

## **Brighton Rock** 1938

Graham Greene

### OVERVIEW

*Brighton Rock* is a frightening descent into a hellish world of human cruelty and hopelessness. Set in Brighton in the 1930s, it tells the story of Pinkie, a young gang leader, who murders two people, a newspaper man and one of the gang members, and then attempts to escape justice by marrying Rose, to prevent her from giving evidence against him. His plan is thwarted by the dogged efforts of Ida, an ordinary woman who takes on the role of detective and saviour. In the end, Pinkie devises a suicide pact with Rose, but that fails and only Pinkie dies.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Graham Greene knew Brighton well, as he often travelled south from London to visit the seaside town. The criminal underworld he depicts in the novel resembles the real-life gangs of the town, who haunted its race track on the hill and its bars on the seafront. The 'Kolley Kibber' promotion stunt in the novel is also based on a scheme run by a London newspaper in the late 1920s.

The Brighton rock of the title is not, as one might think, a stone. Instead, 'rock' was a kind of hard candy in the form of a stick, with the word 'Brighton' written on it. Ida explains her own personality by analogy with the (then) famous candy-stick when she tells Rose that people don't change. 'Look at me,' she says. 'I've never changed. It's like those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down, you'll still read Brighton. That's human nature.'

Greene's novel was adapted as a film with the same title, starring Richard Attenborough, in 1948. The film has the same menace as the novel, with one major change in plot. The enigmatic ending in the novel, when Rose believes she will hear Pinkie's loving voice on the record, is changed so that she actually does hear the recording. But the needle on the record player gets stuck on the words 'I love you,' cutting off the rest of his hateful statement that she 'disgusts' him. This change was opposed by Greene, who described it as the 'the greatest horror of all.'

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Pinkie	Pinkie is the young gangster at the heart of the story.
Rose	Rose, a young waitress, becomes his sweetheart and wife.
Ida	Ida, a middle-aged woman, is the self-appointed detective who pursues Pinkie.
Colleoni	Colleoni is an older and more powerful gangster than Pinkie.
Spicer	Spicer is a member of Pinkie's gang.
Dallow	Dallow is a member of Pinkie's gang.
Cubitt	Cubitt is a member of Pinkie's gang.
Hale	Hale is a newspaper reporter, whose mysterious murder brings the main characters together.

### STORY

*Fear* The story opens with the fear of Charles Hale, a newspaper reporter. Hale is in Brighton on a sunny summer day, when the town is filled with day-trippers. He is there as part of his paper's promotional stunt, in which several reporters assume the identity of a fictional character named Kolley Kibber, but only one is the true KK man. The various reporters roam around the town, leaving cards. Anyone who spots the true KK man wins a prize. This is entertainment, but Hale is filled with dread because he knows that Pinkie and his gang are out to kill him because he knows too much about their protection racket. Desperate for company, Hale is drinking in a bar with a woman named Ida. They

leave in a taxi, kiss and go to the pier, where Ida says she has to duck into the ladies' room. Hale begs her not to leave him alone, and she promises to return soon. When she does, Hale is gone.

*Pinkie* Seventeen-year old Pinkie, the leader of the gang, waits in a café. Soon, the other gang members (Spicer, Cubitt and Dallow) arrive and inform him that they have killed Hale. They also say that they have distributed his KK man cards all over town in order to confuse the police about Hale's whereabouts and supply themselves with an alibi. Pinkie is worried that Spicer might have been seen putting a card under a tablecloth at a café, which would be suspicious since he looks nothing like Hale.

*Rose* Anxious to remove this potentially dangerous evidence, Pinkie goes to the café, where he meets a waitress named Rose. Rose says she found the card and remembers the man who left it. Even more worried now, Pinkie decides the best way to control her is to become her boyfriend.

