

Stamboul Train 1932

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

Stamboul Train is both a political thriller and a psychological exploration of character. The story follows the interaction between six characters on their three-day train journey from Ostend (Belgium) to Istanbul (although Green used the earlier name of Constantinople). The three principal characters (Coral Musker, a penniless dancer, Carleton Myatt, a businessman, and Dr Czinner, an exiled communist leader) are joined en route by journalist Mabel Warren and her partner Janet Pardoe at Cologne, and later by the criminal Joseph Grunlich at Vienna. Amid political turmoil and revolutionary plots in central Europe in the early 1930s, the lives of these characters become enmeshed in the sordid business of ambition, betrayal, murder and political assassination. One could say it is a story of outsiders—an exile, a lesbian, a Jew and a poor chorus girl—but the author does not sentimentalise any one of them. He neither glorifies nor condemns his characters, and although we are not uplifted by the story, it does remain in the mind long after the last page.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Stamboul Train (*Orient Express* in US editions) was Greene's first literary success but not his debut novel. Having had two manuscripts rejected outright, he did get three others published, but *The Man Within* (1929), *The Name of Action* (1930) and *Rumour at Nightfall* (1931) were all commercial failures. *Stamboul Train* then launched Greene into fame and he never looked back. Greene famously divided his fiction into 'novels' and 'entertainments', and this book is the first instalment in the latter category. He admitted that he set out to write the book 'to please, which with luck might be made into a film.' He was, no doubt, conscious of the earlier filmic success of *Shanghai Express* (starring Marlene Dietrich), and it might be said that his novel (made into a film in 1934, though with poor box office) was one of the inspirations for future train thrillers, such as *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The Lady Vanishes* and *From Russia with Love*, all of which were also adapted for the screen. Greene wrote this novel only a few years after converting to Roman Catholicism (at the request of his wife), which might explain the many allusions to Judeo-Christian religion. A final note is that the English writer J. B. Priestly threatened to bring a libel suit against the publisher, alleging that the character of a novelist in the book was based on himself. As a result, Greene had to rewrite nearly twenty pages.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Carleton Myatt	Myatt is a Jewish businessman bound for Istanbul
Coral Musker	Coral is a young English girl who works as a chorus dancer and is out of work.
Dr Czinner	Dr Czinner, who has lived in England under the false identity of Dr John, is a political exile on his way to Belgrade.
Joseph Grunlich	Grunlich is a criminal, who joins the train at Vienna.
Mabel Warren	Mabel is a lesbian journalist who is on the train in search of a story.
Janet Pardoe	Janet is her companion and lover.

STORY

Part One: Ostend

Myatt The novel begins with a boat arriving from England at Ostend, where our passengers disembark and board the train bound for Istanbul. Myatt, a Jewish businessman, has to pay extra to reserve his first-class compartment. He is travelling to Turkey to conduct tricky negotiations for a merger of his firm (export/import of currants) with a rival firm. He is afraid that his agent (Eckman) is in league with a rival (Stein) and would cheat him.

Coral Meanwhile, Coral Musker, the poor dancing girl, settles into her second-class compartment, where she has to endure unwanted sexual advances from a married man. Myatt notices her discomfort and introduces himself. When she faints from weakness, he calls a doctor (Dr Czinner)

and offers her his first-class sleeping compartment while he sleeps in the corridor.

Part Two: Cologne

Mabel Mabel Warren and her lover Janet Pardoe board the train at Cologne. Mabel is a London-based journalist who thinks she has a sensational story when she notices Dr Czinner, an exiled Communist leader, boarding the train. She bribes a station employee to send a telegram about Czinner back to her office in London.

Czinner Then Mabel speaks to Czinner himself, who is travelling on an English passport as Richard John. We learn that Czinner fled Belgrade after he put himself at risk when he testified against a powerful general five years ago. Now, he is returning to Belgrade to instigate a revolution. *Coded map* He pretends he is not Czinner, but Mabel vows to herself that she will make him talk and get a 'big scoop.' She secretly searches his suitcase and discovers a coded map for Czinner's planned revolt. In order to present her cover as a journalist, though, she interviews an author, Mr Savory. Later, she confronts Czinner with the map, and he denies everything. He shows her a newspaper report of a failed uprising in Belgrade. In other words, he will arrive too late; he is a failure. Czinner says that he will leave the train at Vienna.

Love and sex Coral Musker assumes that Myatt has given her his compartment in exchange for sex, but Myatt assures her that this is not the case. In fact, we know that he finds Janet Pardoe far more attractive, but Coral and Myatt talk and establish a close emotional bond. Mabel begins to suspect that Janet doesn't really love her, notices that Myatt is interested in Janet and begins to show interest in Coral.

