

# The Religious Perspectives in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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## المخلص

يدرس هذا البحث وجهات النظر الدينية والصراع القائم بين الخير والشر مع مزاياه وعيوبه في رواية الكاتب كراهام كريني "السلطة والمجد". يكشف البحث أيمان الكاتب بالكاثوليكية من خلال تصوير احداث وشخصيات الرواية. يتعامل هذا البحث مع هذه الرواية التي تعتبر من المؤلفات التي توصف الكنيسة الرومانية الكاثوليكية وما يأمنون به.

أن هذا البحث يقدم شخصية الكاهن السكران في رواية جراهام جرينن "السلطة والمجد". وقد تم إيلاء اهتمام خاص لاستخدام منظورين من خلال شخصية الكاهن: الاول يبين شخصيته في الوجود الدنيوي، مع كل حالات الضعف البشري والردائلي، في حين ان الرأي الاخر يؤكد التفوق الاخلاقي والديني الذي يدل على قداسة الكاهن.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** ديني، الكاثوليكية، وجهات النظر، الحكومة، الكنيسة.

## Abstract

This paper examines the religious perspectives and the conflict between good and evil with its merits and demerits in graham Greene's novel "*The Power and the Glory*". It reveals his Catholic believes as he portrays his characters with the events of the novel. This paper deals with a novel which is considered as a depiction of the Roman Catholic Church and with what they believe.

The research paper presents the character of the whisky-priest in Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. Particular attention has been paid to the author's use of two perspectives upon the figure of the priest: one shows the character in his mundane existence, with all his human weaknesses and vices, whereas the other view stresses the character's moral and religious superiority which testifies to his sainthood.

**Keywords:** religious, Catholic, perspectives, government, Church.

## Introduction

Graham Greene, an English novelist and author, is considered as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. He was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1904, attended a public school, of which his father was headmaster, and later he studied at Oxford. The unhappiness of his home and school life led him to attempt suicide through a variation of Russian roulette and brought about his treatment by a psychoanalyst.

Actually, many of his works focus upon religious issues, and his characters always committed sins. Greene objected strongly to be described as a Roman Catholic novelist; Catholic religious themes are at the roots of much of his writings especially the four major Catholic novels; *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affairs*, which are regarded as the gold standard of Catholic novels.

*The Power and the Glory* is supposed to be read along with *The Lawless Roads* (1939), for in respect of situation, theme, setting and characters the two books are similar to each other. Greene visited the southern Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas where religion had been banned, churches closed, and the priests had surrendered to the government, been killed, or managed to escape. And yet, in spite of all antagonism to religion and fierce persecution of the clergy, this land continues to remain a land of faith. This is exactly what, with necessary modifications, we find in *The Power and the Glory*. Understandably enough, the two principal characters in this novel are the priest and the lieutenant, both being equally important in their own ways as they represent the human being with all their conditions.

This research paper discusses the religious perspectives and the conflict between the state and the Church and between the heart and the mind in Graham Greene's Catholic novel "*The Power and the Glory*" 1940. The kind of this novel is called Catholic novels, which originally appeared in France in the 1880, and then the new Catholic novels emerged after the First World War.

Actually, the subjects of Greene's novels are mainly God, Church, Faith and sainthood. The power and the Glory is one of the

masterpieces of English religious novels in the twentieth century, written by the great novelist Graham Greene, discussing the conflict between the religion and the state and the difficulties that are faced by the priests.

Graham Greene draws on the same narrative techniques, Greene's Catholic novels have opened endings, when their characters are left in a state of uncertainty with regard to their salvation. The writer chooses his characters not in saintly frame. Most of his novels deal with human beings as they are, with their merits and demerits, as human not as angels.

The protagonist in Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* "is the "Whisky priest". He is the last priest left in the state after the other priests have been driven out to abandon their faith; he is neither of an illegitimate daughter, weak-willed and often afraid, although of his shortcomings, faults, and sinfulness, his character gained the sympathy of critics and the readers.

However, Greene gave to English novels two qualities which they had lost; the religious spirit and the sense of importance of the human situation. Greene often chooses to portray the weak, the sinner, failures, and through their very weakness and sense of failure which have special love for God, this love makes them the heroes of his novels.

