

Graham Greene: “The Power and the Glory” A Brief Survey

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ABSTRACT

‘The power and the Glory’ was first published in 1940. This book has four parts. The setting is of Mexico. This novel is built on the equation of the human and non-human. The setting and the protagonist are inseparable. In a state, where the Church and the priests have been outlawed by a revolutionary, presumably Communist government, flees the last remaining priest (he is anonymous), all other priests having already run away or capitulated to the state. The theme pursuit clearly indicated in the epigraph, taken from Dryden, helps to unify the episodic pattern of the novel and gives it a picaresque character. Our attention is concentrated on the priests hunted and harried by the police (red shirts) led by the lieutenant who has dedicated himself fanatically to the eradication of religion in his state. As the priest flees through forests and mountains, we find that the priest is fleeing not only from the police but also from his own self.

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At the beginning of the novel, we see the priest, beaten by ill health and restlessness as he meets by chance, Mr. Tench, the expatriate English dentist. From here on we follow him through a series of adventures and misadventures which stamp him with loneliness and helplessness. He hides like a tramp in the banana station of Captain Fellows whose daughter. Coral gives him food. He goes to the village where his mistress and daughter live, only to realize that, since the police are taking hostages from every village, there is not a village in the state where he would not be an ‘unwelcome danger’. One by one, all havens are closed to him. He cannot go even to his native village, Carmen, for fear of someone losing his life.

We learn through one of his dreams that he was never a very devout priest. In his conception days, he was proud and complacent. He was honoured with good dinners and wines and grew fat and authoritarian. But now he has become whisky priest, ‘a proud, lustful and greedy man’, ‘a fool’, who loves all the wrong things. Through his sins, he has failed not only himself and his people but also God. His life has been punctuated by a series of surrenders of all that he held essential

for a priest, so that now he feels that he has become an odd sort of servant, the devil, ‘a damned man putting God into the mouths of men’. He a priest, has lain with a woman who bore him a child. He alone carried a wound, as though a whole world had died’. In his child Brigitta, the priest’s sin is objectified. John Atkins says, “She is horrifyingly mature. Her childish mind has been rushed through a saturnalia of adult passions and attitudes.”¹ As she sits on a tree trunk, ‘by the rubbish heap with an effect of abandonment, the priest realizes that the corruption of the world was already in her heart. He feels an overwhelming responsibility for her. He cannot help loving her but to love her is to love her sin. And because he loves his sin, he feels incapable of repentance.

The priest starts for Carmen where a half cast joins him. As he pushes the mule with the mestizo slumped on it towards Carmen, the sense of exile floods over him:

“He felt like a man without a passport who is turned away from every harbour.”²

The priest leaves the half caste on the way who is suffering from fever and he reaches Carmen. There he is investigated by redshirt for having the bottle of wine. He runs away and he goes to the home of another priest Padre Jose’s house. Padre Jose becomes angry and asks him to go out of his house. The priest requests Padre Jose to give him shelter in his house.

“He said, ‘If I ever offended you Jose, forgive me. I was conceited, proud, overwhelming, a bad priest. I always knew in my heart you were the better man.’³ Padre Jose forcibly drives him away out of his house and slams the door. Then he is caught by the Red Shirts (the police). They carry him to the lieutenant. The lieutenant cannot recognize him that he is the wanted priest who he has been searching for a long time. He behaves with the priest in a friendly manner. The priest finds different type of persons in the prison.

In the prison also, the priest passes through a great psychological agony. In the prison, he tells the pious woman that he does not know how to repent:

“That was true; he had lost his faculty. He could not say to himself that he wished his sin had never existed because the sin seemed to him so unimportant and he loved the fruit of it. He needed a confessor to draw his mind slowly down the drab passages which led to horror grief and repentance.”⁴

The lieutenant gives the priest some money considering him as a beggar and releases him from the prison. The priest thanks him and promises him that he will never come there again.

Before he reaches the end of the wilderness, the priest experiences a strange communion through the faith of the Indian woman and realizes once again that his destiny is linked with the depraved and the wretched. His short stay with the Lehrs in the neighbouring State tempts him into his old way of life with his piety and the authoritative voice of the conception days. His anxiety arises from his fear that he can do nothing to redeem himself and that his damnation is certain. Listening to the confessions of the people in Mr. Lehr's stable, he is reminded of his own lack of grace:

“He felt an immense agony of all these people who had confused to him and been absolved.... but he could not believe that anyone anywhere would rid him off his heavy heart. Even when he drank he felt bound to sin by love.”⁵

