

Religion, Social Class, and the “Curtain of Lies”: Reconsidering Graham Greene’s Catholic Fiction

Pardeep Kumar*

Department of English, Govt. College Bahadurgarh

Received: 09 / 04 / 2026

Accepted: 15 / 05 / 2026

Published: 26 / 05 / 2026

Abstract: Graham Greene’s novels often bring religion, social class, institutional power, and personal responsibility into the same moral landscape. Critics have paid considerable attention to Greene’s Catholic imagination, but the connection between religious belief and socioeconomic inequality deserves closer attention. This paper examines *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) through the idea of the “religious curtain of lies.” This is an analytical metaphor used here to describe the ways religious language can sometimes hide inequality, justify authority, or turn social suffering into a matter of personal guilt. At the same time, religion can give marginalised people a sense of dignity and a language with which to question or resist oppression.

Drawing on Marxist ideas about class and ideology, along with scholarship on Greene’s Catholic imagination, the paper argues that religion in Greene’s fiction cannot be placed neatly on either side of the divide between social control and spiritual freedom. It often does both. In *Brighton Rock*, Catholic belief is closely tied to criminal marginality, gender, and class. In *The Power and the Glory*, spiritual authority grows out of poverty, suffering, and political persecution. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Catholic conscience is shaped by the moral contradictions of British colonial rule.

Greene therefore presents religious belief as deeply conflicted. It can support existing hierarchies, but it can also expose their cruelty and moral failure. His importance as a novelist lies partly in the way he brings social structures and individual conscience into constant tension. The “religious curtain of lies” does not mean that religion itself is deceptive. Rather, it provides a way of asking when religious narratives hide material inequality and when they help us see that inequality more clearly.

Keywords: *Social Class, Catholicism, Religion, Ideology, Moral Ambiguity, Colonialism.*

Cite this article: Kumar, P. (2026). Religion, Social Class, and the “Curtain of Lies”: Reconsidering Graham Greene’s Catholic Fiction. *MRS Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 3(5), 110-114.

Introduction

Graham Greene occupies a distinctive place in twentieth-century English literature because his fiction brings religion into close contact with morality, politics, sexuality, violence, and social power. His characters rarely make moral choices in isolation. Their decisions are shaped by the institutions and social conditions around them, and those conditions often limit what they are able to do. Religion is central to this struggle. Ideas such as sin, guilt, grace, sacrifice, and redemption give Greene’s characters a language for understanding their lives, but these ideas do not mean exactly the same thing for everyone. Their meaning changes with a character’s social position and circumstances.

Critics have long recognised the importance of Catholicism in Greene’s literary imagination. Mark Bosco argues that Catholicism remains a continuing pattern in Greene’s work and that it needs to be understood in relation to the changing theological and cultural climate of twentieth-century Catholicism. More recent scholarship, however, has questioned the tendency to describe Greene simply as a “Catholic novelist.” In *Between Form and Faith*, Martyn Sampson examines the tensions among religious doctrine, literary form, personal experience, and interpretation in *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *The Power and the*

Glory. Building on this scholarship, the present paper asks a more specific social question: how does religious consciousness interact with social class and institutional power in Greene’s fiction?

To explore this question, the paper uses the concept of the “religious curtain of lies.” The phrase does not come from Greene, and it does not mean that religion is inherently false or deceptive. Here it is used as an analytical metaphor for situations in which religious language can hide material inequality, justify authority, turn structural suffering into personal guilt, or make unequal social conditions appear morally meaningful. But the curtain can also work in the opposite direction. Religious belief may expose hypocrisy and give marginalised characters a language through which they can question, resist, or reinterpret the forces controlling their lives.

The discussion focuses on three novels commonly associated with Greene’s Catholic fiction: *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter*. They are particularly useful because their central characters occupy very different social and institutional positions. Pinkie Brown is a socially marginalised criminal whose understanding of Catholicism is shaped by fear, violence, and insecurity. The whisky priest lives

in poverty and faces political persecution, yet his suffering gives him a form of moral authority. Scobie, by contrast, is a colonial police officer whose private conscience becomes inseparable from the tensions and injustices of British imperial rule.

Taken together, these novels show that Greene presents religion as neither simply oppressive nor simply liberating. Religious language may hide or reinforce inequality, but it may also expose the moral failures of the institutions that create and maintain it. Faith, in Greene's fiction, is therefore a troubled space where social structures and individual conscience meet, challenge one another, and sometimes change one another.

Research Gap and Methodology

Critical studies of Graham Greene have traditionally focused on Catholicism, theology, moral ambiguity, psychological conflict, and the tension between faith and doubt. Bosco's work is especially useful because it shows that Greene's Catholic imagination was neither simple nor fixed. It developed over time in response to changing historical, cultural, and theological circumstances.

