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## Catholic and Napoleonic Awakening in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*

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### Abstract:

*Brighton Rock* is the first Catholic novel of Graham Greene who is regarded as a religio-political exponent of the twentieth century. Pinkie Brown, the protagonist, is steeped in evil at the tender age of seventeen and becomes the leader of a race course gang. One of his gang members —Kite is murdered by the rival gang. In revenge he plans to get Fred Hale killed. Hale is killed but his friend Ida is bent upon finding out the murderers. Pinkie is forced to marry Rose, a waitress so that she may not give evidence against him. Pinkie's conscience pricks him. Ultimately he commits suicide. Rose thinks that Pinkie will be damned for leading such a sinful life. She meets a priest who consoles her by telling her of God's grace and love for sinful people. The priest says: "You can't conceive, my child nor can I or anyone, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God." It may be derived that there is yet a possibility for Pinkie to be rescued and that a peephole has been kept in the fences of heaven for him to pass gradually. Besides, Pinkie's "Napoleonic" ambition links him with Napoleon I and Napoleon III. Thus, the novel is a striking accomplishment because here Graham Greene has mingled together two themes —Catholic and Napoleonic.

**Keywords: Catholic, Napoleonic, awakening, Hell, damnation, salvation, God, Church, good and evil.**

*Brighton Rock* takes Graham Greene 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. One can imagine Greene's chagrin when Catholic critics try to fit his novels into their pattern by giving elaborate theological arguments in their defence. Greene gives vent to his feelings in *Ways of Escape*: "...I was discovered to be—a 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...."<sup>1</sup>

*Brighton Rock* states the beginning of Greene's obsession with evil. In his earlier novels, pursuit, betrayal, murder, violence, corruption, cruelty and injustice give an effective and recognisable dimension to the evil which confronts man. Now, without losing this dimension, Greene adds an eschatological aspect to his presentation of evil. The novel deals overtly with the question of sin, expiation and salvation. The characters and their situations are basically unchanged but there is a narrowing down and specialisation of the complexities and the dilemmas that they face. At the same time, *Brighton Rock* and the 'Catholic' novels which follow have a spiritual intensity, a depth of meaning, which sets them apart from Greene's 'non-religious' novels.

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. Besides, Brighton is very closely associated in the public mind with the sticks of rock sold there, and would have been so even more in the 1930s, when the rock would have been seen as a semi-luxury.

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.<sup>2</sup>

We plunge straight into danger, 'the undertow of suspense and fear', as Elizabeth Bowen calls it while praising the opening of the novel for its wonderful scene-setting.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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 Catholic. As the book starts to unfold, it becomes apparent that the major struggle is not between the forces of society and crime but between good and evil. This may be an age-old subject. What distinguishes this book from others is that the struggle takes place primarily within a character who seems to take the risk of willingly damning himself despite his Catholic conscience.

Sometime after the publication of *Brighton Rock*, Greene made a careless remark to the effect that the novel was about a character who was bound for hell. He later tried to qualify this view by adding that what he "really meant was that... *Brighton Rock* is written in such a way that people could plausibly imagine that Pinkie went to hell, and then I cast doubt upon it in the ending."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, by then, his earlier remark had been accepted as the absolute truth by too many people. Evidently accepting Greene's earlier comment as a simple fact, Evelyn Waugh came to the conclusion that *Brighton Rock* "challenged the soft modern mood by creating a completely damnable youth. Pinkie... is the ideal examinee for entry to Hell. He gets a pure alpha on every paper."<sup>6</sup> And, to some extent, this view is being adopted even today by the most of the critics.

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.<sup>7</sup> Hence there are critics who have concluded that he is a sort of "juvenile Satan."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup>

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.'<sup>10</sup> 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...." (*Brighton Rock*, 87.)

His pride and ambition drive him to crimes which in their turn sustain his ego. He conceives of himself as a super criminal. His aspiration 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.



