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# THE MOTIF OF DAUGHTERS IN "THE POWER AND THE GLORY"

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The greatness of *The Power and the Glory* derives in no small way from the superb portrayal of the central character in the book, the unnamed whisky-priest. He is an ambiguous being with conflicting elements of strength and weakness that, by all ordinary standards, is the least qualified to lead men into holiness through Holy Sacraments and yet capable of fulfilling his spiritual mission to the end of his life.

A prey to a double hunt, pursued by the Police and by God, the *whisky*-priest, whom we were so ready to accept with contempt for his feeble nature, turns out to be the priest-hero that invests a whole province with spiritual promise by suffering martyrdom. The puzzle of the priest-hero's personality is undoubtedly an engrossing feature of the book.

But the priest is not the only character that claims the reader's sympathies. The Police Lieutenant (also unnamed) is treated by Graham Greene with such dignity and understanding that it is only natural for the reader to set up the police officer as the deserving rival to the representative of God. Although he is the traditional enemy of God, with nothing to offer but "a vacant uni-

verse and a cooling world," the Lieutenant is far from being a lost soul, considering that he is closer to the God whom he reckons is fiction than so many others who simply ignore Him.

The Priest and the Lieutenant, on their own, and in contrast with each other, raise significant questions on the nature of courage, sanctity and love. But the interpretation of the novel's meaning and the proper judgement of the human and divine values involved require us to examine the lesser characters with the same attention as we do the main ones. We have Mr and Mrs Fellows, the English couple who own a banana plantation; Coral Fellows, their daughter; Mr Tench, the English dentist; the half-caste who betrays the priest; Padre José, the married priest; and James Calver, the American gunman wanted for murder.

The Priest's meetings with each of these characters (together with the more dominant encounter with the Police Lieutenant) help to convey Graham Greene's view of human experience as being that of a wandering soul battling to embrace faith and regain grace in a world that is either hostile or indifferent. Of spe-

cial mention in this respect is the unfolding of a tender compassionate theme conveyed by the young-old child characters in the book.

As early as Part One, chapter two, we are introduced to the Mexican family of three children: two girls, aged six and ten respectively, and Luis, a boy of fourteen. The conduct of the two daughters during the customary bedtime reading of the life of Juan, the young martyr, "with their beady intense eyes, drinking in sweet piety", puts the mother's mind at rest. She confides to her husband that they are "two little saints already". It is the boy whom the mother worries about. Soon weary of the family reading (though not averse to hear the reading of the last chapter where the young Juan is shot against a wall shouting: Viva el Christo Rey), Luis even dares ask awkward questions about the whisky-priest. Things come to a head when at a later date Luis scandalously exclaims, "I don't believe a word of it." The daughters of course will have nothing of this. They sit "motionless, their eyes large and brown and pious".

Indeed, Luis's sisters are mere "Bystanders" (the end-chapter of Part One being so entitled). They hardly motivate the plot or have any bearing on the character of the whisky-priest. The scenes in which the Mexican sisters appear may be considered as an integral part of the novel's structure in juxtaposing the actual hunt of the renegade priest with the pious literary account of a perfect martyr. But the contrast between the child world and the whis-

ky-priest's existence is more effectively seen when Coral Fellows appears in the book. Coral, the daughter of the English banana planter, Captain Fellows, actively seeks to help the hunted priest escape capture and gives him shelter in their barns. She is only thirteen, "with a neat accurately moulded face and two pinched pigtailed", and she is not frightened. Only the night before she handled the Lieutenant with such ease, allowing him to sleep on the verandah before continuing the search for the priest.

What is the effect of Coral on her parents and, more particularly, on her father? With some surprise we read that Mr and Mrs Fellows feel her as a stranger in the house, an outsider who makes people wary of entrusting themselves to her. And yet she inspires "an inordinate love" in her father, a love touched with fear because he knows he cannot determine the future of his daughter. At that moment, the compromises, anxieties and shame lay outside the gate. But one day the future will be allowed in. It is like watching the one you love "driving recklessly towards the broken bridge, the torn-up track, the horror of seventy years ahead".

