

Graham Greene's od Depiction of Whisky Priest in *The Power and the Glory*

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Abstract

This paper is a fine attempt to portray Graham Greene's literary skill in depicting the whisky priest both as religious and irreligious in his *The Power and the Glory*. This paper nearly presents how Greene distinguished Novels and entertainments. Thus, this paper examines the human qualities, devotion to duty, cathartic sufferings, belief in God's glory and infinite mercy through the character of priest.

Keywords: religious, morality, irreligious, church, temptations, sins, conflicts.

Graham Greene is an attractive writer at various levels. It was Greene himself who first distinguished between his novels and his entertainments. His reasons for making this distinction were various; namely, that his novels were written slowly and entertainments quickly, that the novels were the products of depressive periods and entertainment manic, that the entertainments were crime stories and the novels something more. He remains a novelist in whom the changes are minor and the unity over-whelming. The locales of his novels may have changed, but the imagination has remained a constant from the beginning. He has done what he aimed at doing; he has expressed a religious sense and created a fictional world in which human acts are important. In that world, at least, creative art is a function of the religious mind.

No doubt, Graham Greene is widely acclaimed as a writer with immense potentiality. Though he did not claim to stand in the first rank of authors, he recognised the superiority of Conrad and James. "He could not rival Conrad's Olympian wisdom, his beauty of description, or his searching technical innovations. He lacked James' civilized delicacies and elaborate subtleties. Nevertheless, Greene's range was immense and he succeeded in gaining both critical acclaim and a vast international readership" (Batra 77). Such a prolific writer, Graham Greene (baptised Henry Graham Greene) was born on October 2, 1904. His father, Charles, was second master at Berkhamsted, a private school at Hertfordshire; his mother, Marion was a cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson, the novelist. The family was very well-placed and Greene belonged to the "intellectual Greens". Greene entered Berkhamsted School at the age of seven and three years later moved from Preparatory to Junion School there. He graduated from Oxford with a second-class B.A. in History in 1925. He entered employment with the British-American Tobacco Company but resigned after a few weeks and took to writing. The novel *The Man Within* by Greene sold very well. Greene found

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himself baffled by the success of *The Man Within*. This success prompted him to produce novels, tales, plays, poems, film-scripts, critical and political essays, autobiographical works, travel books, and biographical studies.

Greene's second published novel, *The Name of Action* won recognition as a novelist. As a novelist, he has to his credit publication of such notable novels as 1.*The Man Within*, 2.*The Name of Action*, 3.*Stamboul Train*, 4.*It's a Battlefield*, 5.*England Made Me*, 6.*The End of the Affair*, 7.*The Power and the Glory*, 8.*The Heart of the Matter*, 9.*A Gun for Sale*, 10.*Brighton Rock*, 11.*The Quiet American*, 12.*Loser Takes All* and a few plays like *The Potting Shed*, *The Complaisant Lover* and *Carving a Statue* and such short story collections as *Collected stories*, *The Last World* and other Stories and *May we Borrow your Husband* and Essays like *Yours etc*, *Reflections Mornings in the Dark* and *Collected Essays* and even children's books like *The Little Train* *The Little Horse-Bus*, *The Little Steamroller* and *The Little Fire Engine* and travel books like *Journey without Maps*, *The Lawless Roads In Search of a Character* and *Getting to know the General*.

Almost all the novels of Greene are characterised by unity. He offered a key to this unity in a remark that occurs in his introduction to *The Confidential Agent* where he says that when he began to write that particular novel, he had in his mind only "a certain vague ambition to create something legendary out of a contemporary thriller." This seems always to have been Greene's ambition. The thriller is not merely exciting action and crime. It is a set of patterns and conventions which are as firmly established as those of classical tragedy. Some of these conventions are mentioned by Greene himself in his introduction to *The Confidential Agent*. "The hunted man who becomes in turn the hunter, the peaceful man who turns at boy, the man who has learned to love justice by suffering injustice". These are the materials of his "legends"; they lend a formality to his violence and lead us to expect a moral meaning such as: justice will be done; there will be no open endings; life will be ordered, not sliced". In Greene's novels, generally speaking, violence is not there because the world is violent but because violence satisfies "that moral craving for the just and reasonable expression of human nature left without belief".

