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# The Quest for Salvation in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) by Graham Greene

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## Abstract

The anthropology of religious consciousness occupies a central position in Graham Greene's novelistic aesthetics, placing man at the heart of his literary production. Indeed, *The Power and the Glory* bears the mark of the writer's concerns and anxieties, as he consistently cast a critical eye on human behavior in the practice of religion and its interactions with others in a society deeply rooted in religious beliefs. It is within this literary perspective that his works emerge as a mirror, reflecting societal dynamics.

The present study seeks to examine the troubling question of salvation in *The Power and the Glory* by showing how Graham Greene's main character, despite being deeply devoted to religion, grapples with temptation. However, the fact of being conscious that he is going astray from his creator plunges him into a state of dereliction to the extent that he envisions himself as a useless man. Will man be saved by his deeds or by divine grace? In any case, Greene's unmistakable interest in eschatology is evident, as he has consistently explored the fate of man after death. This is reflected in the divided consciousness of the main character, symptomatic of a tormented soul.

**Key-words:** anthropology, religious consciousness, salvation, fate, anxiety.

Anthropological issues have always been at the heart of literary production and have inspired many writers among which Graham Greene. Born in October 1904 in England, Greene, an English novelist, paid attention to the different events that marked his period. Considered in some senses as “*the most Catholic of Catholic novelists*” (Connolly 1949: 18), Greene was particularly interested in the destiny of the individual after death. His interest in such issues has all the more been triggered by the two deadly wars the world had experienced, bringing into debate the question of Man's salvation. All Greene's literary productions turn around religious themes such as faith, salvation, grace, etc.; showing how salvation, being a fundamental aspiration for every Man, is at the core of his thinking “*Catholic*

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*theology is a radical part of his thinking and feeling, the evident principle of integration in his art*” (Connolly: 16). This issue and that of the individual destiny are unceasingly raised by writers and it is in this outlook that Ronald Rolheiser states:

There is within us a fundamental disease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones and in the deep recesses of the soul (Rolheiser 1998: 75).

Dealing with Graham Greene and the unremitting question of salvation in *The Power and the Glory* seems redundant as it reflects the preoccupation of the writer. According to Connolly, Greene, is placed “*with Dostoesvski, Mann, James, Conrad, Joyce, Kafka, Mauriac and Bernanos and other deep and subtle analysts of sick-for-God modern man*” (16). After the second world war, Graham Greene was traumatized so much so that one of his main mental efforts was about how to get the salvation of the soul. This paper is an attempt to show, through a psychoanalytic approach, how Greene’s characters are relentlessly invaded by guilt after having experience sin; a situation that leads them to dereliction in their search for redemption and salvation. And as highlighted, “*Greene’s preoccupation with sin and grace, the fall and redemption, are even more evident in The Power and the Glory and The Heart of the Matter*” (Connolly: 18).

Thus, our analysis turns around three main points. The first part deals with the manifestation of sin. In other words, it insists on the way the concept of sin appears in the novel. The second part focuses on Greene’s Protagonist State of Dereliction. After sinning many times, the hero experiences a total spiritual abandonment. The third and last part maps out the Hero’s traumatic experience of Guilt.

### **I. The Manifestation of Sin**

Sin is defined as a deliberate transgression of God’s commands. Indeed, transgression can be a word, a deed, a desire in opposition to the divine prescription or an omission of one duty.

In *The Power and the Glory*, sin is firstly shown through the priest’s inordinate self-esteem which makes him stay in Mexico despite the persecutions. His life is led in genuine innocence before the revolutionary law. He is not used to make sacrifices which would have explained his choice of self- denial. He is under illusion as he confesses to his adversary: “*Pride was at work all the time, not love of God. Pride was what made the angels fall. Pride’s the worst thing of all. I thought I was a fine fellow to have stayed when the others had gone*” (Greene 1940: 190). Actually, the priest has stayed in Mexico not for God’s sake but for personal honor.

In addition, the priest becomes self-sufficient towards God and it is well shown through his inattention related to his religious duties. It is in this perspective that he says: “*And then I thought I was so grand I could make my own rules. I gave up fasting, daily Mass, I neglected my prayers*” (190).

