

Reconciling Religious Orientation with the Demands of Fiction in Andrew M. Greeley's Selected Novels

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Abstract:

This article attempts to reconcile the religious orientation of Rev. Andrew M. Greeley with the demands of fiction, *i.e.* the literariness required in a masterpiece. As a sociologist-priest, he has written fictions that are considered or labeled as popular or those that belong to genre fiction. Using Russian formalist literary theories in reading Greeley's selected novels, the researcher was able to elucidate that Greeley's craftmanship is present, though it heavily relies on his background as a priest and sociologist.

Keywords: Greeley, sociology of literature, sociology of religion, fiction, craftmanship

Introduction

Writers show in their writings their beliefs towards many aspects in life. Either deliberately or subconsciously done, only the writer knows for sure. Poets, for instance, reveal how they look at the world at any given time – they never tell directly – as Dylan Thomas' oft repeated adjectival, temporal phrase, “a grief ago” – yet they show. Novelists are no exception for that matter; they are what they write. Also, the knowledge of the writer's life or the educational background may be a factor in seeing the deeper meanings of their works, as much as enhance their appreciation. Father Andrew M. Greeley himself admits that his sociological findings shaped his decision to engage in writing fiction (Pasquariello, 1988: 104).

The sociologist and priest, Father Andrew Greeley, is one of those writers who have embedded in their works veritable wisdom they have gotten from their education and experience (after all, the sins revealed in the confessional box could provide sources for fiction, but could not be exposed, under pain of oath). Contrastingly, being a sociologist seems to be inappropriate to his vocation as a priest. Yet obviously, he has no trouble whatsoever in fusing his academic leaning with his priestly vocation and creative impulse. In fact, he has used these to great advantage in writing novels.

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In his *Passover Trilogy* (1987), for instance, one can see the fusion of the Catholic teachings with the sociology of religion. Yet, one's faith is not shaken as one reads his novels. Astonishingly, Greeley does not stop at being a priest and sociologist. He has ventured in writing fiction to the delight of his parishioners-readers. He has also entered the world of the Arts. Usually called the "Renaissance Priest" (news.uchicago.edu) by his fans, he has written about sixty-six novels, excluding non-fiction books he has written. In his novels, a keen reader would observe that Greeley has never failed to teach in the most subtle way. If not teaching morality, one can read him teaching about his own "idea" of Catholicism. He has done this so subtly that a reader may only realize that the characters have chosen the "right", moral and "less travelled road" in life either by facing the consequences of their decisions and actions or by passing through baptism of fire and blood, so to speak.

Discussion

In the first and second novels of the *Passover Trilogy*, Greeley has shown his religious belief about commitments, no matter how these commitments are limited to the confines of marriage and priestly vows. Both these vows, however, are religious or spiritual in nature. He has specifically used this theme to show the "feast of commitment, of covenant – between God and people, and among the people of God and to one another (Greeley, 1987: ix)".

Through Sean's priestly commitments and Nora's marriage vows, Greeley has taught his readers that the Catholic Church considers the two kinds of vows sacred. Although Sean and Nora have almost broken their promises, they kept them in the end through sheer will (and who knows, by God's inscrutable grace). Readers see the same thing with Hugh when he has decided to leave the Church, although unable to keep his promise, the reader sees the greater purpose. From this point of view, the priest-writer implies that people may be tempted and sin against the Lord, but He is always ready to forgive, if one does not forget his promises.

Though this may sound as a didactic or a moralistic novel, Greeley has maintained his craftsmanship, i.e. he has hidden his purpose in his novels and let them speak for themselves. If only he did not write his "personal afterword", his works may not be easily understood. Besides, he has written those afterwords because he does not want to be misconstrued. He wants readers to consider that he does not focus solely on the carnal scenes in the novels; that these sensual and other sinful scenes in the novels are just means to an end. For instance, the adultery of Father Sean is only used to show that even priests are susceptible to sins; that priests are also human beings; that God forgives sinners; and that God is the God of love.

