

Paradox and Irony in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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Received: 04 July 2026; Received in revised form: 29 July 2026; Accepted: 03 Aug 2026; Available online: 08 Aug 2026 Keywords— Paradox, Irony, Grace, Sin, Christian Realism. ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).	Graham Greene's <i>The Power and the glory</i>, arguably his boldest and most penetrating exploration of faith, stands as a masterwork of paradox and irony. Through the deeply flawed figures of the whisky priest and Marxist Lieutenant, Greene dismantles the traditional Judeo-Christian assumption that redemption is attainable only through a state of grace. Instead, he proposed a radical inversion: spiritual clarity and salvation emerge through human weakness, bodily desire, and moral failure. This paper examines how Greene's ironic vision transforms sin into the ground of grace, revealing a theology in which spiritual sanity arises not from purity, but from the struggle with imperfection. By tracing the priest's evolution from prideful cleric to "glorified sinner," and the Lieutenant's journey from ideological certainty to existential disillusionment, this study argues that Greene positions sin as the crucible of spiritual awakening. Situating the novel within Greene's historical, cultural, and religious contexts, this paper contends that Greene is one of the twentieth century's most incisive Christian realists, misunderstood precisely because of his sophisticated use of paradox and irony as tools for realism and spiritual inquiry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's *The Power and the glory* (1940), henceforth (TPG), stands as one of his most daring and theologically provocative explorations of faith, sin, and spiritual glory. Set in the small Mexican state of Tabasco during the Cristero War (1926–1929), the novel dramatizes the violent conflict between the Church and State after the Mexican government outlawed Catholicism. At its center is an unnamed Catholic priest, known only as the whisky priest, who becomes a fugitive, caught between the instinct for self-preservation and the demands of his vocation. As he navigates the treacherous landscape at the heart of the rainy season, he confronts his own failures, desires, and moral contradictions. Along the way, he encounters characters such as Coral Fellows, Mr. Tench, the Half-Caste, and the Lieutenant whose

ideological zeal drives him to "make a massacre for their sakes - first the Church and then the foreigner and the politician" (Greene p. 54). The novel closes with the Priest's execution, yet the Lieutenant's victory is hollow. The fervour that once animated his mission dissipates, leaving him spiritually diminished.

Understanding the issues raised in this paper requires situating the novel within its historical and artistic context. Greene's reputation as either a "Catholic writer" or "a writer who happens to be Catholic" has long shaped the reception of his work. As Valverde and Bosco (2019) observed, Greene's novels are frequently interpreted through the lens of his religious preoccupations, with critics attempting to categorize his theological affiliations and moral concerns. Whether in *Brighton rock*, *The End of the affair*,

The Heart of the matter, or *TPG*, Greene persistently interrogates the role of the Church, the nature of belief, and the paradoxes of humans striving toward God. Like Pinkie, Sarah, and Scobie, the whisky priest embodies Greene's fascination with the tensions between sin and sanctity, faith and despair, human frailty, and divine mercy.

The controversial yet realistic themes in *TPG* reflect Greene's conviction that "God can re-cycle sin in a mysterious way to make it work for good," a view Barbara wall identifies as central to the novel (Sherry, 1989, p. 34). Mark Bosco similarly notes that Greene's "Catholic consciousness" is a recurrent thematic concern, especially in *TPG*, where the Priest wrestles with despair, guilt, and the desire for meaning (2004, p. 51). Unsurprisingly, Greene's portrayal of the Judeo-Christian tradition has provoked both admiration and condemnation. In 1939, two Catholic bishops in France denounced the novel: in 1953, Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo condemned it as "paradoxical" and morally dangerous, while Cardinal Griffin¹ criticized its "erotic passages" as harmful to the young (Sherry, 1974, p. 42). Early critics often read Greene's work through the lens of Catholic dogma, attributing his moral concerns to his conversion, his marriage to the devout Vivien Dayrell-Browning, and his spiritual conflicts. Cedric Watts observes that Greene's imagination became "preoccupied with the debate between Catholicism, skepticism, and communism" (Watts, p.87). Bosco adds that religious critics struggled to accept Greene's paradoxical inversion of Catholic doctrine (2004, p. 52). Greene himself rejected such labels; as Maria Couto records, he insisted, "Those who say I am a Jansenist have not read theology... I don't believe in such a thing as hell" (1988)².

Later criticism of the 1990s cast Greene as agnostic, Jansenist, or even anti-Semitic, pointing to his creation of "perverse saintly heroes" like the whiskey priest. However, these critiques overlook Greene's artistic intention to take his protagonists

through unorthodox, confrontational journeys toward assumed sainthood. Whether Greene's Catholicism is unorthodox or misunderstood, his contribution to debates on the Church's role in human spiritual and psychological growth remains profound. As Pope Paul VI remarked, parts of Greene's work "are certain to offend some Catholics," yet they illuminate the paradox of humanity's quest for salvation amid natural desire (Sherry, 1989, p. 43). This paper argues that Greene's sustained "argument for the virtue of disloyalty" (Valverde & Bosco, 2019) is central to his use of paradox as both a narrative strategy and thematic core.

Paradox in Greene's Catholic novels is not merely stylistic; it is prophetic. In an era marked by debates over sexuality, identity, and ecclesial authority, Greene's exploration of moral ambiguity and divine mercy is strikingly contemporary. His depiction of "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" (De Vitis, 1986, p. 66) resonates with modern readers navigating the tensions between doctrine and lived experience.

The Power and the glory present a paradoxical and ironic exploration of faith, sin, and redemption. Greene challenges the Judeo-Christian belief that redemption requires a state of grace; instead, he suggests that spiritual awakening emerges through the pursuit of natural instincts and confrontation with human frailty. In this sense, Greene aligns with postmodern notions of unstable truth and fractured identity. The whisky priest becomes a glorified sinner whose salvation is forged through weakness, while the Marxist Lieutenant inadvertently reveals the priest's destiny through cruelty. Spiritual sanity arises, therefore, not from purity but from the struggle with bodily desire. To Greene, *grace is in sin, or, differently, through sin you shall find grace*.

By situating the novel within Greene's historical context and contemporary moment, Greene stands as a towering literary futurist and one of the most incisive Christian realists of the twentieth

¹ For detailed accounts of Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo's 1953 condemnation of the novel as "paradoxical" and morally dangerous, and Cardinal Bernard Griffin's criticism of its "erotic passages", see Sherry, N. (1994). *The life of Graham Greene: Volume 2, 1939-1955*. Janathan Cape.

² Jansenism is a school of thought that believes in the existence of hell. Postulated from the preaching of the

English Flemish theologian and Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jasen, it argued in favour of absolute predestination, where humans are conceived as incapable of doing good without God's unsolicited grace and only a few are believed to receive salvation. This notion is one of the controversies about Greene's Catholicism. See Maria couto's *The Solitude of a writer* (p. 420-22).

century. As François Mauriac observed, Greene's fiction enables readers "to rediscover Christian faith," offering solutions to the problems of grace and salvation that transcend "the rigid categories of theologians and casuists" (Maria Couto, 1988, p.65). Ultimately, Greene's paradoxical imagination, his use of irony as both realism and enchanted grove, reveals a God whose love operates not through perfection but through a broken, restless human heart.