The performance of his pastoral functions only aggravates his sense of guilt and suffering. His state of mind is of a man who believes in the reality of hell because evil has entered his body. “A virtuous man can almost cease to believe in Hell, but he carried Hell about with him. Sometimes at night he dreamt of it.... Evil ran like malaria in his veins.”⁶

Then he starts on to his mule to Las Casas. He passes through several villages, he listens to the confession of other peoples. “At the best, it was only one criminal trying to aid the escape of another – whichever way you looked; there wasn't much merit in either of them”.⁷

While escaping through the forest and the village, at last he is arrested by the lieutenant; the lieutenant and the priest are totally different type of persons. Their battle is a battle for the minds of men. The third and last confrontation between the priest is captured. Their speech is an antithesis about their recognition. The priest says to the lieutenant:

“But I am not a saint... I am not a brave man.... That's another difference between us. It's no good your working for your end unless you're a good man in your party. Then you will have all the old-starvation, beating, get rich any how. But it doesn't matter so much my being a coward – and all the rest. I can give him God's pardon. It wouldn't make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me.”⁸

The lieutenant says to the priest that he has shot three hostages because of him and so he hated him. With the six Red

Shirts in front and six behind, in tight security he carries the priest to Carmen.

At the prison, the priest requests the lieutenant that he wants to confess his sin in the presence of Padre Jose. The lieutenant goes to Padre Jose and requests him to go to prison with him so that the priest could confess before him. But Padre Jose denies to go with him telling that he couldn't go because of his wife and children. The lieutenant returns and tells the whole matter to the priest. The priest becomes very dejected as he cannot confess his sins. Awaiting execution, the priest makes his private confession (Sacramental confession having been denied to him), though he is conscious of his sin and failure.

“I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have lived.... 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 handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed only a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like some one who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted to be a saint.”⁹

Green uses a kind of interior monologue to reveal the agony of a spirit at the extreme limit of despair. The priest's personal acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility, the acceptance of his destiny in a spirit of complete humility and hopelessness, the only way perhaps to trust fully in God and to reach salvation, is intended by Greene to be a prelude to the visitation of divine grace.

In the fourth part of the novel we find Mrs. Fellows and Mr. Fellows having a talk. Mr. Fellows says to her that there is a lot of excitement in town. He conceives that the man whom his daughter Coral sheltered.

The lieutenant goes to the priest's cell and finds him on his knees, praying. The red shirts lay him out into the prison yard. The officer gives the command to present arms. He says, ‘Fire’ and the priest raising both arms above his head, calls out in a strong brave voice to the soldiers and the leveled rifles, ‘Hail, Christ the King’ stooping over his body, put his revolver close to the priest's ear and pulled the trigger. The soul of the young hero had already left its early mansion and the happy smile laid on the dead face.

The priest's isolation grows into a profound distress which attends man's exclusion from life lived publicly and overtly, with in a context of duties and obligations, though the medium of his vocation. The hero's sense of exile, social as well as cosmic, constitutes a fundamental orientation in Greene's novels. The priest dies with the sense of loneliness in his heart, ancient law and a sinner, who feels rejected both by the human beings and the saints.

The next ends in a confused manner. A boy is dreaming about the present whom the police had shot. In his dream, he opens the doors and finds the priest. The priest says that he has just landed. In his dream, the boy sees that the priest tells the boy that his name is Father and his sentence remains incomplete and the novel ends.

The painful spiritual rebirth of the priest is marked by a state of total vacancy. The priest is aware of his desolation, of the withdrawal of life and all living things. 'Life didn't exist anymore; it wasn't merely a matter of banana station.

In the spiritual death of his old-self, the priest is purified of his sins and achieves spiritual enrichment. St. John of the Cross, from whom, both T. S. Eliot and Graham Greene derive much of their religious symbolism, considers descent and despair an essential part of the soul's progress. The priest's death is not an act of despair. It is an offering in love and humility which leaves us to think that this all is too human and suffering but the priest has attained to beatitude. As the priest's last hour approaches, the lieutenant falls asleep in his chair.

"He couldn't remember afterward anything of his dreams except laughter, laughter all the time and a long passage in which he could find no door." 10

The laughter signifies the blessedness of a soul entering heaven. In T. S. Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral', Becket conveys to us the essence of a saint's tragedy:

"For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for, the same reason? ... so also in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice that another soul is numbered among the saints." 11

The Whisky priest, who dies drunk and frightened, is one such martyr.

As in all the religious novels of Graham Greene, the question of a sinner's repentance to ensure God's forgiveness arises in 'The Power and the Glory'. If by repentance we mean the turning away of the sinner once and for all every sin, however small, then the priest does not repent. If however, we mean by repentance the gradual pressing of the sinner, slowly and painfully with periodic lapses, from the side of devil to that of God, then the priest does repent.

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