In addition, if the trilogy basically shows the “feast of commitment, of covenant (Greeley, 1987: ix)”; a “story of a man who spent much of his life in the misguided crucifixion of himself, a man who discovers at last that the Lord of the Passover is not a God of rules but a God of love, a God whose forgiveness cannot be earned since it is already given (Greeley, 1987: ix)” and a “feast of rebirth, of coming back from the dead, of beginning once again (Greeley, 1987: ix)”, one can justifiably say that Jakobson’s Theory on Metaphoric and Metonymic Texts is at work.

With this, one can conclude that the novels are all metaphoric. In *Thy Brother’s Wife* (1982), for instance, instead of deliberately showing what Jesus Christ has done or unfolding a scene from the Holy Bible, Greeley has written a story about a priest and his sister-in-law torn between their love for each other and their vows.

In *Ascent into Hell* (1983), instead of demonstrating ordinary sufferings of a man, the novelist has ventured into a man’s complicated and twisted grasp of suffering, i.e. suffering is good. As taught by his parents, Hugh believes that the easy way is the evil way and that the hard way is God’s will, so he chose not to love and to suppress his sexual desires. Eventually, this desire exploded which resulted to his descent into hell, and paradoxically, slowly, gradually leads him to the painful, glorious ascent into heavenly pursuit of God.

This theme of crucifixion also resonates in some of Greeley’s novels like *Virgin and Martyr* (1985), where Cathy Collins also suffers, and *Angels of September* (1985), where Ann Riley is “crucified” by the Church. And, in *Lord of the Dance*, which unravels several metaphoric resurrections, from the supposedly dead uncle to the return of Noelle as the savior of the Farrell family.

These obvious Catholic teachings cannot be easily seen by a common reader, i.e. if one would not read the “personal afterword”. The critical skills of Greeley, indeed, show that he is not only a learned sociologist and a faithful priest, but also a sensitive, lucid, committed artist in his own right.

The depiction of seven deadly sins, however, is another story. Although these sins were written a long time ago in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1856), many writers and theologians for ages have revisited their debilitating effects – Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC), Dante in *Divine Comedy* (1320), Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1609), Racine in *Phaedra* (1677), O’Neill in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), Kierkegaard in *Fear and the Trembling* (1843), to name some. In the trilogy, almost every sin can be seen. For instance, the most stressed sins in *Thy Brother’s Wife* (1982) are wrath, envy and lust. But the lust in the first novel is nothing compared to the sin of lust in the second novel,



Ascent into Hell (1983). In the *Lord of the Dance* (1984), it is pride that is most pervasive. However, as one reads the story these sins are not obviously seen. In fact, at first reading no one might even see these seven deadly sins – Greeley has indeed defamiliarized them. As Victor Shklovsky (1917) says:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Shklovsky, 1917).

Hence, defamiliarization is at work when talking about these seven sins. The sins have been made unfamiliar by merely giving the proper motivation for the characters to feel what they feel and sin. To illustrate, Sean has slowly, gradually realized that something appears amiss or wrong in his family, i.e. some secrets are being kept from him. At first, he thought he already knew the secret, only to find out later that the worst has been kept from him – his mother still lives and he is a son of a priest. His outrage seems to be normal to the average reader, but when Nora tells him that he will regret his confrontation with his father, the reader sees the level of wrath eating his heart out. Acceptable it may seem, yet his rage assumes evil proportion when his reasoning has been clouded.

Another example of the seemingly innocent sin is Hugh’s concupiscence. The average reader might be able to discern his lower appetite, because he seems to be the kind of man unsuited for a priestly vocation. With the twisted idea that God’s will is the difficult choice, he has chosen to be a priest; hence, the reader sees him as someone not fit for the holy vocation and understand him, as he is. Yet still, Hugh has sinned.