Part Three: Vienna

Grunlich Enter the criminal Josef Grunlich, who accidentally kills a man in his failed attempt to burgle a safe in a railway station building with the help of his adulterous girlfriend. Desperate for funds, he steals Mabel's handbag when she puts it on the platform while making a telephone call. He is delighted to discover that the bag contains a train ticket, which allows him to board the train and leaves Mabel stranded in Vienna. At least, she has managed to phone in her sensational news story about Dr Czinner.

Murderous intent Czinner finds Grunlich rummaging around in his compartment, still looking for cash. Czinner gives him five pounds and dismisses him, but falls into a reverie about his failed revolution and seeks solace from Mr Opie, an English priest and cricket fanatic. Grunlich, meanwhile, admits to himself that he would not have hesitated to kill Czinner if the latter had called the train guard.

Part Four: Subotica

Plans The train, with multiple story lines criss-crossing among its passengers, proceeds past Budapest toward the border town of Subotica. Coral and Myatt become closer and spend the night together in his first-class compartment. They plan to live together when the train reaches Istanbul. The Subotica stationmaster and his assistants are ordered, by long-distance telephone from Belgrade, to search the incoming train and arrest Czinner.

Arrest and trial When Czinner sees the Yugoslavian police enter the train at Subotica, he gives a letter to Coral and tells her to post it in Istanbul. Czinner is arrested along with Coral, who is discovered with the secret letter. Grunlich is also arrested for illegally possessing a gun. After martial law is declared, Czinner is tried in a kangaroo court at the station and sentenced to death. Grunlich is given a prison term, and Coral is ordered to leave the country.

Escape While these three are held in the station waiting room, Grunlich picks the lock and they flee. Czinner is shot and Coral takes him to a deserted barn. The train continues on its journey, but Myatt realises that Coral is missing. When the train breaks down, he hires a car and goes back to Subotica to find her. Grunlich and Mabel later manage to board the train.

Rescue Coral hears a car and thinks it might be Myatt but she will not leave the dying Czinner. Soldiers finally find Coral and Czinner in the barn, where Czinner has died. They are about to re-arrest Coral when Mabel arrives in a car and rescues her. Coral is put back on the train, and Mabel decides to take her as her companion/lover in place of Janet. Coral becomes ill and Mabel nurses her.

Part Five: Istanbul

Myatt and Janet, whom he now fancies, go to a nightclub where they meet up with the rival trader whose business Myatt wants to acquire. Janet has decided to leave Mabel and stay with Myatt. It turns out that Janet is the niece of the business rival and all things seem rosy. However, the future lives of all the characters, as well as the all-important business deal, are left uncertain.

THEMES

Loyalty The primary theme of this complex psychological drama is that of loyalty. What is the basis of fidelity to a lover or a political cause? Is it selflessness or blindness? And, despite its apparent virtue, is loyalty always practical? These questions are dramatised most clearly in the characters of Coral, the girl with the golden heart, and Czinner, the failed revolutionary. Czinner is a vain visionary with a martyr's complex, who returns (or attempts to return) to Belgrade to sacrifice himself for the cause. But at the crucial moment, when he is about to be shot, he thinks 'that he had been damned by his faithfulness to them [his followers] that he had to listen all the time to their false comfort.' Earlier, he had admitted that 'only a party in power could have scruples. Scruples in himself would be a confession that he doubted the overwhelming value of the cause.' In other words, Czinner, the ideologue, believes that his own loyalty to his supporters has been his downfall. He admits that he is an opportunist, not a purist, and that he has betrayed himself. Coral, on the other hand, is loyal to Myatt, her brief lover, even though he seems to have deserted her. When she prays for his return, Czinner, the cynical politician, is impressed by her faith in prayer, but she corrects him by saying, 'I don't believe it does any good, but one has to do something.' While Myatt is shocked at her lack of religious faith, Coral herself is merely 'ashamed.' She accepts that Myatt has deserted her and attempts to cheer herself up by saying 'there's other fish in the sea.' At the same time, though, she is unable to shake off her love for the fickle Myatt, who has run away with another woman. She hates herself for her 'stupid fidelity to Myatt.' At that moment, she realises that she is 'like Dr Czinner: he had been too faithful to people, who could have been better served if he had been cunning.' She looks at him, dying beside her in the shed, and thinks, '[loyalty] just doesn't pay.'

If both Czinner and Coral experience the anxiety of infidelity, they demonstrate a rock-solid loyalty toward each other. They are the two losers in the story, drawn together by their sad plight. Czinner, posing as Doctor John, ministers to Coral when she is ill on the train, and Coral takes care of Czinner when he is wounded. Their bond, based on neither politics nor sex, is perhaps the only uplifting strand in this beady-eyed exploration of the human condition. After finishing the novel, we look back at the epigraph from George Santayana: 'Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence; tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence.'