*Ida* A few days later, Ida goes to a pub, where she learns that the 'KK man' has been murdered. She grabs the newspaper and sees the photograph of the man Hale who disappeared on her. She is shocked and also intrigued by the mystery: he called himself 'Fred' but the paper identifies him as Charles Hale. Concerned and piqued by the paper getting his name wrong, she decides to investigate further. As a firm believer in the supernatural, she thinks that Fred's/Charles' ghost wants her to find him.

*Ouija board* Ida attends Hale's funeral, where she is further appalled by its lack of compassion. Back home, she pulls out her ouija board and, assisted by her neighbour, asks it about the circumstances surrounding Hale's death. The board conjures up a string of seemingly unconnected words that Ida construes to mean 'forced suicide.' Priding herself on knowing right from wrong, Ida now dedicates herself to uncovering the truth.

*Pinkie and Rose* Meanwhile, Pinkie is advancing in his campaign to woo Rose by flashing the cash. Over drinks in a fancy nightclub, he discovers that she, too, is Catholic. As they talk, Pinkie fingers a bottle of sulfuric acid that he keeps in his pocket. In a moment of supernatural communication, the bottle seems to warn him: 'You keep me around for your enemies, but, in the end, I will bring death to you.'

*Colleoni* Pinkie has money and gangsters, but he is small fry compared to Colleoni, the top mobster in Brighton. Colleoni views Pinkie as a rising star and rival, so he invites him to his luxury suite in a swanky hotel on the seafront. The godfather and the little punk chat about the upcoming horse racing and the killing of the previous leader of Pinkie's gang. Things get heated when Pinkie threatens Colleoni, but the older man is impressed with the fiery upstart and offers him a place in his organisation. Pinkie, however, will be no one's flunky; he insults the man and storms out of the hotel.

*Police* Halfway out of the hotel, Pinkie runs into a policeman, who asks him to come to the station and talk with the Inspector. Pinkie is afraid that Rose has revealed something about Spicer (and not Hale) leaving the card, but he discovers that the Inspector is only concerned about possible gangland violence at the race track. He warns Pinkie that Colleoni is too powerful for him. Again, Pinkie feels undervalued and leaves in a huff. He tells himself that there is death all around him and that he is not afraid to die.

*Ida and Rose* Ida is beginning to put two and two together. She learns that the previous leader of Pinkie's gang was killed by Colleoni's men and, following a tip off, she goes to find Rose. Using the sisterhood approach, Ida gets Rose to relax and tell her about the man who left the KK card on that fatal day. Despite Rose's vague statements, Ida is convinced that the man was not Hale. Armed with her information, Ida goes to the police, but they dismiss her as a daffy old lady.

*Spicer* Spicer, who is the oldest member of Pinkie's gang, gets cold feet. He was never in favour of killing Hale and now fears that the police will discover the truth. He is especially fearful that Rose will squeal. He devises a plan to leave Brighton, but he knows that Pinkie will never let him leave since he knows too much. Pinkie makes a decision to eliminate Spicer before Rose is able to identify him as the man who left the card. Pinkie telephones Colleoni and says he has a job for him: kill Spicer at

the race course. Colleoni agrees but the attack goes wrong when his men only wound Spicer. Pinkie finishes the job later by pushing Spicer down the stairs, a murder witnessed by Dallow and Mr Prewitt, Pinkie's lawyer.

*Proposal* Ida tries to get more information, but Rose, under orders from Pinkie and wishing to protect him, refuses to answer her questions. Questioned himself by the police about the gang violence at the race track, Pinkie decides to marry Rose: a wife cannot testify against her husband, he is told by his lawyer. Rose accepts his proposal.

*Cubitt* Pinkie quarrels with Dallow and Cubitt over shared responsibility for Hale's and Spicer's murders. Cubitt quits the gang, runs into Ida and gives her enough information to confirm her suspicion that Pinkie killed Hale.

*Souvenir recording* Pinkie and Rose are married (in a fake ceremony) and stroll around the seafront. Rose pleads with him to make a recording of his voice as a souvenir of their wedding day. Pinkie enters the special booth, a new gimmick set up for tourists, and records a spiteful speech (which Rose cannot hear outside the booth) about how he hates her for trapping him. Because they have no gramophone, though, he thinks she will never hear his offensive message.

