

## Socio-Cultural Constructions and Concerns of Extreme Realism and Idealism in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*

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### Abstract

Graham Greene was a most prolific writer of the twentieth century. Because of his unconventional perspective on religion and its aspects like redemption, his novels have brought him admiration and criticism in probably equal measures. Most of the criticism of his works is from the theological point of view. Many new critics have researched his fiction and non-fiction from relatively new perspectives like existentialism, feminism etc. One of Greene's often used theme was the role of society in the creation of an individual's psyche and character and the examination of the person's response to societal concerns and issues. Most of his characters feel alienated from society. Greene traces this apathy to their childhood and extreme ennui with life.. The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of society and the prevailing culture in an individual's life. It is also the purview of the paper to interpret an individual's responses.

**Keywords:** Betrayal, Culture, Deception, Redemption, Society

*Brighton Rock* is the first novel by Graham Greene to fall into the category of 'Catholic novels'. Even though Greene again uses melodramatic devices of pursuit, deception and betrayal, the innate concern of the novel, and through it of Greene's, is with good and evil from the socio-cultural perspective. The main character of the novel is Pinkie, a boy of merely seventeen. He is the first and only Greeneian character who is totally evil and has consciously damned himself for ever. He has chosen his own life, his own way, making his own set of rules and follows them to the last. His complete nature is a defiance of his society and its prevalent norms. In this he is a 'conscious' character who does not simply comply with society's mores.

He is horror struck by the depravity that has surrounded him since childhood. This immorality, where no one holds any moral value or scruples, has taken him young and shaped his psyche forever. Greene tells us that 'Hell lay about him in his infancy' (68) and it is this Hell to which Pinkie has subscribed to. Bereft of pity, or in fact any ordinary human emotions, Pinkie is a cold, heartless character and 'his grey eyes had an effect of heartlessness, like an old man's in which human feeling has died' (8). But cold and cruel as he is, it cannot be denied that he is again, like many of Greene's characters, a socio-cultural construct. If he is made in this way, it is only because this is what he has seen; this is what has come his way all his life. Life and society have been cruel to him and he returns this cruelty with equal ferocity because 'man is made by the places in which he lives'

(37). His world is a world of sin and corruption and decadence. In the underworld that he is a part of, betrayal, murder and razor blades are an every-day occurrence as '...spies, and murders, and violence...that's real life: it's what we've made of the world...' (*Ministry of Fear*, Greene 57).

No one, least of all Pinkie, is fazed by deaths and brutality. Brought up in squalor and indifference one is solely responsible for one's safety and this life is all they have. The sentiment voiced by Andrews, 'I am all that I have, I am afraid of losing that' (187) in *The Man Within* could well serve Raven in *A Gun for Sale* and Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* as there is no brotherhood or amity between anyone. They are afraid for themselves and themselves alone. No one has any concern for these characters and the world is largely unsympathetic; alienation is what prevails here in their 'underworld'.

Ostensibly, *Brighton Rock* is the story of Pinkie who has murdered Fred Hale but the one fault in the scheme has been spotted by Rose, a waitress. He has to charm her to find out what and how much she knows. In the end he is forced to marry her so that she cannot give evidence against her husband in court. He is relentlessly pursued with single-minded determination by Ida Arnold who becomes the vehicle of Fred's nemesis as he had spent his last moments with her. She feels there is something fishy about it all and is determined to set things straight. The novel ends on a desolate note, with Pinkie coming to a horrible death, leaving Rose alone in the world and Ida happy that justice has been delivered through her efforts. But underlying this theme of pursuit and betrayal is the core of Greene's concern about society and the prevalent culture.

The idea of waning Romanticism from the current world that Greene was developing in his earlier novels like *The Man Within* and *A Gun for Sale* finds complete maturity in *Brighton Rock*. Pinkie is the vicious culmination of previous characters like Andrews and Raven. If there was a hint of Romanticism, even if on the decline in *The Man Within*, it dwindled in *A Gun for Sale* and is totally non-existent in *Brighton Rock*. Greene's description of people who come to Brighton for their holidays is quite noteworthy. The deliberate use of adjectives like 'brittle' 'false' 'determined' 'besieged' lend to the whole gay atmosphere a touch of unreality. Just as in *A Gun for Sale*, 'you wouldn't have believed amid all these avid women that England was on the edge of war' (86) it is quite difficult to believe that amongst all the sad hilarity and dances and music, the underworld, the mob is in operation and people are being murdered in broad daylight. It is Pinkie's world that is real while that of the tourists is temporary and fake. His world is what will remain once the holiday is over.