Anti-Semitism A good deal of ink has been spilled over the charge that Greene's novel, and indeed Greene himself, is anti-Semitic. This accusation rests largely on the characterisation of Myatt, who has many stereotypical aspects of a Jewish businessman, including facial features. Certainly, there are anti-Semitic comments in the story, mostly from the distasteful journalist Mabel Warren. And Myatt himself is acutely aware of such sentiments both on the train and in wider society. When he offers Coral a sleeping compartment, Greene writes: 'Parsimony was the traditional reproach against his race, and he would show one Christian [Coral] how undeserved it was.' Coral is then attracted to Myatt's gentlemanly behaviour, which has no *quid pro quo*, and declares to Mabel that she will tell Myatt that she 'has always liked Jews.' Myatt does desert her in the end, and he is obsessed with his business deal in Istanbul, but those flaws are not especially 'Semitic.' It is certainly striking that the only hero of the story, Coral, is strongly in favour of Myatt and that the anti-Semitic comments are spoken by characters whom Greene has painted in very unsympathetic terms. The prominence of Myatt's Jewish identity, both to himself and to others, cannot be evidence of anti-Semitism but simply a reflection of the times: we must remember that the novel was written in 1932.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Carleton Myatt Myatt is a Jewish businessman, who has a kind heart but never loses sight of the bottom line. He acts with honour toward most characters, but he is also shrewd and ambitious. His characterisation has generated a debate among modern critics about the extent of Greene's anti-Semitism.

Pecuniary Throughout the novel, Myatt is concerned with the financial situation of his business, buying and selling currants. He is on the train to Istanbul to meet a rival businessman and an agent in order to negotiate a merger, but he is beset by anxieties about the deal. Of all these moments, I would select the very last scene of the novel as the most illustrative of this particular character trait. After all the drama—arrests, shootings and escape—Myatt has finally reached Istanbul, where he has charmed Janet Pardoe. She accompanies him to a nightclub to be entertained by dancing and fine dining. They sit down and watch the scantily clad girls cavort around; under the table, their legs touch and he tells her an erotically charged story. His memories of Coral have disappeared like the smoke of the long-forgotten train journey. Their hands touch on the table and do not separate. Myatt asks Janet to leave Mabel and stay with him. She nods in agreement and he squeezes her hand. Then, just at that romantic moment, he sees his rival's agent (Mr Stein) crossing the floor toward their table. 'He wondered if Mr Stein had the contract in his pocket.' Those are the final words of the story. Nothing, not even the prospect of an amorous adventure with young Janet, will deflect Myatt from his pecuniary obsession.

Kind Underneath his mercenary streak, Carleton Myatt is a kind person. I have already alluded to his sympathetic reaction to Coral's condition by offering her a sleeping compartment, but another, equally telling, example occurs somewhat before that moment. Myatt has settled into the restaurant car and is deep in thought about the impending negotiations of a business merger in Istanbul. Opposite him is another man, who calls himself Dr John but is really Czinner, the political exile. Czinner has fallen asleep while waiting for his meal. Myatt looks at the stranger and realises that he is completely exhausted. When the man wakes up, Myatt observes him closely: 'Something in the sudden change from sleep to a more accustomed anxiety, something in the well-meaning clothes betrayed by the shabby mackintosh, touched Myatt to pity.' Myatt asks him if he has found a compartment, and the man says he has. But Myatt persists in offering help. 'I thought perhaps you were finding it hard to rest,' he says. 'I have some aspirin in my bag,' Myatt says, 'Can I lend you a few tablets?' When the stranger snaps at him, saying, 'I have everything I need,' Myatt apologises 'with the humility of a bowed head' and says he is 'sorry to have troubled the man.' This seemingly insignificant moment, which plays no part in the plot, reveals Myatt's underlying kindness.

Coral Musker Coral Musker is the poor suffering heroine of the story. A penniless showgirl, she is on her way to Istanbul to get work in a nightclub. Young and vulnerable, she is impressed by acts of kindness, although she also shows strength when other characters are mistreated.

Empathetic Coral, like Czinner, has an innate tenderness toward people who, like her, are poor or in need of help. This quality is vividly displayed in an early scene on the train. Coral herself has fainted from lack of sleep and nutrition and is being tended to by Dr John (really Dr Czinner). He looks at her with tenderness, and when she regains consciousness, a reversal takes place. 'She thought that it was she who was bending over a stranger with a long shabby moustache. She felt pity for the experience which had caused his great anxiety, and her solicitude went out to the friendliness she imagined in his eyes. She put her hands down to his face. He's ill, she thought...Never has a man needed help more.' In this extraordinary, and near hallucinatory, scene, Coral has the depth of empathy to transfer her own illness to that of the doctor who is ministering to her. Her insight is a revelation, for we later learn that Dr John/Czinner is indeed suffering and in need of assistance.