II. GREENE'S RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION: CONTEXT, CONTROVERSY, AND CATHOLIC NONCONSCIOUSNESS

As discussed in the Introduction, Greene's Catholic imagination is neither doctrinal nor devotional. It is paradoxical, subversive, and deeply realistic. Across works such as *Brighton rock*, *The End of the affair*, *The Heart of the matter*, and TPG, Greene interrogates the limits of institutional religion and the complexities of a person's relationship with God. His protagonists, Pinkie, Sarah, Scobie, and the whiskey priest, are not paragons of virtue, but deeply flawed individuals whose spiritual journeys unfold through sin, desire, and moral failure. As Bosco (2004) notes, Greene's "Catholic consciousness" is not a celebration of orthodoxy but an exploration of the tension between divine mercy and human frailty.

This paradoxical theology, which A. A. De Vitis (1986 p. 66) calls "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God", is central to Greene's narrative method. His fiction challenges the assumption that spiritual truth is found with purity or doctrinal certainty. Instead, Greene suggests that grace emerges through cracks in human weakness and that spiritual authenticity is forged in the struggle with desire, guilt, and failure. In this sense, Greene's Catholic imagination is profoundly modern, anticipating contemporary debates on sexuality, identity, and ecclesial authority. His exploration of moral ambiguity and divine mercy resonates with twenty-first-century readers navigating tensions between doctrine and lived experience.

Understanding *The Power and the glory* requires situating the novel within the turbulent historical and cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Mexico. Greene's 1938 journey through the country, commissioned by *The London times* to report on religious persecution, exposed him to the aftermath of the Cristero War (1926–1929), a violent conflict between the Mexican government and Catholic insurgents who resisted anti-clerical legislation. The state of Tabasco, where Greene sets the novel, is among the most aggressive anti-religious regions.³ The conversation between the dentist and "the stranger" at the port reveals the nature of the ongoing violence against the Church: the Priest is in disguise, hoping to escape with the Obregon to Vera Cruz, Lopez is shot to help people out, and the Church has been transformed into a treasury. (Greene, 2019). Under the governorship of Tomás Garrido Canabal, churches were burned or converted into government buildings, priests were hunted, and public worship outlawed. Greene later described the region as the fiercest persecution of religion since the reign of Elizabeth (Sherry, 1989)

This historical background shapes the novel's atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and spiritual desolation. The opening scene, Mr. Tench walking past the old church and now converted into a treasury, symbolizes the collapse of institutional religion and the displacement of spiritual authority by political power. The government's ban on sacraments and consequences portrayed through the pious woman in the prison cell, its forced marriages of priests like Jose, and its execution of clergy reflect the real policies of the Mexican state during the 1920s and the 1930s (Greene, 2019). Greene's depiction of the Lieutenant's ideological zeal echoes the rhetoric of revolutionary leaders, who viewed the Church as an obstacle to social progress, associating Catholicism with superstition, poverty, and colonial oppression. He thinks that 'The gringo' is less dangerous than the Priest. 'A man like that, . . . does no real harm. A few men dead. We shall all have to die. We do better when we catch one of these [the Priest]. Greene observes:

³ Under Governor Tomas Garrido Canabal, Tabasco became the epicenter of Mexico's most militant anti-religious campaign: churches were burned or converted into state buildings, priests were hunted, and public worship was outlawed. Greene later characterized the region's repression

as the fiercest persecution of religion since the reign of Elizabeth I, a judgment recorded by Sherry (1989) and consistent with the violence depicted in *The Power and the glory*.

"There was something disinterested in his ambition: a kind of virtue in his desire to catch the sleek-respected guest of the first communion party" (2019, p. 17). The above quotation creates the stage for the dramatic and verbal irony that occurs during the encounter between the state and the church in the last chapters of the novel, where the Lieutenant becomes the facilitator for the priest's journey to spiritual sanity and continuation of the glory.

However, Greene's Mexico is not merely a historical setting; it is also a moral and spiritual landscape. Oppressive heat, relentless rain, swamps and jungles, and dilapidated villages create a physical environment that mirrors the characters' internal struggles. In response to Coral's curiosity as to why he prefers rain, he says, 'Oh no, no. They mean another six months living like this' (2019, p.35). Geography becomes a metaphor for Priest's spiritual journey: muddy, treacherous, and marked by moments of unexpected grace. As critics have noted, Greene's Mexico is less a realistic portrait than a symbolic terrain, a "Greeneland" where moral ambiguity and spiritual longing coexist (De Vitis, 1986 p.66).

The Cristero War also provided an ideological framework for Lieutenant's character. His Marxist convictions, hatred of the Church, and belief in a future free from superstition reflect the revolutionary ethos of post-revolutionary Mexico⁴. His desire to "give the people the whole world" by eradicating religion echoes the utopian promises of socialist reformers. Stirred by Luis and his friends and his own childhood, the Lieutenant vows to "eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, [including] all that was poor, superstitious, and corrupt. They deserve nothing less than the truth. . ." (Greene, 2019 p. 54). However, Greene complicates this ideological certainty by revealing Lieutenant's moral contradictions: his compassion for children, his personal austerity, and his growing discomfort with the violence he commits by killing his own people.

The historical conflict between the Church and the State thus becomes a stage on which Greene explores the paradoxes of justice, authority, and moral responsibility.

Greene's portrayal of the whisky priest also draws from historical accounts of fugitive clergy, who continued to minister in secret despite the threat of execution. Priests often ministered clandestinely, traveling from village to village to baptize, hear confessions, and celebrate Mass, even at the risk of their lives⁵ (Pius XI, 1932/2012; Parsons, 1936). Greene's priest, however, is not a heroic martyr in the traditional sense; he is burdened by sin, fear, and self-loathing. By placing such a flawed figure within the historically authentic context of persecution, Greene challenges the narratives of martyrdom and sanctity. The story of Young Juan and his martyrdom sound unrealistic. Sent to report himself, Luis tells his father 'My mother told me to tell you that I told her that I did not believe that the book she was reading . . . ' His father's effort to paint a good picture of the past does not change his perception. 'But this Juan,' the boy said, 'He sounds silly' (Greene, 2019 p. 47).

The cultural context of rural Mexico enriches this novel's thematic complexity. The villagers' mix of superstition, fatalism, and devotion reflects the syncretic nature of Mexican Catholicism. Their longing for sacraments, even when administered by morally compromised priests like Padre Jose and the whisky priest, reveals the deep spiritual hunger that persists despite political repression. Greene's depiction of people's suffering, poverty, and resilience underscores the novel's central paradox that grace often emerges in the most desolate and unlikely places.

In *The Power and the glory*, the historical and cultural context is not merely a background, but an integral part of Greene's exploration of sin, grace, and redemption. The Cristero War creates external

⁴ The ideological roots of post, revolutionary anti, clericalism, including Marxist, influenced hostility toward the Church and the state's vision of a secular "modern" Mexico, are well documented in historical studies of the Cristero War. See Meyer, J. A. (1976). *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican people between Church and State, 1926-1929*. Cambridge University Press; and Butler, M. (2004). *The Cristero Rebellion: conflict, and the struggle for public life in Mexico*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ As Pius XI (1932/2012) observed in *Accerba Animi*, priests who remained in hiding "succeeded in effectively encouraging the faithful, and in secretly administering the holy sacrament," a reality echoed by Parsons (1936), who described clergy traveling in disguise from village to village to baptize, hear confessions, and celebrate Mass at the risk of their lives.

conflict, but the novel's true drama unfolds in the interior struggles of its characters. Greene uses the historical persecution of the Church not to celebrate institutional religion but to reveal the fragility and persistence of faith in a world marked by violence, desire, and moral ambiguity. The result is a narrative that transcends its historical moment, offering timeless meditation on the human condition and the paradoxical nature of spiritual salvation.