Truly speaking, Greene's novels are contemporary as regards their subject-matter. Greene himself described his work as being first political, then Catholic and then political again. In those writing like *It's a Battlefield*, *The Quiet American* *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, which spanned seventy years, he became one of the finest literary commentators on religious, cultural and political tensions in the twentieth century. "He was", as Shakti Batra puts it, "an astute publicist, a resourceful entertainer and an indefatigable moral historian. One of his greatest positive qualities was the exploratory energy implicit partly in his novels, partly in that love of literature which he conveyed so well in critical essays, and partly in the love of language which irradiates his best novels and tales. The distinctive linguistic intelligence and human sensitivity which characterise so much of his work and which are most fully evident in *The*

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Power and the Glory, should ensure that Graham Greene's wide and appreciative readership will endure for many years to come" (P 79).

No doubt, Greene's novels do present a world full of external conflicts and everlasting problems. Man is the centre of all these problems and conflicts. Religion fosters faith in man. The world we all live in is a cosmos and not a chaos. It is a universe and not a multi-verse. It is an indivisible whole. The Cosmic Heart throbs equally in the soul-temples of one and all. The one White flame of Truth ever shines in all the multi-coloured lamps of various teachings. The one Divinity dwells impartially in all the churches, mosques, temples and tabernacles of the world. Such a religious consciousness of harmony is as broad as the sky, allowing all luminaries to shine in its spacious amplitude. In the words of Swami Rajeswarananda, "The deep psychological truth in the heart of each and every one is the intense longing, consciously or unconsciously, for balance, for harmony, for happiness, and for freedom in life. There is thus an innate hankering of the soul for something that is super-physical and super-mental which will help man transcend his limitations of life. This instinct of man to transcend his limitations, has urged him on to different phases of religion" (P ii). The spirit of religion does definitely solve the problem of mankind by the dynamic emphasis upon the divinity of man. The practicality of religion means of a "transfiguration of personality, making oneself a part and parcel of universality" (Rajeswarananda 2). There is no denying the fact that religion fosters faith in man. It is religious faith that saves man from sin and from the results of sin. This is exemplified by Graham Greene in his novel *The Power and the Glory*.

As a serious writer of novels, Greene did introduce in his novels themes about the Third World, which are political, religious and social in nature. Believing in Catholic principles, Greene let Catholicism and Catholics figures in his novels. To him, the world appeared to be inherently tragic and fraught with meaninglessness. As a creative writer with a purpose, Greene had a clear sense of sin, of the dark places of human nature, failure and its moral problems. He wrote about evil people, evil deeds and sinners in struggle. In almost all his novels like *The Power and The Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Ed of the Affair* and *A Burnt out Case*, Greene took up the themes of evil and damnation. His preoccupation with evil and salvation resulted in his writing one of the greatest novels namely *The Power and the Glory*, the study of which does obviously bring out the human desires, foibles and relations of a priest who seeks God's mercy and grace in the end. The protagonist of the novel, the nameless priest arrives at a Mexican Churchless State to propagate his faith. His drinking habit leads him to an act of despair with Maria. That results in his venial sin of becoming a father to an illegitimate child called Brigitte. The priest's illegal love and a host of other sins make him guilty and he is very much afraid of the pain of death and damnation. He is obsessed with his sins and guilt. With all the religious aberrations, the priest is able to hold his faith in God and His mercy. His devotion to duty retains him in the religious fold, but his guilt goads him to escape from the civil authorities who are against church and church services. His sins drive him to sadness and disappointment. He feels like fleeing away from God's wrath. Finally his religious faith stops his attempts to escape. The priest's disappointments and despair are very deep. His mental sufferings are

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incalculable and he is deeply penitent. Only his human qualities, his good deeds and his firm faith in God and His boundless mercy save him from damnation.

Graham Greene's characters include many people from various walks of life. There are guilty people as well as innocent and pious people. Greene in some way or other identifies himself with all in mankind. Allurement of life's evanescent pleasures lads man into a no man's land. Failure to follow God's commandments leads man to a blind alley of sin and despair. Man is tossed between inherited sin and environmental sin. When Adam sinned, we also sinned in him indirectly as we are the descendants of Adam. Environmental sins include present sins on earth. Man prefers the temptations of the physical world to the appeals and commandments of the spiritual world. Today's sensuous attractions are more charming than soul saving spiritual promises to many people. What strikes the reader most in Graham Greene is that even the representatives of church fail to escape from the temptations of sin and trammels of sinful pleasures. That is why Greene presents a weakly clergy in most of his novels. When the sufferers in sin are ordinary human beings or clergymen, Greene showers on them his human concern alike. What Greene does seem to feel very strongly for others is not so much love as pity. In the imaginative world that Greene presents man is helpless, weak and incapable of extricating himself from the universal net of sin. K. Allot and M. Farriss observe:

“In keeping with the Catholic doctrine
Greene subscribes to the view that
man's nature has been wounded by
the Fall and that he is in need of a
divine grace. For Greene, man is not
good or bad but good and bad” (P 38).