Sampson's more recent study takes this understanding further by examining the relationship between theological ideas and literary form. His readings of *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter* highlight religious anxiety and the tension between Church doctrine and personal experience. His discussion of *The Power and the Glory* places Catholicism within wider questions of interpretation and literary meaning.

This paper addresses a related but less frequently explored question. Although religion and morality have been studied extensively in Greene's fiction, the relationship between religious language and socioeconomic hierarchy has not always been placed at the centre of comparative studies of his Catholic novels. Social class is often treated as background, even though it strongly influences how Greene's characters understand and experience religion.

The study uses a qualitative and interpretive method based on comparative close reading. It examines characterisation, dialogue, narrative perspective, social setting, religious imagery, institutional authority, and representations of economic and political power. Marxist theories of class and ideology provide the main theoretical vocabulary, but these ideas are considered alongside theological and literary approaches rather than being used as a single, complete explanation.

This approach is important because Greene's fiction does not fit comfortably into one framework. As Sampson suggests, his novels should not be reduced to fixed ideas about what makes a text "Catholic." This study therefore treats religion as a contested space in which Church doctrine, individual conscience, and lived social experience come together. In Greene's novels, religious belief is shaped not only by theology but also by poverty, privilege, institutional power, and the social conditions in which people live.

Theoretical Framework: Ideology, Class, and Religion

The idea of ideology provides a useful starting point for understanding Greene's treatment of religion. From a Marxist perspective, social inequality is maintained not only through economic and political institutions but also through systems of

belief that can make unequal arrangements appear natural, necessary, or legitimate.

Religion can sometimes play a part in this process. Teachings that emphasise obedience, humility, endurance, or acceptance may lead people to understand inequality mainly as a personal moral test rather than as a wider social problem. Greene's fiction, however, makes this interpretation more complicated. Religion does not simply support existing power. It can also provide a moral language for questioning that power.

In Greene's novels, characters who have little social or institutional power often possess considerable moral authority. The whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* is the clearest example. He is poor, vulnerable, and politically persecuted, yet his lack of social power does not make him morally insignificant. At the same time, characters who hold official authority often experience doubt, guilt, and moral failure.

The idea of the "religious curtain of lies" captures this tension. Religion can hide inequality when suffering is understood mainly in spiritual terms and attention is drawn away from its social and material causes. But religion can also expose injustice by providing moral standards against which institutions and their actions can be judged.

This two-sided understanding is consistent with recent scholarship on Greene's Catholic imagination. Bosco shows that Greene's Catholicism is much more layered than conventional descriptions of the "Catholic novel" suggest. Sampson similarly cautions against imposing a single theological interpretation on Greene's fiction. Building on these approaches, the present study shifts attention towards the social conditions in which religious belief is lived and experienced.

Brighton Rock: Catholicism, Criminality, and Social Marginality

In *Brighton Rock*, religion exists within a social world marked by crime, economic insecurity, gender inequality, and competing forms of authority. Pinkie Brown's Catholic consciousness is important because he does not understand violence in purely secular terms. Ideas of sin, damnation, guilt, and moral responsibility are part of the way he understands himself and the world around him. Yet knowing these ideas does not make him compassionate or ethical. Instead, his Catholicism is closely connected to fear. He understands sin and punishment, but he struggles to accept the ideas of love, mercy, and forgiveness that are also central to Catholic belief. Religion therefore has a complicated psychological effect on him. It gives him a language for recognising guilt, but it also increases his anxiety and becomes part of the way he manipulates others.

Rose has a very different relationship with Catholicism. Her faith shapes her understanding of loyalty, marriage, love, and personal responsibility. At the same time, her economic and social vulnerability, together with her position as a young woman, makes her faith open to exploitation. Pinkie uses her beliefs and emotional dependence to strengthen his control over her.

Their relationship shows that religious experience cannot be separated from social power. Rose has less physical, economic, and social power than Pinkie, but he cannot completely control what her faith means to her. Her religious convictions preserve a sense of moral identity that stands against his despair and nihilism.

Even when her beliefs help keep her in a harmful relationship, they also stop Pinkie's worldview from becoming the only moral perspective in the novel.

Here the "religious curtain of lies" becomes especially clear. Religion can restrict Rose by encouraging loyalty to a harmful relationship, but it also gives her a moral language through which she maintains her identity and resists Pinkie's belief that life is defined only by violence, fear, and damnation. Greene therefore does not present religion as wholly liberating or wholly oppressive. In Rose's experience, it becomes both a source of vulnerability and a form of resistance.