*Suicide pact* Pinkie and Rose get on with life, but so does Ida, who keeps on their trail. Paranoid that he will be arrested, Pinkie devises another plan to remove any possibility of conviction. He makes Rose agree to a suicide pact by convincing her that dying together will be romantic. But it is a trick: she will kill herself first, while Pinkie has no intention of doing the same to himself. He drives them to an isolated spot above the sea and hands the gun to Rose. Tipped off by Ida, the police follow and confront the couple just before Rose attempts to shoot herself. Pinkie then panics, spills the sulfuric on himself, jumps off the cliff and dies.

*Conclusion* The story ends as Ida savours her triumph in causing Pinkie's demise and in saving Rose. She also contemplates a return to her ex-husband, feeling that the world needs more love. Rose, however, mourns Pinkie's death and hopes that she might be carrying his child. When she goes to confession, the priest assures her that God is merciful toward sinners. Clutching the recording of Pinkie's voice, she finds a store with a gramophone to play it on. She only wants to hear his voice telling her that he loves her.

## THEMES

*Religion and morality* The theme that shapes this story is the power of religion and moral systems. There are three distinct belief systems at work, which sometimes clash and ultimately decide the fate of the main characters. First is Pinkie's 'hell fire and brimstone' version of Catholicism, which is born out of his impoverished childhood during which he witnessed his parents engage in copulation in front of him without shame; later he finds that their shabby home has collapsed, 'as if it had been bombed.' It is divine punishment, he reckons, for such immoral behaviour. For Pinkie, god is an instrument of death, punishment and damnation. He grew up in sin and he continues to sin. He believes that he was born in hell and things cannot get any hotter so he will kill at will. Rose has also grown up in poverty, but she puts her faith in a god who will deliver her from deprivation. Prayer and divine powers represent an escape route, which materialises in the fleshly form of Pinkie. He is her saviour and she worships him. A third strand of faith is Ida's whacky supernaturalism. She doesn't believe in a god and instead invests the ouija board with soothsaying properties. Although her 'moral system' seems at first to contrast sharply with the strict Catholicism of Rose and Pinkie, in fact, her simplistic division of the world into 'good and bad people' and of a firm line between 'right and wrong' is close to their binary world of 'heaven and hell.' Pinkie is convinced that he is damned, Rose hopes for redemption and Ida invests herself with occult power. These three moral systems drive the story forward and end up propelling Rose and Pinkie to the tragedy on the cliff at its conclusion. At one point, Dallow tells Ida that she is responsible for their suicide pact, and in one sense, he is right.

*Corrupted innocence* Given the cruelty and brutality of the story, it is easy to forget that Rose and Pinkie are teenagers. Pinkie thinks he is a tough gang boss, on the level of Colleoni, but in reality he commands the loyalty of three other petty criminals. He is also a virgin, not only unaware but also unconvinced about the nature of love and sex. Throughout the story he imagines himself to be bigger

than he is and takes umbrage when he is not shown respect. He is defensive, starts fights whenever he senses trouble and constantly confuses violence with manhood. A callow youth defined by his inexperience in an adult world, his grandiose vision of himself leads him into a corrupt world of crime and murder. Rose is innocence personified. Her guileless belief in a merciful god disarms her against the dangerous world she willingly enters with Pinkie, her saviour, at her side. She, like Pinkie, is not only a virgin but also uninformed about love and sex. She believes her marriage has rescued her when, in fact, it is a fake, a con job set up by Pinkie to protect himself from any future courtroom prosecution. Her immaturity and girlish fantasies make her vulnerable to the fiendish suicide pact devised by Pinkie to do away with her. At the very end, when she longs to play the record of the now-dead Pinkie's voice, we know that her loss of innocence will be staggering. Both of these teenagers end up corrupted by their naivete.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Pinkie** Pinkie is a damaged person. Only seventeen, he is vindictive, cruel and self-absorbed. He fancies himself as a powerful gangster, whereas he is actually a petty criminal. Utterly without moral conscience, he kills his associate and deceives the girl who loves him. Greene's description of his protagonist reveals the depth of Pinkie's inhumanity: 'His grey eyes had an effect of heartlessness like an old man's in which human feeling has died.'

