

Brighton Rock

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Graham Greene published Brighton Rock in 1938. Greene had often spent time in Brighton as a child on holiday at the popular seaside resort on the south coast of England. As a writer, Greene continued to go to Brighton to work on his novels and therefore knew the city well. Brighton Rock begins with a description of a summer day in Brighton:

... the early summer sun, the cool Whitsun wind off the sea, the holiday crowd. They came in by train from Victoria every five minutes, rocked down Queen's Road standing on the tops of the little local trams, stepped off in bewildered multitudes into fresh and glittering air: the new silver paint sparkled on the piers, the cream houses ran away into the west like a pale Victorian water-colour; a race in miniature motors, a band playing, flower gardens in bloom below the front, an aeroplane advertising something for the health in pale vanishing clouds across the sky.¹

Among the holiday crowds walks a newspaper employee by the name of Kolly Kibber, whose job is to leave cards along the boardwalk which people can pick up and turn in for prizes. Kibber is in fear of his

life because a gang is after him because he apparently was the indirect cause of the death of the gang's leader. Kibber realizes that the gang mean to kill him, so he tries to talk a woman named Ida into staying with him during the day. Kibber hopes that the gang will not attack him if he is with someone. Ida agrees to spend some time with Kibber, but asks for a few minutes to freshen up in the ladies room. When Ida returns she finds Kibber has disappeared. Later she reads in the paper that Kibber was found dead of natural causes. Ida becomes suspicious and decides to investigate Kibber's death.

At this juncture part 1 ends and part 2 begins with Pinkie, the new gang leader who had murdered Kibber. Greene mentioned in a 1968 interview that he had originally planned Brighton Rock to be a thriller and detective story:

Brighton Rock I really intended, when I began witing it, to be a detective story. Then the character of Pinkie took hold and I realized that I wasn't going to write a detective story at all. All that remains of a detective story is the original murder.²

Writing in his autobiography Ways of Escape in 1980, Greene confessed further:

The first fifty pages of Brigton Rock are all that remain of the detective story; they would irritate me, if I dared to look

at them now, for I know I ought to have had the strength of mind to remove them, and to start the story again — however difficult the revisions might have proved — with what is now called Part Two.³

The novel now shifts its point of view from Kibber and Ida to Pinkie. The rest of the novel generally stays with Pinkie, but sometimes changes to Ida's point of view as she discovers that Pinkie is the murderer.

PINKIE

Pinkie kills Kibber himself and then has one of his gang continue passing out Kibber's cards to establish an alibi. When Pinkie finds out that a waitress named Rose had noticed that it was not Kibber who left the card on the table she had waited on, Pinkie goes to meet her. Rose, a naive and timid seventeen year old native of the Brighton slum area Nelson Place, is impressed with the confidence and self-assurance of Pinkie, who is also seventeen years old. Pinkie tries to warn her not to talk about the Kibber murder, and goes so far as to hint at danger to anyone who talks about it by pulling out a vial of acid from his pocket. Rose doesn't realize that Pinkie is threatening her, but is awed by his tough guy act.

Pinkie becomes increasingly paranoid and kills one of his men and drives the others away. He finally ends up thinking that he must kill

Rose to keep her from talking, even though he had married her so that she could not testify against him. Although Rose continues to love Pinkie and support him, he decides to use her love to convince her to agree to a suicide pact. Pinkie intends to have Rose kill herself and then he will be rid of her.

What distinguishes Brighton Rock from other novels of crime and gangsters is Greene's portrayal of Pinkie's and Rose's thoughts and feelings about their Catholic upbringing. Pinkie doesn't smoke or drink and has an abhorrence of sex. Pinkie tells Rose that he had been a choir boy and sings a bit of the Latin he remembers. Rose asks Pinkie if he goes to Mass:

"I don't go to Mass."

"But you believe, don't you," Rose implored him, "you think it's true?"

"Of course it's true," the Boy said. "What else could there be?" he went scornfully on. "Why," he said, "it's the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course there's Hell. Flames and damnation," he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts of the Palace Pier, "torments."

"And Heaven too," Rose said with anxiety, while the rain fell interminably on.

"Oh, maybe," the Boy said, "maybe."⁴

The fact that Pinkie thinks about Hell but not Heaven may have more to do with his poverty-stricken, unloved childhood. Pinkie's parents are dead and Pinkie is clearly going through the usual problems of adolescence as well as trying to survive in a cruel environment. Critic Maria Couto points this out:

“Pinkie's situation comes alive with the cry of pain and despair, anger and violent revolt. The focus on Rose's ramshackle home, on Pinkie striving to preserve the purity of his territory inside Frank's corner house with the crumb-strewn bed, the dirt and the smells, illuminates layers of reality to explore ultimately man's capacity of cruelty. It is not Pinkie's Catholicism that gives him his sure knowledge of hell; it is his experience of it in his life.”⁵

Greene admitted that the “effect of poverty on Pinkie and Rose in Nelson Place makes Brighton Rock a social novel as much as a so-called ‘Catholic’ one.”⁶

However, it is very obvious that Greene wants to bring up religious issues in the novel because Pinkie's thoughts are never far from memories of his Catholic upbringing. As Greene's biographer, Norman Sherry points out:

... but Pinkie is not merely a victim of the slums. Central to this novel is the Boy's passionate desire to commit evil.

