

Corruption And Power: A Critical Study of Steven Knight's *Peaky Blinders*



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ABSTRACT: The primary objective of this study is to explore the themes of power and corruption in Steven Knight's web series *Peaky Blinders*. Web series and OTT platforms have become integral to contemporary culture, growing significantly in influence over the past few years. Through this literary form, writers like Steven Knight aim to depict the socio-economic and political realities of our time. Thus, this medium plays a crucial role in reflecting contemporary society and cannot be overlooked. Set in the post-war era, *Peaky Blinders* tells the story of a gang—or mafia family—called the Peaky Blinders. Throughout the series, Knight exposes how deeply corruption permeates the social system, showing how characters like the Peaky Blinders, politicians, and the police exploit corruption for power, status, and personal gain. This theme of corruption is evident in every season of *Peaky Blinders*. In addition, Knight addresses issues such as drug addiction, the dangers of gun culture in urban settings, crime and violence, police brutality, and the marginalization of women. While located in London, *Peaky Blinders* also reflects the harsh realities of urban life, portraying the city as a battleground of competing ideologies. Ultimately, the series reveals that city dwellers, despite their struggles, often lose more than they gain, sacrificing family, children, and personal dreams in the relentless pursuit of power.

KEYWORDS: The Post-War Environment: A Breeding Ground for Corruption, Corruption in Politics, The Role of Law Enforcement, Class and Power: At Price of Corruption, Hero as an Antihero.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Power and corruption are like two sides of the same coin; if one side is missing, the coin is incomplete. In modern literature, these two concepts often go hand in hand. From the early days of English literature to the works of other global literatures, it is seen that individuals often resort to corruption to acquire and wield power. Conversely, power itself frequently leads to corruption, as it opens opportunities for misuse. Thus, it becomes essential to understand the intricate relationship between power and corruption and how each drives the other.

Peaky Blinders is known for its intense narrative, stylish visuals, and captivating characters, but at its core, the series presents a powerful exploration of corruption. Set in the aftermath of World War I, the show centers on the Shelby family and their gang, the Peaky Blinders, who rise to power by exploiting both legal and illicit means. Through its portrayal of corrupt politics, compromised law enforcement, and morally ambiguous characters, *Peaky Blinders* delves into the insidious nature of corruption and its consequences. This is evident in the Peaky Blinders when Tommy tries to employ Grace for escort service to spend some quality of time with Billy Kimber as, "To Tommy, there is literally no difference between a woman selling her body and a man selling his time as a soldier, laborer, or any other kind of job" (season 1; episode 3).

1.2 OVERVIEWS

In the drama series *Peaky Blinders*, Steven Knight tries to highlight the existed gritty underworld of post-war in the city like Birmingham where other individual like the Shelby family tries to gain. Throughout the series, Knight tries to reveal the critical situation of working class and instable socio-economic and political in early 20th-century Britain. As a result, individuals like Thomas Shelby indulge in the criminal activities to hold the power with the help of corruption. With the help of corruption, the individuals like Thomas Shelby achieve power in the emerging corporate world. Even though, the individuals like Thomas Shelby do not untouchable the result of their wrong deeds that they had had with the others.

On the other, the drama series *Peaky Blinders* is a story of Thomas Shelby who is war veteran and get two gallantry awards for his excellent army service. After returned from the war, he has to nothing to do, but he has a man with high expectation and he has no way to get success. On the other hand, the Britain is facing economic instability as a result the youngster like him do not have much to do. So, he sees his future in horse betting and tries to get a valid license. For the sake of get a license and run his bookies, he

Corruption And Power: A Critical Study of Steven Knight's Peaky Blinders

indulges in the criminal activities and turned into a gang leader. For this, he develops his relationships with police and politician so that he can run his business very smoothly and also remove the barriers and competition in his business.

Research Questions:

Why does the corruption understand as a tool for survival for the working class?

How does *Peaky Blinders* depict the relationship between power and corruption?

How does power and corruption seek ethical and moral dilemmas?

