

Hidden Sanctity in *The Power and the Glory* (1940)

“The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly evaded sanctity.”—“Frederick Rolfe: Edwardian Inferno”

“I write about situations that are common, universal might be more correct, in which my characters are involved and from which only faith can redeem them, though often the actual manner of the redemption is not immediately clear. They sin, but there is no limit to God’s mercy and because this is important, there is a difference between not confessing in fact, and the complacent and the pious may not realize it.”—1953 Interview, *The Paris Review*

“What I found most authentic in Greene’s novels is Grace. . . [the] Truth that man does not know. . . . He enables us to rediscover Christian faith; his solutions to the problems posed by Grace and salvation are free from the rigid categories of our theologians and casuists. The liberty he grants to God over mankind is at once terrifying and reassuring because, at the final count, God is love and if nothing is possible to man, everything is possible to Eternal Love.”—Francois Mauriac, Preface to the French translation of *The Power and the Glory*

1938 and 1939 were very busy years for Greene. In the spring of ’38 he visited Mexico for five weeks as a Catholic journalist, and he wrote up his experiences in *The Lawless Roads*. The travel book should not be read as simply a trail run for *The Power and the Glory*, but many of its details find their way into the novel, though transformed. From March to September of ’39, Greene worked on *The Confidential Agent* during the mornings and *Power and Glory* in the evenings. The later has been celebrated (with justice) as his most profound novel. Green himself saw the novel as something of an allegorical morality play in which the characters represent particular virtues and vices, and it was one book that he admittedly “wrote to a thesis.” However, what thesis exactly is this?

There are reasons why it might not be as obvious as one might think. For one thing, the novel is deeply paradoxical. We may know more about the whiskey priest than he does himself. A man who is haunted by his past sins, as well as by his pride and temptations, he is yet blind to his virtues: his courage in the face of fear, his humility and selflessness, and his dogged loyalty to his vocation. Likewise, his struggle with feelings of abandonment has parallels with Christian mystical experience. The novel also goes a long way to admitting that some of the revolutionaries’ objections to the Catholic faith are justified—class-based economic abuse did go on. Also, there is the role played by the various subplots, such as that of the dentist or the Fellows.

Locale

If one doesn’t count the travel books, *The Power and the Glory* is the first of Greene’s many books that are set in a foreign setting. Perhaps beginning with the travel books, Greene discovered that such settings

1. helped defamiliarize the story for his readers,
2. allowed him to personify certain moods that reflect the spiritual state of characters,
3. pictured a political world with moral dilemmas,
4. and highlighted the sufferings of the poor and oppressed.

Exploratory Questions

- Are there certain generic plots (e.g. tragedy, comedy, epic, melodrama) more compatible with a Christian world?
- Does sacrifice (even martyrdom) bridge the space between God’s love and the world’s vile pain? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Can different ideologies be well-intentioned yet wrong?

Saints

"The Saint is a medicine because he is an antidote. Indeed that is why the saint is often a martyr; he is mistaken for a poison because he is an antidote. He will generally be found restoring the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects, which is by no means always the same element in every age. Yet each generation seeks its saint by instinct; and he is not what the people want, but rather what the people need. . . . If the world grows too worldly, it can be rebuked by the Church; but if the Church grows too worldly, it cannot be adequately rebuked for worldliness by the world. Therefore it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most."—G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933)

For many Christian writers and thinkers in the 20th-century the saint is a witness that relativism is a too limited vision of the world, and thus, the saint has a special place in this intersection of time and eternity.

- Jacques Maritain, too, held that the saint's paradoxical attitude towards the present leads to a superior love in a transfiguration of things, thereby transcending the purely sociological.
- While for Hans Urs von Balthasar, the saints are through whom the Church's destiny is achieved, though they may have little fame as the world understands it.
- For T. S. Eliot, as well, a saint has extraordinary insights because he or she is a receptacle of divine freedom and grace: "something given/ And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,/ Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender."

Is it possible to argue that Greene has similar notions in mind for the whisky priest?

Discussion Questions

1. How important are the themes of sin and confession to the novel? (130-132, 141, 173-175, 189-191, 207)
2. What makes the Mass important? (72-75)
3. Why does Greene include moments of comedy, such as the priest trying to buy wine or the episode with the Lutheran Lehrs?
4. Compare and contrast the Lehrs to Ida from *Brighton Rock*.
5. How does the priest end up being a kind of stand-in for Christ and his sacrifice?
6. Can we trace the character of the priest? (cf. 42-43, 64, 96-97, 126-128, 168-171)
7. How do the other stories and examples of priests reflect on the protagonist's?
8. What makes the jail cell scene a symbol of the world as a whole?
9. If the mestizo is a Judas, is the Lieutenant Herod or Pilate?
10. What motivates the Lieutenant? (cf. 24-27, 57, 60, 78, 140-142, 191-203)
11. What makes God's love overwhelming? Is this love safe? (200)
12. What is significance of the eschatological dream? (210-211)