This wounded nature with good and bad qualities is presented by Graham Greene in his novel *The Power and the Glory*. The Protagonist of the novel is a nameless representative of the clergy in the churchless Mexico. In that country, practice of religion is forbidden. It is a land of terror and lust, of treachery and violence. The time is unfit for any religious development. The milieu is quite unfavourable. But only the race – a part of the Mexican race wants to practice religion surreptitiously. In an antagonistic atmosphere, the nameless representative of the clergy begins his mission. When the story opens, he has come down to the part to take a boat to Vera-Cruz. But he is driven back to the dark world while the boat 'General Obergon' whistles for its destination. Throughout the first part of the novel, the nameless representative of the church is referred to as 'he', 'the little man', 'the stranger', 'the man', 'a priest', 'the priest', 'that Whisky Priest', 'that man', 'a small man' and 'father'. The heat of the blazing Mexican Sun and the bleaching dust present an unwelcome atmosphere to the mendicant priest:

“He stood stiffly in a shade, a
small man dressed in a shabby dark

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city suit, carrying a small attaché case. He had a novel under his arm”

(The Power and the Glory 716)

The shabbiness of the priest and the place is emphasized throughout the novel. Hovering vultures in a shabby city with a ruined church, and detonating beetles in the night present a dark symbol. The whole setting is seedy but real. What is known of the priest is that he spent six years at some American Seminary. He was born in Carman – the son of a storekeeper. He existed for ten years in the forests and swamps only moving in the night time. The priest recalls his boyhood thus:

“It had been a happy childhood, except that he had been afraid of too many things and had hated poverty like a crime; he had believed that when he was a priest, he would be rich and proud – that was called having a vacation. He thought of innumerable distance of man travels – from the first whipping – top to this bed, on which he lay clasping brandy. And to God, it was only a moment. The child's snigger and the first mortal sin

lay together more closely than two blinks of the eye” (P G 755).

The priest further recalls his past through his reminiscence. The priest could bring to mind the rich parish churches of the past, the confessions, the holy images and the bargaining for the price of baptism. The seeds of sin were already sown. In the churchless Mexican State, the priest has succeeded in living for ten years, going from village to village, saying mass in secret. He happens to be the last priest left in the State. The whisky – priest with his liquor bottle looks like a big question mark. Step by step, he has surrendered all habits of piety. He has given way to the ‘itch of the flesh’ in a moment of despair and drunkenness. But for all this, he remains to be the only one person through whom God still exists in the whole state. Step by step, the priest is reduced to utter abandonment. The priest is besieged by the secular hosts of evil. Instead of abiding by the church laws, he lives against the ecclesiastical norms. As a priest, he ought to know more about sins and the consequences of sins from private confessions by law abiding religious people. He should know the difference between moral and immoral acts. He should also know more about the kingdom of God from his divine learning. But he miserably fails. He has given way to despair and with a shamefaced lightness of heart committed adultery forgetting God’s commandment “Thou shall not commit adultery”. It is strange that he has not foreseen the enormous consequences a sin may have for a man of his religious stature. The priest is religious as a mere symbol of the representative of the church.

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He is irreligious as a mortal sinner. The priest is religious and irreligious at the same time. This contradictory nature of his character makes him fail whenever he thinks and act sentimentally and emotionally whenever he feels. Writing about Greene’s heroes, Frederick R. Karl holds:

“Obsessed as they are with their transgressions,
they often fail to recognize that they
are not Gods and that God has powers
which they cannot understand” (P 90)

This obsession with his guilty nature coupled with fear and despair prove to be hindrances in the priest’s efforts at salvation. The priest’s concentration on his own limitations delays his efforts in reaching God.” For him to concentrate solely on his own limitations is to demonstrate indifference to anything that might be greater” (Karl 90). Secular attractions and irreligious acts of the priest land him in a dilemma. Hence the priest is not able to have a complete vision of God and His Grace. His aberrations and irreligious acts bind him to sin and its consequences.

To conclude, if the fact that good deeds alone go with a man as a guide in utmost need is understood, it is easy to understand the character of the priest in *The Power and the Glory*. The human qualities, devotion to duty, cathartic sufferings, belief in God’s glory and infinite mercy – make the priest redeem of his sins.

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