III. CHRISTIAN REALISM

The Power and the glory is deeply rooted in the intellectual and theological traditions of Christian realism, a framework most closely associated with Reinhold Niebuhr⁶. Christian realism rejects idealized visions of human nature and emphasizes the inescapable tension between moral aspiration and human frailty. Greene's fiction embodies this worldview with a remarkable clarity. His characters are not moral exemplars but conflicted, wounded individuals whose spiritual journeys unfold through failure, desire, and contradiction. In *TPG*, Greene uses the whisky priest's moral collapse and reluctant perseverance to dramatize the paradox at the heart of Christian realism: that grace often emerges not despite human weakness, but through it.

In *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene employs Christian Realism to expose the paradox and irony of human weakness. The whisky priest, flawed, yet compassionate, demonstrates how failure can become a channel of grace. By contrast, Lieutenant's rigid pursuit of justice reveals how strength blinds itself to mercy. Their foils, figures who trivialize faith or cling to hollow virtue, intensify these tensions, underscoring Greene's central claim that divine power is most vividly revealed not in human perfection but in the fractured contradictions of human frailty.

Whisky priests are quintessential Christian realist protagonists. He is painfully and "desperately

inadequate," as Greene describes him (Greene, 2019, p. 79). His alcoholism, sexual transgression, cowardice, and pride put him far from the traditional image of a saint. However, Greene refuses to portray these flaws as disqualifying: Instead, it becomes the terrain on which the priest's spiritual awakening unfolds. Greene's portrayal of spiritual crisis is deeply rooted in a theological vision in which despair becomes the beginning of grace. As Karl (1972) notes, Greene believed that "when a man finally reaches the state of despair he decides to surrender to the will of God," a conviction that resonates strongly with Augustine's confession that the human heart remains restless until it rests in God⁷.

The paradoxical view that sin is a doorway to grace is central to Greene's theological imagination. The whisky priest's failures do not render him spiritually sterile; rather, they eliminate the illusions of self-sufficiency that often accompany religious authority. His pride, which he identifies as "the sin by which angels fell," becomes a flaw that forces him into self-examination (Greene, 2019, p. 92). His alcoholism, which humiliates him, also humanizes him, enabling him to understand the suffering of the poor. His sexual sin, embodied in his daughter Brigitta, becomes a source of tenderness and responsibility, rather than shame alone. "He went down on his knees and pulled her to him: 'I love you. I am your father and I love you. . . I would give my life, that's nothing, my soul . . . my dear, my dear, try to understand that you are – so important. In Greene's world, sin is neither romanticized nor dismissed as mere moral failure; it is woven into the fabric of spiritual growth. Instead of going north, to safety, he turns south to complete his journey to martyrdom (Greene 2019. P. 79).

Existential Christian Realism also shapes Greene's portrayal of the Lieutenant, who serves as the priest's ideological foil. Lieutenant's Marxist idealism—his belief that eradicating the Church will liberate people—reflects a secular version of moral absolutism. He is austere, disciplined, incorruptible, and utterly

⁶ For the theological foundations of Christian realism, particularly its emphasis on human fallibility, moral ambiguity, and the need for divine grace, see Niebuhr, R. (1941). *The nature and destiny of man: A Christian interpretation* (Vol. 1). Charles Scribner's Sons.

⁷ Greene's belief that despair becomes the point of surrender to God aligns with Augustine's teaching that the human

heart remains restless until it finds rest in God. This interpretation of Greene's Augustinian sensibility is supported by Karl, F. R. (1972). *A reader's guide to the contemporary English novel*. Noonday Press; and Allott, M. (1951). *Graham Greene: The novelist*. Longman, Green.

convinced of the righteousness of his cause. However, his pursuit of justice leads him to commit acts of profound injustice, including the execution of innocent hostages. Hunting down the Priest in his former parish, he declares, 'You heard what happened in Concepcion. I took a hostage there . . . and when I found that this priest had been in the neighborhood, I put the man against the nearest tree' (Greene, 2019, p.74). The Lieutenant's moral clarity about evil caused by the Church against his people becomes a form of blindness. Greene uses him to expose the dangers of ideological purity, suggesting that the refusal to acknowledge human weakness can lead to cruelty being disguised as virtue. As Ray (2005) notes, the Lieutenant becomes "all power and no glory," a man whose utopian vision collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. Greene's narrative reiterates the need for religious realism, which focuses on faith in concrete and flawed human contexts.

Thus, the whisky priest and the Lieutenant embody opposing yet intertwined forms of realism. The priest's journey reveals redemptive realism: he recognizes the limits of his own virtue and the complexity of human desire. Lieutenant's realism is political: he recognizes the material suffering of the people but fails to grasp the spiritual dimension of their lives. This brings relevance to Priest's questions: What if people want to suffer? Greene brings these two forms of realism into dialogue, revealing that neither form is sufficient on its own. The priest's sin does not negate his capacity for grace, as revealed by the Lieutenant during their conversation, and Lieutenant's virtue does not prevent him from committing evil. Their encounters expose the paradox that lies at the heart of Greene's vision: moral strength emerges not from purity but from honest confrontation with human limitations. His use of tragic realism captures a blend of moral failure, grace, and existential struggle.

As the earlier analysis suggests, Greene's Augustinian moral vision disrupts traditional narratives. The whisky priest is no orthodox martyr; he neither wills his death nor embodies the polished virtues typically associated with sanctity, yet it is precisely through this imperfection that the grace becomes legible. He is frightened, reluctant, and often self-absorbed. Yet, his final act, returning to hear the confession of a dying criminal despite knowing it is a

trap, reveals a deeper form of courage. It is not the courage of a triumphant saint like Young Juan, but the courage of a broken man who continues to serve despite his failures. This is the paradox of Greene's theology: holiness is not the absence of sin, but the persistence of love amidst it.

Greene's novel aligns with the broader modernist project of redefining heroism. As Lionel Trilling (1965) notes, modern literature replaces the traditional hero with the anti-hero, whose authority lies not in ethical nobility, but in the authenticity of his struggle. A whisky priest exemplifies this shift. His authority does not come from moral purity, but from his refusal to abandon his calling, even when he believes himself unworthy. His spiritual sanity emerges not from detachment from the body, but from wrestling with it. He is quick to check himself when he asks for brandy from Coral and insists that she must not steal despite his desperate need for the drink. His journey reveals that grace is not a reward for virtue, but a gift that breaks through human weakness.

Thus, Greene's Christian realism provides a conceptual foundation for the novel's exploration of paradox and irony. By portraying sin as the crucible of grace and weakness as a pathway to spiritual sanity, Greene challenges conventional theological assumptions and offers radical reimagining of redemption. In *TPG*, the human condition is not a barrier to divine mercy but a very medium.

Greene's characterization of the whisky priest, his flaws, contradictions, and paradoxical nature shapes the novel's sustained use of paradox and irony. The subplot of young Juan provides deliberate contrast. Juan's spiritual journey is unrealistically pure: from birth to his saint death, he embodies unwavering obedience, self-reflection, and spiritual confidence. Even young Luis grows weary of hearing his mother read Juan's story each evening. Juan's extraordinary courage and serene acceptance of martyrdom are captured in the line: "He was quite calm and happy and smiling at the Chief of Police, he asked if he had come to lead him to the banquet" (Greene, 2019, p. 216).