Aims and Objects:

To understand the dynamics of corruption and power within *Peaky Blinders*

To understand the role of corruption in upcoming changes in the early 20th-century British society

To understand how the corruption and power affect the moral and ethical values of the individual and society.

2.1 Review of Literature:

Paul Long has explored, in his study entitled, "Class, Place and History in the Imaginative Landscapes of Peaky Blinders" that it is a historical drama that represents the working class culture of Birmingham during the inter-war period. It unfolds psychological complexities and madness of humans to gain the power.

In his paper, "Modern Company, Postmodern Crisis: Representing Moral Ambiguity and Class Warfare in *Peaky Blinders*," Alex Long explores the concept of the postmodern crisis in contemporary society. He examines the decline in the quality of both television and film production, contrasting these two forms of media. Despite their differences, he finds that both genres ultimately reach a point where they intersect, almost blinding one to the other.

In their paper, *Sara Mills Model Critical Discourse Analysis on the Peaky Blinders Series*, Evira Ayustin and Maylanny Christian highlight the rising gender issues in contemporary society, framing them as a potential conspiracy against women. Through the portrayal of female characters, the authors explore how women are marginalized and used for the self-serving purposes of a male-dominated society.

Throughout the literature review, it has come to know that a number of theme has been explored in Peaky Blinder through the various point of views. But there are many field and theme are untouched. Therefore, I have chosen my research topic corruption and power in *Peaky Blinders*.

3.1 The Post-War Environment: A Breeding Ground for Corruption:

Throughout the drama series *Peaky Blinders*, Steven Knight tries to introduce that the postwar environment of Britain. It is the time when Britain was facing social and economic instability. This is clearly seen in the Shelby family economic condition. The Shelby family economic condition was not good and their family was not able to control over the whole gambling business. On the other side, it has shown that the soldiers, who are returned from the war, also are haunted by trauma, because the war has stopped. The soldiers do not come over the psychological trauma. Having returned from the war, they face the unemployment and industrial unrest. So, it is evident in the drama that the exotic and upheavals in the economic environment made people desperate. So, the people who get success in their life turned to corruption and other illegal and unethical activities. Consequently, the Shelby family sees this environment as an advantage to build an empire that straddles the line between legitimate business and organized crime.

3.2 Corruption in Politics:

In the drama, Knight tries to reveal the relationship between the corruption and politics. It is very evident that corruption and politics are the integral part of each-other. Without the support of politics and corruption, it is impossible to the Shelby's family to take over the illegal and crime world. In the drama series, Thomas Shelby makes a close relationship with the government officials Winston Churchill to leverage his illegal and criminal activities. On the other hand, Winston Churchill uses Thomas Shelby to increase his political power in the British parliaments. So, the drama series is presented as a landscape of politics and corruption. Moreover, the corruption is not one-sided; the state itself is shown to be complicit, willing to overlook the Shelby's crimes when it serves its interests. So, Winston Churchill helps to Thomas Shelby to win in the parliament elections so that both of them may fulfill their own aim and objects. He delivers his historical speech in house, "Conviction Introduces Emotion, Which Is The Enemy Of Oratory" (season 5; episode 6).

3.3 The Role of Law Enforcement:

Throughout *Peaky Blinders*, knight tries to highlight that the law enforcement has become powerless due to the corruption. As a result, the police have become puppet of the hands of criminals and the Police do not pay attention to criminal and their activities and the police exchanges the bribes in the form cash money and other luxurious things. On the other hand, the city like London and Birmingham has become hubs of criminal activities and the gang's growing influence day by day. It is clearly evident in the character of Chief Inspector Chester Campbell, who is one of the series' first antagonists, epitomizes the moral compromise in law enforcement.

Corruption And Power: A Critical Study of Steven Knight's Peaky Blinders

Although his first appearance is as an honest officer and he commits to end the Shelby's operations and later part of the series it is evident that his operations against the Shelby are more personal. Because he tries to get achieve more in the life and he wants to use the Shelby for his own benefitted.

