Introduction to the life and literary career of Graham Greene

Graham Greene was born in 1904, in a middle-class family in Hertfordshire. Though he had a secure, uneventful and happy childhood, his parents were both remote and authoritative. This lack of communication between them surfaced in the parent-child relationships in his novels, where they are of considerable thematic significance. Lack of understanding lie at the core of all human relationships in Greene, but are especially prominent in the parent-child one, which is after all traditionally based on sympathy, trust and caring. He left behind the security of home and joined school and was thrust into a strange world of new people, with strange and often contradictory emotions and actions. His misery increased when after thirteen he had to board at school during weekdays and was deprived of the haven at home. All around him the boy saw evil - in this awareness lie the roots of the novelists obsession with the loss of awareness, sins and sufferings, corruption, crime and evidence, childhood traumas and adult depravity. Moments of escape from this stifling environment became for him a fleeting time of release and of prayer (towards the end of his life Greene who was born an Anglican converted to Catholicism).

By the time Greene reached his adolescence he found reality in fiction, with its world of pain, and betrayal. His growing unhappiness and depression made him seek desperate ways of escape, including suicide. All through his life this inclination towards self-destruction remained, and propelled him into dangerous situations. In most of his novels too his protagonists choose some kind of suicidal end for themselves. He was, in fact, later, a manic depressive, who displayed this weakness in his adolescence. His parents realised that he was close to a nervous breakdown and took him to a psychoanalyst for
treatment. In spite of having adjusted better to life, Greene would find
the essence of human life in the city and was most at home there.
Perhaps this is why most of his novels are urban in setting and
atmosphere. He made many attempts at writing, but achieved success
for the first time with Stamboul Train in 1932. Some of his other novels
were, A Gun for Sale (1936), Brighton Rock (1938), The Confidential
Agent (1939), The Power and the Glory (1940), The Heart of the
Matter (1948), and The End of the Affair (1951). Greene’s religious
development is faithfully mirrored in his novels, many of which were
directly Catholic in their themes and characterisation. His later
novels show a gradual secularization. But he remained a Catholic to
the end - he never divorced his wife in spite of their estrangement and
was given a Catholic funeral.

**Summary of The Power and the Glory**

In a particular Mexican state the Church outlawed and the priests
driven underground by the threat of bring shot. After several months,
word went out from the governor’s office that there was still one priest,
who was moving from village to village carrying on the work of the
Church by administering the sacraments and saying masses. A young
lieutenant of police, an ardent revolutionist and an anti-clerical,
persuaded his chief to let him search for the priest who, as the
authorities saw it, was guilty of reason. Two photographs were pasted
up together in the police station. One was the picture of an American
bank robber who had killed several police officers in Texas; the other
was that of the priest. No one noticed the irony, least of all the young
lieutenant, who was far more interested in arresting the clergyman.
While the officer was receiving permission to make a search for the
priest, the priest was already in the village, having come there in order
to get aboard a boat that would take him to the city of Vera Cruz and
safety. Before the priest could board the boat word came to him that
an Indian woman was dying several miles inland. True to his calling,
the priest mounted a mule and set out to administer the last rites to the
dying woman even though he realised that he might not find another
ship to carry him to safety. There was one other priest in the vicinity,
Father Jose. But Father Jose had been cowardly enough to renounce
the Church, even to the point of taking a wife, a shrewish old woman.
The authorities paid no attention to him at all, for they felt, and rightly
so, that the priest who has renounced his vows was a detriment and a shame to the Church. After completing his mission, the priest came back to the coast, where he spent the night in a banana warehouse. The English manager on the plantation allowed him to hide there.

The following day, hoping to find refuge from the police and from the revolutionary party of Red Shirts, he set out on the back of a mule for the interior. As he traveled, he thought of his own past and of himself as a poor example of the priesthood. For the priest was a whisky priest, a clerk who would do almost anything for a drink of spirits. In addition, he had in a moment of weakness fathered a child by a woman in an inland village. Thinking himself a weak man and a poor priest, he was still determined to carry on the work of the Church as long as he could, not because he wanted to be a martyr but because he knew nothing else to do. After twelve hours of travel he reached the village where his one-time mistress and his child lived. The woman took him in overnight, and the following morning he said a mass for the villagers. Before he could escape the police entered the village. Marcia claimed him as her husband, and his child, a little grown girl of seven, named him as her father. In that manner, because of his earlier sins, he escaped. Meanwhile the police had decided on a new tactic in uncovering the fugitive. As they passed through each village they took a hostage. When a certain length of time had passed without the apprehension of the priest, a hostage was shot. In that manner the lieutenant of police in charge of the hunt hoped to betray their priest.

