

# The Sin and Punishment in Döblin's *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*

Jingfei Gao

Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China  
2429333053@qq.com

**Abstract:** *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* is a novel completed by Döblin in 1929 that marks the pinnacle of Döblin's literary output. The novel tells the story of Franz Biberkopf's difficult survival in Berlin after his release from prison. The dark thread of the novel is Biberkopf's struggle with god of death, in which the theme of sin and punishment is embedded. By analysing and explaining the transformation of Biberkopf's perception of the problem of sin and punishment, it shows the process of his soul's active lowering of its will towards the path of rationalism. It analyzes the Volitionalism, irrationalism and rationalism hidden under the motif of sin and punishment.

**Keywords:** Berlin, Alexanderplatz, Sin and Punishment, Volitionalism, Rationalism

## 1. Introduction

The subtitle of *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* is "The Story of Franz Biberkopf". He was imprisoned for four years after accidentally killing his girlfriend. The story begins when he returns to Berlin to make a living after he gets out of prison, and he vows to be a man of rules, but he steps into the abyss of crime again. The translator Luo Wei once proposed that it can be regarded as a crime novel, but we believe that the problem of sin and punishment in the novel cannot be simply explained from the perspective of the present world. Socrates once said, "The punishment of justice frees the punished from the greatest evil", and punishment can only be truly effective if it guides the soul. So we should focus on how Biberkopf recognizes the effect of sin and punishment on his soul. Here we try to explore the presentation of the problem of sin and punishment in the subject by analysing the dark line of the novel, namely the dialogue between Death and Biberkopf, and introduces Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's volitionalism and Döblin's ethical ideology to argue for Biberkopf's conscious acceptance of punishment and his transformation from the irrational to the rational.

## 2. The concept of sin and punishment beyond natural law

In the novel, after Biberkopf was released from prison, he once showed a strict sense of morality, "always decent, always alone. This is my oath." [1]. He was extremely pro-order and yearned for a peaceful life, so he had an aversion to social instability such as homosexuals and Reds. But this fragile sense of morality collapsed in full force after the harm done to him by Rüdes and Reinhold, among others. The punishment of imprisonment did not touch his soul, but only gave him a short period of nightmare and irritation at first. The question then arises: why did the punishment of imprisonment not really change Biberkopf? Both the classical school of natural law and the new school of natural law emphasize rationality and justice. Aquinas believed that natural law is what natural rationality tells us what we must do, and that one need not reflect on it, because rationality is the basis for knowing natural law. And human law is produced through the understanding of natural law by human reason. Rousseau wrote in *Emile*: "Only reason can teach us to know good and evil." So for the ignorant, arrogant, and irrational, it is difficult to recognize and obey the standard of good and evil in natural law. Thus, the imposition of punishment on a person under natural law does not shake the sin of Biberkopf's soul. He possessed a concept of sin and punishment that transcended natural law, so that the soul, who had never confessed his sins, would make the wrong choice again and again and go into the abyss again.

### 3. The extreme form of volitionalism in Biberkopf

According to the novel's author Döblin's "new man" and new ethical philosophical ideas, he believes that the unconscious, blind, helpless in the face of the environment cannot understand the world and cannot become the "creator of the world". And Biberkopf is a blind, unconscious archetype. He is used several times in the novel to replace his image with a cobra. "Look, that cobra, it's crawling, it's running, it's hurting." [1]. Such an animalized image may lead man to attribute his irrational characteristics simply to the embodiment of primitive animalism. In his novel *Eternal Life*, Borges says, "Eternal life is insignificant; all living things except human beings can live forever, because they do not know what death is." However, the novel's path to Biberkopf's soul transformation is always accompanied by the voice of death, who has an inescapable fear of death. So his irrationality cannot be equated with animal nature, for "he hears this grim reaper, he hears his slow singing." [1]. Biberkopf could clearly feel the approaching of death, and at the moment when he realized that death was coming, there was a strong force that guided him to escape the pursuit of death, the will to life. Schopenhauer believed that the will is the essence of the world, that the conscious will is embodied in man, that he must constantly strive for survival, struggling with fear of death. In the novel, Biberkopf always has many out-of-control moments, and he can't understand why he is doing something. He groaned and wailed unceasingly after his release from prison; he felt the earth tremble at his feet as he was beaten and thrown out of the car by Reinhold. Some unconscious intuition in his world always happens before rational thinking. This is the embodiment of Schopenhauer's "will before reason". The will to live is the primary form of the will to power, on the basis of which Nietzsche proposed the concept of the "will to power". Nietzsche once pointed out: "All our conscious motives are superficial phenomena: behind our instincts and states of struggle, the struggle for strength." And this will to power does not have a positive effect in Biberkopf's soul, but takes on an extreme form, and it is precisely this almost pathological will to power that is his original sin.

This extreme will to power is first manifested in the pursuit of a sense of strength and freedom in life. Biberkopf once said, "I am either a free man or I am not." [1]. "Because I have muscles; I can do it if I want to." [1]. He admired strong strength and independence from crowds. After being persecuted by Reinhold's criminal gang, he refused Herbert and Emir's request to help him achieve justice, and refused to receive social assistance for his own constraints. He kept his distance from the crowds and the city. Much of Biberkopf's life was concentrated near Alexanderplatz in Berlin, but there seemed to be an invisible wall between him and Berlin, and everything here had nothing to do with him in his eyes and could not prove his real existence. Neither the noise of the steam piledriver nor the quarrel of the couple next door disturbed his life, and the only thing that could prove his existence was his unconscious instincts and impulses, and all he could feel was his own isolated and dangerous heart. In the tavern where he spent most of his time, he had heard political speeches by the proletariat and fascists, but he could not identify with either side. He was tired of politics, and his isolation and detachment were in stark contrast to the group activities associated with the ideology of political debate. It can be said that he cannot find his own place in a rationally dominated society, but he also cannot have his own understanding and thinking.

