

# GUILT

## *The Prison of This World*

Jennifer Waelti-Walters

**I**N ALL HER EARLY WORK, Marie-Claire Blais is fascinated by three major themes: sin, guilt and powerlessness, but nowhere are their roles in Quebec society schematised as clearly as in *The Execution* (1968),<sup>1</sup> her first play. On the surface *The Execution* is the story of an absurd and gratuitous murder set in a boys' boarding-school, and as such its action is brutally disconcerting in the manner of that of Gide's Lafcadio in *Les Caves du Vatican* and the theme of Camus' *Le Malentendu*. It is a very stylized piece, however, in which there is far too much discussion and too little action to provide a gripping drama. Clearly then it should be read otherwise and it seems, upon reflection, that the play is in fact a description and indictment of Quebec society, its values and above all its codes of behaviour both implicit and explicit.

*The Execution* presents a school run by monks — a society in which values are taught to men by men; a society controlled by the church and in which that church is felt as the dominating force. It is, however, a force which remains invisible. This is thus a male society to which women are extraneous. Indeed women appear very briefly in the play in the roles traditionally attributed to them by the Church: mother and sister — virgin nun (and so sister in both her forms). In both cases they are used or perceived as victims of their men-folk and, true to tradition, adore their sons and brothers while being abused by them both materially and emotionally.

The character-structure of the play thus provides a parody of the world as described in Christian writing. And *The Execution* provides a parody of the church's teaching also. Eric, the child who is perfectly innocent is killed, Lancelot and D'Argenteuil, imperfect but innocent people, are punished and Kent, the truly wicked one amongst them, emerges unharmed. The question is, of course, whether divine justice is less imperfect than that of the Church which allows a Christ-figure to be sacrificed again within its very walls.

The Catholic church is therefore the major object of criticism. Its doctrine of original sin is illustrated and many aspects of guilt are explored, particularly in the discussions between Kent who instigated the murder and thus is morally guilty and Stéphane who carries it out and therefore is legally guilty. The concept of duality that is the very basis of Christian culture is drawn to our attention over

and over again, as the opposition between sin and purity, guilt and innocence, and the role of the Devil in Christianity are discussed and illustrated.

Above all, the Church is seen as a prison within whose walls everyone is held captive. The school is full of bars; the world outside is impassable because of the snow and cold; the prison in which Stéphane, Lancelot and D'Argenteuil are held is purely symbolic — a visual representation of the sin and guilt which bind mankind in its human condition.

Once again, however, the dual nature of occidental perception is made apparent as two kinds of freedom offer ways out of captivity: escape through death is given to the innocent Eric (escape presumably into paradise), and Kent creates a sort of liberty by his rejection of all human emotion and therefore his rejection of guilt also. He has freedom in this world but it is freedom of a faustian sort and in him we sense very occasionally a fear of death and ultimate judgment.

The physical prison thus represents the other prisons whose bars are more redoubtable: the prison of school, education and religious training, which is the prison of social values and that of the mind, the prison of irrational (and socially fostered) emotion. Both of these prevent the human being — in this case Stéphane — from taking effective action: Stéphane neither refuses to kill Eric nor accepts his responsibility in the murder and his attitude is reflected in his situation when no-one believes his confession. He stands between Christ (Eric) and the Devil (Kent) and proclaims his love of the former while doing the bidding of the latter — the perfect illustration of man the sinner.

This is a brutal and pessimistic play, for not only is man seen as a helpless sinner but all hope of human justice is denied in the face of man's imperfection and his weakness is illustrated at a social level also. Not only does the right-thinking Christian — Stéphane — give in to the wiles of the Devil, but on a lowlier plane all his liberal and right-thinking protestations collapse before the calculated ruthlessness of Kent. Here we have a lesson in the successfulness of naked power and cynicism over idealism and innocence. Power creates victims and men must choose which side of the struggle they will espouse. Stéphane, our "everyman," is caught not only in the combat of ideals between good and evil, but also in the practical struggle for success in an unjust world. His lesson is stark and hard: he can live or die, succeed or fail, be the aggressor or the victim, and, simultaneously, in the same struggle he can be wrong or right, guilty or innocent, sinful or pure. Yet the success of a martyr, which he tries to claim, is no longer to be had. In the world of *The Execution* strength goes with evil and with manliness, goodness is weak and attributed to women and children. (Eric is 14.) Men who espouse it are to be scorned. This is a curious code of behaviour to be found within a society that has as its totem a Good Man depicted in his deepest abjection as crucified victim, and it sets up an interesting dialectic with the previous code discussed here: that of man between God and Devil.

It would seem that the social structures created within a strong religious context have become empty of significance for society today and that power and the rhetoric of power are all.

THE ENTIRE PLAY TURNS on the exercise of cynical power which is manifest both in its character development and its overall structure. Kent controls everyone by his language, his skill in debate and personality. He compels Stéphane to kill Eric although in discussion the things he, Kent, stands for are no better and are considerably less acceptable than those defended by Stéphane. The difference lies in the orientation of the characters: Stéphane is a thinker, Kent a man of action. Their predilections provide a chart of standard oppositions as we see:

*Stéphane*

justice  
guilt  
cemetery  
books  
ideal murder  
faithfulness  
obedience/hypocrisy  
weakness  
escape situation  
die for others  
lucidity  
extra-ordinary nature of action  
(expect world to be changed)  
tormented  
humiliated

*Kent*

violence  
liberty  
forest  
action  
perverse murder  
betrayal  
power  
control  
revel in situation  
die for self only  
will  
normality of action  
(maintain routine)  
cold and hard  
proud

Stéphane is good, thoughtful, yet he vacillates because of his breadth of understanding. Kent is self-centred and willful. His energy is concentrated and directed to his ends. Hence he can move crowds and dominate individuals. Indeed, in a scene terrifyingly reminiscent of the power of the political and religious demagogues of history, he persuades all his classmates to assume the responsibility for Eric's murder. Only one of his fellows understands what he is doing: Lancelot says "Tu ne présides pas, tu écrases" and with fine irony Kent makes sure that it is he, Lancelot, who is accused of (Kent's) crime.