**Damaged** Pinkie is a young man so damaged that he is cursed with the inability to understand others or even imagine feelings that aren't his own. This psychological scar is illustrated in an early scene, just after Spicer has murdered Hale on Pinkie's orders. As the two of them are leaning on the pier, Pinkie speaks to Spicer about murder and about how a person who commits a murder visits the scene a second time. Greene comments that 'the word "murder" conveyed no more to him than the word "box" or "collar" or "giraffe" The imagination hadn't awoken in him. That was his strength. He couldn't see through other people's eyes or feel with their nerves.' Pinkie's damage is his protection, an asset and not a liability, as most people would view it. It is his strength precisely because it allows him to act as he pleases without a social conscience. It is this damaged quality, the total lack of empathy or compassion, that propels Pinkie forward.

**Vain** Bereft of human sympathy, Pinkie is a vainglorious egoist. From an early age, he has cultivated a vanity to compensate for his perceived lack of respect from others. A perfect example of this dynamic is found at the end of Part Two, when he is advised by a police inspector to leave town because he is not strong enough to take on Colleoni, his rival. After hearing this assessment of his powers, Pinkie leaves feeling deflated but then inflated. 'There was poison in his veins, though he grinned and bore it. He had been insulted. He was going to show the world. They thought that because he was only seventeen...he jerked his shoulders back at the memory that he'd killed a man...He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him; hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths.' Here, Greene uses the famous quotation from Wordsworth ('trailing clouds of glory'), which refers to the divinity of all humans who come from god, to indicate Pinkie's limitless ego and his utter lack of morality.

**Vindictive** Damaged, defensive and vain, Pinkie also has a strong vindictive streak. As the leader of a (very small) criminal gang, Pinkie models himself on his god, who is a figure of vengeful punishment. This quality is well illustrated in his treatment of Brewer, a shopkeeper who pays protection money to Pinkie's gang. When Brewer hasn't paid up one month, Pinkie pays him a visit in the middle of night. It turns out that Brewer has been pressured by Colleoni (the rival gang boss) into paying him for protection, and that betrayal angers Pinkie. Brewer explains that he doesn't have the twenty pounds with him and needs to go out to get it, but Pinkie pulls out a knife and slashes him across the cheek. Brewer warns Pinkie that since he is 'protected' by Colleoni, Pinkie will be in trouble, but Pinkie is unconcerned with any repercussions of his act. He struck out because Brewer not only failed to obey him but also turned coat and joined his rival's protection racket. That means that Pinkie must take revenge, and he does.

**Rose** Rose is a young girl, sixteen years of age, who grows up in poverty and finds an escape route in Pinkie. She is so desperate to be loved and to love that she cannot see the danger that Pinkie represents. Or if she does, she is not scared because nothing could be worse than the dank stairwells of her childhood. She is also a deeply religious person, inculcated with the teachings of the

Catholic church.

*Desperate* Rose's love for Pinkie is the grasp of the desperate. She wants to escape from the tawdry conditions of her life, her uncaring parents and the cold nuns at school. That desperation is vividly illustrated in a scene when Ida (her self-appointed saviour) tries to convince her to leave Pinkie. Rose hides behind a door, refusing to let Ida in after Ida tells her that Pinkie is 'wicked' and doesn't love her. When Rose tells Ida that she [Ida] doesn't know anything, Ida says she has 'evidence.' 'I don't mean that,' Rose says. 'I just don't care...It doesn't matter if he doesn't love me. I love him.' Greene then describes her: 'Driven to her hole, the small animal peered out at the bright and breezy world. In the hole were murder, copulation, poverty, fidelity and the love and fear of god, but the small animal had not the knowledge to deny that only in the glare and open world outside was something which people called existence.' Rose, the small and frightened animal, is so desperate that she clings to whatever is thrown to her, even if it will drag her down.

