

## THE EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS VIEWS IN GRAHAM GREENE'S NOVELS

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## ABSTRACT

This article gives basic information about Graham Greene's work, especially his major novels, reveals his probing interest in religious matters. His writing indicates that throughout his career he has found himself involved in essential - and often paradoxical questions concerning religious faith, particularly as these questions impinge on the twentieth-century mind. In this article some of Greene's paradoxical views on religious matters are explored in a more universal and anti-institutional context than the strictly Roman Catholic one in which his work is usually examined as exemplars of Greene's work in which religious paradoxes are central, Brighton Rock, The Power and the Glory and Monsignor Quixote are discussed.

This article underscores the fact that Greene has almost single-handedly redefined twentieth-century Roman Catholic notions on piety with his constant revelation that pious people often lack charity while salvation is possible for sinners. It also shows that Greene's novels radically question the doctrines on morality espoused by conventional churches, thereby displaying his own religious sensitivity and courage.

**Key words:** *Religious views, Catholic novels, paradox, conflict, Catholic period, spiritual resurrection.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene was born in 1904 and died in 1992. He established his reputation as an entertaining and accomplished writer, known for his literary adroitness and flair for story-telling. His career was long and prolific. Greene published for more than half a century, a rare achievement indeed. In all, over forty works in different genres, flowed from his pen. He is in fact one of the few twentieth century authors with an international audience. Greene's work, especially his major novels, reveals his probing interest in religious matters. His writing indicates that throughout his career he has found himself involved in essential - and often paradoxical - issues concerning religious faith, particularly as these issues impinge on the twentieth-century mind. His major novels thus constitute a substantial documentation of man's spiritual condition in the twentieth century. They portray people who, caught in the turmoil and flux of modern events, and wrought to the limits of their spiritual strength, exist in states between belief and unbelief, hope and despair, commitment and uncommitment, and who solitary, and unsure, victims of their times as they are, seem often to be echoing D.H. Lawrence's cry of anguish and despair: "Give us gods, O give them us".

Although most of Greene's major characters are or were Catholics, this does not make the author a "Catholic writer", one who expounds or promotes the doctrines of Catholic teaching, as many critics have tended to label him. Greene himself repeatedly and adamantly denied being a "Catholic writer", because such a classification limits the scope of his vision and casts doubt on the objectivity of his work. Despite Greene's own protestations about not being a Catholic writer, Owen Williams (1997:7) in a recent review still maintains that "although this was very far from his intention, he became in his lifetime the best-known English language layman of the Catholic Church". Nevertheless, Greene's career can usefully be divided into three periods: the pre-Catholic period, the Catholic period, and the post-Catholic period, a tripartite arrangement, however, that is neither clear-cut nor exclusive. The belief, held by many critics, that the novels reflect Greene's own religious stance and coincide with his active participation in Roman Catholicism or his withdrawal from it, is refuted by the fact that all the novels of the so-called "pre-Catholic period" appeared after Greene had joined the Catholic

church in 1926. On the other hand, the first of the “Catholic novels”, *Brighton Rock*, was published in 1938 – twelve years after Greene had become a Catholic.

The extremely brief introduction to the obituaries to Graham Greene in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Anon, 1992:285) singles out religious interest as the hallmark of Greene’s work: “Greene was renowned for exploring religious themes in his work”. Cf. Also the view expressed in *The New York Times* (Anon., 1992:290): “Greene was often labelled a Roman Catholic writer, a description which annoyed him but nevertheless colored understanding of his work. He was indeed a convert to Catholicism and he did deal with doctrinal issues, but he insisted that he was not a church publicist.”

The division into these three periods may, nevertheless, be made because of discernible differences in Greene’s approach to religious matters in the various periods. In the novels of his pre-Catholic period, religious concerns do not play as prominent a part as in, for instance, the four major novels of the Catholic period. The delineation of religious concerns, often of a paradoxical nature, finds its fullest and most varied expression in the so-called Catholic period. In the novels of the so-called post-Catholic period the conflict widens to encompass a conflict between commitment and uncommitment, involvement and uninvolvedness, or vacuity as opposed to the need for some kind of faith. Paradox strongly underpins even Greene’s last works, as *Travels with my Aunt* (1969) and the shorter novel, *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), amply demonstrate.

