

Religion and Politics in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*

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Abstract:

Graham Greene is one of the most daring and pioneering novelists of the twentieth century. Most of his creative works are prodigiously best-selling and examine typical religio-political matters of the modern world. This paper, fundamentally, points out Greene's religious and political prospects which are woven together in his first Catholic novel – *Brighton Rock*. In this novel, he has tried to form an agreement between the two remarkable currents – religion and politics. The story is set in motion when Pinkie Brown, a seventeen year old hoodlum, and his gang decide to kill Fred Hale because the latter's act of betrayal has led to the death of Kite, the previous leader of the gang. Trying to escape the killers, Hale attaches himself to Ida Arnold, a big-hearted sex figure who specializes in fun. All the same, Hale is murdered and Ida begins to hunt for the murderer almost like an amateur detective. In the meantime, realizing that he is being pursued, Pinkie Brown goes on killing one person after another to save himself. So much so, he is compelled to marry a sixteen year-old waitress named Rose who, like him, is a slum-born Roman Catholic and might have given evidence against him. When his conscience pricks him, he commits suicide. Rose meditates that Pinkie would be damned for steering such an iniquitous life. She joins a priest who, consoling her, says: "You can't conceive, my child nor can I or anyone,

the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God." This statement proves that God is merciful for all living creatures. In addition, Pinkie's "Napoleonic" ambition relates him to Napoleon I and Napoleon III, the prominent dominators of the political world. Thus, the novel is a noticeable achievement because here Graham Greene has blended together two noteworthy themes – religious and political.

Keywords: Religion, politics, God, Church, Hell, damnation and salvation.

Graham Greene's novelistic imagination is religio-political as he combines both religion and politics at the same time. In his interview with Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, he, unimpeachably, affirms that both religion and politics may be intermingled and evolved into a creative vision. *Brighton Rock* takes him into a new territory of the "Catholic novels" that is the initial basis of his reputation as a major novelist of his age. Moreover, it earned for him the name and fame of a "Catholic writer"—a label he was not able to peel off throughout his literary career.

The background to this novel is provided by the promenade of Brighton, Britain, which is frequented by tourists and pleasure seekers of every description. Apparently, it is a glittering world of lights, amusements, music, dance, drinking and entertainments, but behind this glitter



lies the parasitic underworld of gamblers and men frequenting the race course.

The opening of the novel—Brighton Rock is having the characteristics of Napoleonic spirit as it opens in the manner of a thriller:

Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him. With his inky fingers and his bitten nails, his manner cynical and nervous, anybody could tell he didn't belong—belong to the early summer sun, the cool Whitsun wind off the sea, the holiday crowd.¹

We plunge straight into danger, suspense and fear. One man, apart from the multitude, hurries down the Brighton front, aware that any moment may be his last. From then on, the screw turns again and again. Thus, it is clear that there is a sense of terror and fear prevailing even in the beginning lines of the novel. Here, V. S. Pritchett's statement is quite correct:

"Not once in this sea-front world of automatic machines, stale pubs, pull-ins, razor gangs, week-end whores, dandruff and bread-crumbs, does Mr. Greene relent. And one feels at the end as if one of the Boy's razor blades... had slashed the skin and left one seared with an intolerable pain."²

The excitement increases and the suspense deepens as the story unfolds, but the crime and violence in the novel are viewed through a perspective that lifts it above the usual rut of thrillers. The central figure of the novel is Pinkie Brown who runs a racket of criminals. He indulges in evil, betrayal and violence. At the age of seventeen, he becomes the leader of a race-course after the death of Kite who was slashed with razor blades and knives and left to die at a railway station. This foul deed is perpetrated by Colleoni's gang, which has taken advantage of the information given by Fred Hale, who has

betrayed Kite. Pinkie's first preoccupation is to find some means to murder Fred Hale.

Hale, aware of the intentions of Pinkie and his gang, realises that his only safety lies in remaining close to some witness, because Pinkie's gang will not dare to murder him in the presence of one. He succeeds in picking up Ida Arnold, a friendly woman with big breasts, and a blown charm. She would never let down a friend. Afterwards, they take a taxi and Hale discovers that they are being followed. Hale feels ill and nearly collapses. At Palace Pier, Ida goes to the ladies' lavatory for a wash, despite Hale begging her not to leave him, and in those climatic moments, Hale is murdered. When police arrive upon the scene, they conclude that Hale's death is natural, but Ida remains unconvinced.