The title also devotes the thought of Roman Catholic aspect. It is taken from two features which belonging to God, the title may be interpreted in two ways, firstly; true power and true glory are divine and in origin belong to God, but the priest manages to achieve both of these to a certain extent in his own imperfect way and without knowing it. Secondly; the power may be of the government through its police lieutenants, but the glory which belongs to the priests, who even when sinners they are capable of rising to supreme heights of self-sacrifice.

Nevertheless, Greene's loves of travel, many of his novels were result to his trips. The travel to Mexico resulted the ideas of his novel *The Power and the Glory* which considered his masterpiece, as the writer and critic David Pryce-Jones mentioned that in his book "Graham Greene".

“The visit to Mexico led directly to Greene’s most powerful novel, and he acknowledges in the preface to *The Power and the Glory* that the incidents on which the plot is based can be found in *The Lawless Roads*. Seen in this light the travel book becomes a certain raiser to *The Power and the Glory* which brought Greene to the attention of a world-wide audience for it established him as a leading Catholic writer, and one whose gifts were by no means parochial. The book, unpropitious published in 1940, was awarded the Hawthornden Prize in that year, and was generally considered as Greene’s most masterful work” (47).

The setting of this novel is in a totalitarian Mexican state, where Catholicism is outlawed. This novel describes the dangerous adventures of the whisky priest, the last Catholic priest-who resists the laws of the state by carrying on with his priestly duties in spite of his sins and faults.

### **The Religious perspectives in Greene’s novel “*The Power and the Glory*”**

Graham Greene’s novel “*The Power and the Glory*” a religious novel, deals with many religious issues in the Catholic society with all its merits and demerits. Greene's religious beliefs cannot be ignored in any estimate of his achievement but the critical emphasis on his Roman Catholicism, often leads to tendentious interpretations.

Graham Greene’s the Catholic 'trilogy' *The Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, gains his reputation as a Catholic novelist. But Greene does not want to be regarded as a "Catholic novelist" He prefers to be described as a novelist who is a Catholic. Nearly all his novels carry a stamp of his religious consciousness; he is a Catholic writer with a difference. Though religious sense plays an important role in his novels it would be a mistake to confuse it with the sectarian vested interest. Catholicism is important to Greene as a frame of reference in some of his novels. The doctrines and symbols of the Catholic religion feed his creative imagination by giving important hints about the

mystery of the human condition. So Greene's fictional transfiguration of Catholicism is remarkable.

Nevertheless, Keshava Prasad in his book, *Graham Greene the Novelist* mentions:

"Religion has not blunted Greene's inbred radicalism; rather it has sharpened his sense of modern malaise. He did not join the Communist party, but championed people fighting against injustice and exploitation. Struggle is the main plank in the superstructure of his human ideology. His mind is untainted by religious considerations. It requires a human being to realize the predicament of man undergoing the trials of life." (24).

And Graham Greene shows he has it. Greene has linked together religion and the sense of life. As R.W.B. Lewis says: "No writer of his generation has more effectively portrayed the suffocation, the sheer hatred of the visible human world that results from certain kind of religiosity." (64). We can realize how Greene is concerned with sin and sanctity but not sanctification in his novels.

Graham Greene describes the situations of the priests as human beings as they are, with all features of weakness, sin, lust, fear, greed, love and pity, not as saints. The novel represents the challenge between self-sacrifice and with what he wants, as he said in his novel:

"saints talk about the beauty of suffering. Well, we are not saints, you and I. Suffering to us is just ugly. Stench and crowing and pain. That is beautiful in that corner-to them. It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint's eye: a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty and can look down on poor ignorant palates like theirs. But we can't afford to" ( PG 130)

However, we can understand through the passage above, what the priest tells the woman in the prison with him, his view according to his experience in the life. The priest's thought as a Christian believes that he must love all people, and his love should be extended to include not only his daughter but every soul in the world. The writer Karl O' Hanlon comments on these thoughts and he says: "This fragility opens up the possibility for experiencing

real agape. When he is captured and thrown into a foul-smelling, crowded, lightless prison cell, he realizes for the first time an intimate (and moving) sense of human contact and love that has been previously unknown to him” ( 58).

