

Elements of crime writing: Text overview – *Brighton Rock*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of crime. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

Brighton Rock is a 1930s period novel that foregrounds crime and criminality in its first sentence. The sentence (and the word “murder” in particular) is stark and unnerving and suggests something of the kind of crime writing text this is. *Brighton Rock* is not a murder mystery, a whodunit, like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where a civilised, rural and largely middle class community is shocked by a killing. In Greene's novel, murder or acts of violence are an everyday part of the dark underworld, one which is seething with bitterness and terror. Gangs are in open conflict about who will take the lion's share of the protection racket business and violence. Intimidation and murder are common. The language that is used is raw and Greene incorporates the slang of the underworld (polony, buer, nicker, bogies) to give a sense of realism.

In the novel there are two murders in the narrative present, another murder in the past, that of Kite, which has triggered the current hostilities, razor slashings, a bending of the law to obtain a marriage between an underage girl and an underage boy, an attempt to procure the girl's death through cruel deception and a desperate suicide of the main villain. But this text is not simply a crime thriller either. Greene set out to write a crime or detective novel (the subtitle for the novel was originally 'An Entertainment' which is what crime writing is typically thought to be), but in creating a vicious protagonist, whose Catholic teachings lead to his being tormented by notions of mortal sin and visions of hell, and an adversary who is pragmatic and believes only in ensuring right triumphs over wrong, the novel has much in common with the morality plays of the medieval period and the two genres are interestingly interwoven.

Setting

The setting of the novel in 1930s Brighton at Whitsuntide is crucial to the narrative. The Brighton Greene represents is a town of two faces. The novel opens with a focus on the tourist's vision of Brighton. This Brighton is cheerful, a holiday makers' heaven (though the reader already knows that it is here that Hale suspects he will be murdered). As the novel progresses, a different face emerges, one that is far away from the tourist friendly Brighton seafront. At the races, or in the backstreets where Billy's house can be found, there is corruption and criminality, a sleazy underworld of gangs and protection rackets, of which those who holiday in Brighton are largely unaware; it is a world of fallen souls. Interestingly, though, the criminal world also lurks in both the prestigious Cosmopolitan Hotel where Colleoni sets up his power base and on the piers where ordinary people are having fun. The scream of seagulls and the crash of the sea's waves and the songs of the drunken holiday makers act as choric sounds to the grim story that unfolds on the Brighton setting.

Palace Pier is itself a key location. It is the place Rose takes Pinkie on their wedding day and in doing so she takes him inadvertently to the place of Hale's death. Hale is killed at a confectionary stall on the pier in the middle of the day, details of the death and location are not given in Part 1 and only emerge later.

Pinkie is himself a product of a Brighton slum and although given less detail, the other gang members are victims of Brighton's economic poverty also. In some ways Greene suggests it is the place's fault that Pinkie and the other gang members are as they are. The way the environment destroys the spirit is keenly realised in Pinkie's memories of his boyhood home in Paradise Piece, where he lived with his parents, sharing a room with them, with no privacy, witnessing the horrors of their Saturday night sexual activities. The school he attended was equally dispiriting, teaching him only how to become a bully, how to secure power. In the shooting galleries of the seaside town, Pinkie sharpens his skills as a marksman and in Brighton he is nurtured by Kite and drawn into the criminal world.

Crimes – murder and violence

Violence and murder go hand in hand in this novel, and although not all violent acts end in murder, all murders are violent. The murder of Kite triggers the actions in the novel's narrative. Precipitated by Hale's journalism, Kite the former leader of Pinkie's gang is razed at St Pancras station by Colleoni's henchmen. Hale is then murdered in a revenge killing by Pinkie's gang – Spicer, Dallow and Cubitt. Hale is hunted down in terror. Spicer becomes a threat to Pinkie because he makes a mistake and allows his face to be shown. Pinkie double crosses Spicer to Colleoni and Spicer is brutally attacked at the races, though not killed. Pinkie therefore has to complete the job which he does by pushing him to his death down a flight of stairs.

Terrible as the murders are, the violence is perhaps more disturbing, because Greene describes it so graphically. The attack on Brewer (for not paying his subscriptions and instead paying Colleoni) is particularly horrible. Pinkie is also sadistic, pinching Rose until his fingers meet in her skin. He uses violence as a threat to intimidate and control. After the death of Hale and Pinkie's fear that Rose might have evidence against him, he threatens her with acid. When Pinkie turns his suspicions on fellow gang member Cubitt, he taunts "if you were dangerous, I'd do something about you".

