

The End of The Affair: A Study In Faith

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse Graham Greene's novel *The End of the Affair* for its perusal of the idea of faith with special reference to morality, religion and individual belief. As a corollary to the above the research shall dwell upon the notion of faith in the institution of marriage, non-familial relationships (lovers, friends, or a writer and his readers) and religious institutions.

Set at the time of the London Blitz, Greene's novel revolves around a writer, Bendrix, in love with Sarah, his neighbor's wife. The character Bendrix, a study in masculine jealousy, portrays the dire consequences of loss of faith in a relationship. The novel also works as a hagiography of Sarah's character who, the novel suggests, attains sainthood, through her unflinching 'faith' in God. The influence of miracles on individual faith is developed by Greene through the character of Sarah.

The narrative is an intimate study of the clash of the believer and the non-believer, and the consequences of the same. Through the character of Sarah's husband, Henry Miles, a 'docile' bureaucrat who unconsciously takes no notice of his wife, Greene draws a foil to the insecure lover, Bendrix. As an extension, Miles's lack of jealousy seems to suggest lack of love. It is this proposition which Greene develops and then pulverizes with the 'love' Sarah begins to feel for God, born out of faith. Thus, human love and godly love are compared through the litmus test of faith.

Keywords: Faith, morality, masculine jealousy, kindness

Apart from the obvious coordinates discussed above, the paper shall also develop the idea of faith as seen through the processes of writing (Bendrix is a novelist), politics (Miles) and religious disbelief (Smythe). Finally, the impact of Greene's own Catholic beliefs on his writing shall be dwelt upon in the research.

History tends to prove that faith is reborn from its own embers. Graham Greene

In an oft quoted statement Graham Greene comments in the Introduction to *A Burnt Out Case*:

In the years between *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*, I felt myself used and exhausted by the victims of religion. The vision of faith as 'untroubled sea' was lost forever; faith was more like a tempest in which the lucky were engulfed and lost, and the unfortunate survived to be flung battered and bleeding on the shore. (Greene, viii)

Graham Greene's tussle with faith was a lifelong battle. Born in 1904 in Berkhamsted, Greene's father was a headmaster of the private school Greene attended, setting up what biographer Robert Royal calls 'a classic Greene conflict': loyalty to his father versus the impossible desire to be one of the boys. Royal

surmises that Greene's conception of the 'father' as a figure of authority, a judge and a medium of punishment, all arise from his childhood. The above fixation, of 'father' as the 'hound of heaven' (Iyer 39), colours Greene's religious outlook for life. In his stunning travel book on Mexico, *The Lawless Roads*, Greene reveals that he asked for faith at Berkhamsted and got it with a characteristic twist: "I began to believe in Heaven because I believed in Hell."

Ambiguity underlines most of Greene's works, especially the trajectory of Catholic novels walks the tightrope between two extremes. Writing on *The End of the Affair* George Mayberry comments in the *New York Times*: It is savage and sad, vulgar and ideal, coarse and refined, and, a rather accurate image of an era of cunning and glory, of cowardice and heroism, of belief and unbelief. (Mayberry)

The End of the Affair (1951), the last of the quartet of Catholic novels, marks the end of a key phase in Greene's literary career. Literary historian Andrew Sanders observes that, "the Second World War sharpened certain of Greene's fictional perspectives and preoccupations," (Sanders 590) which is evident as some of his finest works appeared between 1940 and 1951. "The novels of this period modulate between troubled and disoriented topographies, each one of which seems to reflect the untidy frustration of another...most of the key characters are Catholic; all of them are ruins, or at best ruinous." (Sanders 590)

The End of the Affair is narrated by an atheist in love with a woman who forsakes him because of a religious conviction that brings her near to sainthood. Thus, in *The End of the Affair*, the tussle rests between atheism and faith. Critic Edward Short comments on the dichotomy in Greene's outlook, within and outside his literature: "This was the paradox that Greene carried within himself: He professed the reality of the Faith but chose not to practice it." (Short)

The same tightrope balances love and hate, belief and disbelief, largely amounting to faith and doubt in *The End of the Affair*. Set at the time of the London Blitz, Greene's novel revolves around a writer, Bendrix, in love with Sarah, his neighbor's wife. The novel works as a hagiography of Sarah's character who, as the novel suggests, attains sainthood, through her unflinching 'faith' in God. The influence of miracles on individual faith is developed by Greene through the character of Sarah.