The priest has explicitly stopped to be a religious man when the others went. He has stayed for God's sake and he wants to do without him. He has risked his life to continue the mission abandoned by his colleagues and yet he behaves like an enemy of God and this can be seen through his failure to perform his duties. As Eric Fromm points it out, "*the real fall of man is his alienation from himself, his submission to power, his turning against himself even though under the guise of his worship of God*" (1950: 53).

As a Christian, the priest should pray incessantly to be in constant communion with the Almighty. It is in prayers only that the disciple draws the necessary spiritual strength for his mission. The believer, who does not pray, is living astray in a state of mortal sin.

Besides, the servant of God shouldn't neglect his oath. Indeed, as a priest, he must have daily mass and as a good Christian, it is compulsory for him to fast. This is mortification in order to fight temptations so as to prevent sin. As the unnamed priest neglects all these practices, he lacks the spiritual strength that would have helped him to resist evil. So, in refusing to respect his oath, he commits a series of sins.

The most striking sin is the one committed by fathering a child illegally. He therefore breaks with the religion of the heart to embrace the pleasures of life. In this regard, Lafille taking up the words of André Gide reveals that there are in every man at all times, two simultaneous postulations: one towards God, the other towards Satan (1963: 317).

All Christians know that it is forbidden by the sixth commandment of the decalogue: "*Do not commit adultery*" (Ex: 81). In other terms, the decalogue is a set of precepts which facilitates the relationship between men and God and between the disciples themselves. This sin is all the more serious since in this case the sinner is a priest. The priest is supposed to be a guardian of the divine law as he is a representative of God on earth. Graham Greene raises a problematic question within the catholic church which imposes celibacy on its priests when the other churches allow theirs to marry.

For catholic church, celibacy is one of the ways and means of holiness. The second Vatican Council declares that:

Celibacy is that precious gift of divine grace given to some by the Father to devote themselves to God alone more easily with an undivided heart. And this perfect continence for love of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in high esteem by the church as a sign and stimulus of love, and as a singular source of spiritual fertility in the world (Vatican Council: CC 42).

Thus, every person who wants to serve God as a priest in the Catholic church knows that he is bound to celibacy. And the non-conformity to this law is a transgression of the divine law. Adultery is linked to lust which the church regards as an inordinate act as it does not conform to the divinely ordained purpose of sexual pleasure.

Moreover, another aspect of the priest's sinful life is that he is a bad example of the weak. He is the only witness of God in that Godless state of

Tabasco yet, he tarnishes the image of the Church. According to the Christian concept, a witness is a believer who testifies the religious experience by his life, words and actions. He or she gives inspiration and is an example to others by his testimony. On the contrary, the unnamed priest is a “*whisky priest*” and worse, he has a daughter.

His life, words and actions do contrast with that of a good witness. Captain Fellows, the father of the child, Carol who hides the priest in a bar, wonders what kind of religion he belongs to. Likewise, one of the little girls of the pious mother who is reading the book about martyrdom of young Juan, holds a negative image of the priest “*He had a funny smell*” (Greene: 213). The use of the group of words “*funny smell*” is pregnant with meaning. Indeed, how can a man of God have a funny smell? Indeed, having such a smell means that the religious has tarnished his image and the image of God by his behavior. That is the reason why Maria couldn’t understand how this man could be a saint. She tells him that he is making people mock the church as he moves away from believers and Jesus. In fact, the priest is torn out between fear and desire, good and evil, the profane and the sacred.

The priest’s degradation really scandalizes the weak and his sin is all the more serious because it is against charity which demands self-restraint in order to protect others from spiritual harm. This obligation in charity is clear from the teaching of Saint Paul, who would not eat meat that is presented to idols so that he would not scandalize the weaker brothers: And in this way, you will be sinning against Christ, by sinning against your Christian brothers and wounding their weak conscience. So then, if food makes my brothers sin, I will never eat meat again, so as not to make my brother fall into sin (Cor: 12-13).