Criminals, the criminal psyche and notions of sin

Pinkie is the main perpetrator of crime in the novel and he is an interesting paradox. He is at the same time, a violent and murderous thug, a frightened boy on the edge of adulthood and a doomed Catholic who sets out to be damned. At just seventeen years old he is a sociopath with an immense capacity for hatred, sharing something with the worst Jacobean villains. He is the gang leader of a protection racket who has a mission to emulate his mentor Kite who he seems to have respected. As a criminal, he is determined and intelligent. (Hale's murder is well planned and Pinkie is always sure to set up his alibis). He carries a razor blade in his long thumb nail and a bottle of vitriol in his pocket in case of emergencies. Pride is his motivating force; he fears being laughed at, and becomes angry when he thinks he is not being taken seriously. As a gangster he exudes confidence and he is excited by violence, often consoling himself with images of horror (he imagines ripping the plaster off Spicer's wounds, for example). But as a criminal, he is actually something of a failure. He is never seen in triumph in the way that Alex triumphs in *A Clockwork Orange*. Pinkie dies at the age of seventeen and given that for the majority of the novel he tries to evade capture so that he will not be hanged, Greene does not show him at the height of any power or success. Pinkie may be a gang leader, but it is clear from the start that it is only a matter of time before Colleoni will ensure that his mob is the only one operating.

Pinkie is labelled by Greene as "the boy" or "the Boy" and his youth is significant in a novel which might be seen as a bildungsroman. He does not smoke or drink (until he deems it necessary for his final plan) and until he marries Rose he is a virgin. Sexual desire disturbs him "like a sickness". He is haunted by his parents' Saturday night couplings and it could be argued, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that these memories are in part responsible for his appalling attitude towards women. He thinks of women in terms of violence that is played out on them – Annie Collins and her suicide on a railway track and Peggy Baron and her disfiguring with acid. When Greene focalises through Pinkie, his protagonist is shown to be fearful of what is expected of manhood; in particular he is tortured about having sex, afraid of the pleasure it might bring. Pinkie's coming of age, unlike that of Alex, is not a rite of passage and it opens up for him a chasm of despair.

Pinkie's Catholicism is also important in Greene's development of the criminal psyche. "The Boy" is enmeshed by images and ideas of heaven and hell. Dona

nobis pacem, he often says, but there is not any peace for him. He is also unable to take up opportunities for redemption and he suppresses any hint of goodness or sensitivity that might be there. For example, he is moved by music but removes himself from situations where his weakness might be exposed. He feels no remorse for his murders and is more troubled by the mortal sin of marrying Rose outside the Christian church. His final act is to commit the ultimate sin of suicide and in this respect there is a self-fulfilling prophecy about his damnation.

Victims

Victims are clearly present in *Brighton Rock* and are a key element in crime writing. Fred Hale is presented as an obvious victim in the opening chapter when he fears for his life believing that he is being hunted. When Pinkie meets him he looks at him the way a hunter might look at a “spotted lion” or a “pygmy elephant – before the kill”. Hale is then murdered mysteriously “off stage” and barely mourned at his funeral. Spicer, himself a criminal, is also a victim, first of a brutal beating at the races and then murdered by Pinkie.

Perhaps the novel’s main victim though is Rose, poor and vulnerable, and manipulated and abused throughout the novel. She is in awe of Pinkie, and is led to believe that Pinkie loves her though he only shows her attention to prevent her from acting as a witness against him after the murder of Hale. In her naivety and desperation to be loved, she fails to see Pinkie’s cruelty and callousness. When he speaks to her with “sudden venom” and taunts her while pinching her skin, asking if she wants him to be her boy, she replies “I’d love it” and she says that if he likes pinching her he can continue. Pinkie marries Rose to buy her silence – as he knows a wife can’t give evidence against her husband. But he feels nothing but revulsion for her. He ultimately tricks her into what she thinks is a suicide pact and although Ida Arnold intervenes and prevents Rose from shooting herself, Rose is not grateful. She tells the priest later that she wishes she had killed herself, partly because she still believes that Pinkie loved her. Her victim status is heightened at the end of the novel when she goes to find the record that Pinkie has left for her and Greene writes: “She walked rapidly towards the worst horror of all”.

Suspense

A typical feature of crime writing texts is the creation of suspense. Greene opens his novel with Hale’s fear that he will be murdered and there is much tension as he tries to elude his violent pursuers, terror brewing inside him. Even the motherly Ida cannot save him. The novel also ends with suspense, in some ways a structural mirroring of the first chapter. Ida, now an avenging angel, supported by a seemingly reformed Dallow, pursues Pinkie in a bid to rescue Rose. In the chase, life and death are held in the balance. Will Ida arrive in time and save Rose in a way she couldn’t save Hale? As we would expect from a crime text and a morality play, Ida does arrive in time and Rose is prevented from committing suicide and Pinkie, confronted by Dallow on whom he wants revenge, raises his phial of sulphuric acid only to have its contents turned on himself. The suspense

is maintained until Pinkie in desperation hurls himself off the cliff and then there is quiet: “.....whipped away into zero – nothing”.