Tennyson's remark 'for knowledge is of things we see' (1228) holds true for both Pinkie and her persecutor Ida Arnold. Their worlds are different and disparate. Pinkie cannot conceive of a world where there is no violence or hatred or disgust. Born and brought up amidst violence Pinkie is a firm believer in Hell. His belief makes him tell Rose, 'Of course, there's Hell' (52). But when Rose asks him about Heaven, he cannot imagine a world of peace where everything and everyone is at peace and gives a vague, 'Maybe, maybe' (52) because 'A brain was only capable of what it could conceive, and it couldn't conceive what it had never experienced' (228).

For Pinkie, peace and Heaven are all alien phrases. He tells Rose quite nonchalantly 'I don't take any stock in religion. Hell -it's just there. You don't need to think of it' (91) is a telling comment about Pinkie's world and his psyche that has been wrought by the society and culture he moves in because according to him and his appalling circumstances 'it's the only thing that fits... Flames and damnation' (52). 'The only thing that fits' his vicious environment is hate and suffering. He has known no kindness since childhood and thus cannot claim any acquaintance with the virtue. About his nature Greene informs his reader that 'he felt no pity at all; he wasn't old enough for pity' (95). His tryst with razor blades means nothing to him and he kills with wanton pride and pleasure. He is not shocked by death, nor moved by pain. He has learned tricks with the razor and derives pleasure and satisfaction from the slashes and pain he wreaks upon others for 'what would be the fun if people didn't squeal?' (51)

The absence of pity and compassion from his innate nature has its roots once again in Pinkie's socio-cultural milieu. Derek Traversi points out that 'Pinkie's criminality, indeed, is an instinctive reaction against the pressure, the obligation to conform...' (26). In choosing his doomed path, and not conforming to society's buckling pressures, Pinkie exhibits a consciousness at work, a consciousness that questions and weighs and then makes a conscious decision. If he chooses to parley with Hell and all that it represents, it is only because this is what life has been for him, this is what he can identify with. Once again Greene makes oblique references to a tortured childhood. His thwarted emotions can be attributed to his childhood that was devoid of compassion or companionship. Even his parents separated the growing child from their own adult world. Pinkie is haunted by memories of his parents having sex. For him there is no love in the act. He views it as 'the frightening weekly exercise of his parents which he watched from his single bed' (90).

The phrase 'single bed' is important because it hints at the exclusion that is Pinkie's terrible fate. He is secluded from all and by all. If there's no love or care at home, society is equally hostile. It lends its darkest image to him, making him resort to the razor as his weapon against harm and pain. 'The razor is for him an instinctive means of defence against a society from whose normal emotions he feels himself excluded' (Traversi 27) .

Society has never shown him pity and, being the socio-cultural construct that he is, Pinkie is a stranger to pity and kindness. He feels no compunction in violating society's norm of normal or accepted behavior. Friendless and alone, he goes forth on his chosen way devoid of human feelings. He kills Fred Hale to send the message of his growing power to Colleoni, the Don of the underworld. Later he kills Spicer, his 'acknowledged' friend, when he feels the threat looming of getting caught through him. When he is leading a trusting Spicer to his death, Pinkie resorts to beguiling deception. Spicer has no inkling of Pinkie's intentions. Greene once again refers to the childhood world of cruelty when Pinkie 'put his hand with spurious affection on Spicer's arm' (101). In doing so he becomes 'like a cruel child who hides the dividers behind him' (101). This reference to childhood, the supposed age of innocence and purity, shows again that Pinkie has learned his cruelty from society that excluded him, the culture that was self-oriented.

After having deceived and betrayed Spicer's trust, Pinkie does not feel any remorse because 'it was impossible to repent of something which made him safe' (109).

Since Pinkie has been both constructed and excluded by society, he is an odd mixture of experience and innocence. Society, because he is born into it, has shown him the steps but alienated him from a deeper knowledge. He knows all the moves but lacks the knowledge that comes with experience. Although nearly eighteen, and belonging to the world of sin and corruption, Pinkie is a virgin. His virginity is also a signifier of his ignorance and alienation. Perhaps that is why Greene refers to him as the Boy. He has not become the man of the world because of his humiliating ignorance of things and sentiments natural and ordinary. The 'weekly exercise' of his parents, also a source of his alienation, leaves him full of loathing and horror. He baulks at all that is natural or human. 'He knew everything, he had watched every detail of the act of sex, you couldn't deceive him with lovely words, there was nothing to be excited about, no gain to recompense you for what you lost...' ( 93).