The narrative is an intimate study of the clash of the believer and the non-believer and the consequences of the same. The character Bendrix, a study in masculine jealousy, portrays the dire consequences of loss of faith in a relationship. Through the character of Sarah's husband, Henry Miles, a 'docile' bureaucrat who unconsciously takes no notice of his wife, Greene draws a foil to the insecure lover, Bendrix. As an extension, Miles's lack of jealousy seems to suggest lack of love. It is this proposition which Greene develops and then pulverizes with the 'love' Sarah begins to feel for God, born out of faith. Thus, human love and godly love are compared through the litmus test of faith.

The paper shall deliberate upon the above issues and faith through reflections upon the characters of Sarah and Bendrix, as well as the influence of Greene's personal religious philosophy on the above said creations.

Sarah Miles is the axis on which faith walks. Greene's bi-polar beliefs are manifested through the voice of Sarah, the slut-saint. The etymological origins of the name Sarah, reminds the reader of the 'faith of Sarah' as seen in the Biblical recounting which state:

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11,12)

Greene himself comments on the origin of Sarah's character in the Introduction to the *Collected Edition*:

The book began to come to life in December 1948...I have always imagined it was influenced by the book I was reading at the time, a selection from Baron von Hâgel, in particular passages from his study of St. Catherine of Genoa. (Greene viii)

St. Catherine's life does mirror in Sarah's 'life of pleasure' (Brittania) and eventual mystical experiences. The disillusionment with her husband, leads Sarah to cuckoldry with multiple lovers, though Bendrix is her last paramour. Then, like St. Catherine, Sarah undergoes a spiritual experience. This mystical incident occurs one night in 1944 during the first V01 bombing. Sarah and Bendrix are together in his flat when he goes downstairs to check on his landlady and instead becomes pinned by the front door as a result of the blast. Sarah goes in search of him and, believing him to be dead, diffidently prays to God. Sarah recounts the incident in her journal:

I knelt down on the floor: I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child- my parents never believed in prayer, any more than I do. I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct..I knelt and put my head on the bed and wished I could believe. Dear God, I said..make me believe. I can't believe. Make me. I shut my eyes and I pressed my nails into the palms of my hand until I could feel nothing but the pain. And I said, I will believe. Let him be alive and I will believe. But that wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. I said very slowly, I will give him up forever, only let him be alive with a chance, and I pressed and I pressed and I could feel the skin break, and I said, people can love without seeing each other, cant they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in through the door, and he was alive (*The End of the Affair* 75-76)

The above recounting is unlike a confession, in that Sarah feels no guilt about her moral conduct. Her renunciation of Bendrix is purely an arbitrary arrangement made with God, a vow she keeps due to her 'faith'. The narrative suggests that though Sarah Miles is an adulteress, her love of her lover, turns ultimately into a love of her God. The conjoining analogy of faith and morality is absent from this narrative. On the contrary, Sarah never truly gives up on her love for Bendrix, in favour of her love for God. The two feelings co-exist in Sarah's mind as is evident from the last journal entry in her diary:

I want Maurice. I want ordinary corrupt human love. Dear God, I know I want to want Your pain, but I don't want it now. Take it away for a while and give it me another time. (*The End of the Affair* 99)

The above quote also underlines the relationship of faith with pain. The idea of the mortification of the flesh is not new to religion. The term originated with St. Paul, who traces an instructive analogy between Christ dying to a mortal and rising to an immortal life and His followers who renounce their past life of sin and rise through grace to a new life of holiness. "If you live after the flesh", says the apostle, "you shall die, but if through the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live" (Romans 8:13; cf. also Colossians 3:5, and Galatians 5:24). The Catholic Encyclopedia states, "Of the diseases mortification sets itself to slay, sin, the one mortal disease of the soul, holds the first place. Temptations to sin it, overcomes by inducing the will to accept hardships, rather than yield to the temptations." (Catholic Encyclopedia) Thus, pain is a means of purification of sin, permeates the hypothesis of Greene's Catholic novel. The epigraph to *The End of the Affair* quotes Leznon Bloy:

Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.

