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Investigating the body and the soul in graham greene's *The power and the glory*

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Abstract

This dynamics of the body and the soul being necessary and yet working in different domains is very interesting. Graham Greene in his Christian novels has dealt with the dichotomy of the body and the soul. It is very interesting to delve into this theme through his novel *The Power and the Glory*. This paper tries to show how Graham Greene's symbiosis between the tangible and the immaterial urges the readers to perceive the divine not merely in the realms of the ethereal but in the very fabric of our corporeal existence.

Keywords: Body, soul, graham greene, *The power and the glory*

Introduction

Graham Greene (1904-1991) was born in the modern period and his parents were not Roman Catholics. But he later converted to Roman Catholicism in 1926. By profession he was a journalist though he gained much fame as a novelist. He is especially known for his Catholic novels, such as *The Power and the Glory*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*, where he has investigated the dynamics of the body and the soul. Many critics like Kenneth Allot, Miriam Farris, John Atkins, Robert O. Evans, and R. H. Miller have theorized upon the body and the soul in Graham Greene's Catholic novels. But the dichotomy between the body and the soul has still remained under-investigated.

The physical body in *The Power and the Glory* emerges as a potent symbol, mediating between the divine and the secular, the sacred and the profane. Greene's intricate treatment of bodily experiences, desires, and vulnerabilities positions the human form as a contested space, fraught with spiritual struggles and moral ambiguities. By placing the body at the narrative's forefront, Greene invites readers to confront the inextricable link between flesh and faith, urging recognition of the sanctity inherent in human imperfection. As the novel unfolds, the priest's body undergoes a series of transformations. Each physical degradation – whether due to alcohol, fatigue, or the oppressive Mexican heat – parallels his spiritual odyssey. His deteriorating health is not merely an outcome of his harsh environment but a reflection of his internal strife. The physical body, in this narrative, is not just a passive vessel; it actively communicates the metaphysical anguish of its inhabitant. The portrayal of the whisky priest as both spiritually burdened and physically ailing subverts the traditional Christian narrative, where the martyrs are often idealized and their sufferings become emblematic of their sanctity. Greene's priest, however, is far from ideal. His body, bearing the marks of sin such as the child he fathered, juxtaposes the profound weight of the spiritual office he holds. This duality accentuates the novel's central theme: the coexistence of sanctity and sin within the human condition. The very act of the whisky priest fathering a child, arguably his most pronounced deviation from Church doctrine, foregrounds the body's role in complicating clerical commitments. This act, which gives physicality to his sin, also humanizes him, allowing readers to grapple with the intersections of bodily desire, spiritual duty, and moral transgression. Greene's nuanced exploration prompts a reflection on the constraints and liberations inherent within the human form, both in its divine potential and its earthly limitations.

Beyond the whisky priest, the bodies of other characters, like the mestizo, the lieutenant, and the villagers, further the dialogue on corporeal representation.