Ida Arnold and the role of detective

Ida Arnold plays the role of avenger and detective. She is the big woman with a laugh and sense of humour (the only supplier of comedy in this crime text). She asks questions and has instincts. The asking of questions is of course key to detection. After a brief acquaintance with Fred Hale whom she meets by chance, she learns of his terror and fear of dying. On her return to London, she is informed of his demise. Ida questions the official verdict that Hale's death was the result of natural causes and embarks upon a quest to expose the truth behind his fate, with the eventual, clearly stated aim, of punishing those responsible. She operates as a skilful strategist, a clever tactician and discovers not only Pinkie's role in Hale's death but also his other crimes. She manages to insinuate herself into key situations, talking to the police, Pinkie, Rose, Dallow and Colleoni.

However, Ida's skills as a detective are not used by Greene to reveal any of the crimes to the reader. His shifting narrative perspectives make it clear in the first part of the novel who murders Hale, long before Ida's discovery. This text is not a whodunit. There is no mystery either about when Hale dies (between 1.30 and 1.45 as Pinkie's trail of alibis makes clear), but how he dies is not satisfactorily resolved by Ida and Greene does not provide the answer for the reader either. Where Ida is successful is in the tracking and pursuing of Pinkie, which she does with relentless zeal, and she is every bit as diligent as Holmes or Poirot, but perhaps not as clever. Her curious nature is highlighted by Greene when she says, “it's the least you can do for anyone – ask questions”. Ida is presented as a character driven by a strong sense of justice and a desire for retribution. The biblical reference to 'an eye for an eye' indicates Ida's uncompromising morality (though Ida is superstitious and not religious, reading the signs of a ouija board rather than the bible), and this positions her as the vengeful force that Pinkie stirs up with his murder of Hale, a force which ultimately will lead to his destruction. In this respect, Ida becomes Pinkie's nemesis (she is the goddess of implacable divine reckoning); this is her role in the narrative and foregrounds the antagonistic relationship that Greene develops between her and Pinkie. Ida does not trust to God to punish wrongdoing. In this sense, Ida is not only an impartial detective, but also the judge and jury, the one who will mete out punishment and retribution as she sees fit.

The detective also needs good luck. At the Brighton races, Ida places a bet on a horse tipped for her by Hale and when Black Boy wins at odds of 12- 1, it enables her to return to Brighton to live in some luxury, to buy off some gang members and to track down the murderer of Hale and to save Rose. In a sense, the race becomes a symbol of good overcoming evil, a sense that there is some divine intervention at work.

The reader, as in many crime writing texts, is invited to play the part of detective. Although it is true that all texts are invitations to readers to sift signs, find meanings from words, interpret and reinterpret, crime writing texts do this in a specific way. This is especially the case with Hale's murder, one of the novel's enduring mysteries. Ida believes that she figures out the answer: "They strangled him.....". However, Ida's theory is flawed - there are no marks discovered on his neck at the inquest. There are hints in the novel (but not discussed by Ida) that Hale was choked with Brighton rock - presumably which later dissolved- but there are no signs of lacerations in his throat, and whether seaside rock would dissolve is unlikely.

The police

For the most part the official police force is ineffective in this novel. The police officers and inspectors are all male and either fail to see that a crime has been committed - as in the case of Hale - or are complicit in criminal activities. They are very much on the side of Colleoni. Ida as a female member of the public, an amateur sleuth, is a stark contrast to the official bastions of law and order. When Ida recruits a police officer at the end of the novel in her pursuit of Pinkie and Rose, the policeman is described as looking "ill at ease" and "confused".

Punishment and retribution

After the death of Hale, Pinkie fears the capital punishment that awaits him if he is caught. His heart misses a beat when he thinks about what the law could do to him. This fear motivates all the actions he takes to prevent discovery. Although the law does not catch up with him, Ida does and in terms of the morality text which *Brighton Rock* is, he gets his just deserts. Ironically, in a struggle with Dallow, the one gang member he thought he could trust, who has now allied himself with Ida, Pinkie's face is burned with his own bottle of "vitriol" and the blinded Pinkie falls over a cliff edge. The imagery of hell is obvious and suggests eternal damnation, though whether God saves him before his fall is not a point Greene discusses. What is clear is Ida's victory and her obtaining retribution for Hale's murder.

Social commentary

A typical element of crime texts is that they offer a social critique or social commentary. Although the novel explores what causes Pinkie to behave as he does, what makes him a malcontent, there is no sense that lessons have been learned. There is no happy resolution for Brighton and no sense of moral cleansing. The body politic remains corrupt. Colleoni is respected by the police and at one point they act on his behalf, advising Pinkie to leave Brighton: "You can't stand against Colleoni". Brighton therefore is unlikely to change and Pinkie's voice, in which he will shatter Rose's illusion of love, is always waiting to be heard: "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?"