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. Such despair produces the propulsion away from repentance by which sin insures consistency with itself in the actions of a sinner. In Pinkie, it generates an active resistance to grace for fear of what it might do. 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*, 321.)

In an overwhelming piece of criticism in *Rose and Crown*, Sean O' Casey said about *Brighton Rock*: "Here the Roman Catholic girl of sixteen and the boy of seventeen, respectively, are the most stupid and evil mortals a man's mind could imagine."<sup>11</sup>

Sean O' Casey seems to be right when he says that Pinkie is evil and Rose is stupid. But it is also true that she is innocent, the point of purity in the dark picture and the object of treachery. She illustrates Greene's preoccupation with the kind of innocence that he identified in the heroines of Henry James. However, both Pinkie and Rose are helpful to each other, and there is a unification of good and evil when they are joined together. Pinkie finds in her his inevitable complement as it is obvious in the following lines:

"What was most evil in him needed her: it couldn't get along without goodness... she was good, he'd discovered that, and he was damned; they were made for each other." (*Brighton Rock*, 167.)

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. Laurence Lerner, for example, says: "Though she has no knowledge of evil in herself, she understands it, and her goodness does not cut her off from experience."<sup>12</sup>

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*, 260.)

The Catholic 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 Catholic 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, 331.)*

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. So, one never can tell, even in the case of a sinner like Pinkie. 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, 331.)*

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, 331.)* 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, 333.)* 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. This seems to be Frederick Karl's conclusion when he says: "In Greene's world, few are past saving, even Pinkie, who has reached so far into the lower depths, can be saved because he did love at one time."<sup>13</sup>

The Catholic Church does not demand, as the priest tells Rose, 'that we believe any soul is cut off from mercy', but Pinkie has deliberately and wilfully evaded it.<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup>

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 Napoleonic 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 Napoleonic 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.

Undoubtedly, central to this aspect of Greene's conception of Pinkie are 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*, 136.)

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*, 132.) 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*, 142.)

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*, 147.) 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*, 247.)

When Ida gets success in defeating Pinkie, she is represented as a "figurehead of Victory," a comparison which not only confirms her glorious victory but also recollects the famous warship *Victory*, aboard which Lord Nelson led the defeat of Napoleon's naval forces at the battle of Trafalgar.

Pinkie is highly ambitious, and this characteristic feature connects him with Louis Napoleon or Napoleon III, known as the "little Napoleon" who wanted to restore his uncle's empire, but was defeated and captured. Afterwards, he got a glorious success as an administrator of France's internal affairs and tried to enlarge the possession and power of the Second Empire through a militant foreign policy. He was successful at first against Russia and Italy, but he failed seriously in his daring attempts against Mexico and Austria. Moreover, he was badly defeated against Prussia at the Battle of Sedan in 1870, and was captivated. During this period, his government at home was overthrown; consequently, upon his release in 1871 he went into exile in England, where he dwelt for some time in Brighton with wife Eugénie. 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*, 76.) Indeed, Colleoni knows little history in this case; when Pinkie asks him who Eugénie was, Colleoni replies, "Oh, one of those foreign polonies." (*Brighton Rock*, 76.) 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.

In fact, Pinkie's murder of Spicer, the loyal gang member he no longer trusts, is an act of desperation which grows out of his own earlier failure as "Napoleonic" strategist. His initial plan is to lead Spicer to the Brighton racetrack to be killed by Colleoni's man. His planning in persuading Rose to accept his offer of marriage is also Napoleonic in its nature. It is by this strategy that he intends to protect himself from the only possible evidence that could charge him with a crime in the murder of Fred Hale.

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 blended 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 his companions. These two themes give the novel the garb of a detective thriller pulsating with excitement and suspense.

Thus, Catholic and Napoleonic awakening is transparent as the novel—*Brighton Rock* is having the backbone of Catholic theme but the nerves of Napoleonic one relating its views with the historical events as well as elements.

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