The whisky priest, in contrast, is a complex, multifaceted figure; his life is anything but a spiritual life - story. His flaws are numerous. The Lieutenant is

astonished to learn that the Priest has fathered a child, yet Greene uses this revelation to highlight the Priest's paradoxical humanity. He admits, "Pride was at work all the time. Not love of God" (Greene, 2019, p. 194). Unlike Juan, whose path to sainthood is marked by purity and unwavering devotion, the whisky priest journey is shaped by bodily desires and human frailty. Greene foregrounds these flaws—his alcoholism, wavering faith, cowardice, and emotional vulnerability—to emphasize Priest's realism as a modern hero. One who impacts a fellow man as he departs from Coral, she assures him, 'if they kill you I shan't forgive them – ever' (Greene, 2019, p.37).

The Priest's vocation itself was not born of a divine calling, but of fear and economic insecurity. Confronted with Brigitta, the living reminder of his mortal sin, he recalls his childhood: "It had been a happy childhood, except that he had been afraid of too many things and had hated poverty like a crime; he believed that when he was a priest, he would be rich and proud -that was called having a vocation" (Greene, 2019, p. 64). When the Lieutenant assumes priests are educated, the whisky priest corrects him: "I'm not that. My father was a storekeeper" (Greene, 2019, p. 196). His desire for survival, an essential aspect of modern human experience, shapes his path toward a unique and controversial form of heroism. Although priesthood is traditionally understood as a spiritual vocation, Greene deliberately subverts this expectation to reveal a more human, conflicted, and paradoxical figure.

Driven not by divine calling but by human weakness, specifically the fear of poverty and desire for material security, the whisky priest's lustful and proud nature leads him to grave mistakes and poor decisions. He remains in Tabasco, while other priests flee out of faith or love for God but, as he later admits to the Lieutenant, out of pride. Now a fugitive, Greene's protagonist succumbs to "despair, the unforgivable sin," and fathered a seven-year-old daughter, Brigitta (Greene, 2019, p. 57). Once accustomed to the privileges of priesthood, he is shocked when "Nobody came forward to kiss his hand and ask for blessings" upon his return, "it is as if he had descended by means of his sin into the human struggle to learn other things besides despair and love, that a man can be unwelcome even in his own home" (Greene, 2019, p. 59). He had loved "the

beauty of [God's] house, the warmth and comfort," yet understood nothing of "the reality of human experience and love" (p. 156).

Chased by the Red Shirts, the Priest seeks refuge with Padre José, who has capitulated on the governor's order that all priests marry. At the moment of humility, he confesses, "I was conceited, proud, and overbearing - a bad priest. I always knew in my heart that you were the better man" (Greene, 2019, p. 116). This pride kept him in Tabasco, while others escaped persecution. He relished being the only priest and being "liked" by Christians. He later admits, "It would have been much better if I had gone too. But I didn't out of pride. 'Not love of God'... Pride was what made the angels fall... I thought I was a fine fellow to have stayed when others had gone" (Greene, 2019, p. 194).

His belief that he is "so grand and could make his own rules" fuel not only his negligence of priestly duties but also his dependence on alcohol. The whisky priest is a habitual drinker who relies on whisky to cope with emotional and psychological strain. He risks carrying it in his attaché case even when alcohol is outlawed. He misses *General Obregón*, his chance to escape, because he cannot resist Mr. Tench's invitation to drink. He would rather go hungry than forgo "a little brandy" from Captain Fellows.

His conversation with young Coral exposes his cowardice. He flees danger, avoids confrontation, and recoils from the possibility of martyrdom. He lacks the courage to tell Coral that he was not a doctor. He lives as a fugitive, hiding in barns, begging for brandy, running through marshes, occasionally erupting in frustration: "Why don't they catch me? The fools. Why don't they catch me?" (Greene, 2019, p. 60). When Coral asks, "But can't you... just give yourself up?" he responds, "There's pain. To choose pain like that - it's impossible" (p. 35). One would expect God's servant to follow Christ's example, yet he hides, while innocent Christians are taken hostage and executed for refusing to betray him. His fear of pain and death reveals his lack of faith and humanity.

Despite being a priest, he struggles profoundly with beliefs. He questions God's existence and purpose whenever adversity strikes: In the opening chapter, "The Port," he denies his faith. When Mr. Tench hears him mutter "O God. Ora pro nobis" and asks if he is Catholic; the priest replies, "No, no.

Just an expression. I don't believe in anything like that" (Greene, 2019, p. 4). He lies about being a doctor, a lie that catches up with him when a child seeks medical help for a dying woman. He laments to Mr. Tench, "It always seems to happen. Like this... I shall miss it... I am meant to miss it" (p. 11). He eats the last cube of sugar meant for a dead child and rationalizes, "If God chose to give back life, couldn't He give food as well?" (p. 155).

The critique of the Priest as God's representative in Tabasco is unmistakable. Cates Baldridge captures this anti-heroic portrayal: "The protagonist's present tense existence is scandalous in a conventional sense in part because he lived continually in extremis..." (2000, p. 50). Greene weaves Priest's fate from his lack of faith. His physical and emotional desires overwhelm his spirituality, leading him to distort doctrine for self-preservation: "He thought: I have to get to shelter - a man's first duty is to himself - even the Church taught that, in a way" (Greene, 2019, p. 154). The Priest's journey mirrors the structure of the hagiography⁸ (Karl, 1972). In saint narratives, he is wholly unfit for martyrdom.

Furthermore, the whisky priest's flawed personality is sharpened by the ruthless idealism of Lieutenant. A police officer is a crucial figure whose ideological zeal shapes the priest's destiny. His conviction, ruthlessness, and revolutionary fervours reflect Mexico's broader political upheaval. Lieutenant believes that the destruction of the Catholic Church is essential to national progress. Greene writes, "He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes, first the Church, and then the foreigners and then the politicians..." (Greene, 2019, p. 54). Outraged that a priest remains alive in Tabasco, he studies the priest's photograph with contempt.

'He looks like all the rest,' the Lieutenant said. It was obscure, but you read from the smudgy photograph a well-shaved, well-powdered jowl much too developed for his age. The good things of life have come to him too early - the respect of his contemporaries, a safe livelihood... the ready acceptance of other people's homage... a happy life. A natural

hatred as between a dog was stirred in the Lieutenant's bowels. "We've shot him half a dozen times," he said. (Greene, 2019, p. 16)

To the Lieutenant, the Priest symbolizes corruption, which keeps the masses poor. He cannot fathom why anyone would believe in "a loving and merciful God" when he sees only "a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings" (Greene, 2019, p. 19). Convinced that the Church must be eradicated even at the cost of innocent lives, he declares, "Those men I shot. They were my own people" (p. 196). He takes hostages from each village, threatening execution if the priest is not reported: "A lot of them will die of course... Wouldn't it be worth it?... To be rid of those people forever" (p. 18).

Ironically, this relentless manhunt becomes the priest's path to spiritual transformation. During their journey back to Tabasco, Lieutenant explains why the Church must be destroyed: its doctrines of sacrifice, poverty, and eternal life deceive and exploit the poor. "You're a danger. That's why we kill you" (Greene, 2019, p. 191). Even after recognizing the Priest's goodness by declaring that he has nothing against him as a person, the Lieutenant still leads him to execution.

