

## Sin and redemption in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*

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### Abstract

The novels *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory* represent a type of no-man's land where the dark clouds of evil seem to partly overshadow and interact with clear, bright sky of goodness and mercy of God. Here Greene depicts two strands of reality; the dichotomy pervades not only in terms of the form of the narrative but also in religious and philosophical interpretations by the characters as expressed in *Brighton Rock*. The secular Ida's view upon life and morality stands in sharp contrast to Catholics Pinkie and Rose who believe that their sins would inescapably lead them to damnation without fail. Roman Catholicism is intrinsic to the character and terrain both; Greene's imaginative immersion in both is triumphant. In *The Power and the Glory* the novelist has depicted the mental dilemma of the whisky-priest quite realistically. This succeeds so resoundingly because there is something un-English about the Roman Catholicism which infuses with its Manichaeian darkness and tortured literalism. The whisky priest, in this dark world replete with evil, corruption, malevolence and immorality, moves from darkness of sin, crime and indulgence in moral wrong doing; through the avenue of realization of one's sin, repentance and

guilt; towards enlightenment in terms of suffering, penance, redemption and regeneration.

**Keywords:** Manichaeian darkness, Catholicism, disillusionment, corrupted innocence, awareness, enlightenment

The novels *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory* represent a type of no-man's land where the dark clouds of evil seem to partly overshadow and interact with clear, bright sky of goodness and mercy of God. These two novels depict "two kinds of reality: a relation between incommensurable and hostile forces; between incompatible worlds. . . It is, in short, the relation Greene had formed for himself in Liberia, between the 'sinless empty graceless chromium world' of modern Western urban civilization and the supernaturally infested jungle with its purer terrors and its keener pleasures."<sup>1</sup> This dichotomy pervades not only in terms of the form of the narrative but also in religious and philosophical interpretations by the characters as expressed in *Brighton Rock*.

The secular Ida's view upon life and morality stands in sharp contrast to Catholics Pinkie and Rose who believe that their sins would inescapably lead them to damnation without fail. *The Power and the Glory* is based upon two months spent by Greene in Mexico in March and April of 1938. Perhaps it succeeds so resoundingly because there is something un-English about the Roman Catholicism which infuses with its Manichaeian darkness and tortured literalism. The ensuing lines:

Th' inclosure narrow'd; the  
sagacious power

Of hounds and death drew nearer  
every hour,<sup>2</sup>

Taken from Dryden, which are used here as the epigraph, refers to hounds and death coming nearer every hour. Symbolically, the protagonist of the novel, torn between the conflicting impulses of gracious good and dark evil, is pursued not only by the hounds of the police and by death but also by his own conscience. Depravity, dejection, degeneration from the original sublimity of soul and darkness of evil are narratively depicted in reference to the character of a whisky-priest who despite personal knowledge of his worthlessness seems hell-bent to continue functioning as priest until captured, although the novel looks like a thriller yet it is said to be Greene's only novel that has been written to a thesis. In this context, whisky-priest is contrasted with Padre Jose along with the gringo, and the lieutenant, portrayed as an idealist and a good man who also pursues the priest and corners him.

Roman Catholicism is intrinsic to the character and terrain both; Greene's

imaginative immersion in both is triumphant. Here the novelist has depicted the mental dilemma of the whisky-priest quite realistically. In 1960, a Catholic teacher in California wrote Greene: "One day I gave *The Power and the Glory* to ... a native of Mexico who had lived through the worst persecutions ... she confessed that your descriptions were so vivid, your priest so real, that she found herself praying for him at Mass. Last year, on a trip through Mexico, I found myself peering into mud huts... half believing that I would glimpse a dim figure stumbling in the rain on his way to the border. There is no greater tribute possible to your creation of these character-he lives."<sup>3</sup> This novel, in a certain way, exemplifies Greene's conviction that the element of darkness of evil and sin plays a significant role in man's life. Even before the story of the novel unfolds, evil is shown to have played havoc with the priest's life who reveals himself as the protagonist of the novel. Greene shows with eager care how under serving this man is to be the final representative of the Church in a province cleared of priests. Eventually as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that throughout the priest is preoccupied with evil; the whole story revolves around his sin, though followed by an awareness and realization of his deviation from the path of goodness and virtue, leading eventually to his yearning for salvation. Along the course of the novel, we are confronted with a bad priest who is painfully aware of his faults, failure and internal corruption. We learn from one of his dreams that he was never a very devout priest. In his Concepción days, he was