This is his private temperament and thus there is never a sense that Pinkie is Pinkie because of his social background. Part of the rich power of the novel derives from the fact that Pinkie is defiant and seeks with a religious passion his own damnation.⁷

Greene discussed his Catholicism in Ways of Escape and his use of Catholic characters:

Brighton Rock I began in 1937 as a detective story and continued, I am sometimes tempted to think, as an error of judgement. Until I published this novel I had like any other novelist been sometimes praised for a success, and sometimes condemned with good enough reason as I fumbled at my craft, but now I was discovered to be — detestable term! — a Catholic writer. Catholics began to treat some of my faults too kindly, as though I were a member of a clan and could not be disowned, while some non-Catholic critics seemed to consider that my faith gave me an unfair advantage in some way over my contemporaries. I had become a Catholic in 1926, and all my books, except for the one lamentable volume of verse at Oxford, had been written as a Catholic, but no one had noticed the faith to which I belonged before the publication of Brighton Rock. . . . Nevertheless it is true to say that by 1937 the time was ripe for me to use Catholic characters.⁸

Greene explained that Pinkie had to be portrayed as totally evil so

that the amazing mercy and love of God could be shown to apply to everyone:

I wanted to make people believe that he was a sufficiently evil person almost to justify the notion of Hell. I wanted to introduce a doubt of Pinkie's future in the words of the priest, who speaks of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God, a doubt whether even a man like that could possibly merit eternal punishment. It is appalling, the strangeness. Because the mercy of God obviously is operating in some inexplicable fashion even with the gas ovens of Auschwitz.⁹

At the end of the novel, as the amateur detective, Ida doggedly continues to follow the trail of evidence to connect Pinkie with the murder, Pinkie's scheme to get Rose to commit suicide backfires. Pinkie pulls out his vial of acid but a policeman smashes it with his patrol stick, splashing it on Pinkie's face. Pinkie runs screaming over the side of the pier and drowns. Although Pinkie dies without confession and absolution and would therefore seem to be damned for eternity according to Catholic doctrine, Greene introduces the idea that Pinkie might have been saved at the last moment as he went to his death. Norman Sherry points out that on at least six occasions throughout the novel, the phrase "Between the stirrup and the ground" is mentioned. This is a quotation from a sixteenth century poet named William Camden: "Betwixt the stirrup and the ground/ Mercy I asked, mercy I found."¹⁰

IDA AND ROSE

Ida, the woman who takes it upon herself to investigate the murder of Kibber, represents secular humanism as opposed to Catholicism. Ida is a superstitious woman who uses an ouija board to get clues to the murder. Ida's motivation is a mixture of a desire to see justice done and enjoyment of the chase:

An eye for an eye. If you believed in God, you might leave vengeance to Him, but you couldn't trust the One, the universal spirit. Vengeance was Ida's, just as much as reward was Ida's, the soft gluey mouth affixed in taxis, the warm hand-clasp in cinemas, the only reward there was. And vengeance and reward — they both were fun.¹¹

Greene wants to show that although Ida is a good, decent woman her lack of religion means that she cannot understand why Rose supports Pinkie. Ida meets Rose several times and tries to persuade Rose to get away from Pinkie. Ida talks in a motherly way to Rose, but Rose shares no common ground with her:

"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?¹²

Rose admits that Pinkie is evil and in sin. She believes that she is also damned with him since they have sinned together. Rose is ready to go to eternal damnation with Pinkie and there is nothing Ida can say to her. As critic B. P. Lamba points out:

Rose is the character that stands for pure innocence, unsullied by the corruption of the world. She recognizes the evil of Ida and the wrong of Pinkie. She fraternises with the evil, since she feels a sort of communion with Pinkie. It is out of pure love that she is willing to be damned. She cannot permit him to be damned alone.¹³

After Pinkie dies, there is one more legacy of his that Rose will have to deal with. Rose has continued to believe that Pinkie loved her, even though he wanted her to kill herself. Pinkie had recorded a record for Rose on the boardwalk. Rose assumed that Pinkie had put some endearments on it, but in fact Pinkie had expressed his resentment of her:

He put in a sixpence and speaking in a low voice for fear

it might carry beyond the box he gave his message up to be graven on vulcanite: "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?"; he heard the needle scratch and the record whir, then a click and silence.¹⁴