Ida has a strong suspicion that Hale has been murdered, and hence she determines to trace the murderers of her boy friend. She begins to hunt for the murderers almost like an amateur detective. In the meantime, realizing that he is being pursued, Pinkie Brown—a completely cold-blooded and almost inhuman murderer—goes on killing one person after another to save himself. So much so, he is compelled to marry a sixteen year old waitress, Rose, whom he hates. In fact, he marries her in order that she may favour him.

Despite Pinkie's attempts to escape, Ida remains on his tracks. He grows desperate by her relentless pursuit. Furthermore, he realizes that he will have to get rid of Rose, and arranges a fake suicide pact with her. He leaves her to kill herself first. She is about to raise the gun against herself when she hears a voice shout 'Pinkie'; feeling this may mean good news, she throws the gun away. Meanwhile, Ida has arrived along with Dallow and a policeman. Pinkie feels that

he has been betrayed by Dallow and produces the bottle of vitriol, but a policeman's baton breaks the bottle, and Pinkie receives the acid in his own face. Blinded by his own vitriol, he dashes over a cliff and falls into the sea—nothing.

All this, of course, is just the surface of the story. Underneath the melodrama, the dominant concern is profoundly religio-political. Looking at the structure of the action of *Brighton Rock*, one would tend to agree that Pinkie seems clearly destined for damnation. He appears to progress steadily in the maliciousness and cruelty of his acts. Evidence can even be found that he perverts one by one the seven sacraments in the seven sections of the book.³ Hence, there are critics who have concluded that he is a sort of juvenile Satan. And there are many critics who agree with the one who finds that Pinkie progressively "descends in stature throughout the work, until at the end he is damned for all eternity."⁴

Raymond Williams has argued that Brighton, like Mexico, West Africa and Indo-China in Greene's novels, is 'a highly personalized landscape, to clarify an individual portrait, rather than a country within which the individuals are actually contained.'⁵ In *Brighton Rock*, the individual portrait clarified is that of Pinkie who, like a juvenile Satan, lives in his Hell which in this case is Brighton. Mr. Prewitt, the shady lawyer in the novel, quotes Mephistopheles, 'Why, this is Hell, nor are we out of it.' He is, of course, thinking of his own suffering, but his remark is applicable to Pinkie as well. Brighton is Pinkie's territory and he can no more get away from it than he can get away from evil. It gives him a sense of complete identification: 'I'm real Brighton', he tells Dallow with 'dreary pride.'

Pinkie's violent anger and disgust have produced a cruel and anarchic

adolescence dominated by a satanic pride. When he is insulted or thwarted, the poison twists in his veins. "He was going to show the world. They thought that because he was only seventeen... he jerked his narrow shoulders back at the memory that he'd killed his man, and these bogies who thought they were clever weren't clever enough to discover that. He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths." (*Brighton Rock*, 84.)

His pride and ambition drive him to crimes which in their turn sustain his ego. He conceives of himself as a super criminal. His ambition for power becomes a substitute for all that life has denied him. It gives birth to megalomaniac fancies in which he sees himself as a conqueror with an army of razors at his back. In such moments his breast 'ached with the effort to enclose the whole world' as he is always having the strength of Napoleonic spirit that aspires to absorb an unlimited political power.

Pinkie's depreciation is not, like that of the hero of classical tragedy, from eminence but from grace. Indeed, he has broken not only with the good but also with repentance, with the possibility of forgiveness. He cannot sincerely believe that 'between the stirrup and the ground' he would seek and find mercy. In his case, Greene explores the special difficulty of repentance, man's unwillingness to be forgiven, the nature of his continuation in sin and his despairing of forgiveness. Even then, towards the end of the novel, as he drives out of Brighton with Rose, he feels grace reaching for him like 'the pressure of gigantic wings against the glass.' He withstands it 'with all the bitter force of the school bench, the cement playground, the St. Pancras waiting room.... If the glass broke, if the beast—whatever it was—got in, God knows what it would do. He had a sense of huge havoc—the confession, the



penance, and the sacrament— an awful distraction, and he drove blind into the rain.’ (*Brighton Rock*, 317.)