Found in *Lord of the Dance* (1984) is the most imperceptible sin – overweening family pride – somewhat common to all people, the rich, the famous, as well as the powerless; therefore, the average reader might not even see that there existed this sin in the last novel. This inordinate love of one’s family reputation is seemingly ordinary, but at times, exercised to great excess, verges sinful.

The defamiliarization of the seven sins only shows that Greeley has learned the art of hiding the seemingly obvious thing. He can “show and not tell” what he wants to convey to his readers.

Another defamiliarized sacred element lies on working out the theme of resurrection. Admittedly, the resurrection of Jesus is the central tenet around which the Christian faith seeks solace and comfort in “the

vale of tears”. It has, however, turned into a different kind of theory, i.e. resurrection “*without the cross*”, as Greeley described.

There are in Catholic circles, it seems for me, four “fallacies” which seem to focus on the Easter phenomenon:

1. Emphasis on the resurrection which ignores the cross.
2. Emphasis on the individual resurrection which ignores the communal nature of New Life.
3. Emphasis on the facts of the resurrection narratives without much attention paid to the meaning of the Easter event.
4. Emphasis to a point almost of compulsiveness on future personal resurrection while isolating this from the rest of the message of the kingdom (Greeley, 1989: 137-138).

The resurrection, as Greeley implied, is a complex process. What he means in first “fallacy” above is that Catholics have started believing that resurrection is possible without the “cross”, without suffering. Unlike what the reader sees in *Lord of the Dance*, Danny and Noelle have suffered so much that they died, so to speak. As Noelle realizes in the end, “you must lose your life to find it (Greeley, 1984: 375)”, a re-echoing of the Biblical construct that “whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10: 39). After the sufferings, they have emerged triumphant. Greeley has shown this eschatological argument in his novel by pointing out that the kind of Catholicism some have started embracing is wrong. Yet, he does not directly tell his readers this idea – instead, he lays bare to them the painful plights of Danny and Noelle.

Also, the second “fallacy” above decries the idea of resurrection becoming more personal, instead of being societal or racial. As Greeley avers, there is “evidence that Jesus came to preach a whole new creation in which life was promised not merely to individuals but to the whole race” (Greeley, 1989: 141).

Although Greeley has not demonstrated the third and fourth fallacies in the novel, he has definitely revealed these antinomies, to exemplify while reading *Lord of the Dance* with the idea that it represents Easter, one can clearly see its message, i.e. the sense of renewal and rebirth.

Essentially, it is the most successfully defamiliarized element in the trilogy – not only that many resurrections have happened, but also these resurrections are not to be taken as literal revival. In the third novel, Greeley’s craftsmanship has noticeably developed. For instance, a supposedly dead uncle has returned, a tortured and sodomized Noelle has regained her “pure, uncracked, unfissured confidence”, to use Iris Murdoch’s classical phrasing, and the family whose trust in one another has lost has been regained. Reading the third novel and looking at these

defamiliarized resurrections will indeed make virtual readers realize that Greeley's artistry has indeed grown.

The most mysterious sacred element is the physical act of love, or sex. Mysterious in the sense that on the one hand some might consider it sacred, the gift of God to mankind; while, on the other, some would regard it profane. However, Greeley looks at sex as the "Great Sacrament"; in fact, he explicitly says that the sexual relationship with one's spouse defines the couple's image of God (Greeley, as cited by Marsden, 1989: 176), however, an ideology, that has made him controversial among his peers. Moreover, the *Passover trilogy* itself has several sexual symbols. To exemplify, most of the settings in the novels happen near lakes, or bodies of water: the vacation house of the Cronin Family, the drowning of Nora's child, the eventual suicide of Paul Cronin, and the lake where Hugh and Maria had a summer swim. This suicidal resource is deliberately done for the symbolisms of the divine feminine—water is the symbol for woman, while fire the emblem for man. Although shocking and blasphemous to some, the Hebrew-Christian element reworked in the residual pagan rite now interlaced with Freudian overtones

...the first manifestation of this new attitude in the celebration of the Christian Passover was the addition in the fourth century of the rite of fire and water. While there was justification in the Exodus story for such a change (the pillar of fire hovered over the waters of the sea), in fact the rite was a Roman spring fertility rite: the fire represented the male organ, as it does in most nature religions and in the depths of the human unconscious; and the water, the female organ. The union of the two, in a symbolism patent to anyone familiar with the ancient religious symbols of humankind, represents sexual intercourse. Moreover, the words spoken as the candle was plunged into the water left little doubt about the meaning intended: "May this candle fructify these waters (Greeley, 1987: viii).