After the police had left the village without discovering him, the priest mounted his mule and went on his way. He travelled northward in an effort to escape the police and, if possible, to make his way temporarily into another state. Some hours after leaving the village, the priest met with a native who fell in with him. Before long the half breed discovered the priest for whom the police were searching. He promised that he, a good Catholic, would not betray the secret, but the priest was afraid that the promised of seven hundred pesos would be too much of a temptation for the poor man. When they reached a town, however, it was the priest's own weakness which out him into the hands of the police. He had to have some liquor, the sale of which was against the law. He managed to buy some illegally, but his possession of the contraband was discovered by one of revolutionary Red Shirts, who raised a cry after him. Tracked down by a posse, the priest was
caught and placed in jail. Fortunately, he was not recognised by the police, but since he had no money he was kept in jail to work out the fine.

The lieutenant of police who was searching feverishly for him unexpectedly did the priest a good turn. Seeing the ragged old man working about the jail, the lieutenant stopped to talk with him. The priest claimed to be a vagrant who had no home of his own. The lieutenant, feeling sorry for the old fellow, released him and gave him a present of five pesos. Leaving town, the priest started out across the country to find a place of temporary safety. After travelling for some time, he met an Indian woman who could speak only a few words of Spanish. She managed to make him understand that something was wrong with her child. He went with her and found that her baby had been shot; his immediate guess was that the American bandit had done the deed.

After performing rites over the child the priest continued his flight. He eventually made his way into the next state, where he was given sanctuary by a German plant owner. After resting a few days, he planned to go to a city and present his problems to his bishop. Before he could leave, however, he was told that the American bandit, a Catholic, was dying and needed the priest. The priest answered the call, even though he was sure he was being led into a trap. The bandit was really dying, but he lay in the state from which the priest had just escaped. With him was a party of police, waiting for the priest’s appearance in order to arrest him.

Immediately after the bandit’s death, the police closed in and the priest was captured. Taken back to the capital of the state and tried for treason, he was found guilty and sentenced to be shot. The lieutenant of police, who felt sorry for the old priest tried to persuade Father Jose to hear his last confession. But Father Jose, feared the authorities and refused. The priest was led out and shot without the benefit of the Church’s grace. Yet the lieutenant of police had not succeeded in removing the Church’s influence; in the evening of the day on which the priest died, another priest made his way in secret, into the town where the execution had taken place.
10.0 Objectives

Friends, a study of this chapter will enable you to:

a) Analyse the characters in The Power and the Glory
b) Study the motives of the characters as observed in the novel
c) Discuss the conflict between good and evil in the novel
d) Study the novel as a reflection of the socio-political situation

10.1 Introduction

While studying Forster’s novel, we saw how he depicted the inner development of the individual in the context of his social and cultural background. On the other hand, Greene in his The Power and the Glory, portrays the individual against the social and political background that shape his destiny. This is because the setting of this novel is Mexico, a land in which the political situation was very unstable. Forster’s novel has a touch of mysticism because he tries to show the differences in the philosophy and ideology of his characters representing their cultures.
10.2 Graham Greene’s treatment of characters in 
The Power and the Glory