*Loyal* Desperate Rose finds purpose in loving Pinkie; it is what gives her meaning in life, and even in possible death. That loyalty, however blind, is what drives her actions through the story. Perhaps the most illustrative moment is when Pinkie has convinced her to commit suicide with him. (As readers, we know that he is not intending to kill himself). While he drives her to an isolated spot on the coast, Rose looks at him and thinks that 'he had gone beyond the act [suicide], some place she couldn't tell where. He was wise; he was foreseeing, she thought. Things she couldn't conceive—eternal punishment, the flames...He was going to damn himself [by suicide], but she was going to show them that they couldn't damn him without damning her too...She felt responsibility move in her breasts; she wouldn't let him go into that darkness alone.' Rose knows that killing oneself is a mortal sin and that she will burn forever in hell, just as Pinkie will. But she wants to go through with the suicide because she will be there to comfort her lover. Twisted, sad and naïve, but loyal to the bitter end.

*Hopeful* Rose is only sixteen. She's naïve to the point of self-destruction, but she clings to the idea of divine redemption for sins and to a flimsy hope that she can be happy. The most moving example of this hopefulness comes on the last page of the novel, when Pinkie is dead. Rose thinks that she might be carrying his child. She also has a recording of his voice, made as a souvenir on their wedding night. She goes to a priest, not to ask for absolution but to confess that she wishes she had died with Pinkie. The priest explains that 'we must always hope and pray. No one is cut off from mercy.' Rose says, 'I want to hope, but I don't know how.' The priest then says that if there is a child, it could pray for his father because 'if he [Pinkie] loved you, then that is surely some good.' When Rose leaves the priest, the pain is gone, replaced by the thought of her carrying life, something to be salvaged from the ruins of her life. Also, there is the recording, his voice speaking to her. She looks forward to that with hope.

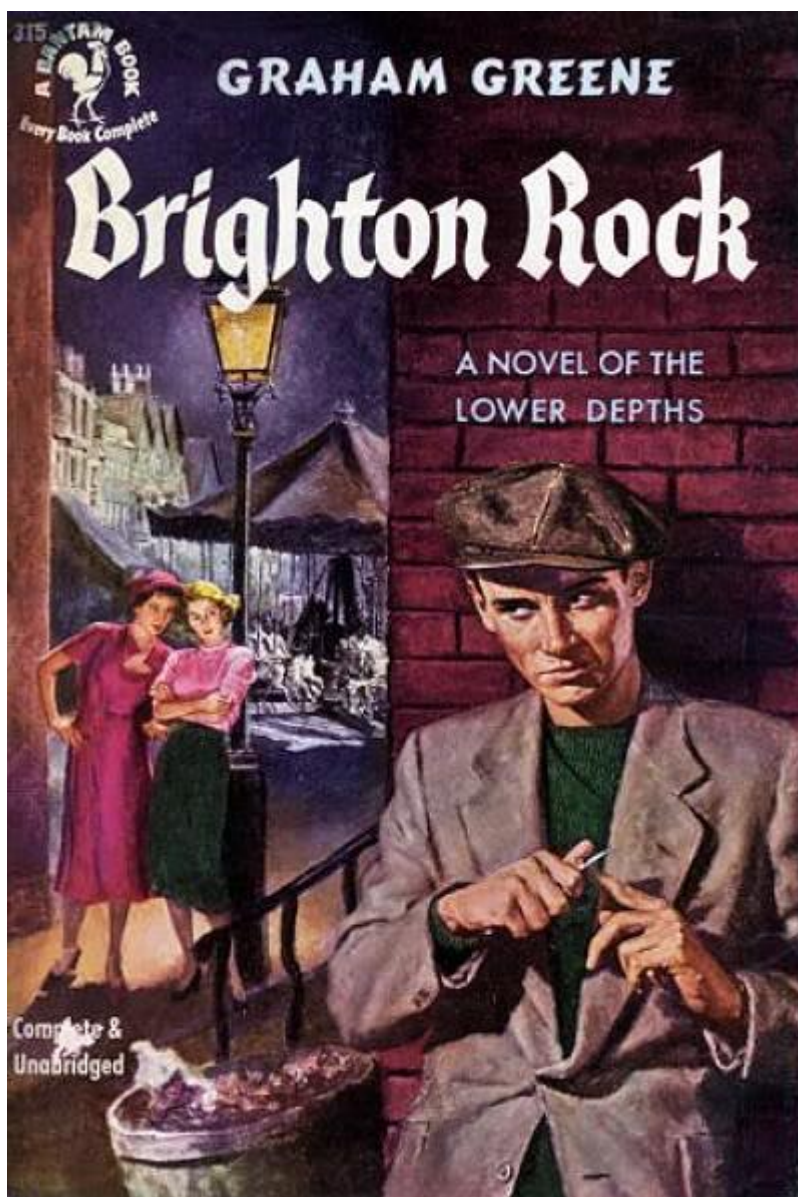
*Ida* Ida is a middle-aged woman who performs in entertainment shows on the seafront and hangs out in bars. She believes in ghosts and the supernatural, and also in the righteousness of her own self-appointed detective work into the mystery of Hale's death. She is a people-person, kind and sensitive, if a little too inquisitive.