## II. METHODOLOGY

As we come to the style or methodology of Graham’s creative work, he wrote many novels on religious paradoxes. His most popular three novels were about religious views and matters. In his doctoral thesis, *Paradox in the Novels of Graham Greene* Ingrid Bonanni traces in Greene’s autobiographical works his “lifelong interest in paradox and his duality on most issues”, a duality which she rightly ascribes to his unhappy youth. Greene’s first twelve years were relatively happy until he became a boarder at Berkhamsted school where his father was headmaster. He could not adapt to a situation where home and school were under one roof. Bonanni (1991:1) usefully defines paradox, and especially Greene’s use of it, as follows:

... this is the nature of paradox: as an apparent contradiction in terms, to use the well-worn definition, it raises issues that defy simple resolution. Paradox, specifically the often clashing paradoxes that Greene employed in his novels, finds its end, not in any reconciliation of opposed issues, but rather in realizing the irreconcilability of fundamental conflicts. The final answer, then, is that there is no final answer. Or if there is one, only God knows it.

In this article I intend exploring some of Greene’s paradoxical views on religious matters in a more universal and anti-institutional context than the strictly Roman Catholic one in which his work is usually examined. As exemplars of Greene’s work in which religious paradoxes are central *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *Monsignor Quixote* will be discussed.

Although *Brighton Rock*, the first novel of Greene’s so-called Catholic period, can be read as a detective story, it is “almost belligerently religious in theme” (Stratford, 1967:166). This novel was a turning point for Greene in that he had discovered that “a Catholic is more capable of evil than anyone” (BR:309), since, *Brighton Rock* - henceforth referred to as BR.

Religious paradoxes in Graham Greene’s novels in the words of McGowan (1955:27), “he reached the distinction of good and evil from right and wrong”, in itself a paradoxical metaphysical statement, underpinning once again Greene’s profound, but essentially anguished, wrestling with (paradoxical) religious concepts.

In *Brighton Rock*, like in the novels of the pre-Catholic period, Greene again depicted a fallen world and unheroic characters without condemning them for their forfeit of grace. The plot centres in the actions of the seventeen years-old Pinkie Brown, the leader of a racing gang, and his efforts to conceal a murder. In the process he marries an innocent girl, Rose, to prevent her from giving evidence against him in court. He makes a suicide pact with Rose from which he intends withdrawing after her death. Ida, a goodtime girl, catches up with the couple in time to save Rose. This causes Pinkie to commit suicide by throwing vitriol over himself and then jumping over the cliffs, dying a terrible death.

The three main characters themselves reflect conflicting attitudes. Ida believes in life, Rose in religion, while Pinkie reveals a conscious willed unbelief. Pinkie, however, constitutes the novel's real religious paradox. He believes, but sets himself up against his belief. His is the tragedy of a Faustus, though on a smaller scale, a man who knows which way salvation lies and yet deliberately opposes himself to Divine injunctions. He tries to assert his own individuality, his own ego and personality, against Divine authority. For example, he believes in hell rather than in heaven: "Heaven was a word: hell was something he could trust". Greene ironically adapting Wordsworth, states: "hell lay about him in his infancy". Yet, despite all Pinkie's efforts to deny his faith, he cannot get rid of his Roman Catholicism, which in its music and rituals, for instance, constantly affects his thoughts and deeds.

Greene himself regarded the mysteriousness of Divine grace as the theme of this novel: *Brighton Rock* is written in such a way that people could plausibly imagine that Pinkie went to hell, and then I cast doubt upon it in the ending. The real theme... is embodied in the priest's phrase at the end of *Brighton Rock*: 'You can't conceive, my child, nor can anyone, the ... appalling strangeness of the mercy of God' (Philips, 1973:173).

A reader who understands Greene's preoccupation with the paradoxical nature of religion, as well as with the anti-hero, a man stripped of all his finery and superficial civilization, will not regard Pinkie as beyond God's mercy. It may therefore be conceded that, however evil his life might have been, his earthly destruction may lead to his spiritual resurrection. In this regard Greene shows an affinity with the seventeenth-century Jansenists, whom McEwan (1988:14) regards as "somewhat heretical Catholics" who stressed that only the "completely mysterious workings of divine grace" can save human beings from hell. The Priest tries to console Rose when she goes to confession after Pinkie's death by reminding her of Peguy, who could not "bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation" (BR:308). He also remarks "We must hope and pray ... hope and pray. The Church does not demand that we believe any soul is cut off from mercy".