Lieutenant remains one of the most fascinating and complex figures in this novel. Although determined to capture the priest "to give his people the whole world" (Greene, 2019, p. 196) and build a better future by destroying the Catholic Church, he embodies Greene's paradox. His revolutionary zeal was tempered by moments of self-examination and doubt. Despite his eagerness to ensure that the Church "is not remembered," he is cautious: he asks for "orders" from the jefe, wants confirmation that the governor's instructions are in writing, and worries whether the governor will protect him if "They make a fuss in Mexico City" (Greene 2019, p. 53). His initial enthusiasm and willingness "to make a massacre for their sakes" wanes once he captures the priest and recognizes him as the same man to whom he once gave money in prison.

⁸ Greene deliberately contrasts the sanitized martyrdom of Young Juan with the morally compromised life of the whisky priest.

Greene thus portrays the Lieutenant as a man whose blind pursuit of the priest paradoxically shapes the hero's path to martyrdom. This antagonism highlights their opposing views. The Lieutenant envisions a world free of misery, corruption, poverty, or superstition. He dreams of a future in which the next generation has "the right to be happy and to choose." To achieve this, he believed that the Church, foreigners, and politicians must be eliminated. Like a Marxist revolutionary, he is willing to sacrifice the present generation for the imagined liberation of the next generation. Advocating for equality and a classless society, the Lieutenant hopes to "begin the world again with them, in a desert" (Greene, 2019, p. 54).

The brief but intense conversation between the Marxist Lieutenant and the cowardly Priest is laden with a paradox. Their exchange touches on the nature of God's love, human suffering, death, poverty, and the roles of the Church and State in shaping human experience. Each defends his worldview, and this contrast reveals the Priest's fate as a modern martyr and a symbol of faith. Both men acknowledge that each is inherently good in some sense. In explaining the complexity of divine mercy and justice, the priest absolves himself.

'I'm not as dishonest as you think I am. Why do you think I tell people out of the pulpit that they're in danger of damnation if death catches them unawares? I'm not telling them fairy stories I don't believe myself. 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... I just want justice, that's all. (Greene, 2019, p. 198)

The Lieutenant becomes a catalyst for Priest's self-realization and transformation. "You're a danger. That's why we kill you. I have nothing against you... as a man" (Greene, 2019, p. 191). The long pursuit through marshes and forests, witnessing the deaths of innocents, confronting the consequences of his mortal sin, and recognizing his responsibility as a father all

forced the priest to confront his fears, doubts, and faith.

The interaction between the protagonist and antagonist reveals Greene's mastery of irony, particularly in his portrayal of sin and redemption. As literary irony, the novel abounds in verbal, situational, and dramatic ironies. Greene's sophisticated use of paradox and his conception of irony as a tool of realism invites a reexamination of sin and spirituality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Cates argues, "surely the tragic spectacle of the twentieth century justified and perhaps demanded such a radical revaluation of values" (2000, p. 2). Greene's ability to thrive as "the century's most representative English novelist" stems from his skillful engagement with contradiction.

Should a priest known for drinking, lying, and adultery be redeemed by God? Greene frames this question through profound irony: spiritual sanity arises not from the pursuit of purity but from the embrace of human experience. Entrapped in Greeneland, caught between the Lieutenant's righteous zeal, the corruption that seeped through the Mexican Revolution⁹ (Knight A., 1986), and his own moral failures, the priest embodies what Margaret Drabble memorably calls "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" (1985, p. 415).

Despite his disreputable drinking, lies, and adultery, the priest becomes a symbol of salvation. Adounsiba (2017) deepens this reading by comparing his passion, death, and resurrection to those of Christ, suggesting that Greene deliberately casts him as a flawed yet redemptive figure. He is, in Greene's own words, the "damned man putting God into the mouths of men" (2019, p. 57), a paradox whose very brokenness becomes the conduit of grace. His odd servanthood transformed those encountered quietly. Coral, who earlier insists, "I don't believe in God... I lost my faith when I was ten," soon becomes fiercely protective of him and even vows revenge if he is killed (p. 37). Mrs. Fellows later observes the same unsettling influence when she remarks, "But the odd thing is - the way she went on afterwards - as if he had told her things" (p. 213). Through these encounters, Greene

⁹ For authoritative historical accounts of the corruption, factionalism and ideological distortions that emerged during and after the Mexican Revolution, see Knight, A.

(1986). *The Mexican Revolution* (Vols. 1- 2). Cambridge University Press.

reveals a priest whose holiness emerges not from moral purity but from the mysterious, disruptive power of grace working through human frailty.

The whisky priest refuses to drink a stolen brandy or encourages Coral to do so. While other Priests, including the bishop, have fled to safety, and Padre José has capitulated on the governor's order to marry, the whisky priest alone risks his life to "put God into the mouths of men" (Greene, 2019, p. 57). He baptizes children, hears confessions, and tends to be sick. In Carmen, the site of his mortal sin and Brigitta's home, he again risks capturing to perform his duties. His sermon marks a moment of epiphany and self-awareness. Ultimately, he abandons the possibility of escape and succumbs to mestizo's manipulation, choosing to hear the confession of a dying man out of pride and conscience. "Even a coward has a sense of duty," he tells the Lieutenant. Adounsiba (2017) aptly observes: "What is remarkable about Greene's depiction of the whisky priest is that he refuses to spare us the Priest's less than noble side, and yet also convincingly shows him overcoming his weakness and performing acts of great heroism" (p. 10). Greene achieves this through his powerful and sustained use of irony.

On the other hand, Greene portrays Lieutenant as an egregiously self-aggrandizing figure. He does not merely embody the "idea of absolute laic perfection without God" (Adounsiba, 2017, p. 7); he also sees himself as a righteous and just man, even though his intentions are driven by a desire for authority and control. Greene notes, "He was a mystic, too" (2019, p. 19), prepared to massacre priests, politicians, and foreigners to eradicate everything he associated with misery, poverty, superstition, and corruption (p. 54). After devising a calculated plan to capture the Priest by taking hostages from every village, supposedly so the people may have "the right to be happy in any way they chose," he later tells the Priest, "Those men I shot. They were my own. I wanted to give them the whole world" (p. 196). Yet, he kills or imprisons them for praying, promises to "see they don't suffer" (p. 192), and intends to teach them only the books he approves.

Greene's portrayal anticipates a postmodern dilemma: the collapse of absolute values and the impossibility of constructing a world free of suffering. Lieutenant's vision raises questions central to

Greene's realism: Can life be a void of human suffering? Can happiness be separated from poverty and wealth? What if people find happiness in prayer, confession, and devotion? Greene's modern heroism lies in the priest's recognition that "the world is unhappy whether you are rich or poor, unless you are a saint, and there aren't many of those." When the Lieutenant challenges him about fear of death, the priest replies, "But I'm not a saint... I'm not even a brave man" (p. 192). Their interaction becomes another of Greene's brilliant paradoxes: the Lieutenant is brought to "self-discovery" when "pride and joy left him" after the priest's execution (Adounsiba, 2017, p. 9).

Furthermore, Greene exposes how the corrupt nature of the Mexican Revolution shaped the priest's actions and destiny. The revolutionary forces, the governor, the Jefe, and the Lieutenant, claim to fight for justice and equality, yet they are corrupt and oppressive. Religious books and objects were outlawed, priests were forced to marry, public worship was banned, and violations resulted in imprisonment or fines. Prison cells were filthy and overcrowded. The governor's cousin profits from selling outlawed alcohol, and officials, including Jefe, drink freely in bars. This paradox leads the priest into the prison cell, where he encounters a pious woman and discovers "the beauty of love in the filth." When she recoils at the sexual scene before them, he tells her, "Don't." The priest urges the pious woman not to recoil from the filth of the prison cell: "Don't believe that it is dangerous. Because suddenly we discover that our sins have so much beauty" (Greene, 2019, p. 128), a realization shaped by his love for Brigitta.