The mestizo's treacherous agility, the lieutenant's rigid discipline, and the villagers' collective fear and faith – each physical portrayal is steeped in layers of symbolic meaning. The lieutenant's unwavering physicality, for instance, starkly contrasts the whisky priest's frailty, yet both are bound in their quest for a moral ideal, albeit from opposing directions. The physical body, far from being a mere vessel, becomes a potent symbol of the myriad spiritual challenges and aspirations that define the human experience. Greene's meticulous interweaving of the corporeal and the spiritual serves as a poignant reminder of the intertwined nature of body and soul, of the material and the divine, and of sin and redemption. Through this intricate portrayal, the novel beckons readers to reflect upon the inextricable link between our physical being and our spiritual journey. No doubt the bodily transgressions of the whisky priest are explicit – his alcoholism and his fathering of a child both underscore the fragility and fallibility of the human form. These sins, rooted in the physical, stand in stark contrast to the priest's spiritual vocation, revealing the inherent tension between the demands of the body and the aspirations of the soul. This dichotomy resonates throughout the novel, highlighting the priest's struggle with his dual identity as a man and a cleric. Greene's characterization of the lieutenant provides another dimension to the novel's exploration of the body. His staunch secularism and dedication to eradicating religious influence stem from a deeply rooted disdain for the perceived weaknesses of the physical form. The lieutenant's ambition to cleanse society of its frailties is inherently tied to his views on the corporeal vulnerabilities that, in his opinion, religion perpetuates. Yet, it is in the moments of physical vulnerability that Greene's characters encounter profound spiritual revelations. The whisky priest's most intimate encounters with faith often transpire when his body is at its weakest. His suffering, hunger, and exhaustion strip away the veneers of his priestly duties, rendering him to his most human state. It is here, in this visceral rawness that he engages in the most profound dialogues with God. The culmination of the whisky priest's journey, marked by his capture and subsequent execution, epitomizes the novel's thematic preoccupation with the physical body. In his final moments, the priest's acceptance of his fate is not merely a spiritual surrender but also reconciliation with the limits of his corporeal existence. Greene underscores the inextricable link between the spiritual and the corporeal. The novel, in its nuanced exploration of the body as both a site of struggle and a vehicle to salvation, reaffirms the complexities and paradoxes of the human experience, reminding readers of the sanctity that resides within our very flesh and bones. The "whisky priest," becomes the primary vessel for the exploration of the idea of soul too. His soul stands perpetually on the precipice, caught between his spiritual obligations and his human frailties. As a priest, he is emblematic of spiritual purity and guidance, yet his personal transgressions – alcoholism, fatherhood outside wedlock – highlight the volatile nature of the soul, its capacity for both sanctity and sin. In the whisky priest, Greene delineates the dichotomy of the soul's aspirations versus its actions. His internal monologues, fraught with guilt and self-reflection, emphasize a soul in turmoil, perpetually striving for redemption even as it acknowledges its own fallibility. This struggle is not confined to the priest alone. Various characters, from the zealous lieutenant to the pragmatic

mestizo, grapple with their own conceptions of the soul, its worth, and its ultimate destination.

A pivotal aspect of Greene's discourse on the soul lies in its relationship with the divine. Throughout the novel, characters frequently engage in dialogues that interrogate the nature of God, His judgments, and the eternal destiny of the soul. The whisky priest's poignant reflections on heaven, hell, and purgatory underscore the soul's journey as one fraught with uncertainties, guided by faith but shadowed by doubt. Another salient theme is the soul's interplay with the external world. Greene's narrative is replete with instances where the soul's sanctity is challenged by societal dogmas and decrees. The anti-religious crusade that sweeps through Mexico serves as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the soul when confronted with overpowering worldly forces. Yet, in these very confrontations, Greene also illustrates the soul's resilience and its inherent yearning for grace.

The novel's denouement encapsulates the triumphant ascendance of the soul. While his physical existence meets a tragic end, his soul, purified through trials and tribulations, attains a state of grace. In this, Greene seems to echo the age-old theological tenet: the soul's journey, no matter how tainted by sin, can ultimately find redemption in divine mercy. Through the trials, reflections, and eventual transcendence of his characters, especially the whisky priest, Greene crafts a narrative that delves deep into the soul's struggles and its ceaseless quest for redemption. The novel, in its layered exploration of the soul's odyssey, serves as a timeless reminder of humanity's eternal quest for spiritual meaning amid the cacophony of worldly chaos. The whisky priest, as an emblematic figure, embodies an intricate duality. His soul is constantly in tumult, caught in the crossfires of his clerical responsibilities and his personal transgressions. His lapses-alcoholism, fathering a child-do not merely signify moral fallibilities; they underscore the broader tension between the soul's aspirations towards the divine and its trappings in the human realm. Greene's narrative, thus, delineates the soul not as an abstract theological construct but as an evolving, palpable essence shaped by its encounters with the world.

While the whisky priest's soul is marked by its vulnerabilities and contradictions, the lieutenant's soul, though rooted in secularism and anti-clericalism, harbors an unwavering commitment to a perceived higher purpose-cleansing the society of religious dogma. The juxtaposition of these two souls-one tormented by its faith, the other by its disdain for it-paints a multifaceted picture of the soul's engagements with moralities, ideologies, and spiritualities. Greene's novel also underscores the universality of the soul's quest for redemption. The whisky priest's final moments, marked by acceptance, surrender, and a semblance of peace, are emblematic of the soul's eventual return to the divine. This cyclical trajectory, from estrangement to reunion, underpins Greene's belief in the soul's indomitable spirit and its innate gravitation towards grace. *The Power and the Glory* stands as a poignant testament to Graham Greene's intricate exploration of the soul. Through the travails and triumphs of his characters, the novel delves into the multifarious dimensions of the soul-its entanglements with the worldly, its battles with moralities, and its perennial quest for the divine. Greene's text, in its profound engagement with the idea of the soul, offers readers a mirror to their own souls, urging them to reckon

with their vulnerabilities and to celebrate their potential for redemption.