proud and complacent. He had been honoured with good wines and dinners and grew fat and authoritarian. But now he has become a whisky-priest, a proud, lustful and greedy man:

“He prayed in the half-light: ‘O God, forgive me – I am a proud, lustful, greedy man. I have loved authority too much. These people are martyrs – protecting me with their own lives. They deserve a martyr to care for them – not a man like me, who loves all the wrong things. Perhaps I had better escape – If I tell people how it is over here, perhaps they will send a good man with a fire of live ...’”<sup>4</sup> He has failed not only himself and his people but also God through his sins. Now he feels that he is “a damned man putting God into mouths of men.”<sup>5</sup> What has made him so? The conditions of the society; the world where cruelty, corruption and evil have full sway: crime, lust and morbidity which fill the land of the *The Power and the Glory*; are in a way responsible for his present condition. This is a dark world of sin and suffering. Violence, corruption and seediness which have always formed the texture of Greene’s vision are more prominently perceptible in this novel. Here Greene’s cognizance of darkness of the world replete with evil gains a deeper insight, and evils is symbolically presented in the Mexican state where clouds of abandonment pervade the climate. The state is hovered by vultures. Waiting for the carrion, as it is clear from the very beginning: “A few vultures looked down from the roof with shabby indifference.”<sup>6</sup> Then it is shown how “the vultures on the roofs looked contented, like domestic

fowls: they searched under wide dusty wings for parasites.”<sup>7</sup> To further describe the working of evil, Greene has pointed out that worms swell up the bellies of the children and there are physical as well as figurative snakes. There is sin, the horror of poverty and the resultant inevitable violence everywhere. Abandonment, squalor, and corruption are part of the aspects of evil in Greene’s dark frame of things. The more pathetic and painful aspect of corruption is its very presence in the young people. It is not merely the sinful priest and his foil, the lapsed Padre Jose, who are aware symbols of corruption; Coral Fellows and Brigitta are also victims of the ubiquitous corruption which is part of the general condition of life.

The whisky-priest, even during his youthful days, suffered from the venial sins of pride and complacency. As he grew older, so did his sins increase? Sins of flesh also attracted him. He indulges in mortal sin since he sleeps with a woman and also begets a child. When he sees this child of sin he remembers:

They had spent no love in her conception: just fear and despair and half a bottle of brandy and the sense of loneliness had driven him to an act which horrified him – and this scared shame-faced overpowering love was the result.<sup>8</sup>

He feels the shock of human love when he sees the child standing there watching him with acuteness and contempt:

He caught the look in the child’s eyes which frightened him – it was again as if a grown woman was there before her time, making her

plans, aware of far too much. It was like seeing his own mortal sin look back at him, without contrition.<sup>9</sup>

It is this very meeting of the priest with his daughter, Brigitta that brings about the ultimate realization of his guilt and unworthiness. Looking at the malicious, corrupt little girl, the priest feels “an immense load of responsibility which is indistinguishable from love.”<sup>10</sup> He has become a real father now and it is the moment of transition in him. He is feeling the full burden of his humanity. He thinks:

This must be what all parents feel: ordinary men go through life like this crossing their fingers, praying against pain, afraid .... This is what we escape at no cost at all, sacrificing an unimportant motion of the body. For years, of course, he had been responsible for souls, but that was different ... a lighter thing.<sup>11</sup>

