



Graham Greene (1904-1991)

“The Basement Room”

20th Century English Literature
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Graham Greene

- Born on October 2, 1904 in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. The fourth of six children, Greene was a shy and sensitive youth. He disliked sports and was often truant from school in order to read adventure stories by authors such as **Rider Haggard** and **R. M. Ballantyne**. These novels had a deep influence on him and helped shape his writing style.
- Educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and had a natural talent for writing. In 1926, he converted to Roman Catholicism.
- Greene adored T. S. Eliot and Herbert Read; his analyst introduced him to a literary circle. After he graduated, he worked as a sub-editor at the *Times* of London (1926-1930) and at the *Spectators*, where he was a film critic and a literary editor until 1940. Besides, during the WWII, he also worked for the British Foreign Office, and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) sent him to Sierra Leone. He later worked under Kim Philby, a future defector to the Soviet Union.

Graham Greene

- Among all his relationships with women, the one with Catherine Walston was the most important. The role of Catherine as Greene's mistress and muse, roughly between 1946 and 1957, has been an open secret to Greene scholars and among his family and friends for many years. *The End of the Affair* (1951) was partly based on this affair. In real life, Greene met Mrs. Walston after her conversion to Roman Catholicism, when she asked him to be her godfather. He was 42 then and internationally celebrated for novels; she was 30, and the mother of 6 children. Greene was always tortured by the affair, and left in his personal papers a fascinating trail of clues as to the importance of the relationship in his life, though he never revealed this affair in his autobiographies.

Graham Greene



• As a writer Greene was very prolific and versatile. Many of his novels are based on his own experiences as an agent in the British Foreign Office. The Asian settings also stimulated Greene's many novels. He wrote 5 dramas and screenplays for several films based on his novels. Greene's film reviews are still worth reading and often better than the film he praised or slashed. Although Greene knew that some critics considered his novels entertainment, his own models were Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford. In his personal library was a large collection of James's work.

Graham Greene

- Perhaps the ultimate moralist thriller-writer, Greene had a facility for combining literary observation with populist plot, and himself divided his books into serious fiction and “entertainments”. Evelyn Waugh, also a famous English writer, singled out for praise the new coolly cinematic quality of his style, but he is now most known for a sort of atheistic Catholicism.
- Aside from his exotic trips, Greene’s also achieved notoriety in his personal life. Greene’s financial success as an author enabled him to live very comfortably in London, Antibes, and Capri. Towards the end of his life, Greene lived in Vevey, Switzerland with his companion Yvonne Cloetta. He died there peacefully on April 3, 1991.

Major works

Novels:

- Brighton Rock (1938),
- The Power and the Glory (1940),
- The Heart of the Matter (1948), and
- The Third Man (1950)
- The End of the Affair (1951),

Novels set in sites of topical journalistic interest:

- The Quiet American (1955) a prescient account of early American involvement in Vietnam;
- Our Man in Havana (1958), set in Cuba;
- A Burnt-Out Case (1961), in the Belgian Congo just before its independence;
- The Comedians (1966), in François Duvalier's Haiti; and
- The Captain and the Enemy (1980), in Panama.

Plays

- The Living Room (1953) and
- The Potting Shed (1957)

“The Basement Room” (1947)

- Like the other stories written between 1929 and 1954, “The Basement Room” hinges on the themes that dominate **Graham Greene's** novels --fear, pity and violence, pursuit, betrayal and man's restless search for salvation.

Summary (1)

- “The Basement Room” is one of Graham Greene’s short stories, told from a third person narrator about a seven-year-old boy Philip’s traumatic experience in his childhood which influences his rest of life till his dying hour at the age of sixty-seven. Philip Lane lived in Belgravia with his parents, the butler Baines and his wife. Without nurses’ restraint, Philip walked in this big house and enjoyed his real life. (In the text he usually thought, “This is life.”) He took a walk on the street, went window shopping, went to the zoo, and tasted ginger-beer and Dunkee cake.

Summary (2)

- However, when Mr. Baines had an affair with Emmy and asked Philip to keep the secret for them, Philip began his nightmare. Meanwhile, Mrs. Baines also tried to coax Philip to tell her Mr. Baines' extramarital relations. Philip involved in this delicate and complex dilemma. In the end of the story, Mrs. Baines was dead in an accident while Philip still wondered who the girl was sixty years later.

Recurring Themes

- The recurring themes of treachery and betrayal in Greene's writing stem from his troubled school years where he was often tormented for being the headmaster's son. After several suicide attempts, Greene left school one day and wrote to his parents that he did not wish to return. This culminated in his being sent to a therapist in London at age fifteen. His analyst, Kenneth Richmond, encouraged him to write and introduced him to his circle of literary friends which included the poet Walter de la Mare.

Adult Secrets

- Baines always refers to the boy as Phil, while Mrs. Baines, his cold and controlling wife, calls him Master Phil and constantly reminds him that trivial little behaviors and missteps can be called to the attention of Phil's mother.
- But the close relationship also transpires that Baines has a girlfriend, whom he explains to Phil as his niece when the boy by chance sees them together. Baines swears Phil to secrecy, which is a burden the boy does not appreciate. Mrs. Baines learns about the girl, prying the secret out of Phil and then insisting that this knowledge of hers be a secret between them. The burden of these adult secrets and his responsibility to keep them weighs even more heavily upon him.

