



Religious sensibilities and determinism in Brighton Rock

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Abstract:

Brighton Rock as a novel thus complexifies our ideas of worldly justice and ideas of freedom and determinism- Pinkie is indeed evil and a criminal but he is also a product of his upbringing and environment, if Rose feels she must be damned with Pinkie it is because she feels more compassion for their similar background rooted in poverty than for the shallow bourgeoisie legal justice of Ida Arnold. Brighton Rock is thus a complex examination of how metaphysical and divine justice, which is explained as more merciful and mysterious than legal justice to Rose at the end of the novel, contrasts with the empirical, logical but also superficial and entirely rational justice lacking divine mercy and compassion for the circumstances that produce the evil that Pinkie Brown has become.

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Graham Greene's Brighton Rock juxtaposes the justice of law and Ida's sense of right and wrong with a more religious sense of justice and issues of salvation and damnation in relating the tale of Pinkie, who seems from the beginning of the novel bound for hell. Yet Pinkie, depraved and evil as he is, is a product of the poverty and deprivation from which he emerges, he has experienced a life of squalor and poverty from birth and is such devoid of any human sense of compassion and mercy due to the keen sense of injustice dealt to him from very young. The brassy world of Ida, the easy sex and world of lovers and cars and happiness is a far cry from

the oppressive poverty that Pinkie who has experienced nothing but deprivation and poverty since young. His catholic sensibility and his disgust towards sex as something which is intrinsically evil put him in a greater religious sensibility and grander metaphysical dimension from Ida who seems shallow with her trust of nothing but the senses, the Ouija board and empiricism. At the heart of the novel is thus a conflict between two spheres of justice – the grander narrative of salvation, damnation and redemption according to the Catholic beliefs of Pinky and Rose and the shallow empirical world of Ida and her relentless pursuit of justice according to the law.

“He wouldn't do me any harm.”

“You're young. You don't know things like I do,”

“There's things *you* don't know.” She brooded darkly by the bed while the woman argued on: a God wept in a garden and cried upon a cross Molly Carthew went to everlasting fire.

“I know one thing you don't. I know the difference between Right and Wrong. They didn't teach you that at school.”

Rose didn't answer, the woman was quite right: the two words meant nothing to her. Their taste was extinguished by stronger foods- Good and Evil. The woman could tell her nothing she didn't know about these – she knew by tests as clear as mathematics that Pinkie was evil – what did it matter in that case whether he was right or wrong? (Greene, 1938 : 199)



Yet Rose would rather be damned with Pinkie than choose the secular shallowness of Ida. The morning after the wedding, she wakes up in Pinkie's room:

She . . . was about to mutter her quick "Our Father" and "Hail Marys" while she dressed, when she remembered . . . What was the good of praying now? . . . she had chosen her side: if they damned him they'd got to damn her, too.

He was going to damn himself, but she was going to show them that they couldn't damn him without damning her too. There was nothing he could do, she wouldn't do: she felt capable of sharing any murder . . . she wouldn't let him go into that darkness alone. (Greene, 1938: 262)

Thus juxtaposed is the secular empiricism of Ida Arnold and the intense religious sensibilities of Pinkie and Rose – it is legal justice that Ida seeks in seeking revenge for Hale's murder but Pinkie and Rose are spiritually awakened to a different kind of justice – a divine justice in which there is salvation and damnation and the mercies of God are infinitely more mysterious than the earthbound legal justice as a priest explains to Rose carrying Pinkie's child at the end of the book.

"You're young. That's what it is." Ida said, "romantic. I was like you once. You'll grow out of it. All you need is a bit of experience." The Nelson Place eyes stared back at her without understanding. Driven to her hold the small animal peered out at the bright and breezy world; in the hold were murder, copulation, extreme poverty, fidelity and the love and fear of God, but the small animal had not the knowledge to deny that only in the glare and open world outside was something people called experience" (Greene, 1938: 123)

The world of Idea Arnold is just a superficial and breezy one in which there is no suffering

and intense experience of religious sensibilities – herein lies Greene's critique of middle class morals – the materialism of Ida Arnold, her superficial dependence on the ouija board for spiritual truths, lacks the intensity and depth of the deeply Catholic sensibility of Rose and Pinkie.