Graham Greene's religious dilemma and political observations are interwoven in the famous novel – *Brighton Rock*, exhibiting the religious concept of Catholicism and its implications for the individual mired in the dark underworld. The setting of the novel – depicting a place namely Brighton (Britain) – represents a pompous world illuminating trivial and shallow amusement, dance and drinking. On surface level it seems to be glittering and enjoyable place however eventually it turns out to be depressing dark world of gamblers and criminals embodying the deterioration of human being in a miserable and pathetic condition of the world. Here, Graham Greene presents a dirty underworld where the poor, deprived and the unprivileged seek to feel the power and

luxury of the rich and wealthy by taking recourse to wrongdoing, crime and violence. Pinkie Brown, the adolescent criminal is a typical product of this corrupt and degenerated world. Here, Greene presents the mafia don Colleoni as leading a life of lavish luxury, protected well by police; in contrast to the small rogue who is subject to death and destruction.

Here Greene also depicts two different worlds: one with open daylight but predominantly godless and the other is the dark underworld but having faith in God. This sunlit world of the wealthy is, in a significant way, the responsible for the plight, evil-doing and degradation of the world of darkness, as inhabited by the poor and the deprived. Greene has made a skillful use of connotations and expressions to bring about a sense of repulsion towards the corrupt and evil-ridden underworld. Pinkie phones Colleoni to attack Spicer. But they attack both Pinkie and Spicer. Spicer escapes and heads for Nottingham, Pinkie kills him by throwing down the stairs. When Pinkie proposes Rose, she gladly accepts but his main focus is on the grief of shouldering the burden of the deaths of Kite, Hale and Spicer. Pinkie has devious ways to convince Rose somehow to marry him so as to attain his vested interests and ulterior motives as a Gangster. Even Charles Hale assumes a pseudonym and tries to convince the people to believe him only in order to gain a sweepstake.

Pinkie Brown, the hero of the novel is delineated as an embodiment of evil. In a way, this character is similar to the child Greene who in his early childhood experienced the fear of darkness and death

constituting the child's psychic reality. Pinkie has been deprived of the chance of being good in his childhood afflicted with poverty, rejection, humiliation, pain of social inequality and prejudices of social institutions. In fact, he tables a significant study of the corruption of childhood with a strong and irresistible inclination towards evil, sin and dark and negative forces. Characterized by a painful egoism, this adolescent boy commits two murders and unsuccessfully plans another. Though determined to commit evil and get entrapped in the dark abysses of sin, he still feels pricks of conscience in his subconscious mind. The sense of guilt germinates in his psyche a desire to confess his crime and involvement in monstrous killing and other sinful deeds. The monster of evil emerges triumphant as the protagonist, driven by his unwavering egoism resists all attempts of good forces of angels. However, Greene seems to suggest that Pinkie might have prayed during his last few breaths while falling from the cliff-edge to the sea.

The kind of life Pinkie has led; the series of incidents happened in relation to him; the way he was interlaced and situated firmly within the dark world laden with crime, violence, deceit, conspiracy, malice and corruption depict him as surely destined for damnation. Evidence can be found that "he perverts one by one the seven sacraments in the seven sections of the book."<sup>12</sup>

The setting of the novel characterizes Brighton as a place where the inhabitants seem to be treading on the path of sin and evil under the dark sky not only

through the night but also during the day shadowed by the clouds of malice and malignity. As V.S. Pritchett avers: "Not once in this sea-front world of automatic machines, stale pubs, pull-ins, razor gangs, weekend 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 intolerable pain."<sup>13</sup> Brighton is a place which eventually turns out to be a breeding ground of evil in the form of crime and violence, as the novel unfolds. Such place as this is Pinkie's territory; even if he desires to disentangle himself from the vicious paths of this place, he cannot do so. He has got a sense of belonging to this place, somehow, he identifies himself with this place. His poisonous anger and contempt can be traced back to his adolescence when he took to his criminal ways, with a satanic pride, in order to prove to the world that he too gloriously existed in the world. His satanic pride leads him to a way of life which though sustains Pinkie's ego, brings him closer to damnation. He plans one after another killing, galloping towards sinful landmarks leading to complete destruction and domination. "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."<sup>14</sup> He was a man, full of high ambition in a world where, in order to compensate for all that he



