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Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght, eamon.maher@it-tallaght.ie

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'Hell, Flames and Damnation':
Graham Greene’s ‘Brighton Rock’

Eamon Maher
The writer is a Lecturer in Humanities in the Institute of Technology Tallaght, Dublin. His most recent book is ‘The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question’ (The Columba Press 2011).

Published in 1938, Brighton Rock is the first novel by Graham Greene to deal in an overt manner with Catholic themes. Because of his infatuation with Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a convert to Catholicism to whom he was engaged, Greene started taking instruction in Catholic doctrine, which led to his being received into the Catholic Church in 1926. Throughout his writing career, Catholic themes continued to preoccupy him, culminating in such masterpieces as The Power and the Glory (1940), The Heart of the Matter (1948) and The End of the Affair (1951). The release of a new film version of Brighton Rock has had the effect of reigniting interest in this early dramatisation of how evil can take hold of a person’s spirit and drag other innocent souls into a downward spiral to damnation.

At the beginning of the novel a newspaper employee called Hale, who has run foul of a local gang of criminals, wanders nervously around Brighton. Chief among his tormentors is a 17 year-old psychopath, Pinkie, who is intent on exacting revenge for the accidental murder of his former benefactor, Kite. Hale had some involvement in this murder, which is why he is being pursued. He attaches himself to the kind-hearted Ida who will become suspicious when she subsequently discovers that Hale, whose body was discovered later that day, is found to have died from natural causes. Ida rightly suspects that Pinkie had something to do with Hale’s death. She sets about getting to the root of what really happened to her friend and ends up embroiled in a potentially dangerous situation. She also manages to endanger the young girl working in a tea shop, Rose, who has information that could prove damaging to Pinkie and his gang.

In order to ensure that she does nothing that might incriminate him, Pinkie befriends Rose. After a short time, she falls helplessly in love with him and they end up being married in a registry office – the shrewd, self-serving Pinkie knows that a wife cannot give evidence against her husband in court. During their first encounter, he spots a rosary beads in her hand bag and realises that she is a Catholic: Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem, he intones, before being transported back to his time as an altar boy: ‘In his voice a whole lost world moved – the lighted corner below the organ, the smell of incense and laundered surplices, and the music.’ Unlike Rose, Pinkie has strayed very far from the piety of his youth. When asked by Rose if he believes in religion, he replies: ‘What else could there be? ... Why, it’s the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don’t know nothing,'
Of course there’s Hell. Flames and damnation …’

Rose likes to believe there is also a Heaven, but Pinkie only sees the evil in the world and in himself. His one consolation is his Catholic belief: ‘You could be saved between the stirrup and the ground, but you couldn’t be saved if you didn’t repent and he hadn’t time…’ Childhood memories of the confession box, the priest’s voice, the bright lights burning in the pink glasses before the statues of the saints, the feeling of safety one encountered in a church, all come flooding back. Although he is disgusted at the thought of sexual concourse, influenced no doubt by witnessing the weekly coupling of his parents with whom he had to share a room, Pinkie recognises that there is an equal amount of goodness in Rose as there is evil in him. He tells her: ‘It’s in the blood. Perhaps when they christened me, the holy water didn’t take. I never howled the devil out.’ As a child, he swore he would become a priest. The celibate state would have suited him in one important aspect: it would have meant he could avoid what he refers to as ‘Married Passion.’

When Rose informs him that she entered a church before joining him in the registry office in the hope of going to confession, he is reminded of the gravity of what they are about to do. The two murders he has committed up to this point ‘were trivial acts, a boy’s game… Murder only led up to this – this corruption’. Pinkie’s Puritanism colours his view of his wife: ‘She was good, but he’d got her like you got God in the Eucharist – in the guts. God couldn’t escape the evil mouth which chose to eat its own damnation.’ With the words ‘It’s a mortal sin’, he takes possession of Rose. On hearing his wife declare her love for him, he reflects: ‘This was hell then…’ Hell for him is being stuck with a woman for whom he feels nothing but revulsion, a revulsion made all the worse because he associates her with his initial experience of sinful sex. Rose is similarly aware of the enormity of what has passed between them: ‘What was the good of praying now. She’d finished with all that: she had chosen her side: if they damned him, they’d got to damn her, too’.

Greene provides a forensic exploration of the consequences of sin in Brighton Rock. The two young characters are conscious of going deeper and deeper into an abyss from which there may well be no return. The gap between ‘the stirrup and the ground’ becomes more and more narrow as Pinkie comes up with the idea that the only way of finding peace is for them to agree a suicide pact. He has no intention of killing himself, however. His plan is for Rose to shoot herself first and then he will claim to the police that she wrote him a note (which is true) saying she could not bear the thought of living without him. Rose is
The recent film version of the novel is unsatisfactory in many respects. Firstly, Pinkie does not come across as the fearfully evil character he is in the novel. Similarly, his conflicted sexuality is not nearly as pronounced in the film version. But it is in the ending of the film that the most glaring discrepancy can be found. One day as they were walking along the promenade, Rose had asked Pinkie to record his voice in a booth. He spoke, not of love, but of his loathing for his new bride. At the end of the novel, Rose is heading ‘towards the worst horror of all’, the playing of the record which will reveal his true sentiments for her. In the film, the record sticks on the words, ‘What you want me to say is I love you...’, which plays over and over to the great consolation of the young woman. The significance of Rose discovering the deep aversion she inspired in her husband stems from her discussions with a priest who emphasises that if Pinkie was capable of love, that at least showed he could not have been completely evil.

When questioned in an interview about his character’s fate in the afterlife, Greene replied: ‘I don’t think that Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were not committed in defiance of God, but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born.’ The major issue in the novel, as far as I am concerned, is the nature of God’s mercy. While Pinkie is undoubtedly a great sinner, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly transpired between the ‘stirrup and the ground’: it is not impossible that Pinkie last thoughts were of repentance. In Greene’s view, such theological issues were beyond the ken of mere mortals and always remain couched in mystery. What I recommend is that everyone get a copy of *Brighton Rock* and make up their own mind as to Pinkie’s fate.