Characters

- **Philip's parents**—absent in the story
- **Mrs. Baines**—the housekeeper of the house
- **Mr. Baines**—the butler of the house
- **Emmy**—Baines' mistress
- **Philip Lane** —a seven-year-old boy

The Baines

Mrs. Baines —the housekeeper of the house

- Getting everything in order, meticulous, loveless, but dutiful
- Changeable (servile/ authoritative)
- Witchlike (p. 286)

Mr. Baines —the butler of the house

- Unhappy and desperate in marriage
- Having an affair with Emmy
- A Fallen idol for Philip



Philip Lane

- Innocent
- Inquisitive
- Imaginative
- Philip witnesses an event that blights his whole life.
- Emotional trauma of his childhood extricates himself from life, from love, from responsibility with a merciless egotism.

Themes/ Motifs

- expectation and disillusionment
- the result of the emotional trauma of the child
- a physical and psychological journey
- the sense of guilt

Expectation and Imagination

- In the beginning of the story, we are told that Philip is “between nurses;” therefore, he’s full of expectation and imagination toward the world outside of his nursery. However, when he really steps into the adults’ world, the reality of adults’ lies and secrets scares him. He feels disappointed and angry since he cannot keep the secret for Baines and feel short in shouldering responsibility. He finally realizes that it is his love for Baines involves him in secrets, in fears he doesn’t understand. Consequently, he runs away from people, from life completely.

Emotional Trauma of the child

- The failure of the man may be psychologically as the result of the emotional trauma of the child. But theologically, Philip was responsible; and when he found himself getting involved and retreated from relationships by extricating “himself from life, from love, from Baines [responsibility] with a merciless egotism,” he damned himself for eternity.

a physical and psychological journey between two worlds

- There are two worlds in “The Basement Room,” which Philip must recognize and choose between, separated by a green baize door, an image Greene used elsewhere to separate the world of innocence from the world of knowledge, the world of love from the world of hate, the world of the child from the world of the adult.

The Sense of Guilt

- The sense of guilt is the essential theme of all Greene's fiction. The protagonists are essentially decent and haunted human beings who are led into sins of violence and despair by the unexpectedness of some human attachment.

Symbols & images

Witches/Wolves (Pp. 471, 476, 478~480)

- a. Mrs. Baines (P.466)
- b. Emmy (P.473)
- c. Rose: the policewoman (P. 484)

In this story, all women are somewhat gloomy. For example, Mrs. Baines is not necessary to be evil. She is typical stoic who put work and duty on the first priority. But Philip associates Mrs. Baines with Witch and Wolves. Baines is just the opposite way. However, for a boy there is no gray area; he either likes or dislikes, loves or hates. Philip hates Mrs. Baines. Though she always calls him “Master”, Mrs. Baines masters him in the name of Philip’s parents. Likewise, Philip has a hunch that Emmy is an unlucky number. And Rose has a large morgue-like mouth.

Symbols & images

Hero (P. 459)

a. Mr. Baines (P. 472)

b. Policeman (P. 483)

- On the contrary, male character has more bright sides. At the beginning, Baines is like Philip's personal mentor. Philip adores what Baines experienced. Philip mistakes Baines for a responsible man (P. 472). Philip is too young to discern good from bad, right from wrong. Besides Baines, Philip is afraid of policemen but he would rather go home with a policeman instead of a policewomen.

Symbols & images

- ***Cake***

- a. forbidden cake/desire (P 460)

- b. sour & sweet things (P 461)

- c. means of refusing & taking (Pp. 461, 464, 469)

The cake has several significant meanings in this story. First, Mrs. Baines points out that Philip is not allowed to eat cake between meals. The desire of eating cake and breaking the rule comes into being. Notice that this rule-breaking doesn't cause any serious damage. Step by step, more and more rules have been broken, such as going for a walk, revealing the secret. Secondly, cake can set a contrast impression. For instance, Mrs. Baines was sour, but she liked making sweet things. Thirdly, when Mrs. Baines asks Philip to have another helping of pudding, Philip likes it but he refuses. In addition, Philip enjoys eating the pink cake with Baines. As the saying goes, "Whose bread I eat, his song I sing." Obviously, Philip sided with Baines.

Symbols & images

The Green Baize Door (Pp. 468, 473)

→nursery/basement/street

- The green baize door serves as a wall which separates nursery and basement. The nursery symbolizes a dull place with protection and limitation, while the basement symbolizes a place where is more attractive, interesting but full of uncertainty and the unknown. In the nursery, everything is well arranged and transparent. The nursery is a place where Philip remains innocent as a child. Seven-year-old Philip is not satisfied with such cozy life. He has curiosity and desire for the life of “the basement” and the outside world. Philip also wants to be an independent “man.” Thus, Philip extended his “feeler” from the nursery to basement, and again from basement to the outside world where is too complicated to bear for a little boy. The outside world is a place involving secrets, lies and betrayal.

Symbols & images

Garden and street

Polarities:

innocence → knowledge

love → hate

child → adult

Story involving initiation resulting in
disillusionment and guilt

Garden: innocence

Street: world

Study Questions

- Make association between the nursery room and the Garden of Eden.
- What do Mr. and Mrs. Baines represent respectively in this story?
- Compare and contrast the disillusionment of Philip and the fall of Adam.
- What does Philip mean when he says “this is life”?
- What’s the impact of Mrs. Baines’s death on Philip’s entire life?
- Can you analyze this story from the psychological approach?

Quiz

- Who are Mr. Baines and Mrs. Baines?
- What happens to Mrs. Baines? And the impact of the incident on Philip's entire life?
- 'Who is she?' is what lingers in Philip's mind for sixty years. Please identify the situation in which the question is asked.

Works Cited

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