Language and Theme in Graham Greene’s 

*The Power and the Glory*

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Abstract

This paper looks at language and theme in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. The novel essentially portrays Greene’s travel experiences in Mexico. It primarily centres on the religious persecutions meted against the Catholic Church by the Mexican government. To effectively capture this, he uses language as a medium to depict hopeless individuals and people who lost faith in God. This paper thus anchors on Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Model of Grammar and Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar to critically examine the inter-connectivity between language and theme. The import on this work therefore lies in its attempt to draw a parallel in the use of language denotatively and connotatively, vis-a-vis the author’s subject matter and themes. It concludes of course, that language is a vehicle for the expression of the central and revolving ideas in a work of art which depict the inner mind of the author.

**Keywords:** Language, theme, religious persecution, Catholic Church, hopelessness.
**Introduction**

This paper does not intend to enter into the argument on what language is or is not. Rather, it seeks to take its premise from the fact that language is a system which connects thoughts together as an output for expressing the choices that have been made. Thus, in examining a topic as we are discussing it becomes difficult to draw a line between the language of a text and its theme. This is so because language and theme are linked together, since language is primarily the medium used to reveal worldviews, ideologies, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices of its users; and theme, can only be expressed through the use of language, even though, it is established here that language and theme connect, attempt would be made in this work to treat language and theme as separate concepts. In this paper, language will be seen as an identity, as a poetic device and as a medium basically in terms of the author’s diction, while theme will be examined from the author’s preoccupation and subject matter.

**Theoretical framework**

This paper will adopt two approaches in examining the language in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. Hence, this study will be based on Noam Chomsky’s (1957) Transformational Generative Model of Grammar and Halliday’s Functional Grammar. Transformational Grammar model has two important concepts, namely: the deep structure and surface structure. The surface structure refers to the feasible part of written or spoken sentences, whereas the deep structure refers to the underlying meaning of an expression. The meaning of a sentence according to this model resides not in the surface structure but on the deep structure. This is to allow for every form of ambiguity to be removed at the deep structure level. Halliday’s Functional Grammar (FG) is a systematically driven grammar, which, while not denying that certain principles of syntax do apply, seeks to consider and identify the role of various linguistic items in building meaning. Also, it permits useful movement across the text, addressing the manner in which linguistic patterning are built up for the construction of the overall text in its particular “genre” shape as it is in response to the context of situation which gave rise to it.

Functional Grammar is grammar and use of language that is simple and to the point. It differs from transformational grammar by the latter being more emotive and inspirational in words and language format being used as opposed to being purely factual. In the analysis that follows in this paper, attempts would be made to analyse the language employed by Graham Greene along these approaches.

**Bio-Data of the Author**

Graham Greene was born in 1904. He attended Berkhamsted school where his father was headmaster, and then proceeded to Balliol College, Oxford. While there he published a collection of poems. On graduation, he worked for some time as sub-editor of *The Times Newspaper*, and later worked as film critic of the weekly *The Spectator* and in 1940 he became its literary editor. In 1941 he was employed by the foreign office which sent him out to Sierra Leone from 1941-1943.

Owing to Greene’s early life, his works were largely influenced by his religion, his fascination with the exotic, his interest in psychology, his experience in extensive travels and his preoccupation with extreme situations that testanindividual’s emotional and spiritual resources.


Synopsis of the Novel
Greene’s The Power and the Glory is basically a travelogue. It is a record of his personal travel experience in Mexico in 1938, a documentation of his physical and psychological subjugation, of sycophantic existence and the hope of the Mexican people. Akpan (1995) opines that Greene’s novel demonstrates the possibility of the individual attaining redemption, salvation and glory though burdened by a sense of despair.

The novel introduces a priest where his psyche is dampened and further compounded by terror transmitted through his arch-rival-lieutenant; who sees this priest as a cheat. Damnation and death were clear and present danger to the Priest. This priest’s existence amounts to a conscious confrontation with the abyss of hopelessness. In his consciousness, there exists a set of fear from the terrors of the Lieutenant. The realization of hope amounts to challenging those factors that inhibit hope. The challenge can certainly be achieved through Christianity, whose doctrine tends to be the only hope of the people.

Language in Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory
Language is a veritable tool for communication. It is used to express the views, argument and ideologies of those who employ it. It is the most sophisticated communication tool of life and what it means to be human. Hence, the ability to communicate through language is what differentiates man from other animals. Language is therefore an extremely important aspect of communication as well as an important index of identity that is used for all communicative functions that a people require. Poetic devices are tools that a poet can use to create rhythm, enhance meaning, or intensify mood or feeling. The opening lines of this travelogue are poetic. It can simply make a good poem when arranged in verse form:

We feel the blazing sun
See the bleaching dust
Hear the vulture that flapped
Even the taste and smell
(TP&TG, 2).

The language is condensed, tacit and poetic and carries in it a whole lot of weighty thoughts, ideas and arguments. The items above have unpleasant connotations (deep structure meanings) and taken together provide an appropriate setting for Greene’s faint feeling of rebellion and overwhelming feeling of despair. The vulture, for obvious reasons, is a recurrent symbol and it represents as it were, the ignorable end that awaits every living thing.

Also, with the power of words embellished in strong symbols, the most obvious scene of despair is the Fellow’s home which has been ransacked and abandoned. The bitch that the Whisky Priest meets at the Fellow’s abandoned home when he is on the run creates a concrete symbol of despair. Consider the excerpt below:

And it came: a mongrel bitch dragging herself across the yard, an ugly creature with bent-ears trailing a wounded or a broken leg, whimpering. There was something wrong with her back. She came slowly; he could see her ribs...
It was obvious that she hadn’t food for days; she had been abandoned (TP & TG, 183).

