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## Reconciling Faith with Whisky: Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* Does the 'Impossible'

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Written in 1939, Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* is noted for its celebration of religious faith in the face of totalitarian atrocity. Greene sets the novel in the then Mexico of President Calles' regime with its enforced 'secularism'. The novel shows how faith fights and thrives against a regimented dispensation, operating as a potent force. However, the novel is unique in having as a protagonist a Catholic priest of many personal lapses, who nevertheless rises to the occasion and without failure constantly responds to his call of duty. The Whisky Priest comes across as an embodiment of refreshing and telling paradoxes. The novel thus establishes a rather slippery relationship between Catholic faith and institutionalized Catholicism. It de-links faith from 'virtues' and 'proprieties', sanctions and sanctities. Before reinforcing Catholic faith, Greene re-configures it. The novel becomes extra-ordinary in reconciling sin and beauty, transgression and love, faith and whisky.

### Introduction:

In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of British writers wrote on Mexico: D. H. Lawrence in *The Plumed Serpent* and *Mornings in Mexico*; Aldous Huxley in *Beyond the Mexico Bay*; and Evelyn Waugh in *Robbery Under Law*. Graham Greene also set his 1939 novel *The Power and the Glory* in Mexico. Greene drew materials for the novel from his own trip to Mexico the previous year in 1938. He recorded the factual experience in *The Lawless Roads*, while facts and fiction combined in *The Power and the Glory*. In this novel, Greene captures the persecution on religion inflicted by the then totalitarian regime in Mexico under President Calles. Greene, during his Mexico visit, saw to his surprise how religious faith, even though suppressed, refused to die down in the face of bullet. The Whisky Priest in the novel becomes the embodiment of this thriving faith in religion amidst relentless atrocity. For Greene, *The Power and the Glory* is not the first novel to be written with a Catholic fervour; nor was it to be the last. It was preceded by *Brighton Rock*; it was to be followed later by *The Heart and the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*. However, noticeably, *The Power and the Glory*, is no Catholic novel in a typical sense. On its publication, it raised more eye-brows than acclaims among the rank of orthodox members of Church. The novel is a celebration of faith, but sans the requirements of the so-called virtues and proprieties demanded by any organized religion. Cates Baldrige suggests: "In this novel...the spiritual atmosphere of the mediated world is weighed against that found in the dangerous precincts of the absolute and judged wanting. The result in Greene's Mexican epic is a radical critique of a Catholic Church – and, by implication, any other institutionalized religion...."

*The Power and the Glory* has the garb of a thriller. Its central character is one runaway Priest, who is being hunted by the Lieutenant and his associates. The Priest is 'wanted' because religion and church have been outlawed by the totalitarian regime of the state. What gives the Priest such a position of prominence in the novel is the fact that he is apparently the last priest alive in the country. Greene in his narrative touches on the destruction of churches and priests wrought by the totalitarian regime. In the very second

passage of the novel, Greene speaks of Mr Trench, a rather minor character, walking 'past the Treasury which had once been a church'. Later, he narrates how the Red Shirts 'had shot about five priests -- two or three had escaped'. As a result of this clampdown, the situation has reached a pass where 'the Church is Padre Jose and the whisky Priest'. All other visible relics or living beings that represent the Catholic Church have been eliminated.

Noticeably, the Priest whom Greene makes the central figure of the novel is no embodiment of orthodox ecclesiastical virtues. The adjective that describes him in the best possible way is 'whisky'. He is a habitual drunkard. He is no teetotaler; neither does he ever try to be one. He has other lapses as well. He is a coward. He once committed fornication and begot an illegitimate child. But all these imperfections, in Greene's narrative, do not disqualify him from being a 'good enough' priest. The critical yardstick is compassion for every living soul. It is simply by attending to his responsibilities – and not by transcending the flesh -- that the Priest does justice to his position and keeps the flame of faith burning in a 'God-forsaken' country. In the opening chapter, he misses the boat for Vera Cruz as he goes to attend the boy's dying mother. Towards the end of the novel, he pays a visit to the dying Yankee – a visit which eventually costs his life. Nevertheless, he never regrets his visit to the Yankee, even as that visit was ill-required. The Whisky Priest is possibly one of his kind in the history of English literature which usually either lambasts corrupt church members like the Pardoner and the Friar in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* or elevate an austere and 'ideal' ecclesiastical figure like Thomas Becket in T S Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Mary R. Reichardt aptly opines: "...the truth he (Greene) has to tell in *The Power and the Glory* is disturbing and consoling at once. In a book full of paradoxes, ironies, and ambiguities, his message is calculated to upset those who complacently believe they know how God judges."

To the state, the Priest falls in the same bracket with a murderer. In Part Two Chapter One, the Lieutenant tells the villagers: "I am looking for two men -- one is a gringo, a yankee, a murderer", and goes on to say: 'The other...is a priest'. The Lieutenant tries to impress upon the people the harms caused by the class of priests: "You're fools if you still believe what the priests tell you...What has God ever done for you? Have you got enough to eat?" The very fact that the Lieutenant has a hard time convincing the masses is suggestive of the continuing hold that Catholic religion maintains in this 'secular' country. Greene does not intend to suggest that religion can be the panacea for masses. But he wants to drive home the necessity of religion as a force that can check the monstrosity of the power of a regimented state.