This complexity supports Sampson's argument that Brighton Rock cannot be reduced to one doctrinal interpretation. The novel is not simply an illustration of Catholic teaching. It is also part of Greene's wider exploration of religious anxiety and the difficult relationship between individuals, belief, and society.

The Power and the Glory: Poverty and Spiritual Authority

In *The Power and the Glory*, Greene moves from the criminal world of Brighton Rock to a setting shaped by political persecution. The whisky priest is poor, morally flawed, and constantly hunted by the state. Yet his weaknesses do not remove his spiritual importance. Instead, they make his moral struggle feel deeply human.

One of the novel's most important reversals is the separation of political power from moral authority. The state has the power to punish, while the priest has almost no material protection. Even so, Greene uses the priest to explore sacrifice, responsibility, and grace. His poverty is therefore more than a background detail. It places him outside established systems of power and allows Greene to distinguish between organised authority and faith as it is lived by an imperfect individual.

The priest is not presented as an ideal religious hero. His alcoholism and sexual past make such a simple reading impossible. His spiritual importance comes instead from his willingness to accept responsibility for other people despite his own failures. He knows that returning to help people may lead to his capture, yet he continues to respond to their needs. Through this character, Greene questions the assumption that moral legitimacy naturally belongs to people who hold official power.

In this novel, the "religious curtain" becomes partly transparent. Religious teaching does not simply hide political oppression. It also exposes the moral failure of a state that tries to destroy religious belief through violence and coercion. This complicates a purely Marxist understanding of religion as an instrument of powerful institutions. The whisky priest is neither wealthy nor politically influential, and his faith does not protect his social position. Instead, it becomes a language through which the authority of the state can be questioned.

Religion therefore works in *The Power and the Glory* as a counter-discourse to political power. It gives moral meaning to the experience of people whom the state tries to silence, while also showing that having the power to control others is not the same as having moral authority.

The Heart of the Matter: Class, Colonialism, and Conscience

The Heart of the Matter adds another important dimension to Greene's treatment of religion and social hierarchy: British colonialism. Scobie holds an official position within the colonial administration, yet his inner life is dominated by insecurity, guilt, and pity. Although he represents institutional authority, he does not experience himself as powerful. His sense of personal responsibility repeatedly clashes with the demands of his public role.

The colonial setting matters because Scobie's moral crisis develops within a hierarchy that is political, racial, and economic. His conscience pushes him towards compassion, while his official position places him inside a system built on unequal power. He therefore tries to respond to structural problems through private acts of kindness and personal sacrifice.

Scobie's Catholicism makes this conflict even more intense. Social and political decisions become, for him, personal questions of sin, guilt, and responsibility. Instead of confronting the colonial system as a whole, he takes many of its contradictions into his own conscience. Problems created by institutions are consequently experienced as individual burdens.

This is one of the clearest examples of the "religious curtain of lies." Social and political problems are translated into personal moral failures. Scobie feels responsible for the suffering around him, while the larger system that helps produce that suffering becomes less visible. His guilt turns his attention inward, towards his own soul, rather than outward, towards the colonial structure in which he works.

Greene does not allow the colonial system to disappear, however. The setting continually reminds the reader that Scobie's choices are limited and shaped by an unequal social order. His suffering is personal, but its causes are not purely private. The novel therefore takes Greene's treatment of class into a wider examination of colonial authority and institutional hierarchy.

Scobie's conscience both reveals and conceals the violence of colonial power. It reveals that participation in an unjust system has serious moral and emotional consequences. At the same time, it can conceal the system itself by turning those consequences into the burden of one individual's guilt.

The Religious Curtain: Concealment and Revelation

Taken together, the three novels show two different functions of religious language. First, religion can conceal inequality. It can turn material suffering into mainly spiritual suffering, reduce structural problems to questions of personal morality, and encourage acceptance of existing authority. Second, religion can reveal inequality. It can provide moral standards with which political and social institutions can be judged, and it can protect the dignity of people who have little economic, political, or social power. This tension between concealment and revelation is central to Greene's treatment of faith.

In Brighton Rock, Catholicism is tied to fear, crime, gender inequality, and social marginality. Rose's faith makes her vulnerable to Pinkie's manipulation, but it also protects a sense of moral identity that he cannot completely destroy. In *The Power and*

the Glory, religious belief becomes a form of resistance to a state that relies on persecution and coercion. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Catholic conscience reveals the psychological cost of living within a colonial hierarchy, even as it turns institutional contradictions into Scobie's private guilt.

Religion, then, is never separate from social class in Greene's fiction. It is shaped by a character's position in society and by the forms of power surrounding that person. The poor, the marginalised, and those who hold institutional power do not experience faith in the same way.