We can notice through reading the novel how the whisky priest seems many times to care about other people like his cell companions, Coral or Trench. However, at the same time he feels guilty as he believes that he should love all people in the same way he loves his daughter. The priest knows that this is the only kind of love that is “great enough to move him to beg for his own damnation in place of another’s” (Allot 189). In other words, the whisky priest is strongly convinced that his daughter is the only person for whom he is ready to be damned. However, one should keep in mind that he is ready to die for all people in the state who are in need of a priest. Many a time he has a chance to escape and lead a safe life away from the persecution. He, however, decides to stay and perform his priestly duties. The priest may not believe in his own goodness. However, his deeds suggest that he is simply wrong.

“He was the only priest the children could remember; . . . It was from him they would take their ideas of the faith. But it was from him too they took God. . . . Wasn't it his duty to stay, even if they despised him, even if they were murdered for his sake? He was shaken with the enormity of the problem”. (PG 80)

He sacrifices his soul and life for the sake of other people. In doing so, he reminds us of Christ who died in order to save all humans. Having realized that, it is hard not to perceive the whisky priest as a saint figure.

However, it is important to mention that the whisky priest had never lost his faith in God and his beliefs in the Catholic Church. His Doubts had been promoted by the conflict between Church doctrine and his human indulgence. It is his faith in God which enables him to continue to give absolution to others in the name of God. He can love his child to the extent of offering his

damnation as propitiation for her corrupt soul; to love and forgive the sinful is to approach Godliness. The priest reaffirms the mystery of the God- man relationship. At the same time that the priest becomes the sacrifice, he may secure his own salvation because when he becomes human and accepts his "sin" he becomes subject to the sacrifice which Christ had made for the sinner. This is why he feels that he cannot place himself even above the Judas-mestizo who is to betray him. As the priest sees it, "Christ had died for this man too: how could he pretend with his pride and lust and cowardice to be any more worthy of that death than this half-caste?"(99). It is significant, that the priest is led to his ultimate destiny by a man with few redeeming qualities. By becoming humble and rejoining the universe of culpable human beings, than, the priest can now secure at least the possibility of salvation by making himself subject to Christ's sacrifice for fallen humanity.

*The Power and the Glory* can also be described as a story of personal growth and a psychological analysis to the protagonist. Throughout the novel one may observe the development of the whisky priest in terms of his soul and treating himself spiritually. Boardman Gwen R says in his book *The Aesthetics of Exploration* that the priest moves from "childish irresponsibility through adolescent giggling and sins to the maturity of acceptance" (66). In the course of the novel, one may observe gradual changes in the behavior and attitude of the priest. He used to be the round faced comfortable cleric more concerned with earthly pleasures than with his duties in the church. The priest, however, becomes aware of his faults and, in addition, is not able to forgive himself.

In the beginning of the novel, when the priest misses the boat which will carry him to a safety city, to answer the call of duty to go with a boy because he realizes that the dying woman would need a priest even more than a doctor in order to make her death-bed confession. His willing to help anyone who needs to help. Lustful, guilty of moral sin, drunken man, has tasted a taboo love and committed adultery and has illegitimate daughter, but still have moral, spiritual values, and a sense of duty.

There are lots of people in the country who also continue to hold their religious beliefs; none of them betray the priest to the authorities, even when the police take hostages from them, and though they are aware of the priest's sins shortcomings. As Greene says: "he thought of the hostages in prison yard, waiting at the water-tap, not looking at him- the suffering and the endurance which went on everywhere the other side of the mountains" (PG 172).

In Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*, we can notice that the Priest change in the course of the novel, as Bosco Marc in his book, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*, mentions, "can be perceived as a certain dialogue with God, in which he objects to some views originating from the Catholic religion such as the idea of damnation. He manipulates those notions in an attempt to show the most humane approach to faith and belief, with all the uncertainties and doubts that it may arouse" (18). In the beginning of the novel Greene shows through the behaviors of the priest that he is concerned with goodness and the virtue of people. Then Graham Greene places emphasis on "the conflict between good and evil that takes place daily within a man's soul" (Wyndham 8). His character represents the Catholic Church torn between the opposing realms. The whisky priest believes in God and is concerned with the afterlife. What is more, he is willing to apply the notion of "voluntary damnation" in their own lives as "it is suggested in the Whisky priest's wish and embodied in *The Power and the Glory* when the whisky priest prays mournfully for his illegitimate daughter" (Bosco 42). Since he is ready to sacrifice himself irrespective of his own fate, they may be perceived as saint figures. What is quite striking is that the whisky priest is forced to commit sins in order to achieve his aims.