Therefore, the priest’s pride leads him to commit a series of sins without having the opportunity to receive the sacrament of reconciliation as there is no other priest. The confession would have cured him from the anguish caused by his numerous sins. Burdened with series of sins committed in Mexico, he gives way to despair.

Despair is a grave sin also connected to pride. It is the sin by which a person gives up all hope of salvation. Indeed, conscious of his sinful state, the priest thinks that he does not deserve God’s mercy. He thinks that his sins are too serious for God to forgive him. His most desperate sin is the fruit of adultery. Indeed, his illegitimate daughter always reminds him of his mortal sin and consequently throws him into despair.

## **II. The Traumatic Experience of Guilt**

Graham Greene’s novels have sometimes been regarded as obsessive expressions of his fragile psychological state of mind and many critics claim that Greene does not depict reality in his novels but projects his own vision of life. Richard Hoggart finds that:

In Greene’s novels we do not explore experience, we meet Graham Greene. We enter continual reservations about what is being done to

experience, but we find the novels up to a point arresting because they are forceful, melodramatic presentation of an imaginative personality (Hoggart. 1970: 33).

In almost all his work, Greene creates extreme situations which usually illustrate human anguish and question the teaching of the church, particularly the matter of human destiny. In *The Power and The Glory*, the protagonist's sentiment of guilt arises out of his main contraventions namely his fornication, the bad example he is for the believers, his tarnishing of the image of the church and the atrocities including the deaths he is responsible for in the villages.

First of all, the whisky priest's fornication constitutes the main cause of his anguish. As we have seen, adultery is one of the grave sins which, according to Christians, leads to death. So the priest suffers intensely from his sin from the beginning to the end of the novel because not only does the act bear a living fruit in the form of his daughter, Brigitta, but also he does not have the opportunity to confess and get absolution which would have liberated his conscience and cured him from the feeling of being guilty.

The unnamed priest's guilt feeling is manifested first through his avoiding of Maria's village for six years. When driven by the presence of the soldiers in his permanent flight, he is compelled to go there, he dives into despair which can be seen in the following line "And he was going back now to scene of his despair with a curious lightening of the heart" (Greene: 55). This passage shows that the priest is concerned with salvation and that he thinks of the consequences of his sin.

Besides, the hearing of the name Brigitta makes his heart jump. In other words, the name of Brigitta reminds him of his unworthy action as a religious man. Likewise, his culpability increases whenever he hears the word daughter. Indeed, the priest remains sick of everything related to his daughter or whatever is in connection with adultery or his unglorious past which tormented him. Talking about Greene's novels, Barnes asserts: Most of Greene's characters do reflect on the past and future. Ironically, their tormented minds neither accept the past nor look forward with serenity to the future; and they can escape the implications of neither. They must resign themselves not to a release, but to a torture, which involves past, present, and future – eternal time. Nearly all Greene's main characters reject their past, yet it is nevertheless the shaping influence of their character (1949: 197).

Actually, the priest is affected by his fornication so much so that he now on lives in an inner turmoil and this is well shown through his own repetitive admission, "I am not only a drunkard... I got a child" (122) and holds on the shame for this misdeed until the end of the novel. He can't stop thinking that he is to die in a state of mortal sin, reflecting then an unbearable situation, an emotional instability. It is in this sense that Georges Bataille's words are very relevant: « Je hais l'angoisse qui: a) me fatigue ; b) me rend la vie à charge, me laisse incapable de vivre ; c) me retire l'innocence »

(Bataille 1957 : 30).<sup>3</sup>

The priest's guilt also stems from his conscience of being a bad example for his parishioners. As a priest he should have been a witness of God, worthy to represent God's holiness, but on the contrary, he is aware that he is a bad priest and knows that he is nicknamed the whisky priest and worse of all, he sees in himself as "a damned man putting God into the mouths of men" (55). This is great suffering to him when we consider his past before the persecution and his concern for salvation. He knows what Jesus Christ says about scandal which is liable to cause spiritual harm: "If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied round his neck and be drowned in the deep sea" (Mt18,6).