In prison, the priest confronts his shortcomings. For years, he had abandoned his duties. Unable to escape Tabasco, he was forced to face his sinfulness and take responsibility. The past six years have been years of gradual spiritual surrender for the priest.

Feast days and fast days and days of abstinence had been the first to go, then he had ceased to trouble more than occasionally about his breviary, and finally he had left it behind altogether... Then the altar stone went - too dangerous to carry... The routine of his life like a dam was cracked... Five years

ago, he had given way to despair—the unforgivable sin.... (Greene, 2019, p. 57)

Ashamed, he avoided Concepción, his parish, for six years. Just as he surrendered religious objects to save himself, he abandoned his parishioners and child. His desire for brandy caused him to miss *Obregón*, to be spotted in Tabasco, and to be imprisoned for carrying outlawed liquor. These actions place him squarely in Lieutenant's sight. Unable to go west (where soldiers search for him) or east (blocked by Red Shirts), he is forced north to Carmen, "the very place where he most wanted to be... it was his duty to go there, it couldn't count as sin" (p. 57). He returned to tattered clothes as an ordinary man. His repeated attempts to escape to a peaceful life have failed (p. 61). His journey toward salvation has often been compared to the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ (Mathias et al., n.d., p. 3).

This new reality marks the final stage of his spiritual transformation: The sermon he delivers that morning, as the police approach, Concepción symbolizes his growth. His discourse on the paradox of pain and suffering reveals spiritual depth: "I tell you that pain is here: this is part of heaven just as pain is part of pleasure" (Greene, 2019, p. 66). He no longer fears his own damnation: "He felt humbled by the pain ordinary people felt voluntarily" (p. 67). His epiphany comes in the prayer, "Oh Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house...", a confession that he has loved the Church's comfort more than its people. For the first time, he feels "the shock of human love... an immense load of responsibility: it was indistinguishable from love" (p. 63). Looking at Brigitta, aware of her future without religious guidance, he pleads, "Oh God, give me any kind of death... only save this child." Greene's irony is poignant when the priest kneels by the trash heap, pulls his daughter close, and says, "I love you'. I am your father and I love you." Unlike politicians who care only for the state, "This child is more important than the whole continent" (p. 79).

The Priest's dynamic humanity, visible even as he awaits execution, reveals Greene's mastery of the paradox. In Greeneland, the boundaries between faith and sin, loyalty, and betrayal are perilous. Thus, the "communist atheist Lieutenant" attempts to suppress religion, while the "hapless priest," who

becomes a martyr almost by default, embodies Greene's artistry (Norman, 1989, p. 311).

Similarly, Greene explored priests' psychological turmoil. Contrary to Lieutenant, Mestizo, and Padre José, who see him as worthless, the reader perceives his inner conflict, sense of uselessness, and longing for salvation (Mathias et al., n.d., p. 2). He is constantly torn between saving himself and fulfilling spiritual duties. In the opening chapter, when a child seeks a doctor for his dying mother, Mr. Tench urges the priest to not go lest to miss the boat. Frustrated, the priest retorts, "You know nothing... That is what everyone says all the time - you do no good" (Greene, 2019, p. 11). His photograph on the prison wall gives a false impression of prosperity and respect. The Lieutenant sees him as "disinterested in his ambition: a kind of virtue in his desire to catch the sleek-respected guest of the first Communion party" (p. 17). When he finally captures him, he tries to understand, "Why you - of all people - should have stayed when others ran" (p. 193).

The Mestizo, a Judas figure, continually tempts and probes the priest's conscience, accusing him of neglecting his duties and lacking charity. Determined to earn his reward, he follows the priest to Las Casas "on an errand of mercy" to save the dying gringo while betraying the priest (p. 175). When the Priest confesses that pride trapped him in Tabasco, the Lieutenant replies, "Well, you're going to be a martyr - you've got that satisfaction" (p. 195). He sees the Priest, and the Church, as a threat: "You're a danger. That's why we kill you" (p. 191). Yet the reader sees a man in constant self-reproach: "Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for" (Greene, 2019, p. 3).

Contrary to Lieutenant's and mestizo's distorted views of the hero's indifference and worthlessness, the reader witnesses a man in constant conflict with himself through prayer, confession, self-examination, and repentance. He repeatedly accuses himself of pride, "the sin by which angels fell" (Greene, 2019, p. 92). His attempts to escape were half-hearted because of this pride. When summoned by the boy to attend the "dying woman," he is torn between catching the *General Obregón*, his chance to escape persecution, and fulfilling his priestly duty. Like the king of a West African tribe, the slave of his people... the stranger got up as though unwillingly he had been

summoned to an occasion he could not pass by" (pp. 11-13). In a moment of dramatic irony, mestizo taunts him: "You think you're very fine... helping your enemies. That's Christian, isn't it?" (p. 96).

Despite the danger and his desire to flee, the priest's conscience compelled him to act. When Coral asks why he cannot simply surrender or renounce his faith, he replies, "There's the pain. To choose pain like that - it's impossible. And it's my duty not to be caught" (p. 35). His words echo D. H. Lawrence's assertion that modern characters cannot be reduced to "the old stable ego" (Kern, 2011, p. 30). Greene's Priest is far from being a virtue - centered life figure. He did not defend himself against the accusations. He tells the Lieutenant plainly, "I'm not a saint... Oh no. Martyrs are not like me" (p. 195). Yet, unlike the Mestizo, he insists, "I'm not as dishonest as you think I am" (p. 198). Greene suggests that spiritual growth requires self-absolution and honest self-examination. Throughout the novel, the priest emerges as a modern hero set against Young Juan, the mestizo, and the Lieutenant, whose flawed humanity becomes the ground for grace. Even the Marxist Lieutenant concedes, "You aren't a bad fellow. If there's anything I can do for you..." (p. 199).

The fragile humanity affirms that spiritual realism locates divine power within human frailty rather than perfection. As this paradox sharpens, the narrative turns into a deeper contest, whether faith and redemption reside in the authority of institutions or in the lived, uncertain grace of ordinary belief. From here on, Greene begins to contest traditional notions of faith and redemption, shifting the focus from doctrinal certainty to the complexities of lived experience.

IV. **CONTESTING TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF FAITH AND REDEMPTION**

Graham Greene's *The Power and the glory* is a master class in reimagining traditional religious narratives. Instead of presenting a saintly, morally upright protagonist, Greene offers an anti-hero: a deeply flawed, alcoholic, lustful, and self-pitying fugitive who paradoxically becomes the novel's moral and spiritual center. His spiritual journey challenged the conventional ideas of holiness and redemption. This tension allows Greene to interrogate the meaning

of faith and salvation. As Drabble (1985) observes, Greene's work is marked by "moral dilemma... attempts to distinguish 'good or evil' from right or wrong," and a persistent focus on "seedy locations" that give his fiction its distinctive tone (p. 415).

Unlike traditional realist heroes, whose stature rests on moral character, Greene, writing as a modernist, creates a "new kind of hero," an anti-hero whose stature is defined by his "hard, true and enlightened existence" (Kern, 2011, p. 34). Although critics have compared the priest's journey with Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, his character is nothing like Christ. He is unmistakably an anti-hero. Greene's portrayal is "less about moral character and more about creativity and fulfillment" (Kern, 2011, p. 34).