Others symbols are sharks, coffin, disease, death, ugliness, loneliness and despair. Symbols like these intensify the mood and help convey the theme of despair. For instance,

The swap and vultures and no Children anywhere, except a few In the village with bellies swollen By worms who ate dirt from the Bank inhumanly (TP & TG, 38).

Akpan (1995) maintains that the society’s sordidness is suggestive of abandonment and despair: despair because, the society seems to be abandoned not just by man, but also by God.

There is also a conscious play on words-pun, in the Priest’s description of the situation:

...rage and weeping from time set free, But bound now in eternity; rage that Has no language, weeping with no voice, Of boundless melancholy, of bitterness Patience and longest nights, of deepest Water, strongest chain, the cruelest lash... (TP & TG, 215)

The author explores the dynamic nature of language as a medium to express his theme. Diction signifies the kind of words, phrases and sentences structures and sometimes also figurative language that constitute any work of literature (Joshua, 2015). The meaning of any discourse is a function of diction. A choice of words may be simple, complex, natural or artificial depending on the intended message of the writer or speaker. In Greene’s The Power and the Glory, the choice of words used play an important role in the interpretation and understanding of

the theme of the novel. For instance, the title, “The Power and the Glory” connotes The Power – the government and the Glory – Church. So it is clash between the government and the church in Mexico.

In a metaphoric expression Greene describes the Lieutenant as a man of titanic drives. He is an adequate metaphor for a man in a grim struggle with the forces of the universe; he stopped just short of evoking the sense of tragedy. He unleashes pugnacious indifference. He is arrogant callous and inhuman. In spite of his nihilistic drives, the people still hold to their faith.

I am looking for one priest... More than a dozen crawled over The tiles with injured wings. It infuriated him (Lieutenant) to think that there are still people in the state who believe in a loving and merciful God (TP & TG, 19).

Also the debilitating inefficiency of the police and judicial system is portrayed in the novel in non-simple sentence structure whose meaning are derived from presumption. There is a pervading sense of fear, despair and suspicion. Violence is indeed pervasive. As the priest he says:

It was a male child, with a withered bullet head, with a mop of black hair, unconscious but not dead, horror and disgust touched him; it was as if man on all this state had been left to man (TP & TG, 195).

This is a very long and winding sentence. It contains several commas, and semi colon. There is also the piling up of adjectives. The choice of this sentence type gives room for the author to express his thoughts in a manner the simple sentence variety may not have allowed.
There is also the use of repetition in an attempt to give relevance to the theme of hope, the church had in spite of the brutalizing effect of the government. In this extract, the author made use of multiple sentence structure as seen in this excerpt:

```plaintext
Faith, one was told, could move mountains and here was faith- faith in the spittle that healed the blind man and the voice that raised the dead (TP & TG, 201).
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Faith is repeated thrice in this short extract. For the Christian church, faith is the only hope they have, a belief that someday they would go to heaven and meet their God.

Language is an important index of identity. In Greene’s The Power and the Glory, language is used to identify three sets of people: individuals, members of the Mexican Community as a group and the Lieutenant as the government. The preform “I” is used to indicate the individuals as the Priest, Padre Jones, the dentist, the Lieutenant etc. Each time it is being used, it portrays individualism in the characters. “I” is the first person singular pronoun. Equally, the author also makes use of the plural “we” and “us” when characters refer to themselves as members of the community who suffer the same plight in the hands of the Mexican government.

The third person plural “they” is used in the novel to refer to the soldiers and police. Some examples from the novel include:
(a) They must get along... (TP & TG, 30)
(b) I am your servant... (TP & TG, 53)
(c) I am looking for one priest (TP & TG, 19)
(d) We will go on... (TP & TG, 14)
(e) For us it is our faith... (TP & TG, 201)

**Language and the Theme**

The theme of novel is that of despair, neglect and frustration. The story revolves around two main characters: The Priest and the Lieutenant. Throughout the novel, the atmosphere of despair, of hate, of brutality and of damnation, renders the Priest gasping for eternal hope and protection. In the novel we are presented with a world of utter darkness; a world where men destroy themselves through hatred and self-egoism just as the Lieutenant destroyed the Priest. In a vivid description of the Priest, the author wrote:

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He felt like a man without a passport who is turned away from every harbour (TP & TG, 131).
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A situation such as presented above depicts a society full of despair. Not surprising, the political and economic situation in such a society is most unhealthy. The government is a revolutionary totalitarian regime which enforces its will by terror and by the gun and seems to have little concern for human rights and the dignity of human life. When the inalienable rights of the individual are violated, life becomes short and brutal. The individual is thus faced with fear and with a heavy sense of despair.

Thus through well selected choices of diction, Greene is able to put across his theme. Most of the expressions that looked vague and decontextualized at the deeper structure level to confirm to the theoretical framework chosen in this paper.
Conclusion
Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* is the production of Greene’s travel experience in Mexico. It is his experiences of hatred, disappointment and despair. It is a record of bitter pursuit, strongest chain and the cruelest lashes. It is a story of a desperate Priest under the draconian and destructive eyes of hatred and boundless melancholy of the Lieutenant.

Thus, through simple narrative, choice of language and power of psychological characterization, Graham Greene has been able to carry the burden in his mind. His use of symbols ranging from inanimate to animate things further confirms his theme. The matrix of TG and FG are theories of grammar that see functionality of language and its elements to be the key to understanding linguistic processes and structures. Functional theories of language propose that since language is fundamentally a tool, it is reasonable to assume that its structures are best analysed at the surface and deep structure levels.

References