Nevertheless, we need to realize that the whisky priest represents the human conditions with their merits and demerits. The fact that he is sinner actually makes him understand Christianity better. The whisky priest's preoccupation with notions of damnation and salvation puts them "in the heart of Christianity" (Bosco 41). It is only because of his faith that he is aware of his sins



and only because of his sins that he is really able to appreciate God's mercy.

However, the novel shows the readers an insight and highlights the corruption of the church which is described to have failed to fulfill its principles and mission toward Christians. The corruption of the church is hinted at through reminders of its past celebrations, communions, and fat remote priests who used to present their gloved hands to be kissed by the parishioners. Greene mentions that as an inner thought to the priest, he said: "He was just one criminal among a herd of criminals. He had a sense of companionship which he had never experienced in the old days when pious people came kissing his back cotton glove" (PG 128).

The corruption of the Church is the opposite picture to the hard life of the ordinary people. So the priest represents the Catholic Church as a corrupted and hypocritical one. Greene expresses that in his novel: "O God, forgive me- I am a proud, lustful, greedy man. I have loved authority too much. These people are martyrs- protecting me with their own lives. They deserve a martyr to care for them – not a fool like me, who loves all the wrong things" (PG 95).

These lines reflect the priest's inner conflict by his interior monologue which reflects his suffering and tortured soul and conscience. This case of inner conflict is part of his dreams in the past, the present state in his mind of remorse which happens in many places, in Maria's village, in the prison, during the journey with the Mestizo, and during the night before his execution. This reveals his repent and inner agony as a sinful clergyman who assumed to save the souls. This theme is mentioned in the novel many times, as Graham Greene says: "He thought: if I go I shall meet other priests: I shall go to confession: I shall feel contrition and be forgiven: eternal life will begin for me all over again" (PG 65).

As the priest's mission is to save the souls from damnation and offer them the salvation, the priest who is supposed so close to God, he is so far away from God by his bad behavior and sins. The case

of disappointment and despair was expressed by the critic and writer David Pryce-Jones, when he said:

“Tears poured down his face: he was not at the moment afraid of damnation-even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty, that it would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place” (48-49).

The Whisky priest’s thought that God punishes him by controlling his mind, because of all his sins especially pride and vain the great sins of the fallen angels which are considered in Catholic beliefs, from the deadly seven sins. The priest says to the lieutenant that “pride was the sin which made the angels fall from heaven”. (PG 195).

The priest was proud to be the last priest staying in the country when the others had left or were killed. Also he neglected his prayers, gave up fasting and daily mass, all his good deeds were pride not love of God, he felt that his soul was captured by his sins, and he who lost in the deep darkness of his ugly sins.

Greene introduced his characters as human beings not in the perfect picture of sanity, so that the priest has a bad side and a good side, as well as the lieutenant character, both of them has human feelings and a sense of empathy in their characters, sometime even toward those who are against them. The critic and writer David Pryce-Jones agrees with Greene in this point by saying:

“The priest and the lieutenant both share this life. In a way the one entails the other. The lieutenant walked in front of his men with an air of bitter dignity. He might have been chained to them unwillingly. He cannot escape his surroundings any more than the priest can; any more than Pinkie (a character in another Greene’s novel) could abandon Brighton. So it is with despair that he watches the peasants practice superstitions as before, and with despair that he gives the priest five pesos-the price of a mass- as he free him from the

drunkenness change. “You are a good man” says the priest ..... the lieutenant brings himself to say to the priest “you aren’t a bad fellow. If there is anything I can do for you.....”(52).

However, one of the main pictures which was given by Greene to represent religious perspectives; the picture about the religious Christian family, the pious mother who reads to her children the biography of a Christian martyr ‘Juan’, her son does not care to the religious story, while her daughter is so interested in it.