Defiant Tender-hearted though she is, Coral can also be strong-minded and outspoken. A good example of her defiance occurs in a conversation with Mabel Warren, the journalist. Mabel finds Coral 'pretty' and is already considering putting her in place of her lover/companion (Janet). In order to wean her away from Myatt, Mabel warns Coral: 'Jews are not to be trusted.' Coral is surprised and worried that Myatt might have thought she was keeping her distance because of his Jewishness. 'Do you think he thought that?' she asks. Mabel tells her not to worry, that 'Jews are used to that.' Now, Coral becomes angry and says firmly, 'Then I'll tell him that I like him, that I've always liked Jews.' Whether or not these are Coral's true feelings is not the point. What matters is that she does not like to hear unkind comments and is not afraid to speak up against them. Her sympathy for the underdog is perhaps a reflex of her own low status (as a penniless chorus girl), but her defiance is a reflection of

an underlying strength of character.

Vulnerable Coral's vulnerability is illustrated in a key scene with Myatt. The day after he has given her his sleeping compartment, Coral is confused about how to respond. She knocks on the door of his new compartment and explains that she feels badly about not thanking him for his generosity. She expects that he wants sex, but she is a virgin and doesn't know what she should do when he doesn't seem to expect any sexual favours. 'How do I repay him,' she asks herself, 'if he doesn't press for payment?' She agonises over what to do—to kiss him, undress or get drunk. He then says that she owes him nothing, though he did have a romantic dream about her. She is touched that he desires her and agrees to visit him that night. All through this scene, Coral feels confused and helpless. Being vulnerable, she does not know how to receive genuine gratitude.

Dr Czinner Dr Czinner is a political radical, who is returning to his country to lead a revolution. As a doctor, he shows compassion and skill, while as a revolutionary, he suffers from a self-absorbed martyr complex and pride. He is, however, an intelligent and thoughtful person.

Lost Dr Czinner is an exile, separated from his homeland and cut off from the political cause that gave his life meaning. In a poignant moment of remembrance, he appears like a dead man walking in his own story. He has just learned that the revolution, which he was hoping to spark by his return, has failed. He feels he is a 'ghost, seeking to return to sentient life after five years of burial [in exile].' He remembers how he had been loved enough for a hired murderer to fire a pistol at his head. 'When he heard the bullet shatter the mirror behind him, he knew how dearly the poor loved him.' Now, when there was no longer a revolution to fight for, he is lost. What can he do now? Return to Belgrade, get arrested and shot in oblivion? Profoundly confused, Czinner reaches for a newspaper and accidentally knocks a glass off a table. The glass shatters on the floor, but Czinner is paralysed with indecision. Should I pick up the paper or the fragments of glass? he wonders. The resolute political revolutionary is so shattered himself that he cannot make the simplest of decisions.

Martyr The confused Czinner does manage to pull himself together and find a purpose: he will sacrifice himself for the cause. Only a few pages after the scene just described above, he realises that he cannot return to England (where he had assumed the identity of a teacher). 'However,' he says to himself, 'if I give myself up and stand my trial with them [in Belgrade], the world will listen to my defence as it would never listen to me, safe in England.' In that moment, he feels that 'his ghostly years were over. I am alive again, he thought, because I am conscious of death.' He knows full well that the authorities will not let him escape a second time. They will surely kill him. 'I am afraid, he told himself with triumph, I am afraid.' Earlier in the novel, we have been given hints of Czinner's martyrdom complex, especially when he envisions himself on a cross persecuted by his enemies. But now, in this later scene, we have the full declaration of his intention to die for the good of the cause.

Reflective Czinner is a victim of his own self-awareness. He is a perceptive and reflective person, who cannot escape judging himself, perhaps a little too harshly. A typical moment of such self-reflection occurs when he finds the petty thief Grunlich rummaging through his suitcase. Instead of chastising him, though, he merely dismisses him by giving him five pounds because Grunlich says he is a 'socialist.' Czinner is not bothered by his gesture, but he is upset by his realisation 'that a movement was not condemned by the dishonesty of its officers. He himself was not without dishonesty, and the truth of his belief was not altered because he was guilty of vanity, of several meannesses: once he had got a girl with child. Even his motives of travelling first-class were not unmixed. It was easier to evade the frontier police, but it was also more comfortable, more fitted to his vanity as a leader.' Czinner is an atheist, but at that moment of self-doubt he finds himself praying to a non-existent god. 'Please forgive me,' he says. But he has no expectation of forgiveness, even from himself.

PAN Books



STAMBOUL TRAIN

Graham Greene

