

## THE ETHICAL MAN AND RELIGION IN GREENE'S THE POWER AND THE GLORY: A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore Graham Greene's approach to human nature and religion in his novel *The Power and the Glory*. The analysis reveals the extent of Greene's religious underpinnings in his writing and how he crafts his characters. Alongside the exploration of his religious beliefs, it also delves into Greene's psychological background, which plays a significant role in shaping his work. The study portrays how Greene's troubled childhood and wavering faith led him to develop a complex and conflicted worldview, a perspective that is vividly reflected in his central character, "the whisky priest." The story of the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* can be interpreted as a man undergoing suffering akin to Christ's journey to the Cross, facing challenges both from society and nature. As the narrative progresses, the priest experiences moral growth, eventually proving to be humble and compassionate, subtly challenging the rigid anti-Catholic stance of the lieutenant.

**Keywords:** *Graham Greene, The Power and the Glory, Whisky Priest, Religious Conflict, Moral Ambiguity, Psychological Struggle*

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### INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940) is both a psychological and religious novel. To understand it fully, one must consider the author's mental state and his religious sensibilities. Born in 1904, Graham Greene was the son of C.H. Greene, headmaster of an English public school, Berkhamsted. During his childhood, Greene exhibited signs of deep fatigue with the world, at times approaching the brink of depression. This pessimistic outlook on life largely stems from his unhappy childhood and the difficult experiences he endured at his father's school.

In an effort to escape the distressing experiences of his youth and adolescence, Greene ran away from school, prompting his parents to send him to a psychoanalyst. In his autobiographical work *A Sort of Life* (1971), Greene describes the panic his parents felt after his flight from school, noting: "My father found the situation beyond him... My brother suggested analysis as a possible solution, and my father—something unusual for 1920—agreed."

Greene's mental state was marked by despondency and exhaustion. To counter these feelings, he adopted increasingly self-destructive behaviors, including alcohol and opium use, illicit relationships, and repeated suicide attempts. Greene's troubled youth is responsible for the grim and often bleak depiction of his fictional worlds, as well as his paradoxical and conflicted outlook on life. Having been a victim of fatigue, melancholy, and revulsion from an early age, Greene questioned whether life was worth living, which led him to attempt suicide multiple times. Years later, Greene's cynical perspective underwent a transformation. While sick and disoriented in Liberia, he discovered within himself "a thing [he] thought [he] had never had: a love for life."

Long before religion could fully explain it to him, Greene's awareness of the existence of evil, manifested through vice, crime, and nightmares, placed him in the company of several renowned English and European writers, such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, François Mauriac, T.S. Eliot, Walter de la Mare, Ford Madox Ford, and F.W. Rolfe (Corvo). Perusing *The Viper of Milan* by Marjorie Bowen, he says that "[he] had been provided for the last time with a subject". Wondering why, he offers his response, saying that he has discovered that "goodness has just once tracked down an ideal manifestation in human body and never will again, however evil can generally track down a home there. Human instinct isn't high contrast yet dark and dim".

Greene's obsession with the inevitability of evil justifies his frequent use of paradox throughout his body of work. As long as we are human, our actions are either evil or good; by engaging in good or evil, we affirm our humanity. Paradoxically, it is better to do wrong than to remain inactive: at least, by acting...

One could argue that the greatness of humanity lies in its capacity for salvation, just as it also lies in its capacity for damnation. The harshest judgment on most criminals—from politicians to outlaws—is that they lack the depth to be truly damned.

Greene's strict experience is likewise secretive. Disappointed with traditional Anglicanism, he changed over to Roman Catholicism. His change occurred in 1926, yet it was not until 1938, in his novel, *Brighton Rock*, that "the inquiries raised by his religion turned into the unmistakable substance of his books.

Greene, attempts to pass on to his pursuers that his change to Catholicism isn't enthusiastic but instead a scholarly one, one that has nothing to do with his contemporary world and its issues. He, in Richard Johnstone's words, "is denying any close to home requirement for conviction; he is asserting that the dilemma of the youngster looking for changelessness in a perilously fleeting society was not his quandary – rather Catholicism introduced itself to him as having in the compelling rationale of science" However, his case to have mentally changed over into Catholicism

invalidates his previous portrayal of himself in 1963 as 'a Catholic with a scholarly if not an enthusiastic faith in catholic authoritative opinion' and his case, in a meeting in 1957, that for 10 years after his transformation, he " basically hadn't had adequate experience of how Catholics think or carry on, and hence... couldn't expound on them." In spite of the fact that Greene's transformation may be seen scholarly, a more itemized passionate portrayal of the cycle of his change is given in his life account: " Now it happened to me... that if I somehow managed to wed a catholic I should in any event to get familiar with the nature and cut off points of the convictions she held". In this light, his gathering into the Roman catholic church, just to wed the young lady with whom he is frantically captivated demonstrates the way that his transformation is additionally an enthusiastic one. Changed over mentally or inwardly, Greene, without a doubt, stays to be "the most confusing of the multitude of abstract believers whose works energized the catholic scholarly recovery in the 20th century.