3.4 Thomas Shelby: The Corrupted Antihero

Knight tries to unveil the certain from the truth that without the corruption crime does not survive in the society. It is only corruption that provides nourishment the crime and criminal in the city. It is clearly evident in the drama that Thomas Shelby who is an embodiment of corruption. He sets up himself and Peaky Blinders in the city with the help of corruption. Initially he indulges in the criminal activities to protect his family and community. Furthermore, he gains power through corruption and compromising his own morals to achieve power. This shows that the whole system is a complex relationship of corruption and power both personal and ideological: while he often despises the system he is forced to operate within, he manipulates it to consolidate his influence. As he rises in society, his idealism erodes, replaced by an almost Machiavellian view of power where the ends justify the means.

3.5 Class and Corruption: Power at a Price:

Throughout *Peaky Blinders*, Knight tries to present that the middle and working class is used to corruption as a tool for their socio-economic develop their socio-economic development. It is evident in the drama that the corruption helps them to get power. As a result they earn money and increase their social and economic upliftment. The drama *Peaky Blinders*' story revolves around the Shelby family belongs to the working middle class. The family uses bribes to set up their influence over the whole city of Birmingham and later the family also gains political power. So, the Shelby family's story unveils the truth that how a working class family get achieved the power and social and economic status with the help of corruption.

3.6 The Cycle of Corruption:

Knight tries to explain the cycle of corruption in *Peaky Blinders*. He explains that the corruption has a self-perpetuating cycle in which the individual compromises with its morality and ethical values with the entanglement in a corrupt system. This is clearly seen in drama in which the Shelby interacts to various officials, politicians, and business and offers them bribes to run their illegal activities smoothly. Now the officials do not interfere in the Shelby family's affair. So, it is often built upon a foundation of unethical alliances. It shows that the cycle of corruption is run from lower to upper level so that no one can raise voice against the corruption. It is shown that the whole circle is a combination of crime and corruption.

3.7 A Stylish and Gripping Crime Saga:

Knight presents *Peaky Blinders* as a stylish crime saga that captivately narrates the crime history and success of the Shelby family. The series is crafted in such a way that viewers are drawn into the story, eagerly anticipating what happens next. While many characters seek a peaceful and happy life, the Shelby family repeatedly engages in criminal activities, with each season ending in new conflicts. The impact of war trauma is evident, as it shapes their choices and prevents them from embracing a peaceful existence, fueling their relentless pursuit of power and control.

3.8 Existing of corruption Culture within government institutions:

In *Peaky Blinders* (set in 1899), Knight reveals that government institutions, including the police, are not immune to cultural corruption. The drama portrays internal police corruption, evident in the authorities' failed attempt to enforce stricter law and order by appointing an Irish constable in Birmingham. This move proves short-lived and ineffective due to the deeply ingrained corruption within the police force. The *Peaky Blinders* exploit this culture through bribery, ensuring their activities continue unchecked while significantly undermining police effectiveness.

CONCLUSION: A MORALLY COMPROMISED WORLD

To summarize, the current research has investigated how modern metropolitan centers such as Birmingham serve as epitomes of corruption, showing how members of the working class, such as Thomas Shelby, use corruption as a survival technique in these urban settings. Furthermore, the study dives into the complex and diverse relationship between corruption and power, underlining the need of comprehending this dynamic in today's socioeconomic context. This complicated dynamic is brilliantly illustrated in the TV series "*Peaky Blinders*," which focuses on the Shelby family. The series not only depicts the difficulties of navigating a society influenced by dirty politics, but it also reflects greater societal realities, emphasizing the widespread impact of corruption on human lives, institutions, and the general social fabric. Even though, the drama series reveals all the concerns throughout the Shelby family known as *Peaky Blinders*. Throughout the drama series, it is explored that humans are lived in a world where the things are governed by the dirty politics.

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Corruption And Power: A Critical Study of Steven Knight's Peaky Blinders

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