That this is a drama turning upon injustice and rhetoric is underlined by the references to *Phèdre* in whose name Eric is killed and to *Electre* which Héléne, Stéphane's sister, is reading at the end of *The Execution*. The structure of the play shows this power of language and the fundamental opposition between rhetoric

and justice very clearly as it moves through the same progression from false trial to transfer of guilt twice. The acts are perfectly parallel.

*Act I*

Scene I	Scene II	Scene III
Choice of victim false trial	Discussion of guilt, etc.	Transfer of crime (1) physically to Lancelot (2) psychically to class

*Act II*

Scene I, II and III	Scene IV and V	Scene VI and VII
Confessions	Discussion of innocence, evil, etc.	False guilt attributed

It is interesting to note that justice is not a major theme in this play, nor indeed is crime. The main spoken interest lies in the attribution or self-attribution of blame and an exploration of the subsequent sense of guilt. The play is a study in the making of a victim and in the maintenance of power.

There is, however, a third message transmitted implicitly in *The Execution*, not this time by the overt illustration of a set of values or code of behaviour but rather by the violation of a code of ideals. Here we leave the social plane as well as the religious one and enter the realm of literary convention. Eric is our Prince Charming, the beautiful, pure and innocent hero who should reign triumphantly over evil at the end of the story. Yet Eric is the victim of a senseless and bloody murder, and Lancelot is accused of the crime. If we consider first the names of these two characters we see that through their defeat the whole hero tradition, the chivalrous and godfearing search for the good, the beautiful and the holy is called into question, rejected as a code appealing to children only, and a code of ruthless expediency takes its place as man's mode of successful operation today.

The play offers the elaboration and juxtaposition of the three codes operating in a contemporary Catholic society: one provided by faith and dogma, one by daily experience, and the third by literature and tradition, and all brought together in a ritual of explanation.

Stéphane is a latter-day everyman or pilgrim trying to make progress in a confusing world — confusing because the three codes are incompatible. In the first he is caught between the Devil and Christ; his desire pulls him towards the good though he is not firm in his choice. In the second he can choose to be powerful or weak, aggressor or victim, and his inclination leads him to want to be in a position of strength. Finally, reader in a world of books, he must opt for reality or fairytale, cynicism or idealism, the world or the book in fact. Trapped, then, in his own indecision, seeing all too clearly the conflicting demands made upon him, he subsides into dream behind the bars of the prison society has created.

Here, as in Marie-Claire Blais' other works to this date, the ordinary person is

a helpless victim in an intolerable situation. Instructed by his education to believe in moral values, justice and aspiration to higher things (of which Eric and Lance-*lot* are the symbols) he is also taught by his religion that he is a poor weak sinner who will always fall prey to the Devil. This creates an intellectual and emotional dilemma sufficient to incapacitate any thinking individual — hence Stéphane's indecisiveness. The interesting thing is that this double-bind situation is created and maintained by one and the same institution: the Church. In this way man can be held subservient, in a state of paralysing guilt at all times, blaming himself if he does not improve his situation and guilty of some kind of sin if he does.

Kent is therefore shown to be right in that the only way to break out of this vicious circle, this prison of the mind, is to take on the characteristics of the Devil and attack the Church and its God directly. His behaviour, however, is inhuman, dehumanizing and anti-humanistic; as such it is unacceptable to the likes of Stéphane. The prison is intolerable, the way of escape is unacceptable; it is no small wonder that Stéphane thinks of suicide. But there again he is caught in yet another trap because suicide is a mortal sin.

Guilt: the prison of this world. Stéphane-everyman feels guilty all the time he stays within its walls, and is guilty (according to the rules of the establishment at least) if he escapes them. As long as he accepts the ritual of blame he has been taught to practise, he will remain a prisoner, punished by others or by himself.

*The Execution* is a bitter analysis of the imprisonment, even the killing, of a people. It is a presentation of the spiritual and rational conflicts created by traditional dogma and education in a modern world and is cast in the form of an inverted fairy-tale — one in which the prince is defeated and the agents of wickedness triumph — in order to provoke an unconscious emotional reaction as well as an intellectual one.<sup>2</sup> The play is a revolt against the Roman Catholic Church and an indictment of its hold over a society, a society reduced to powerlessness by the opposing nature of the demands made daily upon each of its members. It is also a revelation of the power of rhetoric to create and transfer guilt; from Pontius Pilate to Phèdre and on to Kent, the path is clearly delineated and it is the men of the Church who have used it most frequently. Guilt is the weapon by which a Christian adversary may be rendered helpless. Once a sense of sin is bred into a people it has no way of escape: it is a nation of potential victims waiting for condemnation. *The Execution* is a title with a double-edge: execution takes many forms and here all of them are sinful.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marie-Claire Blais, *L'Exécution* (Montreal: Editions du Jour, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> *La Belle Bête* works on this principle also. See J. Waelti-Walters, "Beauty and Madness in Marie-Claire Blais' *La Belle Bête*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, no. 25/26 (1979), pp. 186-98.