There is an intense pathos and irony built round Rose's unswerving devotion to a man who, she feels, is evil and damned. Her love amounts to a complete surrender to Pinkie, a self-effacing effort to identify her goodness with Pinkie's evil. Her love and marriage initiate her into a world of corruption which absorbs her quickly. It is her ready and complete adjustment with the world of Pinkie which makes some critics doubt Rose's innocence. Rose's innocence, however, is still innocence in the midst of corruption. It consists in her selfless desire to commit any sin and accept damnation for the sake of Pinkie. On the Sunday morning following her wedding, she looks out on the world outside where Church bells are ringing. It gives her a sense of freedom and exhilaration.

“People coming back from the seven thirty Mass, people on the way to eight-thirty Matins—she watched them in their dark clothes like a spy. She didn't envy them and she didn't despise them; they had their salvation and she had Pinkie and damnation.” (*Brighton Rock*, 256.)

The religious concept of *Brighton Rock* is absolutely vivid and noticeable as the story begins on Whitsun, which celebrates the origin of the Holy Spirit. Then we are reminded of the presence of grace through several reappearing images and symbols. The recurring rhythmic pressure of the wind, tide, and rain acts as unobtrusive symbols of the nature of grace. The frequent wail of music functions as a painful reminder to Pinkie of his primary season of peace, specifically when he was a choirboy. Subtly imposed is a montage sequence of an old man and a seagull which suggests God's compassion and kindness.

The religious theme of *Brighton Rock* comes to the fore in the confessional scene after Pinkie's death. In itself, it is an effective scene, which clarifies Greene's ideas about sin and redemption through the dialogue between Rose and the anonymous priest. Rose is convinced that Pinkie is damned and she wants to be damned too. The priest tells her about a Frenchman (Charles Peguy):

“There was a man, a Frenchman, you wouldn't know about him, my child, who had the same idea as you. He was a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all through his life, because he couldn't bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation.... This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments; he never married his wife in church. I don't know, my child, but some people think he was—well, a saint.” (*Brighton Rock*, 327.)

The priest is, in effect, trying to say that there is no limit to God's mercy which operates in queer, irrational ways beyond human comprehension. He goes on speaking: “You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the... appalling... strangeness of the mercy of God.” (*Brighton Rock*, 328.)

When Rose mentions that Pinkie was a Catholic and knew what he was about, he answers, summing up the action of the novel:

“*Corruptio optimi est pessima...* I mean—a Catholic is more capable of evil than anyone. I think perhaps because we believe in him—we are more in touch with the devil than other people.” (*Brighton Rock*, 328.) He claims that Pinkie's love for Rose was an indication of his goodness and that it shows that he was not beyond redemption. Rose goes home to play the phonograph record of Pinkie's 'loving' message ('God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?'). The novel ends: "She walked

rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all." (*Brighton Rock*, 325.) This is the final and the most painful turn of the screw. From this scene it might be deduced that there is yet a chance for Pinkie to be saved, that a chink has been left in the walls of heaven for him to slip through.

Greene, of course, suggests that God's mercy may not be denied to Pinkie, but the doubt that he is doomed cannot be stilled. When Rose is left at the end walking towards 'the worst horror of all', the doubt becomes a certainty. Pinkie ends up like Frederick Rolfe about whom Greene has written: "He would be a priest or nothing, so nothing it had to be... if he could not have Heaven, he would have hell, and the last footprints seem to point unmistakably towards the Inferno."⁶

However, Greene suggests that Pinkie is nearer to God than Ida or Rose because a sinner's estrangement from God is not a complete separation from Him. It involves a longing or love for God with whom he may be reconciled through confession and repentance. Further, he emphasizes the fact that man can get salvation only because of the grace of God.

Moreover, the character of Pinkie may also be analysed and examined as a Napoleonic strategist, and this analysis unites the novel to the political awakening of the novelist.