Coral, however, is far from being vulnerable. Precisely because life has not yet got at her, she wore a false air of impregnability. The future has yet to claim her. Her father may not be prepared for the eventuality of 'what is to happen?'. He flinches away from problems which he has never dared to confront. But Coral, ever so ready to accept responsibili-

ties, seems ably given to preparing herself. She is in fact educating herself all the time. When she is not studying European history she is inspecting alligator skins tacked on the wall or else giving orders to the Indians to get the cargo ready for loading. The weightiest responsibility (and the most adventurous for a thirteen-year old) is giving refuge to a Catholic priest without arousing the suspicion of the police or else unduly scaring her parents who do not want trouble with the authorities.

What is the bond between the daughter of the English planter and the Priest? In small but significant ways, Graham Greene establishes the unalterable priestly nature of the man of God. Coral, in her desire to help, suggests escape. But the Priest says that there is always somebody needing him, and he would rather foil police efforts to catch him by waiting for the rains that will make pursuit impossible in the marshy regions. The girl proposes that he should give himself up. But the Priest plainly says that it is his duty not to be caught as he is the sole representative of God in the province. Coral will still try to help. He can always renounce his Faith and save himself the pain and the fear of being on the run. The Priest emphatically answers that this is impossible because it is out of his power. Coral finally understands: "Like a birthmark" is how she defines the sacramental sign of the pastoral priesthood.

The encounter of the Priest and the English girl sheds light upon the

personality of the priest-hero by showing how the dignity of the man is inextricably linked to his office as priest. He himself never doubts his priestly function, indelibly stamped on his character on the day he was ordained. And because he is a priest he is potentially capable of the ultimate heroism — martyrdom.

Coral Fellows remains part of the Priest's consciousness till the end. In truth the next time he remembers her she is no longer at the banana station, having either fled with her family or been killed. At the spectacle of a deserted human settlement, while rummaging among the papers that must have belonged to the girl, the Priest remembers the readiness of Coral Fellows to swear enmity against anyone who hurt him; at the same time, he is reminded of the other girl, his daughter, who has, conversely, bared her hatred of him in a most wicked manner before his departure from the village.

The encounter of the Priest with his daughter occurs after he has received sanctuary from the English girl. The bonds of love and compassion he has come to acknowledge as being present between him and Coral need to be re-experienced, now that he is visiting his home after an absence of six years, in a meeting with his own flesh and blood. Entering the village, his heart beating with "a secret and appalling love" in expectation of seeing his daughter again, the Priest is greeted by a group of young children, too young to remember the old days when priests dressed in black and wore Roman collars and had soft patronis-

ing hands. The surprising thing is that he fails to recognise his own daughter in the group. It is only a little later that he realises that the young-old girl who had stared at him with a devilry and malice beyond her age is his own daughter. The lack of immediate recognition has a definite effect on the Priest. It accentuates "the shock of human love". The begetting of this child, in an atmosphere of fear, despair, loneliness and a half bottle of brandy, paradoxically leads to a "sacred shamed-faced overpowering love". Forbidden to procreate by the rules of his holy office, the Priest does not only sire a daughter on a poor village woman but he commits the horrifying act without love. Yet now because he is burdened with parental responsibility he is overcome by love.

The situation is familiar. The reader has already witnessed the parent-child relationship between Captain Fellows and his daughter. Both the Captain and the Priest are aware of their responsibilities and the resulting helplessness of trying to fit the girls into the future world. But while Captain Fellows flinches away from the problems which he dare not confront, the Priest receives an insight into human nature such that his awareness of human and divine love is appreciably widened. Care of souls is a grave priestly responsibility. But compared to what parents have to shoulder it is a lighter thing. God can be trusted to make allowances for the sinful misfortunes that we all are guilty of. However, when you have a daughter to bring up, can you trust smallpox,

starvation and men?

In undergoing this fatherly solicitude the whisky-priest is no doubt responding to his particularly unedifying situation. He is living in mortal sin and every act of his spells damnation. He is far from being contrite. This is not simply the foregoing of his days of abstinence or the relinquishing of the altar stone. Ecclesiastical penalties are the more appropriate for those omissions. Here, on top of his "rubble of failures" is the damning weight of carnal sin. How can he stay among his people if his presence is a corrupting example? Seeing his daughter staring back at him — as if a grown woman was there before her time — he feels like his own mortal sin was looking back at him, without contrition. He puts out his hand to drag Brigitta near him and away from something. "But he was powerless; the man or the woman waiting to complete her corruption might not yet have been born: how could he guard her against the non-existent?"