To conclude, *Brighton Rock* marked a new literary direction for Greene. Here, more distinctly than in the previous novels, the conflicts between belief and unbelief come into focus, and the many facets of these conflicts, the ironic ambiguities and paradoxes, are examined and evaluated more intensely and satisfyingly than ever before.

### III. ANALYSIS

Greene's next novel, *The Power and the Glory*, "a pre-eminently religious novel" (Lamba, 1987:58), exposes conditions in Tabasco, a small state in Mexico, where priests were persecuted with pitiless cruelty by the totalitarian, anti-religious regime which took over the province in 1917. The central opposing characters are an unnamed Whisky Priest, who sometimes assumes the name Montez, and a similarly unnamed Lieutenant of the Police. *The Power and the Glory* is divided into four parts. The first introduces the Whisky Priest, who has been a fugitive for eight years, while trying to escape from the country where he has remained as the last priest, following the execution or defection of the others. The second part shows the Priest's return to his native

village, where he meets his illegitimate daughter, Brigitta, and narrowly escapes arrest by the Lieutenant. The Priest is later arrested for breaking the anti-liquor laws and spends a night in prison. The third part chronicles the Priest's betrayal by the mestizo who wants to get a reward promised by the Lieutenant. The fourth part of the novel reports the last conversation between the Priest and the Lieutenant before the Priest is executed. Significantly, *The Power and the Glory* resembles Greene's preceding works, especially *Brighton Rock*. The theme of pursuit is again developed against a vividly authentic background which, because of the violence and poverty that are to become increasingly typical of Greene's fallen world, critics have dubbed "Greeneland" - much to Greene's own dismay. Nevertheless, in *The Power and the Glory* the theme of pursuit takes on a deeper significance than in *Brighton Rock*.

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS

In the later novel the Priest serves as the main embodiment of belief and the Lieutenant of unbelief or atheism. The fact that both are nameless indicates the universality of the conflict they represent. In his early criticism of the novel De Vitis (1964:89) rightly regarded *The Power and the Glory* as a consistent allegory on the theme of *Everyman*, while Karl Patten (1957:233) commended Greene for his increasing symbolism: "if the priest is an *Everyman* who is to be related, by suggestion, to Christ, then the Lieutenant is to be understood as a Saul of Tarsus".

The Priest himself is a paradoxical figure. Friedman (1990:136), for instance, notes in him a "double rhythm of hope and despair, action and passivity, vaunting ambition and victimization, longing for escape and for capture, obsession equally with the diurnal and the transcendent moment". In addition, Greene convincingly makes use of sustained paradox to contrast the Priest, an earthly, fallible human being, prone to the sins of all his parishioners and tending to relapse in performing his religious duties, with the Lieutenant, who leads a puritanical life and is dedicated to his secular ideals. No better description of the Priest's fall from grace can be given than that presented in his confession to the Lieutenant: 'That other priest was right. It was when he left I began to go to pieces. One thing went after another. I got careless about my duties. I began to drink. It would have been much better, I think, if I had gone too. Because 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' (PG: 235-236).

Greene compounds the irony of the Priest's confession in that it is to the Lieutenant, the Priest's arch enemy, himself a proud man, and a committed unbeliever. Indeed, the Lieutenant is much more like an ideal priest than the Priest himself. Greene emphasizes the Lieutenant's chastity, honesty, asceticism, and dedication: his room is like "a monastic cell" (PG:23), "[himself he felt no need of women" (PG:21); and there "was something of a priest in his intent observant walk - a theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again" (PG:23).

The creation of the Lieutenant is one of Greene's finest achievements. Dedicated, high-minded, he is a worthy opponent of the Priest. His actions are selfless and in a paradoxical sense impeccably moral, as an abstract of his aims illuminates: ... it was for these [the children] he was fighting. He would eliminate from his childhood everything which had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes - first the Church and then the foreigner and then the politician (PG:65).