had been deprived of; he chose to tread on the path of evil, crime, sin and degeneration. Ironically, Pinkie while moving fearlessly on the path of sin and evil assumes himself to be a conqueror of the world, possessing immeasurable strength and power. Though he hails himself as a powerful leader, his great fall from grace renders him lying helpless in a pathetic condition.

The novel is set in a backdrop of a historical era before World War II, the time of despair and unrest was in transition. Pinkie identifies himself with his mentor based on his occupation, inclination, and masculinity discernible in his indulgence in violence and killings. But still, what distinguishes him from another gangster i.e. Mr. Colleoni is his reasons and guiding forces, peculiar motives and justification for taking recourse to such sinful ways leading towards his decline and destruction. However, he at times also feels tempted to leave the dark world of crime, murder, violence, and deception forever and lead a settled and conventional life with Rose. "The words stirred in his brain like poetry: one hand caressed the vitriol bottle in his pocket, the other touched Rose's wrist".<sup>15</sup> But again he finds himself drawn back towards his chosen path of being a hardened criminal. The dilemma of the protagonist 'to be or not to be', to act or rest; of choosing between the two conflicting impulses i.e. goodness and evil forms the nucleus of the thematic aspects of this work. "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the

canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass."<sup>16</sup> When Pinkie feels irresistibly drawn back by his criminal profile, he stands incapable of doing away with his fetters of sin. "Life held the vitriol bottle and warned him: I'll spoil your looks."<sup>17</sup> Pinkie, playing the role of a gangster understands and believes that the benchmark of his capability and strength in his cruelty, toughness, and violence. It was only on the basis of these standards that he came to be recognized as equally significant as others and integral to the gang of criminals. The novelist puts an emphasis on the conditions and the situations that led to the evolution of this peculiar set of mind in case of Pinkie. All through his childhood and adolescence he has been enduring rejection, poverty and exploitation at the hands of the unjust society. To redeem all this pain, hatred, suffering and humiliation at a tender age, he emerges as a gangster who is all powerful and capable enough to fight for his dreams and desires and achieve what he wants or long denied for; though through violence and evil ways in an equally callous society, as he sees it. He doesn't restrain from harming others for his interest. As we interpret the behaviour, actions and thinking pattern of Pinkie from the psychoanalytic perspective, the role and impact of his past life on his consciousness becomes evident. "In the psychoanalytic approach, the focus is on the unconscious mind rather than the conscious mind. It is built on the foundational idea that your behaviour is determined by experiences from your past that are lodged in your unconscious mind. While the focus on sex has lessened over the decades since

psychoanalysis was founded, psychology and talk therapy still place a big emphasis on one's early childhood experiences."<sup>18</sup> So, it was all on the basis of his bitter experiences that he developed into a sociopath with an inclination towards partaking in a world of killings, evil and sin at large. In his childhood, he happened to see his parents making love with each other. Subsequently he started hating sexuality, as a Catholic he came to regard sex as sinful. These diversions from the normal behaviour and the inherent complexes further propelled him towards his indulgence in and interaction with the dark world of crime, murder and sin. The foundation of his individual identity is, in a great proportion, shaped by Kite, the former leader of his gang. Pinkie feels a need to exert his manhood and prove his masculinity by acting with violence in an appalling world replete with cruelty, exploitation, deception, poverty and squalor. Here the novelist also reveals some positive traits of the character of Pinkie who otherwise would appear as all-encompassing evil man. His friendship, attachment, and loyalty in case of his mentor Kite add dimensions to his personality. Pinkie's sense of revenge for the murder of Kite who was much more than his guardian and patron motivates him to indulge in more killings. Kite not only adopted him into the world of Brighton but also provided him with a motive to live, a sense of belonging, and a basis of his identity though in an unwholesome world of crime and squalor. After the death of his leader and mentor, naturally enough, Pinkie once again finds himself standing forlorn in