But when he moves in to kiss Rose to prove that he loves her, 'he was aware all the same of a horrifying ignorance' (93). He is 'shaken by a sense of loneliness' (50) whenever he confronts desire because he has 'an awful lack of understanding' (50). He has been kept away from the most mundane pleasures of life and this makes him doubly bitter. His bravado is nothing but a façade for his ignorance. This appears to be Pinkie's problem in the novel. He has 'watched' everything but not 'experienced' anything. The pain that he inflicts without pity upon others, when experienced by the self leaves him mortified. 'He had wept, begged, run: Dallow and Cubbitt would hear of it. What would happen to Kite's mob now? He tried to think of Spicer, but the world held him... it wasn't eternity he thought of but his own humiliation' (107).

In thinking of himself even at this moment shows how selfish Pinkie is and how all his concern is for preserving himself in a cruel world. Even though he is a product of society and wages a lone war against it as a conscious decision, he will prove to be a weak opponent for the collective, unforgiving force that society is. Because of his innocence, society 'will, in the end, use the very abnormality it has fostered in him to hunt him down to destruction' (Traversi 27).

Ida, on the other hand, is a total contrast to Pinkie. If Pinkie cannot fathom a just world, she is equally blind to Pinkie's world. 'I believe in right and wrong' (46) she claims with pride. She is a bohemian and Camaraderie, good nature, cheeriness fell like shutters before a glass-plated window.

You could only guess at the goods behind: sound old-fashioned hallmarked goods, justice, an eye for an eye, law and order, capital punishment, a bit of fun now and then, nothing nasty, nothing shady, nothing you'd be ashamed to own, nothing mysterious (77).

She can, then, be viewed as a representative, a personification of society. Just as society lays down rules and norms and is concerned not with the human factor but with their ruthless and absolute implication, Ida has her notions about 'right

and wrong' (44) and will not stop at anything to see justice prevail. This makes her relentless and there is 'something dangerous and remorseless in her optimism' (36).

Because of her friendly and accommodating nature, she offers the notion of hope and companionship to everyone who comes in contact with her. In belonging to everyone and making everyone feel comfortable with her is another point of difference from Pinkie. If Pinkie is friendless and is haunted by a terrible sense of loneliness, she is a stranger to the word and all its connotations. She has no understanding of things that are hidden from her eye. 'A stranger: the word meant nothing to her: there was no place in the world where she felt a stranger...There was nothing with which she didn't claim kinship...' (72).

In belonging firmly to the different worlds they inhabit, Pinkie and Ida are ignorant of the other's realities or meanings. Their points of view and indeed perceptions are shaped by the particular and peculiar realities of their own worlds as real to themselves as they are alien to the other. Pinkie's world is full of violence and deaths are so frequent and unnoticed that 'The word murder conveyed no more to him than the word 'box', 'collar', 'giraffe'' (45).

Ida's idea about society and its functions is superficial but seductive nevertheless for the ideals it offers. Her view is not individual but largely universal. In being rather unselfish, she is opposite to Pinkie who is isolated and selfish to the core. Each is ignorant about the other's existence. 'Only the darkness in which the Boy walked, going from Frank's, going back to Frank's, was alien to her; she had no pity for something she didn't understand' (72). This is a telling comment upon society and how it carries on its work blindly. It does not concern itself with the individual human factor. Its sole concern is to set up ideals which it expects everyone to uphold irrespective of the particular stations or situations of people.

Perhaps this is the only point where their natures meet: their lack of understanding of what can exist beyond their immediate perceptions. If Pinkie cannot fathom having a friend, she cannot bear the thought of someone feeling alone and miserable. She would like to extend her warmth and cheer to everyone. Thus was Hale attracted to her because 'She was like darkness to him, shelter, knowledge, common sense; his heart ached at the sight' (10). She carries her bonhomie about her and even when she views her own character objectively she finds that in spite of her desire for pleasure, she is on the right side. Her fixation for notions of justice and law make her believe that she is the harbinger of all that is good in the world. As for her weakness for having fun, she dismisses it by telling herself that 'God didn't mind a bit of human nature' (151). This is another point at which Pinkie and Ida are different from each other. He doesn't know the meaning or importance of fun or entertainment- his life and his society have offered him neither- and she lives for the fun of it. Pinkie is a virgin and his intense hatred and disgust for sex is almost unnatural. Perhaps his very virginity – again a non-conformation to what society decrees is normal – is the reason for the disgust he holds for an otherwise 'natural' passion. Ida, on the other hand, not only knows about sex but also possesses intimate knowledge through her experience. Unlike Pinkie, who has just watched and knows the moves, she has had her experience. Her sense of bonhomie is in fact based on her carnality.