Consequently, the Priest's weaknesses are not obstacles to grace; they are grounds for salvation. Traditional saints are paragons of virtue; Greene's Priest is "neo-heroic" (Kern, 2011, p. 34). He is a drunkard who fathered a child with a parishioner. He refuses to surrender because he fears death: "I am frightened... There's the pain. To choose pain like that, it's impossible" (Greene, 2019, p. 35). He stays in Tabasco, not out of duty but pride. His attempts to flee were marked by feelings of unworthiness. To a realist critic, he lacks "ethical nobility" and resembles nothing like Young Juan (Kern, 2011, p. 34). However, Greene insists that grace operates precisely through a spiritual breakdown. The priest's awareness of his sin makes him more compassionate, human, and capable of understanding suffering. He becomes a saint not because he is pure but because he continues to choose service despite his impurity.

Greene rejects the triumphalist idealism of heroes modeled after Jesus. Priests' sense of failure becomes a measure of their spiritual authenticity. In the prison cell, he confesses to the pious woman that he is a bad priest: "The eight hard hopeless years seemed to him to be only a caricature of service: a few communions, a few confessions, and an endless bad example" (Greene, 2019, p. 207). He believed that his sacrament was contaminated by his moral and spiritual infidelities. Even at the moment of execution, he feels he has betrayed God and his people, praying that God send "someone more worthwhile to suffer for."

Paradoxically, Greene uses this self-loathing, “physically unattractive, sexually unconventional, impotent and cowardly neo-hero” to critique perfectionist versions of faith. The priest’s humility and his refusal to see himself as holy makes him spiritually credible. He embodies the idea that holiness is not self-confidence but self-emptying. In the traditional sense, his final act of sacrifice is not heroic. Christianity demands singularity of purpose, modeled after Christ, who is “the way.” However, the Priest’s life is marked by “discontinuity, wrong turns and dead ends” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). When he returns to hear the confession of a dying criminal, he knows that it is a trap. He goes anyway, not out of courage but out of duty and compassion. From his introduction at the harbor to his execution, he never becomes brave, never overcomes his flaws, and never transforms into an idealized martyr like Young Juan. Instead, he remains flawed yet chooses the good and possibly the human. Greene suggests that redemption lies in fidelity, rather than perfection.

The state’s persecution sanctifies him. “You’re a danger. That’s why we kill you. I have nothing against you... as a man,” the Lieutenant tells him (Greene, 2019, p. 191). The government seeks to eradicate the Church by eliminating priests, yet the whisky priest’s very existence—weak, lustful, drunken, wandering, hunted—reveals the absurdity of their fear. With the help of Lieutenant and Mestizo, he became a symbol of endurance. “I’d rather be caught,” he tells Coral (Greene, 2019 p. 35). His spiritual stubbornness appears in the services that he continues to offer at great personal risk. His sermon in Carmen marks the climax of his spiritual awakening: “It hadn’t after a while seemed to matter very much whether he was damned or not, so long as these others...” knew about God (p. 66). As the police approach, he declares, “Heaven is where there is no jefe, no unjust laws, no taxes, no soldiers and no hunger” (p. 67). His faith persists in unlikely vessels such as Coral Fellows, Mr. Tench, his parishioners, the American Yankee, and even the Lieutenant. His “sainthood” is almost accidental: he becomes holy because the world tries to crush him, not because he tries to be holy.

In *The Power and the glory*, Greene redefines spiritual biography as solidarity with human suffering rather than “a continuous organic unfolding in life” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). Unlike Lieutenant and Young Juan, Priest’s greatest strength is not virtue, but empathy. He understands poverty; he lived there before becoming a priest and for seven years as a fugitive. He knows shame, fathering a child, begging for brandy, is unable to comfort, and defend Brigitta when she is mocked by other children. He knows of hunger, fighting a dog for a bone at the Fellows’ abandoned house, taking the last cube of sugar from a dead child’s mouth to survive (Greene, 2019. p. 155). His flaws bring him closer to his people, because he shares their weaknesses. This is in stark contrast to sanctity narratives¹⁰, where saints are set apart from ordinary life. Greene’s message is bold, prophetic, and revolutionary: a saint is not someone above humanity but someone deeply human.

The execution of the whisky priest and the quiet arrival of another unnamed priest crystallize Greene’s theological claim that grace operates through imperfections. The newcomer’s simple declaration, “I am a priest” (p. 220), signals that the sacramental mission endures beyond the flawed man who carried it. For young Luis, this arrival confirms that the whisky priest’s compromised ministry still holds deep meaning for the community. The appearance of a new priest also intimates the glory denied to the whisky priest himself: although stripped of purity, honor, and triumph, his vocation proves continuous and mysteriously fruitful.

Despite his physical weakness, sexual lapses, and moral ambiguity, he remains more spiritually vital than the “silly” Young Juan because, for Greene, as for Lawrence and many modernists, God works through broken instruments, fractured minds, and wounded bodies. Thus, redemption emerges as communal inheritance rather than individual achievement. The whisky priest’s life ultimately testifies that faith persists not through perfect leaders but through persistent, imperfect ones, whose frailty becomes the medium of grace.

¹⁰ Classical sanctity narratives typically portray holiness as a linear ascent toward moral perfection, “a continuous organic folding in life” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). Greene deliberately overturns this model. As Sherry (1974)

observes, Greene’s saints are “not models of perfection but figures in whom grace works through failure (p. 112), Making the whisky priest’s flawed, suffering humanity not a deviation from sanctity but its very condition.

Greene uses the whisky priest to argue that holiness is compatible with weakness, redemption is possible even for the deeply flawed, faith is not about moral perfection but moral persistence, and grace works through human imperfection, not despite it. This is why the protagonist “becomes a saint almost by default,” not because he embodies traditional virtue, but because he embodies radical, reluctant, stumbling fidelity (Maher, 2015, p. 311). Like Conrad in *Lord Jim*, Greene “probes aesthetic and existential questions more than moral ones,” asking that one lives an authentic life rather than a conventional, courageous or moral one (Kern, 2011, p. 37).

The historical and physical settings of the novel explore how faith persists amid institutional collapse and personal failure. Parents yawn prayers to accompany their dead children. The treasury now stands where the Church once stood (Greene, 2019, p. 1), and Mr. Tench, though not a Christian himself recalls, “When they sacked the church, it didn’t feel right...” (p. 7). The whisky priest is not a model of virtue, yet it is precisely through his imperfections that Greene redefines grace.

Greene also critiques the religious biographical tradition using the subplot of Young Juan as a structural echo of virtue literature. In contrast, Priest’s death is quiet. Instead of executing him in the open cemetery, the jefe tells Mr. Tench, “It was better not to this time. There might have been a demonstration” (Greene, 2019, p. 215). The whisky priest is a good man, but because he is a priest, he must die. His death lacks the triumphant declarations of the traditional saints’ lives. However, his sacrifice, symbolized by the vulture circling overhead, suggests that sainthood lies not in perfection, but in the courage to continue when faith feels the most fragile. Greene weaves irony, biblical allusion, and narrative structure to challenge the religious biographical tradition of redemption and sanctity, portraying the “romantic model as romantic biology” and exposing the naïveté of idealized spiritual purpose (Kern, 2011, p. 41).