The same cry echoes in the chambers of innumerable paternal hearts. And it is not simply the need to protect and secure from abuse. Brigitta and countless other children in the world have a soul to save or lose. The priest is a man whose special purpose is precisely the salvation of souls. Once the task looked simple enough. But now with "The whole vile world coming round to ruin her" the Priest knows his desperate inadequacy. Just as when parting with Coral Fellows the Priest had offered to pray for the girl so does he now on leaving his own

daughter: "O God, give me any kind of death — without contrition, in a state of sin — only save this child".

The reader of *The Power and the Glory* is rewarded by looking closely into the personalities of the two girls. Coral (a modern name) is a thirteen-year old; Brigitta (a more Christian name) is merely seven. The English girl is the innocent that the Priest's daughter can never hope to be. But nevertheless Coral has her weaknesses. With all her goodwill and efficiency, Coral can hardly claim to understand the pity and the wickedness of the world. She has not even had the companionship of other children, having known only swamps and vultures. She may be grown-up — "an awful pain took her suddenly in the stomach... it was a new pain (not worms this time)" — but she hardly knows what tenderness is. Pretending and the games of childhood had never appealed to her. Always brisk, always alert and competent, Coral has been for long a mature young woman. No less mature is Brigitta. But in her case it is an appalling reality. Her very smile is enticing and "whipped-up". "The world was in her heart already, like the small spot of decay in a fruit". Born in sin and deprived of God's grace, she seems doomed to eternal damnation. The Priest is "shaken by the conviction of loss". There is very little if anything which she does not know. Yet how far does she understand? Her mind has been rushed through a whirlwind of adult passions. She is already singled out in the village because she is the Priest's daughter, and

priests do not work in the fields and, anyway, (according to the ten-year old Pedro in Brigitta's village) priests are not any good for women.

The parting conversation with Brigitta by the rubbish heap near the river leaves the Priest wretchedly aware of the evils that life brings and of the power of sin. But there is no dark despair. Strengthened by his faith and his priestly mission, the Priest concludes: "One mustn't have human affections — or rather one must love every soul as if it were one's own child. The passion to protect must extend itself over a world..." To some of us this may appear a mark of presumption on the part of the Priest. The pitying and shielding concern for the spiritual and material welfare of one's daughter is best left to God because revelation teaches us that our whole life is in the hands of an eternal love. Yet, we feel that the promptings of *divine* concern that well up in the human heart of the whisky-priest are far from upsetting our religious values since the parental role of the Priest as the actual father of Brigitta is sufficiently harmonised with his priestly vocation as the spiritual father of us all.

The moments spent with his own daughter and with Coral Fellows serve to underline the humanness of the Priest while at the same time marking him (notwithstanding his moral bankruptcy) as a man who walks with God. The Catholic priest becomes the parent. To know that the Priest feels the heavy responsibility of parenthood is to convey to

ordinary readers the sense of God taking care of everything. The vision of the whisky-priest, in so far as his daughter is concerned, would have been incomplete had he not extended it to include the world.

Parents long for the respect of their children and seek to love them. They strive to provide them with a bright future and warn them about the dangers that await them. The office of fatherhood on its own is encompassed by care, pain and responsibility. The Priest in *The Power and the Glory* helps us to understand that a child is not simply entrusted to parents who may choose to leave unfinished or exposed to ruin that

which they themselves gave birth to. The child has to be given back to God.

Brigitta and Coral, in their different ways, suggest that they are self-sufficient in the matter of natural needs and everyday life. But the young-old girls are unprotected. Disease, hunger and lust, not to mention compromise and shame, will assail the frail humanity of the girls. The Priest will offer to pray for Coral; for Brigitta he will give his life. But the desperate inadequacy remains. To care for the girls and yet to be powerless to control the evil that will charter their fall.