The novel ends with her going to church and confession. The priest assures her that God's mercy is appallingly strange and that at least she can depend on the memory of Pinkie's love. The novel ends with her going home: "She walked rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all."¹⁵

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Brighton Rock sold only 8,000 copies when it came out, but over the last fifty years it has sold more than 100,000 copies in paperback. The critics were generally quite impressed with the novel when it came out, although some critics found it ridiculous that characters from the slums would be so concerned with religious philosophy. George Orwell pointed this out in a review of the novel:

... the central situation is incredible since it presupposes that the most brutishly stupid person can, merely by having been brought up a Catholic, be capable of greater intellectual subtlety. Pinkie the racecourse gangster, is a species of satanist, while his still more limited girlfriend understands and even states the difference between the categories 'right and

wrong' and 'good and evil'.¹⁶

Other critics realize that religion does play a part in many people's lives — even criminals. The issues of the human concept of right and wrong and the religious concept of good and evil are important. The rise of Fascism and totalitarianism began to give people the feeling that societies needed religious faith more than ever. The writer Angus Wilson pointed this out:

It was 1938. A time when we all needed painful truths that would stick. Did not want easy answers that would fade after they had jogged us along a little. We all needed a confirmation of the civil forces that were manifesting themselves. Needed to realize, and more important to feel, something deeper than just right and wrong, good guys and rotten eggs. The world of that big — both hearted and breasted — decent, sensible, no-nonsense woman, Ida Arnold, was not going to be enough. . . . But the insufficiency of Ida's no-nonsense good sense, her certainty of right and wrong as the limit of the depths of the human spirit, was, as I remember it, hard to take in a world clinging to optimism; yet the final conviction was total.¹⁷

BRIGHTON ROCK ON FILM

Brighton Rock was filmed in 1947 in England, with Graham Greene helping with the script. The character of Pinkie was played by twen-

ty-four year old Richard Attenborough, who went on to be knighted by the Queen for his services to British film and is now on the board of the British Film Institute. The film was fairly faithful to the book and in fact was criticised by some reviewers at the time as being too vicious and violent. There was one change made to the script, with Greene's approval. The last scene in the film showed Rose playing the record that Pinkie had recorded for her but the needle sticks where Pinkie says "I guess you want me to say I love you — I love you — I love you." The camera then pans up to the wall where we see a crucifix. This gives the film a happy ending of sorts. Presumably Rose will never find out that Pinkie did not really love her.

In a 1969 interview, Greene took responsibility for the changed ending of the film:

I liked the ending of the film and I am completely guilty. I have complete justification for the needle sticking on the gramophone record: I knew the distributors would not accept the ghastly ending of the book. I also knew that thinking people would realize that one day Rose would play the record and move the needle beyond the crack and thus get the shock with which the book ends. The ghastly outcome was only delayed. It was the director's idea to pan up the crucifix on the wall. This gave the impression that the needle stuck miraculously. Earlier in the film Pinkie had tried to destroy the record but was interrupted by Rose. This explains the crack

in the record: there is nothing miraculous about it.

Brighton Rock has continued to be an important novel for fifty years because its question of whether there is a higher authority than man still needs to be asked. The continued killing in ethnic wars around the world shows that people cannot solve their problems with nothing more than ideas of right and wrong.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Graham Greene, Brighton Rock (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 1.
- 2 Christopher Burstall, 'Graham Greene Takes the Orient Express', The Listener (21 November 1968) in Conversations with Graham Greene, ed. Henry J. Donaghy (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 57.
- 3 Graham Greene, Ways of Escape (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 60.
- 4 Brighton Rock, p. 49-50.
- 5 Maria Couto, Graham Greene: On the Frontier (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), p. 57.
- 6 Marie-Francoise Allain, Conversations with Graham Greene, trans. Guido Waldman (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), p. 88.
- 7 Norman Sherry, The Life of Graham Greene, Volume One 1904-1939 (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1989), p. 638.
- 8 Ways of Escape, p. 58.

- 9 Christopher Burstall, p. 57.
- 10 The Life of Graham Greene, Volume One 1904—1939, p. 648.
- 11 Brighton Rock, p. 33.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 199—200.
- 13 B. P. Lamba, Graham Greene: His Mind and Art (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1987), p. 44.
- 14 Brighton Rock, p. 176.
- 15 Ibid., p. 248.
- 16 George Orwell, 'The Sanctified Sinner' in Graham Greene: Twentieth Century Views, ed. S. Hynes, quoted in Graham Greene: On the Frontier, p. 59.
- 17 Angus Wilson, 'Greene: Four Score Years and Then', The Times (7 September 1984), quoted in Graham Greene: On the Frontier, p. 60.
- 18 Gene D. Phillips, 'Graham Greene on the Screen', The Catholic World (August 1969), in Conversations with Graham Greene, ed. Henry J. Donaghy, p. 77.