

THE FAILED QUEST TO ESCAPE GOD IN THE END OF THE AFFAIR

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ABSTRACT

The End of the Affair, thus while being a religious novel seems to be ambivalent overall about religion. While it presents God as an undeniable presence, it does not seem to present that God as a character that the characters of the novel love because they cannot live with the consequences of their actions. What in ultimate however is the certitude of God's existence that all the characters of the novel come to know through the consequences of their actions. The biblical God is someone all the characters come to know, though not necessarily love as He keeps them from their innermost desires.

KEYWORDS: End of the Affair, Biblical God, Character, Baptized

INTRODUCTION

In Graham Greene's the *End of the Affair*, God is shown to be an omniscient presence whom the characters fail to escape even though they try to pretend that he does not exist. Bendrix is deeply jealous of Henry, whose wife Sarah had an affair with him in the past. However he could never persuade Sarah to leave Henry for him even though it was a loveless marriage. He hires a private detective Savage to find out what had happened in the two year interval since she had stopped seeing him, and discovers she has since had an affair with another man.

Sarah for one is a woman who desperately does not want to believe in God but discovers that she cannot escape his presence. It turns out that she had prayed to God to keep Bendrix alive when a bomb blast took place in the building they were having an affair in. She had prayed that if God kept Bendrix alive, she would stop seeing him. Indeed Bendrix emerges alive in an answered prayer to her and she has to stop seeing him and start believing in God even though it was not what she wanted.

Sarah had told God to make her believe in him even though she did not by keeping Bendrix alive. It turns out that the God she was trying so desperately to escape did exist by answering her prayer and keeping Bendrix alive though she did not wish to believe in him as she was committing adultery which she thought was only between her and God. It turns out that the omniscient God did apprehend her being deeply mired in sin and did care about her purity, sending the signal that she should end the affair by keeping Bendrix alive in response to her prayer. Years later when Sarah dies, Sarah's mother discloses to Bendrix that Sarah had been baptized a Catholic even though she did not know it herself. This explains her bursts of religiosity even though she for most of her life had thought herself agnostic.

Bendrix himself while being deeply in love with Sarah could never quite separate love from hate. He hated Henry for being able to keep Sarah even though he had long ceased to have any physical desire for her and had lulled the marriage into a pallid and loveless one.

He hated Henry for being able to hold on to Sarah only by virtue of a marriage vow which he had held on to

without bringing any sparks to the marriage which was what prompted Sarah to seek love outside the marriage in the first place.

Bendrix describes himself as a deeply jealous man. Throughout his affair with Sarah he cannot cease feeling jealous towards Henry for possessing Sarah even though he had long ceased feeling passion for her or igniting passion in the marriage. It was this jealousy that led Bendrix to hire a private detective to find out if Sarah had gotten intimate with another man since she had abruptly stopped seeing her two years ago.

It turned out she indeed was seeing a colleague of Henry's whose wife had run away with a civil servant and they had not taken very long to fall in love. Bendrix is jealous that Sarah seems such a loose and fickle woman, though it is revealed in her diaries that it is Bendrix she really loved.

As a result the characters in Graham Greene's novel apprehend the existence of God, even though they do not love God and in fact, hate God for not allowing them to love each other. For Sarah and Bendrix, it is the simple marriage vow to Henry which keeps them from getting together, but Sarah apprehends that what she is doing is sinful when she prays to God upon the bomb blast that her vow matters only to him but she will cease her adultery if God keeps Bendrix alive.

Indeed God reveals his presence and existence by keeping Bendrix alive and from then on, Sarah begins to fear God and apprehend that he exists though she does not necessarily love him and indeed hates him for keeping her apart from the man she truly loves.

Eventually Sarah sees Henry's colleague Richard in another affair and another adulterous relationship but when Richard asks him to leave Henry for her she tells him she loves another, who is of course, Bendrix. The irony is thus heavy, while Bendrix suffocates all the love out of Sarah by being jealous and possessive all the time because of the guilt that drives him in an adulterous relationship it is he that Sarah truly loves but is kept apart from by law and by God's justice.

The characters of the novel eventually begin to apprehend the existence of God and understand the nature of his laws even though they do not necessarily love God because it is his law that keeps them apart from their true passions. Sarah and Bendrix are kept apart by the hollow marriage vow that keeps Sarah and Henry together even though the passion has long since evaporated from their marriage and their marriage has lost its vitality.

Often the characters question if free will is an illusion. They think that God has predestined them to be trapped in sin by arranging that they fall in love in an adulterous relationship which they prefer over the legitimate marriage. At one point Bendrix questions if God had arranged him to be an agent of the devil so that saints such as Henry could emerge pure and untarnished by the lust of adultery.

Indeed he argues that if God can choose and appoint his saints, the devil can likewise choose and appoint his saint and Bendrix feels that he has been appointed by the devil to destroy Henry's marriage and to be kept from his true love Sarah. At one point Bendrix describes himself as the demon speaking to Henry when he denies that Henry is a fool when he knows he has been taking him for one by cuckolding him.