the midst of a crowd of peculiar faces. He had to struggle hard once again to gather himself and pour his energy and agency all into his vendetta for his irrevocable loss i.e., the demise of Kite.

The Roman Catholicism of Pinkie and Rose is presented in sharp contrast to the belief-system of Ida Arnold who is quite secular and lenient in her standards of morality and conduct. The incidents and happenings in the novel, as it unfolds, reveal the conflict between the goodness and evil at work in such dark and God-forsaken place i.e., Brighton. Throughout the plot of the novel these characters' ideas and thinking clash; as Ida is a symbol of vitality, goodness, and life while Pinkie is a sociopath with his indulgence in types of crime and violence. The delineation of these two characters, their poles apart ideologies and standards, and the conflicting impulses all form the framework of the underlying concepts of the novel.

Though the time came when Greene found it useful to place Catholic doctrines and characters at the centre of his work, true Catholic piety and selectiveness have continued to seem alien to him. He has often described himself, paradoxically, as a "Catholic-agnostic." Certainly he has never made any bones about his distrust of orthodox Catholic theology, his utter lack of curiosity about the intellectual underpinnings of the Church... For Greene, intellectual assent to a set of doctrines prescribed by somebody else has little or nothing

to do with being a Catholic; he has always felt free to accept or discard various elements of Roman dogma as he sees fit, and to contort Catholic precepts beyond recognition in order to suit his own psychological needs. At times, indeed, Greene seems to have disposed of so much of Catholicism that there would appear to be no particular reason to call it Catholicism and not something else.<sup>19</sup>

What gives impetus to the novel is not the array of happenings involving the characters of the underworld but its treatment of Roman Catholic doctrine and failure of the protagonist in conforming to the morals and values as featured in the doctrines. The motives and actions of the protagonists lead to the conflict between good forces and the evil also from the point of view of Roman Catholicism, specifically concerning the concept and behaviour in terms of contradictions of morality and sin. Like Greene, these two characters i.e. Pinkie and Rose are Catholics; their ideas, concerns and moral sensibilities are way different than those of the other characters, namely Ida. She is a modern woman full of life, zeal, and vitality.

Here, Graham Greene lays emphasis on contemporary agnosticism and prevailing conflict between conventional Catholic religion and modern scientific thought that questions everything and seeks experimentation and experience before believing any concept or doctrine. Pinkie, with his theological morality, due to his indulgence in murders, crime, violence and

deception, chooses hell over heaven. He deeply reflects over his decline in the mire of sin and experiences a moral seriousness of the extent to which he has walked into the dark abysses leading to damnation as per his religious beliefs. He very well knew that the intense role he has vividly played in corruption of his counterpart i.e. Rose, a Catholic, will ensure his descent into hell and will finally lead to his damnation. Thus the world of Greene's protagonists is a Satanic one, emphasizing the prevalence of dark forces i.e. sin, immorality, deception, danger, crime, corruption and killings. Although, the critics maintain that the protagonist, here, is in fact a victim of evil-ridden social setup and may be considered as having some faint scope of redemption though suffering; Greene gives a clear hint that Pinkie is damned. However, there are ways of merciful God that are beyond the knowledge, interpretation, and comprehension of human beings. The mystery of the grace of God stands unravelled. "It is the vivid awareness of evil in themselves and others that make some of Greene's younger characters so horrifying to the older ones, who do not expect much from the world in the first place."<sup>20</sup>

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