Thus, it is pain, acquired through sin which ultimately leads to the protagonists' faith, in Greene's narrative. Sin is an overpowering element in Greenland, not just *The End of the Affair* in particular, where the idea of mortal sin in a perfectly conventional sense is used to a great dramatic effect. Greene paradoxically blends 'hell' and 'mortal sin' with themes of 'forgiveness' and 'unlimited mercy of God'. (Ker 112) Greene's bipolarity of themes mirrors Eliot's thought that only the one who knows evil is sufficiently alive to know well.

Sarah walks the distance from young Greene's disbelief to his conformation to Catholic values. However, the tale diverges with the idea of 'conversion'. It is obvious that Greene's Sarah has 'caught faith like a disease' but does it lead to Sarah becoming a saint? The narrative not only suggests a strange overlapping of affections in Sarah's mind it also colludes mortal love with divine love.

Adding another level of complexity to the idea of faith is that Sarah's character seems to equate physical beauty with divinity. Throughout the novel, physical disfigurement looms in the background. Sarah's husband Henry with his bald pate cannot induce the affections of his wife. Bendrix uses his lame leg as an excuse for both self doubt and doubt against Sarah. He laments: "I had only to look in the mirror to see doubt, in the shape of a lined face and a lame leg- why me?" (*The End of the Affair* 37) The rationalist Richard Smythe, marred by an obnoxious birth mark, reasons:

You believe in God...that's easy. You are beautiful. You have no complaint, but why should I love a God who gave a child this? (*The End of the Affair* 98)

Sarah counters the above logic by kissing the birthmark, an action which serves as metonym for kissing God's pain. She furthers the argument by reflecting:

I thought I am kissing pain and pain belongs to You as happiness never does. (*The End of the Affair* 98)

Sarah's journal offers a vivid account of her struggle against the 'flesh', or the desire for 'mortal corrupt love'. In a pendulistic movement, Sarah wavers between her love for Bendrix and her love for God, situated at loggerheads, reminiscent of the twin catholic phases 'desolation' and 'consolation'. This leads to immense mental anguish but she is never able to break her vow, either due to her own will-power or due to the 'grace' of God. It is imperative to consider that Greene never projects Sarah as the 'sinner' who turns into a saint but, instead as the one who is worthy of affection, in spite of being a sinner. Her innocence is underlined over numerous pages, either through her remorselessness, or her sense of infinity of time, which in turn seem to signify justification. "Is there no one who will love a bitch and a fake?" Sarah asks towards the end of the book. But by then, Greene's sensitive portrayal has shorn all qualms about morality, and unlike a typical Catholic novel, the narrative allows Sarah to become an atypical apostle of faith.

The plot suggests that each character walks through a process of absolution through pain, leading to belief. Thus, Sarah's emotional and physical purgatory is the medium through which she eventually achieves unity with the divine. For Bendrix, it is 'hatred' and 'fear' which force him to turn believer.

Greene makes such bridges of imagination between reality and fiction, that the resultant novel is an amalgamation of the author's personal bipolarities and struggle with 'faith'. Sarah represents, the one who has turned believer, whereas Bendrix, like the Greene questions 'God' but vouches complete faith in the Devil: I have never understood why people who can swallow the enormous improbability of a personal God, boggle at a personal Devil. I have known so intimately the way the devil works in my imagination. (*The End of the Affair* 47)

The devil is incarnated in the character of Bendrix and then re-incarnated in the study of 'self' that Bendrix offers. This layering of characters, opinions and time (three time zones cleave the storyline into subsequent parts) create a remarkably postmodernist retelling. Greene begins his novel through Bendrix who is writing when the affair has ended and his beloved, Sarah is dead. It is three years after her death that Bendrix begins the process of catharsis by writing a novel, which he terms 'a record of hate'. (*The End of the Affair* 1)

Bendrix's role in the novel is two-fold, he is at the same time protagonist and narrator of the story. As Richard Creese clearly schematizes "Bendrix's narration divides into three narrow, carefully distinguished timeframes." (Creese 4) Timeframe B, "the heart of Greene's novel," (Creese 4) starts on a cold and rainy night of January 1946 and proceeds until the last scene of the plot, occurred some three months later. Timeframe C deals with the affair, spanning from the summer of 1939 to the London bombing, 16 June 1944. The focus of these two time sections is Bendrix as a lover or, if one prefers, as a character. However, he writes his own chronicle in 1949, a section that Creese names Timeframe A: Bendrix in his role as a narrator moves entirely within the ranges of this time plan, a strategy which allows him to create distance from his double self, Bendrix the character.