Greene’s characters are vibrant and intense, and do not bear resemblance to traditional characters of earlier English drama or fiction. They are not types but archetypes, and are primary or symbolic characters in essential human condition, like the characters in a Morality play. This is why the two major characters are nameless. But what is unusual is that no matter how typed they may seem, they grow morally and emotionally. The two main characters in the novel are the priest and the Lieutenant. The priest who is the hero of the novel, is trapped in a highly dangerous situation. His duty is to serve the Catholic community in the Mexican state where active priests are arrested and killed. He tries to stay alive because he wants to continue his service to God. There is constantly a conflict in his mind about whether to remain in Mexico or to escape. When he reaches a port where he can escape in a steamboat, he is called by a sick woman who wishes to confess her sins. He goes to her and the steamboat leaves without him. The reader wonders if he is a martyr or a saint, because he not only has inadequacies and weaknesses (he is a semi-alcoholic and has fathered an illegitimate child), but continuously upbraids himself for them. At the same time, the more he regards himself as a failure, the more he shows the virtue of humility. He is regarded as a criminal in the eyes of the law and a sinner in the eyes of devout Catholics. He is judged wanting by others, but he himself does not judge others. He knows his own weaknesses, and has love and compassion in his heart even for the mestizo who he knows will betray him. When he dies after being caught by the Lieutenant, he becomes the martyr he had never dared to aspire to become.

The Lieutenant is an upholder of law, and not a villain, though he is a hunter and an opponent of the priest. Perhaps this is because both, the pursuer and the pursued are representatives of opposing spiritual worlds. He is a fanatically dedicated and intelligently resourceful Marxist assisted by soldiers and the police. Both the Catholic priest and the atheistic Lieutenant are idealists, both work hard for their ideals, both have sympathy for the villagers, particularly the poor and children, and both are ideologically opposed. During their meetings, the Lieutenant begins to feel sympathy and respect for the priest. This
is why, though it is illegal, he fetches a confessor (the cowardly Padre Jose) and a bottle of brandy for him. So both the priest and the Lieutenant are anonymous and both have dialectically representative roles. While the hero is unquestionably the priest, the Lieutenant's view is also given importance, to balance between the bad hero and the good villain, to suggest their equal status as fallen men, and to point their recognition of human qualities in each other.

10.2 Check Your Progress.

Mention two good qualities each of :-

a) The priest

b) The Lieutenant

10.3 Some observations on The Power and the Glory

The Power and the Glory is one of the most powerful of Greene's major novels, and the one considered by most critics to be his finest. The theme of the hunted man establishes an exciting and nightmarish atmosphere to the novel which is like a thriller. But there is much more in it than a simple manhunt. Greene has created characters that are human and symbolic at the same time. The priest and the lieutenant represent the dualism in the human spirit - godliness as opposed to godlessness, love as against hatred, spirituality as against materialism, and concern for the individual as against concern for the nation. After the lieutenant captures the priest, there is a dialogue between the two men which lies at the heart of this story of good and evil. The lieutenant's ambition to catch this man is a disinterested one. He has no personal enmity towards the priest but sees him as a symbol of the poor who are corrupted by the church. He is a nihilist who wants to destroy the church along with memories along with his own unhappy childhood. Though the lieutenant is the antithesis of the priest his obsession with the hunt and his dedication to his job (of eradicating Catholicism) lead him to lead a life that is priest-like, e.g. He lives in very simple lodgings. The lieutenant's hunt for and
persecution of the priest turned the priest into a martyr in the eyes of the people. The lieutenant hates the rich and loves poor, but he cannot understand or tolerate pain.

On the other hand the priest has endured pain, anxiety and guilt for years but sees in his suffering the presence of God's love. The priest is very conscious of his weakness and failure both as a man and as a priest. An alcoholic, a scandalous priest with an illegitimate child, a man terrified of pain and death, he has no illusions about himself. In fact his self-knowledge raises him to the level of a hero. He is redeemed in our eyes by his keen sense of responsibility for his sins and for the suffering he has brought upon others. His purgatory is in Mexico in his years of flight and in his tormented conscience. He accepts his loss of peace in the belief that the only reason God denies him rest is so that he could save a soul. After he sees Brigitta, his love and sense of responsibility for this child overwhelm him. Through her he finds his salvation. The lieutenant and the priest provide a foil for each other and one realises that the lieutenant needs the priest to absorb his hatred. This symbolic relationship between the two characters is of fundamental importance to the novel.