This picture of the mother to teach her children the principles of the religion and reading stories about the martyrdom and sainthood in spite of the forbidding of religion in their state. Greene said in the novel: “In the back room of the Academia Commercial a woman was reading to her family. Two small girls of six and ten sat on the edge of their bed, and a boy of fourteen leant against the wall with an expression of intense.” (PG 29-30).

Graham Greene shows us more than one picture about religious believers and their duty. One of these pictures; the former pries Padre Jose who missed the respect of people, because he left his holy duty, even the children bothered and belittled him. His own guilt is in having forsaken his religious duty and priesthood because of his fear from the authority, he has no peace, and he never offends with the children in his neighborhood. He believes that he is a bad man and he is damned, there was no respect anywhere left for him in his home, in the town. The author describes Padre Jose and his unhappiness in life:

“But an old priest... he stood outside himself and wondered he was even fit for hell. He was just a fat old important man mocked and taunted between the sheets. But then he remembered the gift he had been given which nobody could take away.... On daily office, on Masses, no confession, and it was no good praying any longer at all.... He looked back over his shoulder and caught the faces out in expression of wild glee; his little pink eyes showed no anger-he had no right to be angry”. (PG 29-30).

Another picture given by Greene in his novel is love, love as a notion appears many times in *The Power and the Glory*. Throughout the novel the reader gets to observe not only different kinds of love but also different approaches to understanding it, because it is the basis of Christianity. Therefore, this notion may be crucial in discussing the sainthood of the unnamed priest. Keeping that in mind, the priest's behavior, which does not always seem to be appropriate in terms of morality, can be sanctified as it is clearly motivated by love. The whisky priest thinks that the human heart is unreliable. He also believes that God's love is beyond people's understanding. What is even more, it may be terrifying:

God *is* love. I don't say the heart doesn't feel a taste of it, but what a taste. The smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditch-water. We wouldn't recognize *that* love. It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us—God's love. [...] I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful the human heart looks to Him (PG 199).

However, according to the priest, this is the only genuine love that exists in the world. Although the priest states that he does not understand God's love or mercy, his deeds suggest the opposite. He is very critical and self-despising. On the other hand, he seems unable to feel hate towards other people.

In the end of the novel, the glory of the priest's death is similar to that surrounding of the Christ's death. They sacrifice themselves and die for people; however, not only for those good and religious believers, but also for those who were corrupted and committed sins. Furthermore, the unnamed priest's death influences other people – Luis being a good example. At the beginning, as Allot says "Luis objects to the sentimentality in the martyr's biographies" (178). He finds them boring and seems not to understand the real meaning of faith and the church. Luis admires the lieutenant and other revolutionists. However, the unnamed priest's death influences him greatly. He "rejects the lieutenant – aiming a blob of spittle at his revolver butt and assumes Coral's 'duty' by ministering to the new priest" (Allot 190). The priest seems to be the last priest in the country; therefore his death is

almost equal with the death of the Church. Consequently many characters, after the priest's death, are left with a sense of "desertion and loss" (Allot 190). The impact of the execution can be compared with the great impact which Christ's death had on the lives of all people.

### Conclusion:

The truth of Greene's aim is religious instruction, religious specifically in Catholic term or even Christian in any doctrinal sense, but dealing with a vision of human life which involves a believer in the other society.

Graham Greene presents Catholicism in many of his novels; he has acknowledged that his conversion to the Catholic Church was deeply influenced, and the accidents of his own troubled childhood and youth had deep influence on his writings. His form is clearly for damnation and salvation. Greene has said that he should be taken as an author who is a Catholic rather than as a Catholic author, every creative writer is a man having some obsession, so Greene's obsession is religious.

The paradoxical manner which Greene uses in the character of the priest is a mixture of weaknesses and strengths. It is difficult to decide whether he is regarded as a hero, martyr, or may be a saint, to decide that must be going too far. The reader certainly is puzzled about him, in many occasions he wins the reader's sympathy, respect and admiration. If we are aware of the advance of Greene's preference for Roman Catholicism, and if we go through the novel, we must have knowledge of Greene's own religious views.

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