Indeed, every Christian has the obligation to conform his life, words and actions to Jesus Christ's teachings, for this reason, obligations is greater for a priest because of his status. The whisky priest is conscious of his responsibility as the only priest in the state. He blames himself for his degradation as it can be seen in the following passage: "He had felt nothing but regret; it was difficult even to feel shame where no one blamed him. He was the only priest most of them had ever known – they took their standard of priesthood from him" (Greene: 61).

This is also a perfect illustration of the priest's sentiment of guilt stemming from his consciousness of the bad example he is. His inner feeling makes him wonder if it is not better to leave the country so that the believers would be free from his example.

In addition, the other cause of the priest's culpability is his endangering the villagers. After ten years of persecution, the governor hears that there is still a priest in the country, he orders more investigation. So, it is decided that hostages will be taken from villages and even killed so as to make people report him. But the villagers, faithful to their hope or not willing to involve themselves in the blood of martyrs would rather risk their lives than betray the deprived priest. Consequently, the parishioner, Pedro Montez is shot in Conception because the police have discovered the priest's mass wine reserve in his house. The priest's crying testifies that he is somehow responsible for Pedro Montez's death.

Moreover, in Maria's village, Minguél is taken as hostage in front of the priest whom the police fail to recognize. He finds many other hostages in the prison and this situation increases his sentiment of guilt which is well illustrated in the following passage: "Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for. It seemed to him a damnable mockery that they should sacrifice themselves for a whisky priest with a bastard child" (131). In

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3 "I hate the anxiety that, a) tires me; b) makes my life dependent, leaves me unable to live; c) takes away my innocence."

fact, it would be bearable if he did not feel so damned. Further, he makes the resolution not to be any more the cause of such sufferings: “He assured himself aloud: there were going to be no more hostages. If I have been seen I will give myself up. I assure you no one shall get into trouble because of me” (152).

This assertion shows how the protagonist feels guilty of the sufferings he causes to his parishioners. In a word, Greene’s main character suffers so much so that he thinks that it will be better to surrender instead of causing more harm to his people. A parallel can be drawn between the story of the unnamed priest and that of Scobie. Like the unnamed priest, Scobie used to be a model in his community. But, after the travel of his wife, he falls in love with Helen and dive into a series of sins. Being parted between his wife and Helen and refusing to harm each of them, Scobie prefers to sin and enters in a realm of total despair. He ends up in saying:

O God, I am the only guilty one because I have known the answers all the time. I have preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can’t observe your suffering.... You are ill at me. I can’t go on, month after month, insulting you (Greene 1948: 315).

Contrary to Scobie who ends up his life by killing himself, the unnamed priest gets despair but does not kill himself because as a religious man, he knows about the danger of killing oneself. Green tends to portray his characters as abnormal human beings by insisting on their flaws as Catholics. Talking about Graham Greene, Connolly asserts that:

In his books normality appears to be romantic folly, a mere mathematical average, an unattainable equilibrium, a bourgeois deception, an affront to reality, a sentimental prejudice” (18). Still, he mentions that “Greene has not yet shown us his saints, but he has furnished us with an impressive gallery of sinners” (18); considering the fact that “characters are as unnerved, exhausted and psychologically diseased as they are sinful” (18).

## **II. The State of Dereliction of Greene’s Character**

Dereliction is the state of someone who is left to himself as he is deprived of any divine assistance. In other words, a person is in dereliction when there is in his life an apparent silence of God. So, in *The Power and the Glory*, the unnamed priest seems totally lost after sinning not once but many times. Indeed, he has made the choice to resist persecutions in Mexico for God’s sake. But the Almighty let him experience horrible sufferings. Describing the psychological state of mind of Greene’s characters that may even bring the reader into consciousness. Indeed, Connolly remarks that “the emptiness of vice, the hell of the soul isolated from its divine affinity, the burning sense of loss which terrifies so many of Greene’s characters jolt even the unwary reader into a realization that man has a kind of existence, but no real being, apart from God” (19). In fact, the protagonist is living in a moral vacuum and in a constant fear of God’s punishment.