### **TREATMENT OF ETHICAL MAN AND RELIGION IN *THE POWER AND THE GLORY***

Greene sought to restore two essential elements that had been lost in the English novel: the sense of religious significance and the importance of human actions. To deepen the dimensions of his novels, Greene places his characters within a world where they are viewed from a divine perspective.

Though his characters may seem flawed and insignificant in the sensory world, a world marred by bleak violence, they hold immense significance in another realm—one that is as distant from men as God is, yet fueled by human imagination. Greene's belief in the existence of another world and the importance of human action led him to portray his characters in a unique way: "It is the love of God that endures, for in His eyes they always perceive themselves as unremarkable, unwanted, ineffective, and thus worthy of attention."

This contradictory viewpoint is especially true of the "whisky priest," the tormented central figure in *The Power and the Glory*, who reflects the turmoil of Greene's own soul. Though guilty, flawed, and teetering on the edge of failure, he emerges as a true hero due to his extraordinary love for God, a love that is all the more profound because of his awareness of his own weakness and failures. In his efforts to portray the darker aspects of human existence, Greene employs modern psychological concepts to shed light on his characters' inner lives, which are marked by intense feelings of suffering, guilt, awareness, and anguish.

To blend the philosophical intent of his novel with psychological depth, Greene employs the stream-of-consciousness technique, a method that brings to light the priest's hidden awareness, revealed through past recollections or the dreams he experiences throughout his long journey in the ministry.

Set in a repressive Mexican state where Catholicism is outlawed, the novel portrays the perilous journey of a hunted man—the last Catholic priest—who defies the state by carrying on with his sacred duties. The "whisky priest" is not only physically pursued but also spiritually sought after. The real focus of the novel is not merely the priest's pursuit by the police lieutenant, but rather the profound pursuit by God, which ultimately prevails. Although intangible, this spiritual chase is inferred from the priest's inner reflections and his responses to the events he experiences.

The reason for this extraordinary pursuit is central to the novel's exploration. The priest is pursued by God because of his imperfections. He is far from an ideal minister. He grapples with many flaws, flaws he becomes painfully aware of. His first major weakness is his dependence on alcohol, earning him the nickname "whisky priest". His second major flaw is his indulgence in a sexual affair with Maria, his servant, which occurred seven years earlier, resulting in the birth of his illegitimate child, Brigida. The third of his flaws is his vulnerability, coupled with a significant sense of pride that arises after the execution of all the other priests. Yet, through these weaknesses, he finds his strength. Despite his failings, the subtle suggestions about his past life indicate that he might be more devout than he would have been had he not faced persecution, or even if he had adhered strictly to his vows. Without experiencing such trials, the priest may never have learned how to endure suffering or develop a profound capacity for love.

Individual debasement and the enduring it cause, Greene accepts, are essential for the achievement of affection. For the priest to attain the noble virtue of love for God, he must first confront the harsh and disappointing truths about his own life. According to Greene, innocence is undesirable; being blameless means lacking awareness of both good and evil, rendering one incapable of love as well as sin. This concept introduces Greene's belief in the duality of sin: just as sin can distance a person from God, it can also create a path toward greater love for God, through guilt, confession, and repentance.

Greene's awareness of sin as a cause rather than a result of his faith is clearly illustrated when he states: "Religion may later explain it to me differently, but the pattern was already there—perfect evil walking the earth where perfect good can never walk again." Here, Greene presents a paradoxical idea: in reaching out toward evil, a person may actually find God; conversely, in seeking God, one might unexpectedly encounter the devil.

Greene suggests that man's deepest insight into spiritual reality only occurs when he becomes fully conscious of the vast distance separating him from God. This concept is clearly evident in Greene's portrayal of the "whisky priest," or what William James refers to as the "sick soul," a person whose religion and life are synonymous with suffering. Sin

is an integral part of the "virtuous sinner"—the priest. As a result, pain and guilt are his constant companions, present in every time and place. To reveal these emotions, Greene uses the stream-of-consciousness technique, or internal monologue. Through these internal dialogues, readers gain insight into various scenes that expose both the workings of the priest's mind and Greene's complex views. From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes evident how the priest grapples with an overwhelming sense of pride—one of the most dangerous sins, a transgression that even the angels could not avoid. This pride stems from being the last surviving priest in a land where all others have been purged. Instead of viewing his survival as an act of divine grace, he feels a subtle superiority over the other fallen priests, who he sees as weaker or less resilient. His pride distorts his perception, leading him to believe that his endurance elevates him above others, despite the fact that his own moral failures weigh heavily on his soul. This internal battle between self-righteous pride and his awareness of personal sin creates an ongoing tension that mirrors the spiritual torment he faces throughout the story.