Greene ultimately presents religion as neither simply oppressive nor automatically liberating. It can strengthen unequal relationships, but it can also challenge them. The "religious curtain of lies" captures this instability: religion may hide the material causes of suffering, yet it may also bring those causes into moral view. Its role depends on who speaks in its name, whose interests are involved, and how religious belief is experienced within a particular social world.

Discussion: Beyond the Opposition between Religion and Ideology

The discussion of these novels suggests that Greene's fiction cannot be fully understood through a simple opposition between religious faith and secular social criticism. A purely theological reading may overlook the material conditions that shape his characters' lives, while a purely Marxist reading may fail to recognise the genuine moral and spiritual importance of their religious experiences. Greene's achievement lies in the difficult space between these approaches.

His characters are neither completely free individuals nor merely products of their social surroundings. Their choices are limited by class, gender, institutions, political authority, and religious belief, but they still retain some moral agency. They make decisions, accept responsibility, and struggle to understand the consequences of what they do, even when the conditions around them leave no easy or satisfying choices.

This tension helps explain the continuing critical interest in Greene's work. Recent scholarship has increasingly moved away from fixed categories and simple interpretations. Sampson, for example, examines the tensions among theology, literary form, and interpretation rather than treating Catholicism as a stable or straightforward idea. The present argument extends this approach by bringing social class more directly into the discussion.

Greene's Catholic imagination is always rooted in particular social realities. His characters do not experience theology as an abstract system. They encounter it through their bodies, occupations, economic circumstances, relationships, and positions within social institutions. As a result, the question "What does religion mean in Greene's fiction?" cannot be separated from another question: "For whom does religion mean what it means?" This is where social class becomes essential to the analysis.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that religion and social class are closely connected in Graham Greene's major Catholic novels. In *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter*, religious consciousness is shaped by socioeconomic circumstances and institutional power. Greene's characters

understand sin, guilt, grace, sacrifice, and redemption through the particular social worlds in which they live.

The idea of the "religious curtain of lies" helps describe this relationship. The curtain refers to moments when religious narratives can hide material inequality, justify authority, or turn structural suffering into a matter of individual guilt and responsibility. It draws attention to situations in which social and political problems are understood mainly as personal or spiritual failures.

At the same time, Greene shows that religion can question the very structures it may appear to support. Pinkie's Catholicism reveals the psychological dangers of religious doctrine when it is separated from compassion. The whisky priest shows that spiritual authority can emerge from poverty, weakness, and persecution rather than from institutional status. Scobie's moral crisis shows how religious conscience can become trapped within the unequal structures of colonial power.

The central argument therefore needs an important qualification: religion can function as ideology, but it cannot be reduced to ideology. This distinction is important to Greene's literary significance. His fiction neither celebrates Catholicism without question nor dismisses it as a mere social illusion. Instead, it places religious belief under continuing pressure from class, politics, institutional authority, and individual experience.

Religion becomes a language through which Greene's characters try to understand suffering, justify decisions, resist authority, and confront guilt. That language may hide the material causes of suffering, but it may also make the moral failures of social institutions easier to see. The "curtain" therefore has a double function: it can conceal inequality, but it can also become transparent enough to reveal the injustice behind it.

Greene's continuing importance lies in his refusal to settle this ambiguity. His novels suggest that social inequality cannot be understood only in economic or political terms because people experience unequal conditions through moral, emotional, and religious systems. At the same time, moral and religious ideas cannot be separated from the material circumstances in which they develop and are lived.

The relationship between religion and class in Greene's fiction is therefore neither simply oppositional nor simply harmonious. It remains a continuing tension. Religion may legitimise hierarchy or expose its injustice. It may comfort people who suffer or encourage them to endure that suffering. It may deepen guilt, but it may also provide a language of dignity, hope, and resistance.

This unresolved tension is one reason Greene's Catholic fiction remains important to literary criticism. Rather than giving a final answer about whether religion liberates or controls, Greene encourages readers to look at the social conditions in which it can do either. The "religious curtain of lies" should therefore not be read as a rejection of faith. It is better understood as an invitation to examine the distance between religious ideals and social reality.

Behind this curtain are questions that remain significant: Who has authority? Who bears the burden of suffering? Whose morality is accepted as legitimate? And can spiritual equality exist alongside material inequality?

Greene's fiction remains compelling because it does not offer simple answers to these questions. Instead, it keeps faith, power, inequality, and individual conscience in an uneasy but productive relationship.

References

1. Bosco, Mark. *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
2. Greene, Graham. *Brighton Rock*. William Heinemann, 1938.
3. *The Power and the Glory*. William Heinemann, 1940.
4. *The Heart of the Matter*. William Heinemann, 1948.
5. Sampson, Martyn. *Between Form and Faith: Graham Greene and the Catholic Novel*. Fordham University Press, 2021.