For instance, after years of endurance he tries to escape because his

life is in danger. He misses the ship as he wants to perform his priesthood duties. The hearing of the general Obregon's siren illustrates his despair: "He knew what it meant: the ship had kept to time-table: he was abandoned. He felt an unwilling hatred of the child ahead of him and the sick woman – he was unworthy of what he carried" (Greene 1970: 13).

Additionally, Graham Greene's protagonist has come to the conclusion that he is wretched. The priest holds this sentiment of wretchedness throughout the novel. This feeling increases his anxiety which is the main cause of his suffering. But, the most striking thing is when he doubts about God's mercy expressed through the following passage:

I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful the human heart looks to him. But I do know this – that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too. He said slowly: I wouldn't want it to be any different. I just want justice, that's all (194).

Definitely the priest feels himself damned. This is because he is anxious that he is going to die without absolution. Therefore, this anxiety is acute as he realizes that he is close to death. It will be easier for him if he has a mere sign of God to console and encourage him but God seems to be absent. So, he thinks that all he has done so far is nothing but harm which can be seen in the following:

He thought: if I hadn't been useless, useless... The eight hard hopeless years seemed to him to be only a caricature of service: a few communions, a few confessions, and endless bad examples. He thought: If I had only one soul to offer, so that I could say, look what I've done ... people had died for him, they had deserved a saint, and a tinge of bitterness spread across his mind for their sake that God hadn't thought fit to send them one... He thought of the cold faces of saints rejecting him (202).

Actually, the priest will so humble if he feels himself worthy. In other terms, if he has the assurance that his life is not so imperfect. The experience of dereliction heightens the priest's anguish. It leads him to realize his wretchedness and believes he is damned, being therefore in a state of total despair. Peace of the mind is very significant and important for Greene who constantly believes that salvation is the only way out for the believer. The priest has frightfully been tormented in the depths of his being by suffering from the fact of having a daughter, which in fact, is not permitted by the Catholic religion.

## **Conclusion**

Graham Greene's characters are always obsessed by the question of salvation. In other terms, the problem of the individual destiny after death is at the central core of his writings. In almost all his works, Greene has managed to show how his characters are parted between two forces: Good and evil and how they have tried to survive in such an environment. For Greene, sin is permanently present everywhere in human life and it depresses him and as Charles Moeller remarks:

Avec Graham Greene, le véritable visage du mal se révèle: c'est le péché, présent partout, dans le temps, parce qu'il souille l'enfance, dans l'espace parce que la même cruauté et violence qui ravage les écoles se retrouve dans les grandes cités et les plus lointains pays du monde (Moeller 1967: 287).<sup>4</sup>

The above assertion is a perfect illustration of Greene's obsession of evil especially of sin. He introduces his anguish of sin and damnation in all his novels. As a true Catholic, Greene raises consciousness by highlighting the religious principles and by displaying the characters flaws. By dealing with the issue of salvation, he shows that "by prayers and sacrifices one soul can succeed in lifting the burden which weighs on the liberty of another" (More 1951: 55). It is only through prayers and sacrifices by doing good all-around, by breaking with sin and by welcoming grace that one can get redemption and salvation. As More points it out,

it is an experience infinitely more tormenting, for to lose one's peace is a rather negative expression which leaves the imagination without representations, while the concept of damnation soon evokes all kinds of moral and physical punishments, the thought of which tortures the soul (58).

By putting the stress on the psychological state of mind of the main protagonist, we have tried to show how man can be attracted by the pleasures of life which ultimately lead him to the life of a sinner, living astray from God. Suffering, dereliction, abandonment, torments of every kind are the marks of the priest's psychological situation. In a nutshell, Greene often creates in his fiction a corrupted world filled with sin and his fictional characters hover between damnation and salvation, hence his pessimistic view of the world.

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4 With Graham Greene, the true face of evil is revealed: it is sin, ubiquitous in time, as it stains childhood, and in space, because the same cruelty and violence that ravage schools are found in major cities and the furthest countries of the world.

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