This statement also reinforces in the conversation of Father Ace McNamara and Danny Farrell in *Lord of the Dance*:

Catholicism is pagan symbols with a new overlay of meaning – like the blessing of the Easter water with the lighted candle: obviously a pagan intercourse ceremony converted to mean that on Easter Jesus consummated his marriage with his bride, the Church, and that we who are baptized are the fruits of this fertile union (Greeley, 1984: 311).

Most probably, readers may confuse this Christian Easter with the Egyptian goddess Ishtar – since Easter is the new veil of the feast of fertility, the old veil is Ishtar, the goddess of fertility. The term *Easter* may have come from her, Ishtar. Given the fact that the divine feminine has gravitas, this might be accurate. Greeley has said time and again that

“Catholicism is pagan symbols with a new overlay of meaning”, but he does not name the gods and goddesses of the old religions.

However, Greeley himself explains the origin of the Christian Passover:

That’s Anglo-Saxon. Easter comes from the same root word “east”, which stands for dawn, and for the East. Easter was a festival in the springtime honouring the dawn goddess whose name was Eastern, a kind of an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the pagan Aurora.

Eastern had three symbols that always appeared with her in her ceremonies: they were bunnies and eggs and lilies. So, if you wonder where the Easter lily, and the Easter egg and the Easter bunny come from, they are an Anglo-Saxon overlay. But they are quite appropriate, because they stand for life, and Easter is a festival of life, of life renewed (Pasquariello, 1988: 7).

In light of these statements, sex is undeniably considered as sacred. Despite Greeley’s graphic description of lovemaking, especially with those characters that have illicit affairs, he holds that the physical act of love is sacred in its own right.

Creatively, sex in the novel is laid bare. Frustratingly enough, the scenes of physical union do not have any defamiliarization whatsoever; these scenes are all depicted in their rawness, full sensuousness, probably, to humanize the characters and to point out their natural appetites to live life in all its full glory. Nonetheless, the laid bare technique is most likely used by Greeley for him to show his admiration of the male and female energy.

Conclusion

In light of the discussion, Greeley has indeed reconciled his religious orientation with the demands of fiction through the use of the following: using Jakobson’s metaphoric-metonymic theory; applying Shklovsky’s defamiliarization of meanings behind the known icons in Catholicism – feminine divine, the cross and the Catholic Church; and, the lay-bare technique for the readers to see the basic and original intentions of the narrator – human sexuality, illicit affairs, corrupt clergy, dirty politics, family secrets, among others.

Through his fusion of his religious orientation and academic background within the novels, he was able to hint at deeper meanings in his trilogy, like the four “fallacies” in viewing the Easter rites; the residual pagan rites/symbols; and, the sacredness of marriage and physical union of man and woman.

As a fictionist, Greeley felt obliged to tell stories based on his sociological researches and ideologies. In doing so, he undoubtedly did not undermine his craftsmanship as a novelist. Although, Greeley’s craftsmanship relies heavily on his knowledge of the sociology of

religion and Catholicism, rather than the different literary techniques, hence, the virtual readers will have this sense or feeling of “let-down” in his works.

Interestingly, however, as Shafer mentioned, “Greeley is at the leading edge of postmodernity” (Shafer, 1989: xxv) which makes him more relevant in this age of postmodern literature. With the fusion of his craft, mythology, sociology, and religion, hopefully, his works will not remain on the shelves of the romances and popular literature and shall make their way to the shelves of great American writers.

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