Even Padre Jose is one other priest in the novel, who stands as a foil to the Whisky Priest. Padre Jose has chosen the easy way of agreeing to the dictates of the ruling dispensation. He has renounced his faith and married. He lingers as a symbol of weakness against whom the Whisky Priest gains in stature. The episode where the Whisky Priest visits Padre Jose's house and Jose turns him away, saying: 'go. I don't want martyrs here' is highly suggestive. Being the lone functioning Priest, the Whisky Priest is much on demand. He is the only Priest available for confession: 'After five years there is so much to confess.' He is the voice of solace and sustenance to the villagers in the troubled times: "That is why I tell you that heaven is here: this is a part of heaven just as pain is a part of pleasure". Ironically, he has nobody to whom he can pour his heart out: "He felt an immense envy of all those people who had confessed to him and absolved."

The Prison Scene is a crucial scene that comes at almost the mid-point of the novel. The Whisky Priest lands in prison not because he was recognized as the runaway priest, but simply because he created some noise in the middle of the night. He does not have money to bribe the policemen, and is, therefore, thrown into jail. The corruption that pervades the

totalitarian state becomes evident. More importantly, the Prison Scene becomes critical to the development of the Priest's character. Locked in a pitch-dark cell with murderers and thieves, crushed between odorous bodies with an unseen couple copulating somewhere, the Priest is 'moved by an enormous and irrational affection' for the inmates of the prison. Even the utterance of the word 'bastard' fills him with 'miserable happiness', reminding him of his own illegitimate child. The prison presents to him a microcosm of the world: "This place was very like the world: overcrowded with lust and crime and unhappy love...." It is here that he has his epiphany: 'suddenly we discover that our sins have so much beauty'. This is remarkable. Lynette Kohn observes: "...in *The Power and the Glory* the priest sees in the sins of others not a corresponding maxim of the church for correction, but his own inclination towards similar sins." Life is not a stay on earth for the redemption of the 'original sin'. Instead, the power of salvation inheres in 'sin'. The Whisky Priest is extra-ordinary in reconciling sin and beauty, transgression and love, faith and whisky.

The Whisky Priest harbours immense love for his illegitimate daughter Brigitta. He is not just a priest; he is also a father in heart. He never pits his fatherhood against his priesthood. Possibly, the man needs to be viewed separately from his office. Faith, for the Whisky Priest, does not entail forsaking of human emotions and instincts for the sake of an abstract God. Follies and foibles are only too human. It is not an impeccable way of life that leads to God; it is about love and forgiveness for every living soul: "...God was the parent, but He was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac, and the judge." Perhaps the most poignant speech comes from the Priest when he talks to his 'opponent', the Lieutenant, for one last time: "I don't know a thing about the mercy of God...But I do know this -- that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too." It is not any worship of God, any chanting of hymns, any establishment of church, but simply love in humanity regardless of any other consideration that raises the Whisky Priest beyond the level of ordinary priesthood.

A question that is often tossed up in the novel is whether the Priest is a martyr or not. Various other characters find a martyr in him even before he lays down his life. The woman in the Prison says: 'We have a martyr here'; even the half-caste tells the Priest: 'You may be a saint for all I know'. The Lieutenant in the final conversation says: 'Well, you're going to be a martyr'. After the Priest's execution, the mother tells her children: 'He was one of the martyrs of the church'. The Priest himself, however, vehemently denies his status as a potential martyr: 'There are good priests and bad priests. It is just that I am a bad priest'. As T S Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* emphasizes, one must do the right thing for the right reason. To lay down one's life with the deliberate purpose of attaining sainthood or martyrdom would tantamount to expression of pride. The more the Priest rebuffs himself for his foibles, the more he shows the quality of humility. At the end, he becomes a Christ-like figure with his participation in human suffering. The novelist also describes him in the image of a sacrificial 'bull'.

In Greene's novel *The Last Word*, the arch-dictator, before slaying the last Pope, reflects: "Is it possible what this man believed may be true?" The Lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory* cannot remain totally unaffected either by the Priest's last few words. As a competent custodian of the state, he ensures speedy execution of the Whisky Priest. However, soon a new nameless priest appears, and the continuity of faith in the 'Godless' land is maintained. The message is loud and clear: faith is indestructible. Greene takes the title of the novel from the Lord's Prayer. Apparently, the 'power' belongs to the state and the Lieutenant, while 'glory' belongs to the Whisky Priest. However, on a deeper level, both the 'power' and the 'glory' belong to the Priest – not the power of bayonet, but the power of love

and mercy. Faith is the winner at the end of it all. But this faith must not be equated with religious 'sanctities'.

**Conclusion:**

In *The Power and the Glory*, Catholic faith thus enjoys a rather slippery relationship with Catholicism. Greene recognizes the benefits of Catholic practices like masses and confessions, but disregards the stipulations and stipulating nature of the conventional Church. The Church cannot afford to be autocratic and all-controlling like President Calles. The novel reconfigures faith before reinforcing it.

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