Ida Arnold was on the right side. She was cheery, she was healthy, she could get a bit lit with the best of them. She liked a good time, her big breasts bore their carnality frankly down the Old Steyne, but you had only to look at her to know that you could rely on her' (80).

If Pinkie inspires fear, Ida, because of her wanton nature, instills a feeling of safety. Both are incorrigible constructs of the societies they live in. Pinkie's world is immediate and personal while Ida's is wholly impersonal. What she doesn't see or know does not affect her at all. But what she knows and sees makes her indomitable. Her chance encounter with Fred Hale becomes the point where their two disparate worlds will come into permanent contact. She is not going to give up on someone she knew even though Fred met her just once. Like society she cannot abide the thought of anyone feeling alienated when she is around.

A day, she thought, that's all he's been gone, and I dare say there's not another soul but me thinking about him: just someone he picked up for a drink and a cuddle, and again the easy pathos touched her friendly and popular heart...that was the trouble: no one but her to ask questions (34).

Like society, she believes in the sanctity of life. She is determined to see 'fair play' prevail in the world because for her it is 'the only philosophy she lived by' (76). If Pinkie is cruel and pitiless, Ida is also relentless and entirely without scruples where values and notions of justice are concerned. She is not concerned with the cost it might incur upon the bearer of her terrible and dangerous optimism.

Somebody had made Fred unhappy, and somebody was going to be made unhappy in turn. 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 the reward was Ida's...and vengeance and reward – they both were fun (37).

This disbelief in God and ideas of heaven and hell is also an indicator of the lawless times in which Pinkie and Ida move. Where Pinkie is driven to believe in Hell because of his circumstances, Ida is concerned only with the here and now. She tells Rose not to bother about religion as 'it's the world we got to deal with' (198). She does not mind playing God to see fair play in the world. Greene vies the disbelief in God as a common factor in many novels. In each, the protagonist lacks belief but the person he comes in touch with holds both belief and faith. But the depth and intensity of the faith is shown ever declining in the times of the setting of the books. From Elizabeth's firm belief in *The Man Within*, to Anne's casual habit in *A Gun For Sale*, likened to superstition used only as a charm to ward off harm and danger, Faith has indeed come down in the world. It has lost the exalted place it was awarded in the Romantic Era and in the present world of Pinkie and Ida, God is non-existent. If Pinkie believes in hell it is because he has been living in hell all his life, Ida is above such considerations. She does not believe in after life; her concern is with the here and now.

Death shocked her, life was so important. She wasn't religious. She didn't believe in heaven or hell, only in ghosts, Ouija boards, tables which rapped...life wasn't so important perhaps to them as what came after: but to her death was the end of



everything. At one with the One – it didn't mean anything...She took life with a deadly seriousness: she was prepared to cause any amount of unhappiness to anyone in order to defend the only thing she believed in (36).

Andrews attributes Elizabeth's sense of peace to her belief as she is willing to leave everything to God and His mercy. Anne hesitates to 'play God or the Devil's game' (54), Ida has no compunction in playing God, wreaking vengeance. The progress or decline from faith to habit to complete disbelief is also a marker of the complete end of the romantic ideals. It is also one of the explanations for the anarchy that rules the world of Pinkie and Ida. Even though Greene deplored the label of 'Catholic writer and always challenged accepted beliefs, in the end he cast his vote for god and faith when he remarked that 'The trouble is I don't believe my disbelief.' (*New York Times* Greene 26). When writing about Henry James, Greene also lamented the loss of religious faith in the novels after James' death. He said that characters without faith 'wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper thin' because 'with the religious sense went the sense of importance of the human act' (Bosco 5).

The society that Greene describes in *Brighton Rock* is a society which has forsaken God. The result is utter confusion making men 'betray the dignity of reason to violence and brutality' (Zabel 40). Pinkie has resorted to violence and Ida to justice. Both show the consciousness at work behind their actions. Their chosen course of action is not accidental; it is indeed the result of what the consciousness has seen and accepted. Because their society and culture are at variance, their consciousness about virtue and vice is also markedly different, which ultimately sets their worlds apart. Andrews and Raven have been seen as the precursors of Pinkie, in whom the process of depredation is complete. Both Andrews and Raven share a hint of sensitivity. When they come in contact with a good person, the goodness also brushes them. This is what differentiates Pinkie from the other two protagonists, and is a frank expose of the effect society has on the psyche. Andrews is the bearer of a conscience because it has been instilled in him by the Romantic ideals. But Pinkie, living in hell as he does, cannot afford a Romantic conscience. When Rose enters his life, he seeks to corrupt her too. His actions, thus, are completely for the sake of self and survival, guilt and repentance holding no meaning for him. Society has alienated him and he returns this hate by holding 'intimacy back as long as he could at the end of a razor blade' (113). If he deceives and betrays and murders it is simply a way of life for him as he has been cast and shaped in this mould by his society and culture.