*Compassionate* Ida may be somewhat wacky in her belief in the supernatural, but she also has compassion for her fellow human beings on earth. She feels a personal link to Hale, who died (or was he killed?) after she left him alone. When she sees the notice in a newspaper for his funeral, she decides to attend because, as she says to herself, 'maybe there's no one else.' Her drinking companions in the bar try to talk her out of it, saying that it's none of her business. But she dismisses this. 'Someone ought to be there,' she declares. When she leaves the cremation parlour and watches Hale's remains rise up as smoke into the sky, she weeps. Ida hardly knew the man—he had picked her up in a bar, they exchanged a kiss and a few words—but Ida's compassion means that she feels a bond with him.

*Moralistic* Ida's morality is simplistic. Although she does not believe in god, her moral code follows the biblical equivalent of 'an eye for an eye.' We have an insight into her thinking in the scene that follows Hale's funeral, when she walks back to the bars on the Brighton seafront. 'Ida's mind worked with the simplicity and regularity...of a sign flashing on an off: "Do you use Forhams for the Gums?" If you believe in God, you could leave vengeance to him, but you couldn't trust the Almighty. Vengeance was Ida's, just as much as the reward was hers.' Ida's right-or-wrong view of life is, Greene later shows, as dangerous as Pinkie's amorality and Rose's naiveté. Ida is emboldened by her unquestioning belief that she is a moral agent. Once she gets the scent, she hunts and hounds

Pinkie and Rose, arguably driving them to the edge of the cliff, where they planned to commit suicide.

*Dogged* Ida, the simple moralist and believer in the supernatural, is nothing if not determined. Her 'either-or' view of life leaves her no option but to pursue the truth concerning the circumstances surrounding Hale's death. Once she realises that Rose (and therefore Pinkie) is part of the story, she is dogged in hounding Rose for more information. A good example of her pursuit is described in a scene when she goes back to the restaurant where Rose works as a waitress. 'I'm going to work on that kid every hour of the day until I get something,' she says to herself. Greene then paints the scene: 'She rose formidably and moved across the restaurant, like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end all wars, the signal flag proclaiming that every man would do his duty.' When Rose flees at this intimidating sight, 'Ida moved relentlessly toward the service door,' where she stands in the doorway, blocking Rose's exit and demands answers. Rose escapes into her room, but Ida follows and bangs on her door. 'I'm going to make you listen,' she says. Then Ida thinks: 'When you were life-saving, you must never hesitate, so they taught you, to stun the one you rescued.' That is Ida's strength as well as weakness: she is determined to find answers even if someone is hurt in the process.



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