However, even in the moments of the Priest's degradation, as in the prison scene, Greene underscores the indestructibility of the Priest's faith, as opposed to the awareness of lack of faith in the Lieutenant: It

infuriated him to think that there were still people who believed in a loving and merciful God. There are mystics who are said to have experienced God directly. He was a mystic, too, and what he had experienced was vacancy a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all. He knew (PG:23). The Lieutenant's noble idea to create a just society is in itself paradoxical: his endeavours to establish a just and peaceful society simply lead to suffering and cruelty. The Lieutenant, however, cannot be regarded as unfeeling. His harshness results from his belief that the church is directly accountable for the unjust

society. He sees in the priesthood a corrupt system which favours only the few, and because he wants to wipe out clericalism, he orders the taking and shooting of hostages. Yet he is simultaneously capable of charity, as in his offer to allow Padre Jose hear the Priest's confession. The Priest, on the other hand, expresses the theodicy of the novel when he argues in a sermon to the persecuted Christians that suffering and pain have to be endured on earth to move us nearer to the ultimate and all-inclusive good: "He was talking about heaven, standing between them and the candles in the ragged peon trousers and tom shirt ... He said: 'One of the Fathers has told us that joy always depends on pain. Pain is part of joy'" (PG:79).

Conversely, the Lieutenant's pursuit of the church arouses a feeling of compassion in the Priest; for example, when in the darkness and stench of the prison,

"he was moved by an enormous and irrational affection for the inhabitants of this prison. A phrase came to him: 'God so loved the world (PG:151). He is no longer proud and smug: "He had a sense of companionship which he had never experienced in the old days when pious people came kissing his black cotton glove" (PG:153). Then he felt "no pity at all" (PG:157), but "in his corruption" (PG:166) he learns.

Significantly, the Lieutenant serves to ennoble the Priest by stopping the latter's further degradation and forcing him to recognize his own weaknesses. Moreover, in his last moments the Priest realizes that he has failed his mission on earth, but in this realization he achieves his spiritual apotheosis: "Tears poured down his face; he was not at the moment afraid of damnation - even the fear of pain was in the background. He only felt an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all" (PG:253). With the Priest's death at the end of the novel, Greene deftly resolves the conflict between the two protagonists.

When the Priest dies and the Lieutenant seems to be victorious, we have the inversion, the arrival of a new priest. The church triumphs and the title of the novel asserts itself: for Thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory. The Power and the Glory is a remarkable achievement, in the words of John Updike (1990:16): "The Power and the Glory is generally agreed to be Graham Greene's masterpiece, the book of his held highest in popular as well as critical esteem". There is not perhaps any development of character: The Whisky Priest and the Lieutenant are fixed in their mould from the beginning. They are, however, convincingly drawn and their actions motivated. The Whisky Priest comes alive as a tenacious man of God, despite his frailties and abject condition, while the Lieutenant is presented as a high-minded ascetic, dedicated to his radical mission in life. It is indeed a moving and thought-provoking novel.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has underscored that Greene has almost single-handedly redefined twentieth-century Roman Catholic notions on piety with his constant revelation of the essential paradox that "the greatest saints are the people with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious people only escaped sanctity with the greatest difficulty" (Simon, 1952:75). Simon's early observation may be extended to view Pinkie, the Whisky Priest, and to a lesser degree Monsignor Quixote and Sancho, as characters

who are touched with grace, while the Lieutenant as well as the Bishop and Father Herrera should be seen as devoid of charity and compassion. This paradoxical view of characters is quite convincing, although “uncomfortable” (McEwan, 1988:14). Greene has thus contributed to the idea of a new humble, “imperial” Roman Catholic Church.

These novels also reveal that Greene’s commitment is to life, life lived to the full and not to a sterile, dogmatic kind of life. Greene constantly attacks self-righteousness, thereby displaying his own religious sensitivity and courage. Greene’s novels thus radically question the doctrines on morality espoused by conventional churches.

I agree also with Sharrock’s (1984:82) view that in Greene’s novels “there is always a tension, a peculiarly English tension, not simply between the world and the spirit, but between two equally balanced and desperately antagonistic points of view”. This tension between paradoxical values is noticeable in the work of a vast number of English writers, for instance Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and William Golding.

In other words, Greene has throughout his literary career employed paradox to reveal the density and duality of morality and ethics. His novels thus “extend and clarify our understanding of the world of his imagination and they furnish a coherent view of human nature in all its paradoxes and contradictions” (Sherry, 1989:228). In the words of Salvatore (1988:15) Greene’s “characters speak so that the reader may perceive and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of many different life categories”.

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