As mentioned earlier, for Ida, life is "sunlight on brass bedposts, Ruby port, the leap of the heart when the outsider you have backed passes the post and the colours go bobbing up. Life is poor Fred's mouth pressed down on hers in a taxi vibrating with the engine parade. There was something dangerous and remorseless in her optimism." (Greene, 1938: 36) Ida's one dimensional view of the world thus lacks an awareness of mortality and the greater metaphysical environment: "Nothing could ever make her believe that one day, she too, like Fred would be where the worms.... Her mind couldn't take that track, she could only go a short way before the points automatically shifted and set her vibrating down the accustomed line, the season ticket line marked by desirable residence and advertisements of cruises and small fenced boskages for rural love, " (Greene, 1938: 144)

In contrast to the bright breezy and superficial world of Ida Arnold is the darker and religiously intense world of Pinkie Brown: " I'll tell you what life is. It's gaol, it's not knowing where to get some money, Worms and cataract, cancer. You hear 'em shrieking from the upper windows- children being born. It's dying slowly." (Greene, 1938: 226)

Mr Prewitt, the unethical lawyer, demonstrates some sense of the metaphysical awareness Ida lacks towards the end of the novel when he misquotes Mephistopheles from Faustus " Why this is Hell, nor are we out of it." This is an assertion of hopelessness and existential despair of a world which seems to be abandoned by God,



but only because it is a darkened view of the world which lacks the narrative of hope that true theology would bring.

Nonetheless it is a dark theology which would resonate with Pinkie and Rose for they have only known suffering and oppression since young due to their grim poverty. In a scene Pinkie says to Rose “Of course it (The Catholic doctrine) is true...it’s the only thing that fits. These atheists they don’t know anything. Of course there’s Hell. Flames and damnation. (Greene, 1938: 61-2) While Pinkie may be hardened as a character to vice, sadism, destruction and bullying, his character is enlightened in the sense that he knows the eternal significance of his actions and his eternal destination which lends a sense of tragedy to his actions,

Pinkie knows he is bound for Hell, but feels there is nothing he can do about it because he has only known a life of deprivation and hardship since young and hence turned into the hardened criminal he is devoid of empathy and compassion for others including Rose whom he tries to drive to suicide. However it is Pinkie and Rose who are enlightened to the metaphysical realities of the world such as the existence of heaven and hell, mortal sin and the eternal ramifications of one’s actions. It is the shallow secularism of Rose which claims that she knows right and wrong which is deluded because it is blind to metaphysical realities of greater significance than realities which avail themselves only to the senses or knowledge which is based solely on that, which Ida prides herself on.

The priest at the end of the novel further complexifies our notions of good and evil. Whereas Rose is confident of Pinkie’s knowledge of good and evil, the priest ambiguates questions of moral and religious knowledge and certitude, asserting that we cannot know the limits of God’s divine mercy and grace. The priest suggest that

religious knowledge is transcended by divine mercy. It is paralleled by its human counterpart in Rose’s love for Pinkie. Hence it is implied there may be a last moment state of divine intervention and grace which may redeem Pinkie between the stirrup and the ground which we do not know about, hence when it comes to proclaiming that Pinkie is destined for Hell, the priest claims there are limits to finite human knowledge which may not be able to comprehend the transcendent divine mercy which may not be as opaque and strictly delineated or devoid of compassion as the empirical rules of law and justice that Ida Arnold embodies.

Brighton Rock as a novel thus complexifies our ideas of worldly justice and ideas of freedom and determinism- Pinkie is indeed evil and a criminal but he is also a product of his upbringing and environment, if Rose feels she must be damned with Pinkie it is because she feels more compassion for their similar background rooted in poverty than for the shallow bourgeoisie legal justice of Ida Arnold. Brighton Rock is thus a complex examination of how metaphysical and divine justice, which is explained as more merciful and mysterious than legal justice to Rose at the end of the novel, contrasts with the empirical, logical but also superficial and entirely rational justice lacking divine mercy and compassion for the circumstances that produce the evil that Pinkie Brown has become.

References:

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