It is interesting that Greene's exploration begins with the body. The whisky priest's alcoholism, the weight of fathering a child, and the scars from his constant flight from the authorities render his body a living map of his spiritual journey. His physicality doesn't undermine his spirituality; rather, it amplifies it. Each wound, each pang of hunger, and each physical deprivation he undergoes is intrinsically tied to his inner spiritual turmoil. This symbiotic relationship posits the body not as a mere vessel for the soul, but as its tangible extension. The soul, on the other hand, isn't a detached, pristine entity but is deeply entrenched in the material world. It bears the weight of choices, societal judgments, and personal dilemmas. The whisky priest's soul, for instance, is a battleground, caught between the dogmas of his faith and the worldly allure. But even amidst its fragility, the soul's aspirational trajectory toward grace and redemption remains undeterred. Greene, thus, positions the soul not as an abstract counterpart to the body but as its spiritual compass, constantly seeking alignment with the divine even when ensnared in worldly trappings.

The novel's supporting characters further accentuate this intertwined nature of body and soul. The lieutenant, with his vehement anti-clerical beliefs, epitomizes a soul in conflict with its own body. His disdain for the Church is juxtaposed against moments of undeniable compassion, revealing a soul that, despite its secular moorings, remains bound to a higher moral code. Similarly, the villagers, with their unwavering faith amidst physical deprivations, underscore the resilience of the soul even when the body is subjected to adversity. Greene's narrative, by intertwining these two realms, posits that spiritual evolution is contingent on both the trials of the body and the resilience of the soul. The whisky priest's eventual capture and execution crystallize this idea. His physical end does not signify spiritual obliteration; rather, it marks a transcendental fusion of his body and soul into the realm of the eternal. Greene's intricate delineation of their interplay set against a backdrop of societal chaos, emphasizes the indomitable spirit of humanity that seeks grace, redemption, and transcendence. By blurring the demarcations between the corporeal and the ethereal, Greene invites readers to embark on their own introspective journeys, recognizing that true spiritual evolution is a harmonious dance between body and soul.

Greene's nuanced narrative style ensures that the corporeal does not undermine the spiritual. Instead, the physical experiences, sufferings, and vulnerabilities of the characters accentuate their spiritual engagements. The harshness of the environment—the desolate terrains, the constant threat of capture, the pervasive hunger, and deprivation—all these bodily experiences become avenues for profound soul-searching, making the body an indispensable vessel for spiritual revelations. The whisky priest's moments of physical vulnerability, in particular, serve as crucibles for deep spiritual introspection, reinforcing the idea that the corporeal is not antithetical to the ethereal but rather an extension of it. Further, Greene's portrayal of the lieutenant provides a complementary perspective on this interplay between body and soul. Though driven by a secular and anti-clerical ideology, the lieutenant's commitment to his cause resonates with a spiritual fervor. His physical pursuit of the whisky priest mirrors a deeper, spiritual quest—a search for meaning, order, and justice in a world marred by

perceived religious decadence. This juxtaposition underscores Greene's assertion that the spiritual does not exist in isolation but extends into every facet of human existence, including our bodily actions and desires. Atkins says,

In fact, *The Power and the Glory* is one of the most carefully worked out of all his novels. Not an image and scarcely a word is superfluous. But the assault on the reader's allegiance is much more violent than in, say, *The Heart of the Matter* or even *The End of the Affair*. This novel can make us uncomfortable. (Evans 185)

One of the novel's most poignant reflections on the spiritual extension in body and soul emerges in the whisky priest's final moments. Facing his imminent execution, the whisky priest experiences a profound union of body and soul. His physical surrender, marked by a palpable vulnerability, becomes a moment of spiritual transcendence, underscoring Greene's belief in the inherent sanctity of the human form and its capacity for divine grace. Graham Greene, with his profound narrative insights, illuminates the intricate symbiosis between the tangible and the ethereal, emphasizing their mutual dependencies in the quest for meaning, redemption, and grace. By positioning the body not as a hindrance but as a vessel for spiritual engagement, Greene challenges conventional dichotomies, urging readers to perceive the divine not merely in the realms of the ethereal but in the very fabric of our corporeal existence.

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