The title *Brighton Rock* has been seen by critics as referring to Pinkie alone because he is evil through and through. But it is apt for all the three characters. They are all 'like those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down, you'll still read Brighton' (198). If Ida is determined to construct a world in which 'every man would do his duty' (121) she is as unchangeable as Pinkie in his evilness. Rose is also like the stick of rock, for she too will not swerve from her goodness and commitment. They are all doomed to their conscious acts of will and are like those rocks. The point that Ida makes about their personalities is interesting, making the title and its implications poignant. The word 'Brighton' will appear even if you 'bite

it all the way down' (198). This shows that both Pinkie and Rose are created by their immediate world of Brighton: no matter what they do they cannot do anything about their innate nature, they are as much a part of Brighton as its product. Ida is from London and is alien from their world and their perceptions about things. What she fails to realize, caught up in her idealistic pursuit, is that what holds true for London might not be applicable in Brighton and all that it means. Thus, she is a true stranger to Pinkie and Rose and their immediate world. When about to confront death, Pinkie resents the society and culture that has rendered him thus. He becomes conscious that he isn't really an individual but a product of his society.

His cells were formed of the cement school-playground, the dead fire and the dying man in the St Pancras waiting-room, his bed at Frank's and his parents' bed. An awful resentment stirred in him – why shouldn't he have had his chance like all the rest, seen his glimpse of heaven if it was only a crack between the Brighton walls...(228).

The last words 'Brighton walls' resonate with the idea of what a society can do to a child's innocent psyche. Through its disinterestedness, one can create a metaphysical monster like Pinkie. The Brighton walls that confine him, denying him his glimpse of heaven, are so strong and tall that he finds it impossible to change himself. Such a monstrous character being damned is what he deserves. Greene himself, while talking about Pinkie and *Brighton Rock*, said 'I wrote a novel about a man who goes to hell...' (Ingersoll 169). Pinkie also blames society and the prevailing culture for corrupting the innocent, and he has been corrupted deeply for he has spent his life amid this anarchy. In thinking about the implications of childhood on a person's psyche, Pinkie exhibits Greene's own consciousness since he, too, laid importance on this early phase. When Pinkie chances upon a 'broken rocking horse', 'a pram which had been converted into a wheelbarrow' and 'a doll with one glass eye and a dress soiled with mould' (108) Pinkie is overwhelmed with anger.

These all are relics of childhood and their derelict state suggests society's disinterestedness in preserving childhood and its innocence. The doll with 'a dress soiled with mould' is also suggestive of a corrupted childhood where the 'mould' can be seen as representing society's corruption. Society, and its cruel culture, has shown its disinterestedness towards childhood by ignoring this crucial phase. The pram which has been converted into a wheelbarrow shows that it is a practical world where selfishness reigns and all gives way to practical utility. He does not know the owner of these relics but finds himself hating the 'nameless, faceless' (108) person. This nameless, faceless person can be seen as society itself, which is nameless, faceless but is existent; its force can be felt upon all.

In bearing such a consciousness, Pinkie, the one ostracized by society exhibits far more sensitivity than the others around them. In their own ways, they are more aware of their society and its culture and what it makes of children. This debasing effect of society and culture made Greene revise his opinion about Pinkie's fate. He observed the socio-cultural influence and came to the decision



that if Pinkie's evil is a socio-cultural creation, his redemption also should be a socio-cultural construction. David Lodge's remark that a certain pity and understanding is solicited for the criminal hero by recapitulating his appalling social background' (22) holds true for this 'wholly unpleasant character'.

In a conversation with Marie Francoise Allain, Greene expresses a different opinion about Pinkie's fate. 'I don't think Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were committed not in defiance of God but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born' (158-9). This is a more compassionate perception than the one forwarded by him earlier. Many critics have also recognized the veracity behind this idea and express their acceptance of Greene's views about the role of society and culture in one's making. Thus it can be concluded that even after creating a completely evil character and destining him for Hell, Greene acknowledges that one's actions are not really independent. The influence of society and culture upon such deviant actions cannot be negated.

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