The consequence of such a differentiation becomes particularly evident when we consider that the character Bendrix is an atheist, and almost a compulsive one, whereas in his position as a narrator he has turned into a believer. On

various occasions the split in Bendrix's twin nature surfaces, as highlighted in the following passage in the opening of the novel, set in 1946, when the protagonist meets Henry by chance:

It is convenient, it is correct according to the rules of my craft to begin just there, but *if I had believed then in a God*, I could also have believed in a hand, plucking at my elbow, a suggestion, "Speak to him: he hasn't seen you yet." (*The End of the Affair* 1, emphasis added)

The routes and tasks of the two Bendrix run parallel and cross one another: the character has to conquer a woman, the narrator his readers. If the former fights against belief (in God), the latter against his own reader's disbelief, something which emerges quite evidently from the very first words "if I come to say anything in favour of Henry and Sarah I can be trusted," (*The End of the Affair* 1) asserts Bendrix. Incidentally, the terms 'trust' and 'distrust', both as a noun and as a verb, may not have the same occurrence as 'love' and 'hate' (300 and 100 respectively), but with 28 recurrences in such a short book they reveal an obsession on the part of the narrating voice for what involves the general credibility of the story. Why does Bendrix, and by extension, Greene need such innate and imposed sincerity? As Pier Paolo Piciucco correctly assess:

The End of the Affair is a mind-boggling, somewhat implausible story indeed, starring a(n adulterous) woman turning into a saint and performing miracles, and surely part of the narrator's anxiety to be believed stems from his being aware of having a very difficult task to carry out. (Piciucco 6).

Years later Greene regrets the use of miracles in his narrative:

'every so-called narrative should have had a natural explanation, and the coincidences ought to have continued over the years, battering at the mind of Bendrix, forcing on him a reluctant doubt.' (Tibbets 43)

Thus, Greene's personal philosophy of doubt, which he places as the genesis of Faith, emerges as the chief catalyst in Bendrix's psyche. It is both doubt and fear that Bendrix is plagued by and it mirrors Greene's personal equation with faith. Greene's approach towards faith is always circuitous, where he arrives at faith, not through the characters that have principles but through the 'fallen', cowardly or spiteful. In all of Greene's Catholic novels, as also in *The End of the Affair*, it is the kindness of a sinner which the author focuses on, far more than the follies of saints. In an interview with Marie-Francoise Allain, Greene comments:

I have, if you like, more doubts, but my faith has grown too. There's a difference between belief and faith. Faith is above belief. One can say that it's a gift of God, while belief is not. Belief is founded on reason. On the whole I keep my faith while enduring long periods of disbelief. My faith remains in the background, but it remains. (Allain)

Thus, Catholicism is not Greene's domain of faith in the absolute sense. It is perhaps, the motive of humanizing God and the church, through the medium of 'doubt', which Greene works towards. By using the mystery genre as a tool of narration, Greene 'seduces' his readers and unspools a tale of miraculous realism, which continues to fascinate, decades later. Greene allows faith to percolate into

every atheist in the book. Sarah acquires faith through pain, Smythe and Parkis through the 'miracle' of healing and Bendrix with hatred. God is humanized both by Bendrix's venomous outbursts against the 'rival' and Sarah's love, the 'two shades of the same colour' (Tibbets). The narrative extends inter-personal faith, not just love, to a mystical level, where the inner self is reflected into the higher self, where the lover and God cease to be different.

Most poignantly, it is the hand of Bendrix, extended to support his neighbor, the widower Miles, moved by a common love they shared, that truly captures Greene's faith, the faith in human kindness.

¹ Justification, in Christian theology, is God's act of removing the guilt and penalty of sin while at the same time declaring a sinner righteous through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

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