10.4 Conflict between good and evil in The Power and the Glory

The problem of conflict between evil and good is prominent in the novel. Greene believes that in the ultimate analysis it is God's justice that is predominant over man's idea of justice. The problem of evil and suffering is at the centre of human tragedy. When good and evil are engaged in a fight, the fate of this battle depends on the fortitude and integrity of each of each individual involved in it. In this novel, Greene shows a situation where cruelty, corruption have full sway, and crime, lust and unhappiness fill the land. This is a world of sin and suffering.

10.3 Check Your Progress.

Answer in one sentence :-

Which two sins has the priest committed ?

______________________________
The protagonist is a priest who does wrong and who is aware of his corruption. When he was young, he suffered from the sins of pride, complacency, weakness for drink, as well as the sin of the flesh. As he grows older, his sins increase. He is aware of his evil and sin and is unable to do anything to save himself from damnation. Greene shows that both Padre Jose and the whisky priest are aware of their sacrilege. The real battle between the forces of good and evil takes place in the soul of the priest. In his death, the evil is defeated and the forces of good transform the priest into a saint.

### 10.4 Check Your Progress.

Fill in the blanks :-

a) The battle between good and evil takes place in the ........of the priest.

b) The priest is transformed into a ........ .

### 10.5 The Power and the Glory as a reflection of the socio-political situation

This novel shows a state where religion has been outlawed. Only two priests are left to carry on the word of the gospel. One of them (i.e. Padre Jose) marries and bids farewell to his vocation, the other is the whiskey-priest, who indulges in illicit sex, gluttony, pride and drinking. He also suffers from cowardice and flees the parish, but he cannot bring himself to leave his faith. He knows that he is sinning but is incapable of saving himself. The priest is a man hunted by the law because this is a state where the church has been banished from the land and the people do not have the freedom to follow their faith. This is a place where there is religious persecution, a world that is full of squalor, desolation, wanton cruelty and corruption. Yet the people have a desperate need for faith, and it is this that may save them from a sterile civilization and graceless materialism. Thus this is the perfect locale for the depiction of Greene's story.

### 10.6 Conclusion

Greene's The Power and the Glory uses the technique of the thriller,
that of the hunter and the hunted, having all the ingredients of betrayal, chase and hunt. But as Greene becomes involved with more profound themes, he uses a more complex technique with the use of symbolism and emphasis on subtle psychological aspects.

A study of the above novels, which are representative texts, gives an idea of the literary trends during a particular period in English literature. They also indicate some aspects of the philosophy and style of that particular writer. Such a study enables the reader to understand how the novel evolved as a literary form and how it was shaped by the period in which it was written. Literature grows out of life, and a literary artist tries to reflect the microcosm (the individual's world), as well as the macrocosm (the outside world) in his or her art. While doing so, the artist weaves together the various threads of plot and characterisation by using a narrative technique that suits him best to build a structure that will be aesthetically and logically satisfying. While studying the novels prescribed for study, it is important to analyze them in the light of these factors. Though a study of the critical works is useful, a careful reading of the text is essential for a proper understanding and appreciation of the novel. The critical works suggested are a preliminary guideline, and the student is expected to analyze the text and form an independent opinion after reading many more of them.

### 10.7 Summary

In The Power and the Glory, Greene shows a situation where the church has been banished from the country. The protagonist is a priest gone bad but who is aware of his corruption. Sins of the flesh attract him and increase as he grows older, and he sleeps with a woman and begets a child. He loves this child of sin, but his pursuit of his vocation is his saving grace. He is pursued by the Lieutenant, who is well-meaning but misled. The priest is finally betrayed by a mestizo he goes to help. He is arrested, put into prison and executed. Greene portrays his characters vividly and realistically. The two main characters in this novel, viz., the priest and the Lieutenant, are nameless and represent ideologies rather than individuals. Both have their good points and weaknesses, and they serve as foils to each other. The novel depicts the conflict between good and evil in the outer
physical world, as well as the inner world of the human mind as seen in the case of the priest. When he dies, the evil is defeated and good triumphs.

Check Your Progress - Answers

10.2
a) humility, compassion.
b) intelligence, dedication.

10.3
The priest has committed the sins of being an alcoholic and bearing an illegitimate child.

10.4
a) soul
b) saint

Field Work:
Read the novel The Heart of the Matter by Graham Greene.