However, the author uses the whisky priest’s contradictory nature to illuminate the paradox of grace: redemption is not reserved only for the morally perfect but may emerge through flawed persistence and reluctant courage. On the day of his execution, the priest is gripped by fear, fear of pain, and fear of how

long it will last. He clutches an empty brandy flask, “trying to remember an Act of Contrition. ‘O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins...’” (Greene, 2019, p. 208). He feels remorse as failure. Young Juan, by contrast, prays “not for himself, but for his enemies...” (p. 217). The juxtaposition is deliberate; Greene dismantles the edifying narrative of martyrdom. The Priest’s sanctity is steeped in irony because he is betrayed by someone he once tried to help, and his death is quiet and uncelebrated, a stark contrast to the virtue – centered life in the children’s storybook that opens the novel. Greene subverts the heroic narrative by offering a portrait of grace that is gritty, reluctant, and deeply humane.

The novel’s opening chapter, “The Port,” establishes an ironic trajectory. The priest introduces himself as a “quack” doctor, a desperate disguise in a regime where priesthood is punishable by death. His deception was both necessary and tragic. His casual invocation, “O God. Ora pro nobis,” ironically set the stage for his spiritual journey. When Mr. Tench questions his faith, the Priest quickly replies, “No, no. Just an expression. I don’t believe in anything like that” (Greene, 2019, p. 4). Yet, this denial foreshadows a deeper entanglement: whether by fate or faith, he is drawn into a web of moral responsibility both as a doctor and as a priest.

The Priest’s first decisive moment of reluctant compassion occurs when he must choose between escape and service. Faced with a dying woman, he cannot turn away. Greene reveals not only his inadequacies, drunkenness, cowardice, and lust, but also his humanity. Drinking has become second nature. He risks death for a shot of brandy, endures prison for carrying outlawed liquor, and collects money from impoverished villagers for sacraments to spend only on alcohol. Through this deeply flawed figure, Greene crafts a theology of brokenness: grace seeps through cracks, and even the most compromised soul can become a vessel of redemption.

Biblical allusions have deepened this contradiction. The Priest’s journey echoes Christ-like imagery: he is “called back” three times, mirroring Peter’s three denials and Christ’s thrice-asked question, “Do you love me?” (*King James*. John 21: 15 - 25). Greene also plays with the hymn of praise, “the power and the glory,” to question whether

institutional religion embodies these ideals or whether they are found in quiet acts of compassion.

Thus, the Priest's repeated calling back does not merely delay his escape; it charts the reluctant rhythm of his path toward martyrdom, binding hesitation to destiny. His first calling occurs when he is summoned to the dying woman in "The Port," rising "as though unwillingly he had been summoned to an occasion he couldn't pass by" (Greene, 2019, p. 11). His second call occurs when he returns to baptize a child despite knowing the danger. As Drabble (1985) notes, "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" becomes central to Greene's fiction. His third calling, to hear the American gringo's confession, closes the door to his escape and leads directly to his execution. Mestizo, like Judas, who leads him to this, parallels Christ's betrayal. Like Christ, he walks into betrayal and death in the obedience of His Will.

Greene critiques institutional religion by showing that its absence exposes both its limitations and latent potential. Institutional religion is stripped of authority, yet grace persists through human vulnerability. As an institution, the Church is largely invisible or impotent. Luis' father tells him that they have been deserted. However, in this vacuum, grace emerges through flawed human action. Greene's theological vision is radical: glory is not found in triumph, but in surrender; grace is in sin. The priest's martyrdom is quiet, uncelebrated, and morally ambiguous.

The whisky priest dies not as a saint but as a sinner who refuses to abandon his flock, a modernist "neo-hero." This sharply contrasts with the sanitized martyrdoms in the children's storybook, where "a smile of complete adoration and happiness passed over Juan's face" (p. 117). Greene suggests that true spiritual power lies in broken persistence in the recognition of bodily desires, rather than institutional purity.

The novel's final irony emerges in the question of whether the whisky priest's life was a failure or hidden triumph. Young Luis, disappointed with Lieutenant, becomes the continuity of faith. In his dream, "the dead priest winked at him," and upon waking, "he knew that it was his duty." When the new priest arrives, "I am a priest", Luis opens the door eagerly and kisses his hand (p. 220). This quiet gesture

becomes a living doxology: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever." Greene echoes Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming through the priest's endless "self-questioning and reconstruction," revealing the "instabilities" that characterize modernist protagonists (Kern, 2011, p. 30). Like the executed anti-hero, the new priest has no name, nationality, race, or family, and is another anonymous vessel of grace.

By invoking the Eulogy to God in the title and then dismantling its traditional associations, Greene invites readers to reconsider where holiness truly resides, not in cathedrals or creeds, but in the trembling hands of a man who chooses compassion over escape. Each missed opportunity strips away the priest's chance of safety and forces him deeper into spiritual service. "I shall miss it... I am meant to miss it" (Greene, p. 11). After the sermon in Concepción, he again narrowly escaped capture. "Why don't they catch me?" he cries. Greene uses Christ's passion to challenge traditional notions of sainthood.

Frederick R. Karl observes that "the humiliation of the whisky priest... transforms him" (1972, p. 958). The whisky priest becomes a vessel of grace, not through purity but through persistent sacrifice. The structure of the novel reinforces this subversion. It opens and closes Young Juan's hagiographical story. Greene juxtaposes this sanitized martyrdom with the morally ambiguous reality of the whisky priest's life and death. By ending with another priest arriving, Greene leaves readers questioning whether redemption is a singular event or an ongoing imperfect process.

V. CONCLUSION

Greene's *The Power and the Glory* endures because it refuses the consolations of certainty. Through the whisky priest, fearful, lustful, alcoholic, proud, and yet persistently faithful, Greene dismantles the romanticized ideals of sainthood and replaces them with a modernist vision of holiness grounded in human frailty. The novel's paradoxes, between purity and sin, courage and cowardice, institutional collapse, and sacramental endurance, reveal a theology in which grace emerges not despite imperfection but through it. The whisky priest's life demonstrates that spiritual authenticity is not measured by moral

consistency, but by the stubborn willingness to serve amid weakness.

Greene's narrative structure reinforces this vision. The juxtaposition of Young Juan's hagiographical perfection with the whisky priest's moral ambiguity exposes the inadequacy of idealized martyrdom. The Lieutenant's ideological certainty collapsed before the Priest's reluctant compassion. Mestizo's betrayal becomes an unlikely doorway to the priest's final act of service. Even the Church's institutional failure, silence, absence, and compromised representatives cannot extinguish the people's hunger for grace. In this world, holiness is not institutional but embodied, not triumphant but trembling, and not pure but persistent.

The whisky priest's death, stripped of spectacle and sanctity, is the novel's most profound irony. He dies, believing that he has failed, yet his flawed ministry awakens faith in young Luis, whose quiet gesture of kissing the new priest's hand signals the continuation of a tradition that the state cannot suppress. Greene suggests that grace is unpredictable, communal, and often invisible to those who mediate it. The whisky priest's legacy survives not because he was virtuous but because he was present, because he kept moving, serving, and loving, even when he believed himself was damned. *The Power and the Glory* endure as a radical, unsettling, and deeply compassionate meditation on the mystery of salvation in a modern world fractured by doubt, desire, and the longing for God.

Ultimately, Greene offers a vision of redemption that is radically human. Ultimately, Greene positioned himself among the most incisive Christian realists in the twentieth century. The whisky priest's body, hungry, trembling, and sinful, becomes an unlikely site where divine mercy takes root. His story affirms that sanctity is not the achievement of the strong but the vocation of the broken. By weaving irony, paradox, and modernist fragmentation into a narrative of spiritual endurance, Greene redefined what it meant to be a hero in the twentieth century. The whisky priest's life, like the novel itself, insists that grace is found not in the power and glory of institutions, but in the fragile persistence of those who continue to love in the dark.

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