The character of Pinkie may be similarized with a number of historical figures remarkable not only for their ambitious plans but also for their attempts to transform those ambitions into reality through military forces. Indeed, the allusions to the battlefields, warships and military tactics refer to the political theme that is an inherent part of the novel. Considering this aspect of Greene's conception, Pinkie is likened to the figures

of Napoleon I and Napoleon III. Pinkie's youth and tiny stature are in this context reminiscent of Napoleon I. He conceives of life as "a series of complicated tactical exercises, as complicated as the alignments at Waterloo." He laments the lack of sufficient time for quasi-military planning: "Tactics, tactics, there was never any time for strategy." (*Brighton Rock*, 133.)

Coexisting with this impression of Pinkie is his posture after he has been attacked by Colleoni's men at the racetrack, an image which recalls the familiar pose of Bonaparte with one hand tucked inside his coat: "Pinkie limped along the sand with his bleeding hand hidden, a young dictator...." (*Brighton Rock*, 129.) Later, at the sight of Pinkie's wounds, his lawyer Prewitt picks up the image of combat: "Oh dear, oh dear," he says, "you've been in the war." (*Brighton Rock*, 139.)

Ida is linked with naval battles and nautical imagery. Determined to pursue Rose relentlessly until the girl reveals the truth about Pinkie's murder of Fred Hale, Ida moves through Snow's restaurant "like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end wars, the signal flag proclaiming that every man would do his duty." (*Brighton Rock*, 144.) Yet her attempt to persuade Rose to betray Pinkie meets "militant" resistance both literally and figuratively when Rose refuses:

"The bony and determined face stared back at [Ida]: all the fight there was in the world lay there—warships cleared for action and bombing fleets took flight between the set eyes and the stubborn mouth. It was like the map of a campaign marked with flags." (*Brighton Rock*, 244.)

Pinkie's "Napoleonic" ambition links him also with Louis Napoleon, or Napoleon III, the "little Napoleon" whose

dream of restoring his uncle's empire led finally to humiliating defeat and capture. Largely successful as an administrator of France's internal affairs, Napoleon III attempted to expand the power and influence of the Second Empire through a militant foreign policy. Successful at first against Russia (in the Crimean War) and Italy, he failed seriously in ventures against Mexico and Austria and, in 1870, against Prussia, who defeated the French soundly at the Battle of Sedan. While Napoleon remained in captivity after Sedan, his government at home was overthrown; consequently, upon his release in 1871 he went into exile in England, where he stayed for a time in Brighton with wife Eugénie.⁷

In the novel Greene illustrates that, once, he resided at the fictional Cosmopolitan Hotel, now the home of Pinkie's chief rival, Colleoni. Pinkie, on his first visit there, is fascinated by the elegant arm-chairs and couches stamped with "Napoleonic crowns" and adorned with gold and silver thread. "Napoleon the Third used to have this room," Colleoni tells him, "and Eugénie." (*Brighton Rock*, 73.) Indeed, Colleoni knows little history in this case; when Pinkie asks him who Eugénie was, Colleoni replies, "Oh, one of those foreign colonies." (*Brighton Rock*, 73.) Here, Pinkie finds a connection between himself and Napoleon III, and this connection makes his ambition much stronger. Hence, he longs to get luxurious status, power and authority in order that he may become a universal conqueror.

The characteristic features of Colleoni, Napoleon I and Napoleon III illustrated in the novel prove that Pinkie was a Napoleonic strategist whose satanic determination was to rule in the underworld rather than serve God. Although he was having little means, his ambition was very wide. Finally, it is right to state that Pinkie may be compared with

the anti-Christ and regarded as a modern Napoleon.

The novel is a remarkable achievement, for, here, Greene has successfully mingled together two themes which apparently are exclusive. Of these the first theme which preoccupies Greene is that of salvation and damnation, the problem of good and evil in a world, which seems to be bereft of the grace of God. The other theme relates the novel to the Napoleonic ambitions and inclinations which are characteristic features of Pinkie and modern politicians. These two themes give the novel the garb of a detective thriller pulsating with excitement and suspense.

Consequently, it would be proper to argue that the chromatic theme of the novel – *Brighton Rock* is a clear antithesis that is developed between religion and politics. Moreover, the elaborate analysis of the novel testifies that Greene's vision has two extremities – the first one is posited in the dominion of religion and the second one is stationed in the region of prevailing politics.

References

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