At the end of the novel when Sarah dies Bendrix does learn to believe in God and fear him though he does not necessarily love God and indeed hates him for punishing Sarah for her adultery through death and keeping them apart

though they were truly in love when Sarah was alive. The novel ends with Bendrix uttering that he has no doubt that God exists and is a God who sends justice and retribution for sins while he does not love this God and indeed hates this God for keeping him from what he most desires.

Indeed God's justice is inescapable for each of the characters of the novel even though they try to ignore God at various points and pretend that he does not exist. God's justice is indeed, inexorable and something they cannot flee from.

Throughout the novel the characters are tormented by guilt for engaging in sin and adultery. Bendrix destroys the relationship by manifesting this guilt in jealousy of Henry and seeking to possess Sarah all the time and being jealous of her past, present and future. Sarah on the other hand, is led to believe the bomb blast is retribution for their adultery and prays to God to relieve her of her punishment by promising to turn away from sin if God keeps Bendrix alive.

Indeed uncannily God responds by keeping Bendrix alive and Sarah is forced to turn away from her adulterous ways even though her marriage has become pallid and loveless and it is Bendrix rather than Henry whom she truly loves.

At one point Sarah tells God she hates Henry for being the factor that keeps her away from running away with Bendrix even though he has long since stopped physically desiring her or kindling any sparks in their marriage.

It is at moment like those that she feels she does not seem to have free will and is rather a puppet of God because she feels she is bound by his invisible laws to steer her away from what is most precious to her.

There is a thin line between love and hate in the novel. Bendrix tells us many times that his love for Sarah came closer to hatred for abandoning him after the bomb blast and for not gathering the courage to leave Henry even though their passion in the marriage has long faded.

Sarah hates Henry for being the factor that keeps her away from finding true love though she fears the God whose law she must honour by staying true to Henry because God had sought her out and shown her that he existed through inflicting the bomb blast where Bendrix and she were having the affair and securing her promise not to continue in adultery.

God's justice is thus inexorable and inescapable for all the characters in the novel. Bendrix is eventually punished for his adultery by having the woman who he loves most, Sarah taken away from him once through abandonment after the bomb blast and second through her death.

While Sarah had come to apprehend and appreciate the existence of God, she too did not escape his relentless justice for her two affairs outside marriage as she eventually meets with an early death.

Hence the God of Greene's world is a God that all the characters come to fear though they do not necessarily love Him because He keeps them from their most intimate desires because he construes them as sin and punishes and distributes justice accordingly. Indeed, all the characters of the novel express their hatred for God and his wrath at one point or another because they are kept from their true passions due to his law and his swift justice in punishing those who fail to keep God's standards and God's law.

The attitude of Greene towards the biblical God is thus ambivalent. Greene depicts the biblical God as a God of justice who sees to the swift retribution of sins but does not seem to depict the biblical God as a merciful God of compassion because the reasons they are kept from their passions seems to be a hollow law which preserves a marriage

which has long since gone stale with Henry. There is little doubt that Greene believes that the biblical God exists, as all his characters come to apprehend through the dealing of justice in their lives.

On the other hand, it would be false to say the Biblical God that Greene depicts is free of compassion and mercy. He spares Bendrix's life on the condition that Sarah turns away from sin, indeed, God secures this promise from her by keeping Bendrix alive and thus steering her away from adultery.

The conflict at the heart of the novel is thus the temporary satiation of desires at the expense of the eternal preservation of one's sanctity with God which the characters willingly forgo. God is merciful to those who preserve his law, as He demonstrated through his preservation of Bendrix. But for those who flout his laws repeatedly, as Sarah does when she goes on to have another affair outside marriage, the punishment is swift. Sarah dies early, much to the grief of all her lovers.

On the other hand, Greene's ambivalence towards the biblical God cannot be denied as Greene seems to be implying that this biblical God would rather preserve a marriage which has become a lie, hollow and empty rather than allow the characters to pursue their true passions.

The unfolding of Sarah's life is a tragedy for all who know her because she cannot escape her sham marriage and repeatedly falls into sin by trying to escape her marriage which has become a falsehood and false bond for her which she is swiftly punished for. According to Greene thus the biblical God does not seem to allow his characters to authenticate their desires, or live their lives true to themselves.

Indeed God demands that marriage vows be kept, without considering the state or authenticity of the marriage. Greene thus seems to imply that while adultery is a sin and the punishment for adultery is inexorable and swift, God does not seem to heed the authenticity of the marriage being violated or the true passion that is destroyed by God seeing to the punishment of his laws through swiftly punishing adultery by having Sarah meet an early death and destroying the affair between Sarah and Bendrix.

Greene thus seems to depict God as an austere and jealous God who distributes his justice and retribution swiftly on those who violate his commandments but seems to imply that God does not heed the conditions which lead to the violation of his commandments. As a result, all the characters of Greene's novel fear God but do not love him and indeed hate God for keeping them from their truest desires.

CONCLUSIONS

The End of the Affair, thus while being a religious novel seems to be ambivalent overall about religion. While it presents God as an undeniable presence, it does not seem to present that God as a character that the characters of the novel love because they cannot live with the consequences of their actions. What in ultimate however is the certitude of God's existence that all the characters of the novel come to know through the consequences of their actions. The biblical God is someone all the characters come to know, though not necessarily love as He keeps them from their innermost desires.

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