflict between the state and religion culminates in the priest's execution by the police firing squad, and it is this conflict which creates the priest's predicament.

It is with a purpose that Greene has the whisky-priest captured when he tries to save a man who is damned. His self-sacrifice is a mark of his devotion and the culmination of a life of suffering love. He pursues, however, unwittingly, the highest ideals that may be cherished by saints. The course of his life is a perfect illustration of religious pursuit, which entitles him for salvation by the infinite mercy of God.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, religion becomes victorious in the end. The whisky-priest is put to death as a judicial punishment for carrying out his religious duties, but his solemn request — "Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for...." is responded and his place is taken by another priest.

Summing up the creative achievement of a vigorous talent like Graham Greene's can be as trying as the task of plumbing the depths of evil in a fallen world or seeing through the "appalling strangeness" of God's mercy. Here is a writer who probes hate and lust to discover the secret of love, and explores sin to enhance the possibilities of salvation. As a novelist, Greene often plunges into violence in quest of peace and wades through chaos in search of order. Some of the most violent and political settings in his novels are used as a pretext for dramatizing the collision of the private and the public worlds. The following statement made by Norman Sherry seems to intensify the fact that *The Power and the Glory* is the only novel on which Greene's novelistic identity is based:

"I think his masterpiece is *The Power and the Glory*.... The first three paragraphs of the novel when he gives you camera shots of the place, why it is astounding. You are in the place."<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Graham Greene himself accentuates the fact: "I think *The Power and the Glory* is the only novel I have written to a thesis."<sup>8</sup> It is not exaggeration if we say that the origin of Greene's novelistic stream has its main source in the novel—*The Power and the Glory*.

Greene is undoubtedly one of the greatest exponents of the twentieth century English novel, whose especial contribution has been his immense

capacity for effective story-telling and his unique vision of the world, which has turned his obsessions into works of art. The line of development in his novelistic career has not, of course, been quite straight: like all human achievement, it has gathered strength and attained a greatness that is undeniable; it has also veered away and has on occasion even fallen short of expectation.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, it is right to conclude that the coral theme of the novel—*The Power and the Glory* is nothing but a prosperous source of Graham Greene's novelistic identity that remained lighted as well as sighted even at the later career of his life.

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