Second, because the will to power itself has a tendency to seek domination, a strong desire to conquer can be found in Biberkopf. This desire to conquer made Biberkopf a violent aggressor when he handled the relationship between men and women. He beat his girlfriend Ida to death in anger on suspicion of his infidelity. After being released from prison, he beat up his new girlfriend Yonezawa for the same reason. He never saw women as equals, as if women existed only to prove the strength of male power. His bragging to Meck about his discipline and suppression of Reinhold also comes from a stereotypical pursuit of "a strong will commanding a weak one" [6]. Death has admonished his soul countless times, "Arm your heart, and then I will speak to you again." Your eyes will be filled with tears." [1]. He responded arrogantly: "You tried to intercept me on the road and knock me down. But I have a hand that strangles people, and you can't defeat me." [1]. It can be seen that his extreme will to power even makes him dare to face the questioning of the god of death.

Biberkopf's will to power shows a strong rejection of morality and law. After his first act after rejoining a criminal gang, he felt solemn joy, like a new life, because "the negative meaning of the will is expressed in the obstruction and deprivation of the lives of others, that is, unrighteousness and sin." [6]. The satisfaction of his irrational unrighteousness has led him to mistakenly believe that he is on the path of self-development, and the control of the will to power over him has left him with no time to take into account rational concepts such as justice, morality, and ethics. He saw morality as a "weak will to power." The moral law oppresses the passion of life and is the negation of oneself. He once said of his disgust for the world, "Some people never love anything, but keep their hearts to themselves." [1].

And he will eventually impose the will in his heart on the world and overthrow the order that belonged to this world. The new world that belongs to him will be full of sin, violence and ignorance.

#### 4. The awakening of a rational consciousness of sin and punishment

In the novel, Biberkopf chose to join their criminal gang after being pushed out of the car by Reinhold and losing an arm. Having mustered up enough courage, he stood in front of Reinhold again, overcoming his trembling instinct, "I'm not a coward, though I only have one arm." [1]. He longed for Reinhold to submit to his will. But unlike Biberkopf, "Reinhold is the kind of cold, unchanging violence that will not change in this life, and this man's life is lost in an untouchable way." [1]. Aristotle proposed in *Poetics* three causes of a person's misfortune, namely defects, evil, and negligence. Reinhold's behavior can be understood as the evil of nature, that is, the contempt and disdain for morality. He said: "This guy is struggling to resist. This guy's bones had to be broken. It's not enough for this guy to drop an arm." [1]. For him, violence and evil are his nature. But Biberkopf's criminal behavior is only a means of realizing the will to power. When he is struck by reality again and again, and finally crushes by death, a rational consciousness of sin and punishment finally rises in his soul.

Just as Biberkopf learned that Reinhold had killed Yonezawa, his spirit was completely destroyed. The exhortations of the Grim Reaper hit him more and more intensely, and fear welled up in his heart—the "lawnmower" Grim Reaper finally came to him, "The Grim Reaper sang his song slowly and slowly." [1]. And the trial of Grim Reaper when he came also became a turning point for Biberkopf to recognize his sins and take the initiative to accept punishment. "If there is only one God, —then in His presence we all have another nature and another life." [1]. The Grim Reaper's dialogue with him is not only a judgment of his sins, but also a call of rationalism. The Grim Reaper said, "After all, you will be willing to give up on yourself." [1]. He forced Biberkopf to open his eyes to recognize the harm done to himself and those around him by his extreme will to power, and the consequences of his irrepressible impulses and instincts, which eventually devoured his soul and made him more and more arrogant and blind, even wanting to rule everything with force and violence. The Grim Reaper asked him to meet with Rüdes, Reinhold, and Ida, and the painful experiences associated with them tormented him. He cried what he was suffering. As the two angels said, he chose to plunge himself into the fire, disappeared, and died.

"Suicide is not the cancellation of the will to life, but the manifestation of the excessive attachment of the will to life." [6]. He gave up his life, which was also the final manifestation of volitionalism in his soul. The unbearable pain of those sins was removed from his soul along with his will, and he accepted the judgment of the Grim Reaper for his sins, and in death became a new Biberkopf—sober and capable of knowing the world and himself.

When he truly realizes his sins, the punishment really works. The Grim Reaper gave him the right to choose, "He should carry a new life." [1]. This man, with the help of the Grim Reaper, who took the initiative to destroy the extreme will to power, chose to "use his soul to cope with it and bear it." Rationalism illuminated his soul, and the blind and ignorant will could no longer dominate his actions. He must get to know the world and participate in the new world of "sugar, dirty, and everything."

#### 5. Conclusion

In *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*, I see the significance of the question of sin and punishment for humanity. After experiencing the "coercive therapy" given to him by Döblin, Biberkopf finally broke away from his original ignorant and arrogant life and eliminated the Volitionalism in his soul. After a painful blow and the persuasion of death, a rational sense of sin and punishment finally arose in his soul, and Biberkopf showed the rationality that should be possessed in the midst of a crowd. At the same time, Döblin's reflections on the struggle between rationalism and irrationalism are presented through Biberkopf's "confession" path, which further deepens the theme of the novel.

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