Greene skillfully highlights the priest's acute awareness of his own sinful nature. As he travels toward Maria's village, his thoughts drift back to his past, to moments of shame and regret. He recalls his clownish appearance, a face once good enough for casual banter with women, a face that now seems to mock him with each reflection. He has tried, unsuccessfully, to transform this image of himself, only to be reminded constantly of the compromises he has made—each one chipping away at his character. Every decision, every indulgence, only solidifies his inner knowledge of his moral weakness. The weight of these memories presses down upon him, particularly the unforgivable sin of despair that overtook him five years earlier. The priest's inability to confront or redeem these moments of personal failure keeps him trapped in an unending cycle of guilt and self-condemnation, where salvation seems as elusive as the peace he so desperately seeks. Upon arriving at Maria's village, the priest is deeply troubled by a dilemma: a strong urge to stay and fulfill his priestly duties in a place where, to all appearances, God has been forgotten. Despite the overwhelming hostility of the people, who despise him for his moral failings and see him as a poor example of a spiritual leader, he feels tethered to this desolate community. Torn between the pull of his sacred obligations and the people's disdain, the priest wrestles with the notion of whether his presence still has any divine purpose, or if his continued ministry is nothing more than a hollow charade.

Greene's use of the "garbage tip" or "trash dump" serves as a powerful symbol of corruption and moral decay. It is by this refuse heap that the priest sees his daughter for the last time as he leaves Maria's village, a bleak representation of her hopeless future. The imagery of the trash dump mirrors the spiritual and physical desolation that pervades the lives of the characters, particularly the priest and his daughter, caught in a world that offers little hope for redemption or change. The pile of waste is not only a symbol of the world's filth but also a reflection of the priest's inner sense of failure, weighed down by his inability to provide his daughter with a better life. This same concern for his daughter's bleak future haunts the "whisky priest" when he is imprisoned for possessing a bottle of cognac. His thoughts return repeatedly to Brigida, and he is overwhelmed by guilt over the role his own failings have played in shaping her destiny. Inside the jail cell, his contemplations return to Brigida and again Greene's picture of the undesirable, malevolent and contaminated world is imagined.

Greene also uses dreams to shed light on the priest's inner consciousness. The priest's ongoing but subconscious anxiety about his daughter manifests in his dreams, which reveal the depth of his unease and regret. These dreams serve as a conduit for his troubled soul, reflecting the guilt that pervades every aspect of his being. These visions are Greene's way of illustrating the workings of the priest's conscience. Filled with guilt, the priest's dreams take him back to a time when he led a more prosperous and carefree life, indulging in excessive food and drink. In these reflections, his past excesses serve as a stark contrast to the hardship and remorse that now define his existence, highlighting the profound transformation of his character.

Greene suggests that spiritual growth can only be achieved through a life filled with suffering—pain, regret, despair, exhaustion, and loneliness. This suffering, he implies, is the only path by which one can attain true spiritual enlightenment. In his view, it is through enduring these trials that man is able to transcend his flaws and achieve a sense of divine grace. This is Greene's answer to the novel's central question: what other way is there for man to attain spiritual greatness? Though deeply flawed, Greene believes that the whisky priest succeeds in achieving a measure of God's power and glory through his unwavering faith and the tremendous sacrifices he has made. Despite his shortcomings, the priest's journey—fraught with danger and suffering—ultimately becomes one of spiritual triumph, as his acts of service are marked by a quiet resilience and a profound dedication to God's will. In Greene's view, the priest achieves not only suffering but also a form of sainthood. The potential for sanctity is unmistakably demonstrated in the closing lines of the novel, where the priest reflects, *"It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage."* This revelation highlights the simplicity of sainthood—something within his reach all along, requiring only the smallest of sacrifices. The novel also presents the police lieutenant, a complex figure who serves as a counterpart to the whisky priest. Initially, the lieutenant appears to be the complete opposite of the priest: a staunch believer in the authoritarian state, he possesses a purely materialistic outlook on life. He is grounded in the secular world, seeing human existence as little more than the result of biological evolution, devoid of higher meaning, and governed by a decaying, indifferent universe. His worldview contrasts sharply with the spiritual struggles of the priest, setting the stage for their moral and philosophical confrontation. The lieutenant possesses a strength of character rooted in his ignorance of

vulnerability. Yet, despite their surface differences, he mirrors certain aspects of the priest's character, and in many ways, they are more alike than dissimilar. Both are deeply committed to their respective missions—both are driven by a sense of purpose, and both are destined to see their roles through to the bitter end, no matter the cost.

### **CONCLUSION**

Reading *The Power and the Glory* leads one to realize that Greene's characters are, in many ways, extensions of his own personal struggles. The tormented mental state of the priest reflects Greene's own emotional instability and intellectual dilemmas, shaped by his life experiences and limitations. Greene's complex personality, much like the murky waters of a trench, remains elusive and contradictory. This ambivalence is especially evident in the character of the "whisky priest," as well as in the police lieutenant. As a priest, the whisky priest should embody purity of heart, yet his internal conflict—whether to pursue personal desires or remain devoted to his religious duties—creates a deep moral crisis. This inner turmoil erodes his conscience, causing constant self-doubt and suffering. Similarly, the lieutenant, despite his rigid authority, experiences his own moments of guilt, particularly after the priest's execution, showing that both characters are trapped in cycles of remorse and inner conflict.

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